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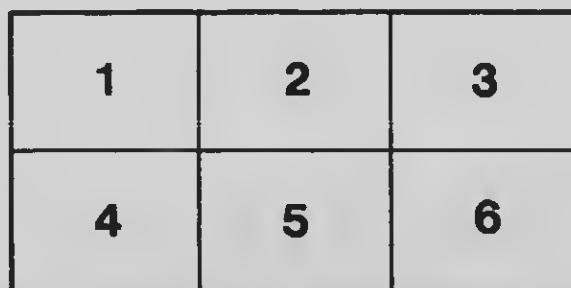
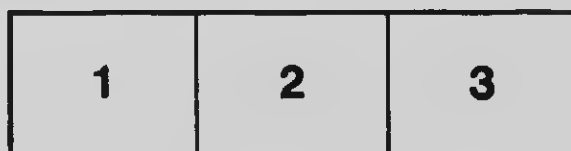
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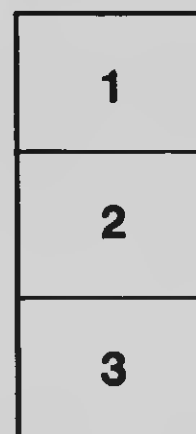
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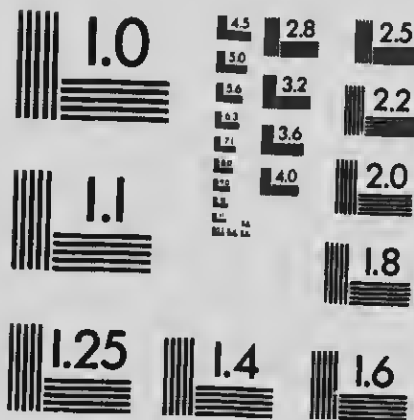
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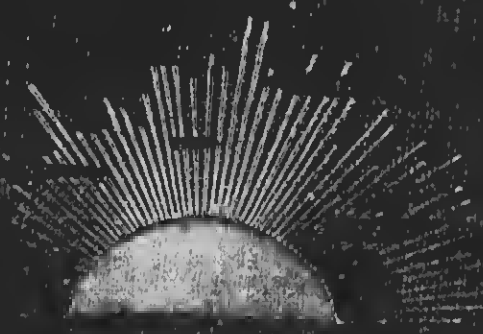
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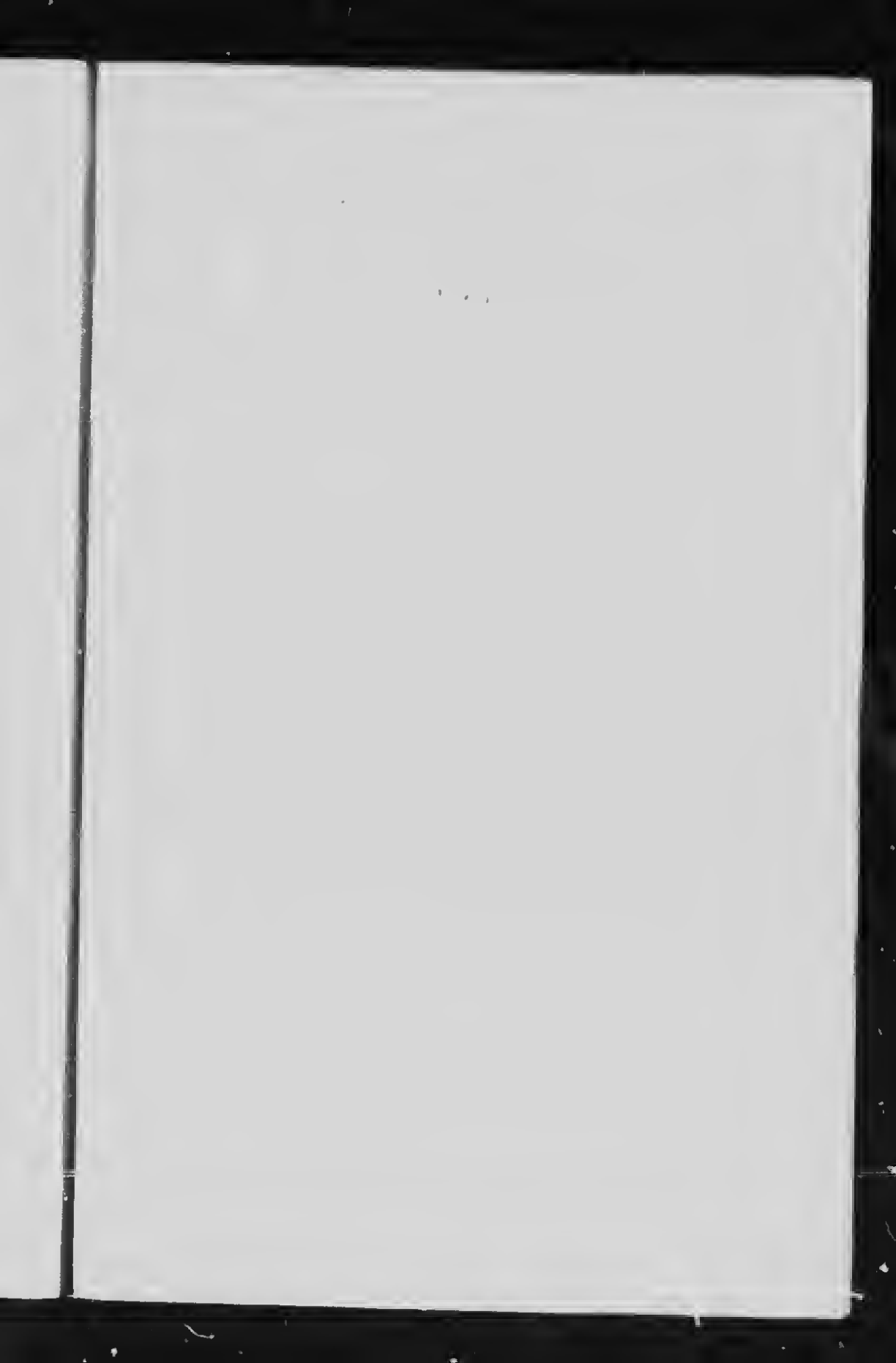
# THE EMIGRANT TRAIL

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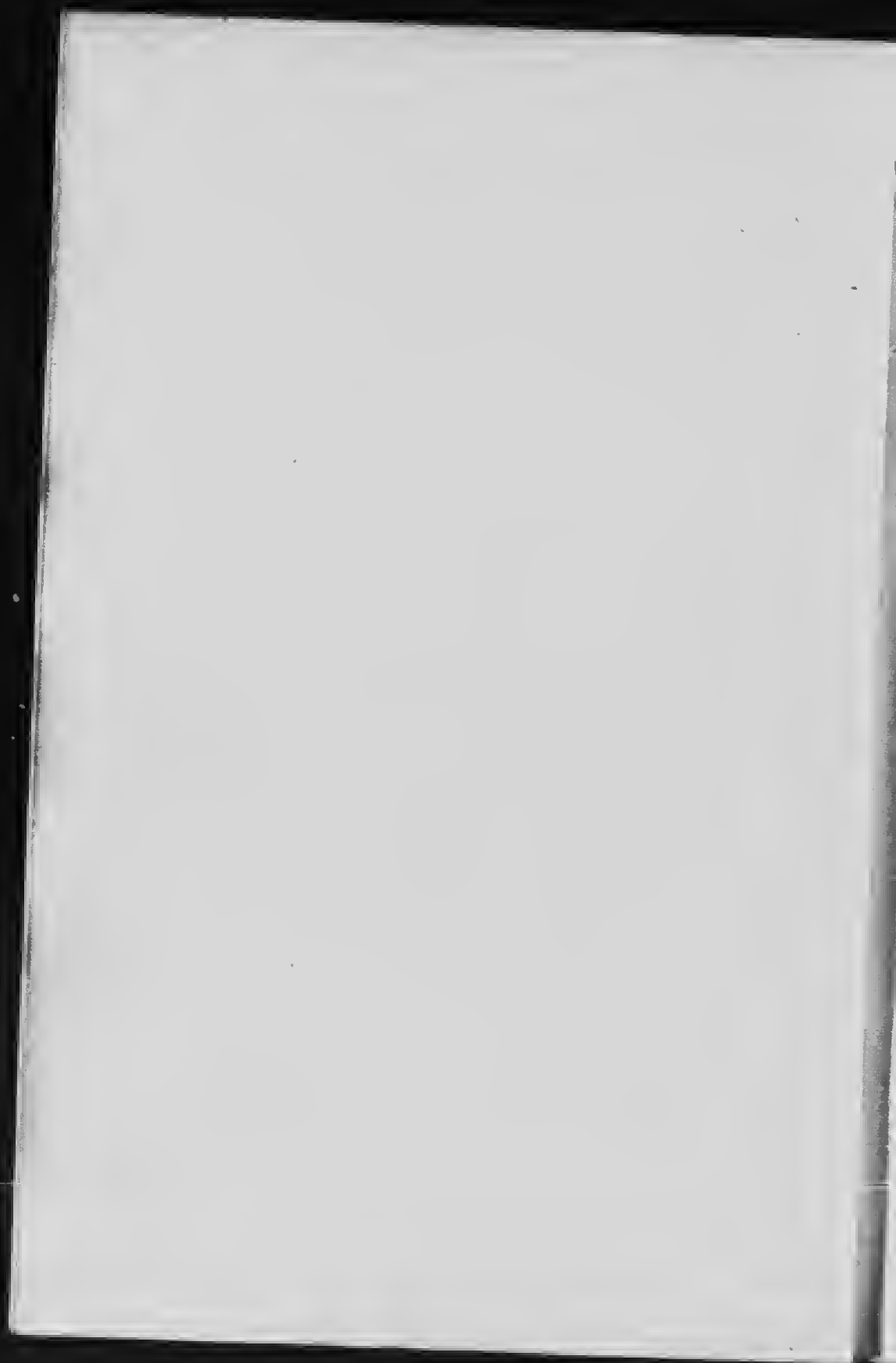
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THE  
EMIGRANT TRAIL







He gathered her in his arms, and bending low carried  
her back into the darkened cavern.

—See page 416

# THE EMIGRANT TRAIL

BY  
GERALDINE BONNER

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The River of the  
Desert

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PART I  
The Prairie



## CHAPTER I

It had rained steadily for three days, the straight, relentless rain of early May on the Missouri frontier. The emigrants, whose hooded wagons had been rolling into Independence for the past month and whose tents gleamed through the spring foliage, lounged about in one another's camps cursing the weather and swapping bits of useful information.

The year was 1848 and the great California emigration was still twelve months distant. The flakes of gold had already been found in the race of Sutter's mill, and the thin scattering of men, which made the population of California, had left their plows in the furrow and their ships in the cove and gone to the yellow rivers that drain the Sierra's mighty flanks. But the rest of the world knew nothing of this yet. They were not to hear till November when a ship brought the news to New York, and from city and town, from village and cottage, a march of men would turn their faces to the setting sun and start for the land of gold.

Those now bound for California knew it only as the recently acquired strip of territory that lay along the continent's Western rim, a place of per-

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petual sunshine, where everybody had a chance and there was no malaria. That was what they told each other as they lay under the wagons or sat on saddles in the wet tents. The story of old Rouba-doux, the French fur trader from St. Joseph, circulated cheerily from mouth to mouth—a man in Monterey had had chills and people came from miles around to see him shake, so novel was the spectacle. That was the country for the men and women of the Mississippi Valley, who shook half the year and spent the other half getting over it.

The call of the West was a siren song in the ears of these waiting companies. The blood of pioneers urged them forward. Their forefathers had moved from the old countries across the seas, from the elm-shaded towns of New England, from the unkempt villages that advanced into the virgin lands by the Great Lakes, from the peace and plenty of the splendid South. Year by year they had pushed the frontier westward, pricked onward by a ceaseless unrest, "the old land hunger" that never was appeased. The forests rang to the stroke of their ax, the slow, untroubled rivers of the wilderness parted to the plowing wheels of their unwieldy wagons, their voices went before them into places where Nature had kept unbroken her vast and pondering silence. The distant country by the Pacific was still to explore and they yoked their oxen, and with a woman and a child on the seat started out again, responsive to the cry of "Westward, Ho!"

As many were bound for Oregon as for Cali-

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fornia. Marcus Whitman and the missionaries had brought alluring stories of that great domain once held so cheaply the country almost lost it. It was said to be of a wonderful fertility and league-long stretches of idle land awaited the settler. The roads ran together more than half the way, parting at Green River, where the Oregon trail turned to Fort Hall and the California dipped southward and wound, a white and spindling thread, across what men then called "The Great American Desert." Two days' journey from Independence this road branched from the Santa Fé Trail and bent northward across the prairie. A signboard on a stake pointed the way and bore the legend, "Road to Oregon." It was the starting point of one of the historic highways of the world. The Indians called it "The Great Medicine Way of the Paleface."

Checked in the act of what they called "jumping off" the emigrants wore away the days in telling stories of the rival countries, and in separating from old companies and joining new ones. It was an important matter, this of traveling partnerships. A trip of two thousand miles on unknown roads beset with dangers was not to be lightly undertaken. Small parties, frightened on the edge of the enterprise, joined themselves to stronger ones. The mountain men and trappers delighted to augment the tremors of the fearful, and round the camp fires listening groups hung on the words of long-haired men clad in dirty buckskins, whose

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moccasined feet had trod the trails of the fur trader and his red brother.

This year was one of special peril for, to the accustomed dangers from heat, hunger, and Indians, was added a new one—the Mormons. They were still moving westward in their emigration from Nauvoo to the new Zion beside the Great Salt Lake. It was a time and a place to hear the black side of Mormonism. A Missourian hated a Latter Day Saint as a Puritan hated a Papist. Hawn's mill was fresh in the minds of the frontiersmen, and the murder of Joseph Smith was accounted a righteous act. The emigrant had many warnings to lay to heart—against Indian surprises in the mountains, against mosquitoes on the plains, against quicksands in the Platte, against stampedes among the cattle, against alkaline springs and the desert's parching heats. And quite as important as any of these was that against the Latter Day Saint with the Book of Mormon in his saddlebag and his long-barreled rifle across the pommel.

So they waited, full of ill words and impatience, while the rain fell. Independence, the focusing point of the frontier life, housing unexpected hundreds, dripped from all its gables and swam in mud. And in the camps that spread through the fresh, wet woods and the oozy uplands, still other hundreds cowered under soaked tent walls and in damp wagon boxes, listening to the rush of the continuous showers.

## CHAPTER II

ON the afternoon of the fourth day the clouds lifted. A band of yellow light broke out along the horizon, and at the crossings of the town and in the rutted country roads men and women stood staring at it with its light and their own hope brightening their faces.

David Crystal, as he walked through the woods, saw it behind a veining of black branches. Though a camper and impatient to be off like the rest, he did not feel the elation that shone on their watching faces. His was held in a somber abstraction. Just behind him, in an opening under the straight, white blossoming of dogwood trees, was a new-made grave. The raw earth about it showed the prints of his feet, for he had been standing by it thinking of the man who lay beneath.

Four days before his friend, Joe Linley, had died of cholera. Three of them—Joc, himself, and George Leffingwell, Joe's cousin—had been in camp less than a week when it had happened. Until then their life had been like a picnic there in the clearing by the roadside, with the thrill of the great journey stirring in their blood. And then Joe had been smitten with such suddenness, such awful suddenness! He had been talking to them when David had seen a suspension of something, a stop-

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page of a vital inner spring, and with it a whiteness had passed across his face like a running tide. The awe of that moment, the hush when it seemed to David the liberated spirit had paused beside him in its outward flight, was with him now as he walked through the rustling freshness of the wood.

The rain had begun to lessen, its downfall thinning into a soft patter among the leaves. The young man took off his hat and let the damp air play over his hair. It was thick hair, black and straight, already longer than city fashions dictated, and a first stubble of black beard was hiding the lines of a chin perhaps a trifle too sensitive and pointed. Romantic good looks and an almost poetic refinement were the characteristics of the face, an unusual type for the frontier. With thoughtful gray eyes set deep under a jut of brows and a nose as finely cut as a woman's, it was of a type that, in more sophisticated localities, men would have said had risen to meet the Byronic ideal of which the world was just then enamored. But there was nothing Byronic or self-conscious about David Crystal. He had been born and bred in what was then the Far West, and that he should read poetry and regard life as an undertaking that a man must face with all honor and resoluteness was not so surprising for the time and place. The West, with its loneliness, its questioning silences, its solemn sweep of prairie and roll of slow, majestic rivers, held spiritual communion with those of its young men who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

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The trees grew thinner and he saw the sky pure as amber beneath the storm pall. The light from it twinkled over wet twigs and glazed the water in the crumplings of new leaves. Across the glow the last raindrops fell in slanting dashes. David's spirits rose. The weather was clearing and they could start—start on the trail, the long trail, the Emigrant Trail, two thousand miles to California!

He was close to the camp. Through the branches he saw the filmy, diffused blueness of smoke and smelled the sharp odor of burning wood. He quickened his pace and was about to give forth a cheerful hail when he heard a sound that made him stop, listen with fixed eye, and then advance cautiously, sending a questing glance through the screen of leaves. The sound was a woman's voice detached in clear sweetness from the deeper tones of men.

There was no especial novelty in this. Their camp was just off the road and the emigrant women were wont to pause there and pass the time of day. Most of them were the lean and leathern-skinned mates of the frontiersmen, shapeless and haggard as if toil had drawn from their bodies all the softness of feminine beauty, as malaria had sucked from their skins freshness and color. But there were young, pretty ones, too, who often strolled by, looking sideways from the shelter of jealous sunbonnets.

This voice was not like theirs. It had a quality David had only heard a few times in his life—cul-

## The Emigrant Trail

tivation. Experience would have characterized it as "a lady voice." David, with none, thought it an angel's. Very shy, very curious, he came out from the trees ready at once and forever to worship anyone who could set their words to such dulcet cadences.

The clearing, green as an emerald and shining with rain, showed the hood of the wagon and the new, clean tent, white as sails on a summer sea, against the trees' young bloom. In the middle the fire burned and beside it stood Leff, a skillet in his hand. He was a curly-headed, powerful country lad, twenty-four years old, who, two months before, had come from an Illinois farm to join the expedition. The frontier was to him a place of varied diversion, Independence a stimulating center. So diffident that the bashful David seemed by contrast a man of cultured ease, he was now blushing till the back of his neck was red.

On the other side of the fire a lady and gentleman stood arm in arm under an umbrella. The two faces, bent upon Leff with grave attention, were alike, not in feature, but in the subtly similar play of expression that speaks the blood tie. A father and daughter, David thought. Against the rough background of the camp, with its litter at their feet, they had an air of being applied upon an alien surface, of not belonging to the picture, but standing out from it in sharp and incongruous contrast.

The gentleman was thin and tall, fifty or there-

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abouts, very pale, especially to one accustomed to the tanned skins of the farm and the country town. His face held so frank a kindliness, especially the eyes which looked tired and a little sad, that David felt its expression like a friendly greeting or a strong handclasp.

The lady did not have this, perhaps because she was a great deal younger. She was yet in the bud, far from the tempering touch of experience, still in the state of looking forward and anticipating things. She was dark, of medium height, and inclined to be plump. Many delightful curves went to her making, and her waist tapered elegantly, as was the fashion of the time. Thinking it over afterwards, the young man decided that she did not belong in the picture with a prairie schooner and camp kettles, because she looked so like an illustration in a book of beauty. And David knew something of these matters, for had he not been twice to St. Louis and there seen the glories of the earth and the kingdoms thereof?

But life in camp outside Independence had evidently blunted his perceptions. The small waist, a round, bare throat rising from a narrow band of lace, and a flat, yellow straw hat were the young woman's only points of resemblance to the beauty-book heroines. She was not in the least beautiful, only fresh and healthy, the flat straw hat shading a girlish face, smooth and firmly modeled as a ripe fruit. Her skin was a glossy brown, softened with a peach's bloom, warming through deepening

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shades of rose to lips that were so deeply colored no one noticed how firmly they could come together, how their curving, crimson edges could shut tight, straighten out, and become a line of forceful suggestions, of doggedness, maybe—who knows?—perhaps of obstinacy. It was her physical exuberance, her downy glow, that made David think her good looking; her serene, brunette richness, with its high lights of coral and scarlet, that made her radiate an aura of warmth, startling in that woodland clearing, as the luster of a firefly in a garden's glooming dusk.

She stopped speaking as he emerged from the trees, and Leff's stammering answer held her in a riveted stare of attention. Then she looked up and saw David.

"Oh," she said, and transferred the stare to him. "Is this he?"

Leff was obviously relieved:

"Oh, David, I ain't known what to say to this lady and her father. They think some of joining us. They've been waiting for quite a spell to see you. They're goin' to California, too."

The gentleman lifted his hat. Now that he smiled his face was even kindlier, and he, too, had a pleasant, mellowed utterance that linked him with the world of superior quality of which David had had those two glimpses.

"I am Dr. Gillespie," he said, "and this is my daughter Susan."

David bowed awkwardly, a bow that was sup-

## The Prairie

posed to include father and daughter. He did not know whether this was a regular introduction, and even if it had been he would not have known what to do. The young woman made no attempt to return the salutation, not that she was rude, but she had the air of regarding it as a frivolous interruption to weighty matters. She fixed David with eyes, small, black, and bright as a squirrel's, so devoid of any recognition that he was a member of the rival sex—or, in fact, of the human family—that his self-consciousness sunk down abashed as if before reproof.

"My father and I are going to California and the train we were going with has gone on. We've come from Rochester, New York, and everywhere we've been delayed and kept back. Even that boat up from St. Louis was five days behind time. It's been nothing but disappointments and delays since we left home. And when we got here the people we were going with—a big train from Northern New York—had gone on and left us."

She said all this rapidly, poured it out as if she were so full of the injury and annoyance of it, that she had to ease her indignation by letting it run over into the first pair of sympathetic ears. David's were a very good pair. Any woman with a tale of trouble would have found him a champion. How much more a fresh-faced young creature with a melodious voice and anxious eyes.

"A good many trains have gone on," he said. And then, by way of consolation for her manner

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demanded, that, "But they'll be stalled at the fords with this rain. They'll have to wait till the rivers fall. All the men who know say that."

"So we've heard," said the father, "but we hoped that we'd catch them up. Our outfit is very light, only one wagon, and our driver is a thoroughly capable and experienced man. What we want are some companions with whom we can travel till we overhaul the others. I'd start alone, but with my daughter——"

She cut in at once, giving his arm a little, irritated shake:

"Of course you couldn't do that." Then to the young men: "My father's been sick for quite a long time, all last winter. It's for his health we're going to California, and, of course, he couldn't start without some other men in the party. Indians might attack us, and at the hotel they said the Mormons were scattered all along the road and thought nothing of shooting a Gentile."

Her father gave the fingers crooked on his arm a little squeeze with his elbow. It was evident the pair were very good friends.

"You'll make these young men think I'm a helpless invalid, who'll lie in the wagon all day. They won't want us to go with them."

This made her again uneasy and let loose another flow of authoritative words.

"No, my father isn't really an invalid. He doesn't have to lie in the wagon. He's going to

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ride most of the time. He and I expect to ride all the way, and the old man who goes with us will drive the mules. What's been really bad for my father was living in that dreadful hotel at Independence with everything damp and uncomfortable. We want to get off just as soon as we can, and this gentleman," indicating Leff, "says you want to go, too."

"We'll start to-morrow morning, if it's clear."

"Now, father," giving the girl she held a renewed clutch and sharper shake, "there's our chance. We must go with them."

The father's smile would have shown something of deprecation, or even apology, if it had not been all pride and tenderness.

"These young men will be very kind if they permit us to join them," was what his lips said. His eyes added: "This is a spoiled child, but even so, there is no other like her in the world."

The young men sprang at the suggestion. The spring was internal, of the spirit, for they were too overwhelmed by the imminent presence of beauty to show a spark of spontaneity on the outside. They muttered their agreement, kicked the ground, and avoided the eyes of Miss Gillespie.

"The people at the hotel," the doctor went on, "advised us to join one of the ox trains. But it seemed such a slow mode of progress. They don't make much more than fifteen to twenty miles a day."

"And then," said the girl, "there might be peo-

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ple we didn't like in the train and we'd be with them all the time."

It is not probable that she intended to suggest to her listeners that she could stand them as traveling companions. Whether she did or not they scented the compliment, looked stupid, and hung their heads, silent in the intoxication of this first subtle whiff of incense. Even Leff, uncouth and unlettered, extracted all that was possible from the words, and felt a delicate elation at the thought that so fine a creature could endure his society.

"We expect to go a great deal faster than the long trains," she continued. "We have no oxen, only six mules and two extra horses and a cow."

Her father laughed outright.

"Don't let my daughter frighten you. We've really got a very small amount of baggage. Our little caravan has been made up on the advice of Dr. Marcus Whitman, an old friend of mine. Five years ago when he was in Washington he gave me a list of what was needed for the journey across the plains. I suppose he's the best authority on that subject. We all know how successfully the Oregon emigration was carried through."

David was glad to show he knew something of that. A boy friend of his had gone to Oregon with this, the first large body of emigrants that had ventured on the great enterprise. Whitman was to him a national hero, his ride in the dead of winter from the far Northwest to Washington, as patriotically inspiring as Paul Revere's.

## The Prairie

There was more talk, standing round the fire, while the agreements for the start were being made. No one thought the arrangement hasty, for it was a place and time of quick decisions. Men starting on the emigrant trail were not for wasting time on preliminaries. Friendships sprang up like the grass and were mown down like it. Standing on the edge of the unknown was not the propitious moment for caution and hesitation. Only the bold dared it and the bold took each other without question, reading what was on the surface, not bothering about what might be hidden.

It was agreed, the weather being fair, that they would start at seven the next morning, Dr. Gillespie's party joining David's at the camp. With their mules and horses they should make good time and within a month overhaul the train that had left the Gillespies behind.

As the doctor and his daughter walked away the shyness of the young men returned upon them in a heavy backwash. They were sowhelmed by it that they did not even speak to one another. But both glanced with cautious stealth at the receding backs, the doctor in front, his daughter walking daintily on the edge of grass by the roadside, holding her skirts away from the wet weeds.

When she was out of sight Leff said with an embarrassed laugh:

"Well, we got some one to go along with us now."

David did not laugh. He pondered frowningly.

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He was the elder by two years and he felt his responsibilities.

"They'll do all right. With two more men we'll make a strong enough train."

Leff was cook that night, and he set the coffee on and began cutting the bacon. Occupied in this congenial work, the joints of his tongue were loosened, and as the skillet gave forth grease and odors, he gave forth bits of information gleaned from the earlier part of the interview:

"I guess they got a first rate outfit. The old gentleman said they'd been getting it together since last autumn. They must be pretty well fixed."

David nodded. Being "well fixed" or being poor did not count on the edge of the prairie. They were frivolous outside matters that had weight in cities. Leff went on,

"He's consumpted. That's why he's going. He says he expects to be cured before he gets to California."

A sudden zephyr irritated the tree tops, which bent away from its touch and scattered moisture on the fire and the frying pan. There was a sputter and sizzle and Leff muttered profanely before he took up the dropped thread:

"The man that drives the mules, he's a hired man that the old gentleman's had for twenty years. He was out on the frontier once and knows all about it, and there ain't nothing he can't drive"—turning of the bacon here, Leff absorbed beyond explanatory speech— "They got four horses, two

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to ride and two extra ones, and a cow. I don't see how they're goin' to keep up the pace with the cow along. The old gentleman says they can do twenty to twenty-five miles a day when the road's good. But I don't seem to see how the cow can keep up such a lick."

"A hired man, a cow, and an outfit that it took all winter to get together," said David thoughtfully. "It sounds more like a pleasure trip than going across the plains."

He sat as if uneasily debating the possible drawbacks of so elaborate an escort, but he was really ruminating upon the princess, who moved upon the wilderness with such pomp and circumstance.

As they set out their tin cups and plates they continued to discuss the doctor, his caravan, his mules, his servant, and his cow, in fact, everything but his daughter. It was noticeable that no mention of her was made till supper was over and the night fell. Then their comments on her were brief. Leff seemed afraid of her even a mile away in the damp hotel at Independence, seemed to fear that she might in some way know he'd had her name upon his tongue, and would come to-morrow with angry, accusing looks like an offended goddess. David did not want to talk about her, he did not quite know why. Before the thought of traveling a month in her society his mind fell back reeling, baffled by the sudden entrance of such a dazzling intruder. A month beside this glowing figure, a month under the impersonal interrogation of those

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cool, demanding eyes! It was as if the President or General Zachary Taylor had suddenly joined them.

But of course she figured larger in their thoughts than any other part or all the combined parts of Dr. Gillespie's outfit. In their imaginations—the hungry imaginations of lonely young men—she represented all the grace, beauty, and mystery of the Eternal Feminine. They did not reason about her, they only felt, and what they felt—unconsciously to themselves—was that she had introduced the last, wildest, and most disturbing thrill into the adventure of the great journey.

### CHAPTER III

THE next day broke still and clear. The dawn was yet a pale promise in the East when from Independence, out through the dripping woods and clearings, rose the tumult of breaking camps. The rattle of the yoke chains and the raucous cry of "Catch up! Catch up!" sounded under the trees and out and away over valley and upland as the lumbering wagons, freighted deep for the long trail, swung into the road.

David's camp was astir long before the sun was up. The great hour had come. They were going! They sung and shouted as they harnessed Bess and Ben, a pair of sturdy roans bought from an emigrant discouraged before the start, while the saddle horses nosed about the tree roots for a last cropping of the sweet, thick grass. Inside the wagon the provisions were packed in sacks and the rifles hung on hooks on the canvas walls. At the back, on a supporting step, the mess chest was strapped. It was a businesslike wagon. Its contents included only one deviation from the practical and necessary—three books of David's. Joe had laughed at him about them. What did a man want with Byron's poems and Milton and Bacon's "Essays" crossing the plains? Neither Joe nor Leff could

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understand such devotion to the printed page. Their kits were of the compactest, not a useless article or an unnecessary pound, unless you counted the box of flower seeds that belonged to Joe, who had heard that California, though a dry country, could be coaxed into productiveness along the rivers.

Dr. Gillespie and his daughter were punctual. David's silver watch, large as the circle of a cup and possessed of a tick so loud it interrupted conversation, registered five minutes before seven, when the doctor and his daughter appeared at the head of their caravan. Two handsome figures, well mounted and clad with taste as well as suitability, they looked as gallantly unfitted for the road as armored knights in a modern battlefield. Good looks, physical delicacy, and becoming clothes had as yet no recognized place on the trail. The Gillespies were boldly and blithely bringing them, and unlike most innovators, romance came with them. Nobody had gone out of Independence with so confident and debonair an air. Now advancing through a spattering of leaf shadows and sunspots, they seemed to the young men to be issuing from the first pages of a story, and the watchers secretly hoped that they would go riding on into the heart of it with the white arch of the prairie schooner and the pricked ears of the six mules as a movable background.

There was no umbrella this morning to obscure Miss Gillespie's vivid tints, and in the same flat,

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straw hat, with her cheeks framed in little black curls, she looked a freshly wholesome young girl, who might be dangerous to the peace of mind of men even less lonely and susceptible than the two who bid her a flushed and bashful good morning. She had the appearance, however, of being entirely oblivious to any embarrassment they might show. There was not a suggestion of coquetry in her manner as she returned their greetings. Instead, it was marked by a businesslike gravity. Her eyes touched their faces with the slightest welcoming light and then left them to rove, sharply inspecting, over their wagon and animals. When she had scrutinized these, she turned in her saddle, and said abruptly to the driver of the six mules:

"Daddy John, do you see—horses?"

The person thus addressed nodded and said in a thin, old voice,

"I do, and if they want them they're welcome to them."

He was a small, shriveled man, who might have been anywhere from sixty to seventy-five. A battered felt hat, gray-green with wind and sun, was pulled well down to his ears, pressing against his forehead and neck thin locks of gray hair. A grizzle of beard edged his chin, a poor and scanty growth that showed the withered skin through its sparseness. His face, small and wedge-shaped, was full of ruddy color, the cheeks above the ragged hair smooth and red as apples. Though his mouth was deficient in teeth, his neck, rising bare from the

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band of his shirt, corrugated with the starting sinews of old age, he had a shrewd vivacity of glance, an alertness of poise, that suggested an unimpaired spiritual vitality. He seemed at home behind the mules, and here, for the first time, David felt was some one who did not look outside the picture. In fact, he had an air of tranquil acceptance of the occasion, of adjustment without effort, that made him fit into the frame better than anyone else of the party.

It was a glorious morning, and as they fared forward through the checkered shade their spirits ran high. The sun, curious and determined, pried and slid through every crack in the leafage, turned the flaked lichen to gold, lay in clotted light on the pools around the fern roots. They were delicate spring woods, streaked with the white dashes of the dogwood, and hung with the tassels of the maple. The foliage was still unfolding, patterned with fresh creases, the prey of a continuous, frail unrest. Little streams chuckled through the underbrush, and from the fusion of woodland whisperings bird notes detached themselves, soft flutings and liquid runs, that gave another expression to the morning's blithe mood.

Between the woods there were stretches of open country, velvet smooth, with the trees slipped down to where the rivers ran. The grass was as green as sprouting grain, and a sweet smell of wet earth and seedling growths came from it. Cloud shadows trailed across it, blue blotches moving languidly.

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It was the young earth in its blushing promise, fragrant, rain-washed, budding, with the sound of running water in the grass and bird voices dropping from the sky.

With their lighter wagons they passed the ox trains plowing stolidly through the mud, barefoot children running at the wheel, and women knitting on the front seat. The driver's whip lash curled in the air, and his nasal "Gee haw" swung the yoked beasts slowly to one side. Then came detachments of Santa Fé traders, dark men in striped serapes with silver trimmings round their high-peaked hats. Behind them stretched the long line of wagons, the ponderous freighters of the Santa Fé Trail, rolling into Independence from the Spanish towns that lay beyond the burning deserts of the Cimarron. They filed by in slow procession, a vision of faded colors and swarthy faces, jingle of spur and mule bell mingling with salutations in sonorous Spanish.

As the day grew warmer, the doctor complained of the heat and went back to the wagon. David and the young girl rode on together through the green thickness of the wood. They had talked a little while the doctor was there, and now, left to themselves, they suddenly began to talk a good deal. In fact, Miss Gillespie revealed herself as a somewhat garrulous and quite friendly person. David felt his awed admiration settling into a much more comfortable feeling, still wholly admiring but relieved of the cramping consciousness that he had entertained an angel unawares. She was so natural

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and girlish that he began to cherish hopes of addressing her as "Miss Susan," even let vaulting ambition carry him to the point where he could think of some day calling himself her friend.

She was communicative, and he was still too dazzled by her to realize that she was not above asking questions. In the course of a half hour she knew all about him, and he, without the courage to be thus flatteringly curious, knew the main points of her own history. Her father had been a practicing physician in Rochester for the past fifteen years. Before that he had lived in New York, where she had been born twenty years ago. Her mother had been a Canadian, a French woman from the Province of Quebec, whom her father had met there one summer when he had gone to fish in Lake St. John. Her mother had been very beautiful—David nodded at that, he had already decided it—and had always spoken English with an accent. She, the daughter, when she was little, spoke French before she did English; in fact, did not Mr. Crystal notice there was still something a little queer about her *r's*?

Mr. Crystal had noticed it, noticed it to the extent of thinking it very pretty. The young lady dismissed the compliment as one who does not hear, and went on with her narrative:

"After my mother's death my father left New York. He couldn't bear to live there any more. He'd been so happy. So he moved away, though he had a fine practice."

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The listener gave forth a murmur of sympathetic understanding. Devotion to a beautiful woman was matter of immediate appeal to him. His respect for the doctor rose in proportion, especially when the devotion was weighed in the balance against a fine practice. Looking at the girl's profile with prim black curls against the cheek, he saw the French-Canadian mother, and said not gallantly, but rather timidly:

"And you're like your mother, I suppose? You're dark like a French woman."

She answered this with a brusque denial. Extracting compliments from the talk of a shy young Westerner was evidently not her strong point.

"Oh, no! not at all. My mother was pale and tall, with very large black eyes. I am short and dark and my eyes are only just big enough to see out of. She was delicate and I am very strong. My father says I've never been sick since I got my first teeth."

She looked at him and laughed, and he realized it was the first time he had seen her do it. It brightened her face delightfully, making the eyes she had spoken of so disparagingly narrow into dancing slits. When she laughed men who had not lost the nicety of their standards by a sojourn on the frontier would have called her a pretty girl.

"My mother was of the French *noblesse*," she said, a dark eye upon him to see how he would take this dignified piece of information. "She was a

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descendant of the Baron de Poutrincourt, who founded Port Royal."

David was as impressed as anyone could have desired. He did not know what the French *noblesse* was, but by its sound he judged it to be some high and honorable estate. He was equally ignorant of the identity of the Baron de Poutrincourt, but the name alone was impressive, specially as Miss Gillespie pronounced it.

"That's fine, isn't it?" he said, as being the only comment he could think of which at once showed admiration and concealed ignorance.

The young woman seemed to find it adequate and went on with her family history. Five years ago in Washington her father had seen his old friend, Marcus Whitman, and since then had been restless with the longing to move West. His health demanded the change. His labors as a physician had exhausted him. His daughter spoke feelingly of the impossibility of restraining his charitable zeal. He attended the poor for nothing. He rose at any hour and went forth in any weather in response to the call of suffering.

"That's what he says a doctor's duties are," she said. "It isn't a profession to make money with, it's a profession for helping people and curing them. You yourself don't count, it's only what you do that does. Why, my father had a very large practice, but he made only just enough to keep us."

Of all she had said this seemed to the listener the best worth hearing. The doctor now mounted

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to the top of the highest pedestal David's admiration could supply. Here was one of the compensations with which life keeps the balances even. Joe had died and left him friendless, and while the ache was still sharp, this stranger and his daughter had come to soothe his pain, perhaps, in the course of time, to conjure it quite away.

Early in the preceding winter the doctor had been forced to decide on the step he had been long contemplating. An attack of congestion of the lungs developed consumption in his weakened constitution. A warm climate and an open-air life were prescribed. And how better combine them than by emigrating to California?

"And so," said the doctor's daughter, "father made up his mind to go and sold out his practice. People thought he was crazy to start on such a trip when he was sick, but he knows more than they do. Besides, it's not going to be such hard work for him. Daddy John, the old man who drives the mules, knows all about this Western country. He was here a long time ago when Indiana and Illinois were wild and full of Indians. He got wounded out here fighting and thought he was going to die, and came back to New York. My father found him there, poor and lonely and sick, and took care of him and cured him. He's been with us ever since, more than twenty years, and he manages everything and takes care of everything. He and father'll tell you I rule them, but that's just teasing. It's really Daddy John who rules."

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The mules were just behind them, and she looked back at the old man and called in her clear voice:

"I'm talking about you, Daddy Jo'n. I'm telling all about your wickedness."

Daddy John's answer came back, slow and amused:

"Wait till I get the young feller alone and I'll do some talking."

Laughing, she settled herself in her saddle and dropped her voice for David's ear:

"I think Daddy John was quite pleased we missed the New York train. It was a big company, and he couldn't have managed everything the way he can now. But we'll soon catch it up and then"—she lifted her eyebrows and smiled with charming malice at the thought of Daddy John's coming subjugation. "We ought to overtake it in three or four weeks they said in Independence."

Her companion made no answer. The cheerful conversation had suddenly taken a depressing turn. Under the spell of Miss Gillespie's loquacity and black eyes he had quite forgotten that he was only a temporary escort, to be superseded by an entire ox train, of which even now they were in pursuit. David was a dreamer, and while the young woman talked, he had seen them both in diminishing perspective, passing sociably across the plains, over the mountains, into the desert, to where California edged with a prismatic gleam the verge of the world. They were to go riding, and talking on, their acquaintance ripening gradually and delight-

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fully, while the enormous panorama of the continent unrolled behind them. And it might end in three or four weeks! The Emigrant Trail looked overwhelmingly long when he could only see himself and Leff riding over it, and California lost its color and grew as gray as a line of sea fog.

That evening's camp was pitched in a clearing near the road. The woods pressed about them, whispering and curious, thrown out and then blotted as the fires leaped or died. It was the first night's bivouac, and much noise and bustle went to its accomplishment. The young men covertly watched the Gillespie Camp. How would this ornamental party cope with such unfamiliar labors? With its combination of a feminine element which must be helpless by virtue of a rare and dainty fineness and a masculine element which could hardly be otherwise because of ill health, it would seem that all the work must devolve upon the old man.

Nothing, however, was further from the fact. The Gillespies rose to the occasion with the same dauntless buoyancy that they had shown in ever attempting the undertaking, and then blithely defying public opinion with a servant and a cow. The sense of their unfitness which had made the young men uneasy now gave way to secret wonder as the doctor pitched the tent like a backwoodsman, and his daughter showed a skilled acquaintance with campers' biscuit making.

She did it so well, so without hurry and with knowledge, that it was worth while watching her,

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if David's own cooking could have spared him. He did find time once to offer her assistance and that she refused, politely but curtly. With sleeves rolled to the elbow, her hat off, showing a roll of hair on the crown of her head separated by a neat parting from the curls that hung against her cheeks, she was absorbed in the business in hand. Evidently she was one of those persons to whom the matter of the moment is the only matter. When her biscuits were done, puffy and brown, she volunteered a preoccupied explanation:

"I've been learning to do this all winter, and I'm going to do it right."

And even then it was less an excuse for her abruptness than the announcement of a compact with herself, steadfast, almost grim.

After supper they sat by the fire, silent with fatigue, the scent of the men's tobacco on the air, the girl, with her hands clasping her knees, looking into the flames. In the shadows behind the old servant moved about. They could hear him crooning to the mules, and then catch a glimpse of his gnomelike figure bearing blankets from the wagon to the tent. There came a point where his labors seemed ended, but his activity had merely changed its direction. He came forward and said to the girl, "Missy, your bed's ready. You'd better be going."

She gave a groan and a movement of protest under which was the hopeless acquiescence of the conquered:

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"Not yet, Daddy John. I'm so comfortable sitting here."

"There's two thousand miles before you. Mustn't get tired this early. Come now, get up."

His manner held less of urgency than of quiet command. He was not dictatorial, but he was determined. The girl looked at him, sighed, rose to her knees, and then made a last appeal to her father:

"Father, *do* take my part. Daddy John's too interfering for words!"

But her father would only laugh at her discomfiture.

"All right," she said as she bent down to kiss him. "It'll be your turn in just about five minutes."

It was an accurate prophecy. The tent flaps had hardly closed on her when Daddy John attacked his employer.

"Goin' now?" he said, sternly.

The doctor knew his fate, and like his daughter offered a spiritless and intimidated resistance.

"Just let me finish this pipe," he pleaded.

Daddy John was inexorable:

"It's no way to get cured settin' round the fire puffin' on a pipe."

"Ten minutes longer?"

"We'll roll out to-morrer at seven."

"Daddy John, go to bed!"

"I got to see you both tucked in for the night before I do. Can't trust either of you."

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The doctor, beaten, knocked the ashes out of his pipe and rose with resignation.

"This is the family skeleton," he said to the young men who watched the performance with curiosity. "We're ground under the heel of Daddy John."

Then he thrust his hand through the old servant's arm and they walked toward the wagon, their heads together, laughing like a pair of boys.

A few minutes later the camp had sunk to silence. The doctor was *ved* away in the wagon and Miss Gillespie had drawn the tent flaps round the mystery of her retirement. David and Leff, too tired to pitch theirs, were dropping to sleep by the fire, when the girl's voice, low, but penetrating, roused them.

"Daddy John," it hissed in the tone children employ in their games of hide-and-seek, "Daddy John, are you awake?"

The old man, who had been stretched before the fire, rose to a sitting posture, wakeful and alert.

"Yes, Missy, what's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

"It's not that, but it's so hard to fix anything. There's no light."

Here it became evident to the watchers that Miss Gillespie's head was thrust out through the tent opening, the canvas held together below her chin. Against the pale background, it was like the vision of a decapitated head hung on a white wall.

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"What is it you want to fix?" queried the old man.

"My hair," she hissed back. "I want to put it up in papers, and I can't see."

Then the secret of Daddy John's power was revealed. He who had so remorselessly driven her to bed now showed no surprise or disapprobation at her frivolity. It was as if her wish to beautify herself received his recognition as an accepted vagary of human nature.

"Just wait a minute," he said, scrambling out of his blanket, "and I'll get you a light."

The young men could not but look on all agape with curiosity to see what the resourceful old man intended getting. Could the elaborately complete Gillespie outfit include candles? Daddy John soon ended their uncertainty. He drew from the fire a thick brand, brilliantly aflame, and carried it to the tent. Miss Gillespie's immovable head eyed it with some uneasiness.

"I've nothing to put it in," she objected, "and I can't hold it while I'm doing up my hair."

"I will," said the old man. "Get in the tent now and get your papers ready."

The head withdrew, its retirement to be immediately followed by her voice slightly muffled by the intervening canvas:

"Now I'm ready."

Daddy John cautiously parted the opening, inserted the torch, and stood outside, the canvas flaps carefully closed round his hand. With the intrusion

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of the flaming brand the tent suddenly became a rosy transparency. The young girl's figure moved in the midst of the glow, a shape of nebulous darkness, its outlines lost in the mist of enfolding draperies.

Leff, softly lifting himself on his elbows, gazed fascinated upon this discreet vision. Then looking at David he saw that he had turned over and was lying with his face on his arms. Leff leaned from the blankets and kicked him, a gentle but meaning kick on the leg.

To his surprise David lifted a wakeful face, the brow furrowed with an angry frown.

"Can't you go to sleep," he muttered crossly. "Let that girl curl her hair, and go to sleep like a man."

He dropped his face once more on his arms. Leff felt unjustly snubbed, but that did not prevent him from watching the faintly defined aura of shadow which he knew to be the dark young woman he was too shy to look at when he met her face to face. He continued watching till the brand died down to a spark and Daddy John withdrew it and went back to his fire.

## CHAPTER IV

IN their division of labor David and Leff had decided that one was to drive the wagon in the morning, the other in the afternoon. This morning it was David's turn, and as he "rolled out" at the head of the column he wondered if Leff would now ride beside Miss Gillespie and lend attentive ear to her family chronicles. But Leff was evidently not for dallying by the side of beauty. He galloped off alone, vanishing through the thin mists that hung like a fairy's draperies among the trees. The Gillespies rode at the end of the train. Even if he could not see them David felt their nearness, and it added to the contentment that always came upon him from a fair prospect lying under a smiling sky. At harmony with the moment and the larger life outside it, he leaned back against the canvas hood and let a dreamy gaze roam over the serene and opulent landscape.

Nature had always soothed and uplifted him, been like an opiate to anger or pain. As a boy his troubles had lost their sting in the consoling largeness of the open, under the shade of trees, within sight of the bowing wheat fields with the wind making patterns on the seeded grain. Now his thoughts, drifting aimless as thistle fluff, went back

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to those childish days of country freedom, when he had spent his vacations at his uncle's farm. He used to go with his widowed mother, a forlorn, soured woman who rarely smiled. He remembered his irritated wonder as she sat complaining in the ox cart, while he sent his eager glance ahead over the sprouting acres to where the log farmhouse—the haven of fulfilled dreams—stretched in its squat ugliness. He could feel again the inward lift, the flying out of his spirit in a rush of welcoming ecstasy, as he saw the woods hanging misty on the horizon and the clay bluffs, below which the slow, quiet river uncoiled its yellow length.

The days at the farm had been the happiest of his life—wonderful days of fishing and swimming, of sitting in gnarled tree boughs so still the nesting birds lost their fear and came back to their eggs. For hours he had lain in patches of shade watching the cloud shadows on the fields, and the great up-pilings when storms were coming, rising black-bosomed against the blue. There had been some dark moments to throw out these brighter ones—when chickens were killed and he had tried to stand by and look swaggeringly unconcerned as a boy should, while he sickened internally and shut his lips over pleadings for mercy. And there was an awful day when pigs were slaughtered, and no one knew that he stole away to the elder thickets by the river, burrowed deep into them, and stopped his ears against the shrill, agonized cries. He knew such weakness was shameful and hid it with a

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child's subtlety. At supper he told skillful lies to account for his pale cheeks and lost appetite.

His uncle, a kindly generous man, without children of his own, had been fond of him and sympathized with his wish for an education. It was he who had made it possible for the boy to go to a good school at Springfield and afterwards to study law. How hard he had worked in those school years, and what realms of wonder had been opened to him through books, the first books he had known, reverently handled, passionately read, that led him into unknown worlds, pointed the way to ideals that could be realized! With the law books he was not in so good an accord. But it was his chosen profession, and he approached it with zeal and high enthusiasm, a young apostle who would sell his services only for the right.

Now he smiled, looking back at his disillusion. The young apostle was jostled out of sight in the bustle of the growing town. There was no room in it for idealists who were diffident and sensitive and stood on the outside of its self-absorbed activity bewildered by the noises of life. The stream of events was very different from the pages of books. David saw men and women struggling toward strange goals, fighting for soiled and sordid prizes, and felt as he had done on the farm when the pigs were killed. And as he had fled from that ugly scene to the solacing quiet of Nature, he turned from the tumult of the little town to the West, upon whose edge he stood.

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It called him like a voice in the night. The spell of its borderless solitudes, its vast horizons, its benign silences, grew stronger as he felt himself powerless and baffled among the fighting energies of men. He dreamed of a life there, moving in unobstructed harmony. A man could begin in a fresh, clean world, and be what he wanted, be a young apostle in his own way. His boy friend who had gone to Oregon fired his imagination with stories of Marcus Whitman and his brother missionaries. David did not want to be a missionary, but he wanted, with a young man's solemn seriousness, to make his life of profit to mankind, to do the great thing without self-interest. So he had yearned and chafed while he read law and waited for clients and been as a man should to his mother, until in the summer of 1847 both his mother and his uncle had died, the latter leaving him a little fortune of four thousand dollars. Then the Emigrant Trail lay straight before him, stretching to California.

The reins lay loose on the backs of Bess and Ben and the driver's gaze was fixed on the line of trees that marked the course of an unseen river. The dream was realized, he was on the trail. He lifted his eyes to the sky where massed clouds slowly sailed and birds flew, shaking notes of song down upon him. Joe was dead, but the world was still beautiful, with the sun on the leaves and the wind on the grass, with the kindliness of honest men and the gracious presence of women.

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Dr. Gillespie was the first dweller in that unknown world east of the Alleghenies whom David had met. For this reason alone it would be a privilege to travel with him. How great the privilege was, the young man did not know till he rode by the doctor's side that afternoon and they talked together on the burning questions of the day; or the doctor talked and David hungrily listened to the voice of education and experience.

The war with Mexico was one of the first subjects. The doctor regarded it as a discreditable performance, unworthy a great and generous nation. The Mormon question followed, and on this he had much curious information. Living in the interior of New York State, he had heard Joseph Smith's history from its beginning, when he posed as "a money digger" and a seer who could read the future through "a peek stone." The recent polygamous teachings of the prophet were a matter to mention with lowered voice. Miss Gillespie, riding on the other side, was not supposed to hear, and certainly appeared to take no interest in Mexico, or Texas, or Joseph Smith and his unholy doctrines.

She made no attempt to enter into the conversation, and it seemed to David, who now and then stole a shy look at her to see if she was impressed by his intelligent comments, that she did not listen. Once or twice, when the talk was at its acutest point of interest, she struck her horse and left them, dashing on ahead at a gallop. At another time she dropped behind, and his ear, trained in

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her direction, heard her voice in alternation with Daddy John's. When she joined them after this withdrawal she was bright eyed and excited.

"Father," she called as she came up at a sharp trot, "Daddy John says the prairie's not far beyond. He says we'll see it soon—the prairie that I've been thinking of all winter!"

Her enthusiasm leaped to David and he forgot the Mexican boundaries and the polygamous Mormons, and felt like a discoverer on the prow of a ship whose keel cuts unknown seas. For the prairie was still a word of wonder. It called up visions of huge unpeopled spaces, of the flare of far flung sunsets, of the plain blackening with the buffalo, of the smoke wreath rising from the painted tepee, and the Indian, bronzed and splendid, beneath his feathered crest.

"It's there," she cried, pointing with her whip. "I can't wait. I'm going on."

David longed to go with her, but the doctor was deep in the extension of slavery and of all the subjects this burned deepest. The prairie was interesting but not when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was on the carpet. Watching the girl's receding shape, David listened respectfully and heard of the dangers and difficulties that were sure to follow on the acquisition of the great strip of Mexican territory.

All afternoon they had been passing through woods, the remnant of that mighty forest which had once stretched from the Missouri to the Alle-

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ghenies. Now its compact growth had become scattered and the sky, flaming toward sunset, shone between the tree trunks. The road ascended a slight hill and at the top of this Miss Gillespie appeared and beckoned to them. As they drew near she turned and made a sweeping gesture toward the prospect. The open prairie lay before them.

No one spoke. In mute wonderment they gazed at a country that was like a map unrolled at their feet. Still as a vision it stretched to where sky and earth fused in a golden haze. No sound or motion broke its dreaming quiet, vast, brooding, self-absorbed, a land of abundance and accomplishment, its serenity flowing to the faint horizon blur. Lines of trees, showing like veins, followed the wandering of streams, or gathered in clusters to suck the moisture of springs. Nearby a pool gleamed, a skin of gold linked by the thread of a rivulet to other pools. They shone, a line of glistening disks, imbedded in the green. Space that seemed to stretch to the edges of the world, the verdure of Eden, the silence of the unpolluted, unconquered earth were here.

So must it have looked when the beaked Viking ships nosed along the fretted shores of Rhode Island, when Columbus took the sea in his high-pooped caravals, when the Pilgrims saw the rocks and naked boughs of the New England coast. So it had been for centuries, roamed by wild men who had perished from its face and left no trace, their habitation as a shadow in the sun, their work as

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dew upon the grass, their lives as the lives of the mayfly against its immemorial antiquity.

The young man felt his spirit mount in a rush of exaltation like a prayer. Some fine and exquisite thing in himself leaped out in wild response. The vision and the dream were for a moment his. And in that moment life, all possible, all perfect, stretched before him, to end in a triumphant glory like the sunset.

The doctor took off his hat.

"The heavens declare the glory of God. All the earth doth magnify his name," he said in a low voice.

## CHAPTER V

A **BROKEN** line of moving dots, the little company trailed a slow way across this ocean of green. Nothing on its face was more insignificant than they. The birds in the trees and the bees in the flowers had a more important place in its economy. One afternoon David riding in the rear crested a ridge and saw them a mile in advance, the road stretching before and behind them in a curving thread. The tops of the wagons were like the backs of creeping insects, the mounted figures, specks of life that raised a slight tarnish of dust on the golden clearness. He wondered at their lack of consequence, unregarded particles of matter toiling across the face of the world.

This was what they suggested viewed largely from the distance. Close at hand—one of them—and it was a very different matter. They enjoyed it. If they were losing their significance as man in the aggregate, the tamer, and master, they were gaining a new importance as distinct and separate units. Convention no longer pressed on them. What law there was they carried with them, bore it before them into the wilderness like the Ark of the Covenant. But nobody wanted to be unlawful. There was no temptation to be so. Envy, hatred

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and malice and all uncharitableness had been left behind in the cities. They were a very cheerful company, suffering a little from fatigue, and with now and then a faint brush of bad temper to put leaven into the dough.

There was a Biblical simplicity in their life. They had gone back to the era when man was a nomad, at night pitching his tent by the water hole, and sleeping on skins beside the fire. When the sun rose over the rim of the prairie the camp was astir. When the stars came out in the deep blue night they sat by the cone of embers, not saying much, for in the open, spoken words lose their force and the human creature becomes a silent animal.

Each day's march was a slow, dogged, progression, broken by fierce work at the fords. The dawn was the beautiful time when the dew was caught in frosted webs on the grass. The wings of the morning were theirs as they rode over the long green swells where the dog roses grew and the leaves of the sage palpitated to silver like a woman's body quivering to the brushing of a beloved hand. Sometimes they walked, dipped into hollows where the wattled huts of the Indians edged a creek, noted the passage of earlier trains in the cropped grass at the spring mouth and the circles of dead fires.

In the afternoons it grew hot. The train, deliberate and determined as a tortoise, moved through a shimmer of light. The drone of insect voices rose in a sleepy chorus and the men drowsed in the wag-

## The Prairie

ons. Even the buoyant life of the young girl seemed to feel the stupefying weight of the prairie's deep repose. She rode at a foot pace, her hat hanging by its strings to the pommel, her hair pushed back from her beaded forehead, not bothering about her curls now.

Then came the wild blaze of the sunset and the pitching of the camp, and after supper the rest by the fire with pipe smoke in the air, and overhead the blossoming of the stars.

They were wonderful stars, troops and troops of them, dust of myriad, unnumbered worlds, and the white lights of great, bold planets staring at ours. David wondered what it looked like from up there. Was it as large, or were we just a tiny, twinkling point too? From city streets the stars had always chilled him by their awful suggestion of worlds beyond worlds circling through gulfs of space. But here in the primordial solitudes, under the solemn cope of the sky, the thought lost its terror. He seemed in harmony with the universe, part of it as was each speck of star dust. Without question or understanding he felt secure, convinced of his oneness with the great design, cradled in its infinite care.

One evening while thus dreaming he caught Susan's eye full of curious interest like a watching child's.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked.

"The stars," he answered. "They used to frighten me."

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She looked from him to the firmament as if to read a reason for his fear:

"Frighten you? Why?"

"There were so many of them, thousands and millions, wandering about up there. It was so awful to think of them, how they'd been swinging round forever and would keep on forever. And maybe there were people on some of them, and what it all was for."

She continued to look up and then said indifferently:

"It doesn't seem to me to matter much."

"It used to make me feel that nothing was any use. As if I was just a grain of dust."

Her eyes came slowly down and rested on him in a musing gaze.

"A grain of dust. I never felt that way. I shouldn't think you'd like it, but I don't see why you were afraid."

David felt uncomfortable. She was so exceedingly practical and direct that he had an unpleasant feeling she would set him down as a coward, who went about under the fear that a meteor might fall on him and strike him dead. He tried to explain:

"Not afraid actually, just sort of frozen by the idea of it all. It's so—immense, so—so crushing and terrible."

Her gaze continued, a questioning quality entering it. This gained in force by a slight tilting of her head to one side. David began to fear her next

## The Prairie

question. It might show that she regarded him not only as a coward but also as a fool.

"Perhaps you don't understand," he hazarded timidly.

"I don't think I do," she answered, then dropped her eyes and added after a moment of pondering, "I can't remember ever being really afraid of anything."

Had it been daylight she would have noticed that the young man colored. He thought guiltily of certain haunting fears of his childhood, ghosts in the attic, a banshee of which he had once heard a fearsome story, a cow that had chased him on the farm. She unconsciously assisted him from this slough of shame by saying suddenly:

"Oh, yes, I can. I remember now. I'm afraid of mad dogs."

It was not very comforting for, after all, everybody was afraid of mad dogs.

"And there was a reason for that," she went on. "I was frightened by a mad dog when I was a little girl eight years old. I was going out to spend some of my allowance. I got twenty cents a month and I had it all in pennies. And suddenly there was a great commotion in the street, everybody running and screaming and rushing into doorways. I didn't know what was the matter but I was startled and dropped my pennies. And just as I stooped to pick them up I saw the dog coming toward me, tearing, with its tongue hanging out. And, would you believe it, I gathered up all those

## The Emigrant Trail

pennies before I ran and just had time to scramble over a fence."

It was impossible not to laugh, especially with her laughter leading, her eyes narrowed to cracks through which light and humor sparkled at him.

He was beginning to know Miss Gillespie—"Miss Susan" he called her—very well. It was just like his dream, riding beside her every day, and growing more friendly, the spell of her youth, and her dark bloom, and her attentive eyes—for she was an admirable listener if her answers sometimes lacked point—drawing from him secret thoughts and hopes and aspirations he had never dared to tell before. If she did not understand him she did not laugh at him, which was enough for David with the sleepy whisperings of the prairie around him, and new, strange matter stirring in his heart and making him bold.

There was only one thing about her that was disappointing. He did not admit it to himself but it kept falling on their interviews with a depressive effect. To the call of beauty she remained unmoved. If he drew up his horse to gaze on the wonders of the sunset the waiting made her impatient. He had noticed that heat and mosquitoes would distract her attention from the hazy distances drowsing in the clear yellow of noon. The sky could flush and deepen in majestic splendors, but if she was busy over the fire and her skillets she never raised her head to look. And so it was with poetry. She did not know and did not care anything about the

## The Prairie

fine frenzies of the masters. Byron?—wrinkling up her forehead—yes, she thought she'd read something in school. Shelley?—"The Ode to the West Wind?" No, she'd never read that. What was an ode anyway? Once he recited the "Lines to an Indian Air," his voice trembling a little, for the words were almost sacred.

She pondered for a space and then said:

"What are champak odors?"

David didn't know. He had never thought of inquiring.

"Isn't that odd," she murmured. "That would have been the first thing I would have wanted to know. Champak? I suppose it's some kind of a flower—something like a magnolia. It has a sound like a magnolia."

A lively imagination was evidently not one of Miss Gillespie's possessions.

Late one afternoon, riding some distance in front of the train, she and David had seen an Indian loping by on his pony. It was not an unusual sight. Many Indians had visited their camp and at the crossing of the Kaw they had come upon an entire village in transit to the summer hunting grounds. But there was something in this lone figure, moving solitary through the evening glow, that put him in accord with the landscape's solemn beauty, retouched him with his lost magnificence. In buckskins black with filth, his blanket a tattered rag, an ancient rifle across his saddle, the undying picturesqueness of the red man was his.

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"Look," said David, his imagination fired.  
"Look at that Indian."

The savage saw them and turned a face of melancholy dignity upon them, giving forth a deep "How, How."

"He's a very dirty Indian," said Susan, sweeping him with a glance of disfavor.

David did not hear her. He looked back to watch the lonely figure as it rode away over the swells. It seemed to him to be riding into the past, the lordly past, when the red man owned the land and the fruits thereof.

"Look at him as he rides away," he said. "Can't you seem to see him coming home from a battle with his face streaked with vermillion and his war bonnet on? He'd be solemn and grand with the wet scalps dripping at his belt. When they saw him coming his squaws would come out in front of the lodges and begin to sing the war chant."

"Squaws!" in a tone of disgust. "That's as bad as the Mormons."

The muse had possession of David and a regard for monogamy was not sufficient to stay his noble rage.

"And think how he felt! All this was his, the pale face hadn't come. He'd fought his enemies for it and driven them back. In the cool of the evening when he was riding home he could look out for miles and miles, clear to the horizon, and know he was the King of it all. Just think what it was to feel like that! And far away he could see the

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smoke of his village and know that they were waiting for the return of the chief."

"Chief!" with even greater emphasis, "that poor dirty creature a *chief!*"

The muse relinquished her hold. The young man explained, not with impatience, but as one mortified by a betrayal into foolish enthusiasm:

"I didn't mean that *he* was a chief. I was just imagining."

"Oh," with the falling inflexion of comprehension. "You often imagine, don't you? Let's ride on to where the road goes down into that hollow."

They rode on in silence, both slightly chagrined, for if David found it trying to have his fine flights checked, Susan was annoyed when she said things that made him wear a look of forbearing patience. She may not have had much imagination, but she had a very observing eye, and could have startled not only David, but her father by the shrewdness with which she read faces.

The road sloped to a hollow where the mottled trunks of cotton woods stood in a group round the dimpling face of a spring. With well-moistened roots the grass grew long and rich. Here was the place for the night's camp. They would wait till the train came up. And even as they rested on this comfortable thought they saw between the leaves the canvas top of a wagon.

The meeting of trains was one of the excitements of life on the Emigrant Trail. Sometimes they were acquaintances made in the wet days at Inde-

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pendence, sometimes strangers who had come by way of St. Joseph. Then the encountering parties eyed one another with candid curiosity and from each came the greeting of the plains, "Be you for Oregon or California?"

The present party was for Oregon from Missouri, six weeks on the road. They were a family, traveling alone, having dropped out of the company with which they had started. The man, a gaunt and grizzled creature, with long hair and ragged beard, was unyoking his oxen, while the woman bent over the fire which crackled beneath her hands. She was as lean as he, shapeless, saffron-skinned and wrinkled, but evidently younger than she looked. The brood of tow-headed children round her ran from a girl of fourteen to a baby, just toddling, a fat, solemn-eyed cherub, almost naked, with a golden fluff of hair.

At sight of him Susan drew up, the unthinking serenity of her face suddenly concentrated into a hunger of admiration, a look which changed her, focused her careless happiness into a pointed delight.

"Look at the baby," she said quickly, "a lovely fat baby with curls," then slid off her horse and went toward them.

The woman drew back staring. The children ran to her, frightened as young rabbits, and hid behind her skirts. Only the baby, grave and unalarmed, stood his ground and Susan snatched him up. Then the mother smiled, gratified and reas-

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sured. She had no upper front teeth, and the wide toothless grin gave her a look of old age that had in it a curious suggestion of debasement.

David stood by his horse, making no move to come forward. The party repelled him. They were not only uncouth and uncomely, but they were dirty. Dirt on an Indian was, so to speak, dirt in its place—but unwashed women and children—! His gorge rose at it. And Susan, always dainty as a pink, seemed entirely indifferent to it. The children, with unkempt hair and legs caked in mud, crowded about her, and as she held the baby against her chest, her glance dwelt on the woman's face, with no more consciousness of its ugliness than when she looked over the prairie there was consciousness of Nature's supreme perfection.

On the way back to camp he asked her about it. Why, if she objected to the Indian's dirt, had she been oblivious to that of the women and the children? He put it judicially, with impersonal clearness as became a lawyer. She looked puzzled, then laughed, her fresh, unusual laugh:

"I'm sure I don't know. I don't know why I do everything or why I like this thing and don't like that. I don't always have a reason, or if I do I don't stop to think what it is. I just do things because I want to and feel them because I can't help it. I like children and so I wanted to talk to them and hear about them from their mother."

"But would your liking for them make you blind to such a thing as dirt?"

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"I don't know. Maybe it would. When you're interested in anything or anybody small things don't matter."

"Small things! Those children were a sight!"

"Yes, poor little brats! No one had washed the baby for weeks. The woman said she was too tired to bother and it wouldn't bathe in the creeks with the other children, so they let it go. If we kept near them I could wash it for her. I could borrow it and wash it every morning. But there's no use thinking about it as we'll pass them to-morrow. Wasn't it a darling with little golden rings of hair and eyes like pieces of blue glass?"

She sighed, relinquishing the thought of the baby's morning bath with pensive regret. David could not understand it, but decided as Susan felt that way it must be the right way for a woman to feel. He was falling in love, but he was certainly not falling in love—as students of a later date have put it—with "a projection of his own personality."

## CHAPTER VI

THEY had passed the Kaw River and were now bearing on toward the Vermilion. Beyond that would be the Big and then the Little Blue and soon after the Platte where "The Great Medicine way of the Pale Face" bent straight to the westward. The country continued the same and over its suave undulations the long trail wound, sinking to the hollows, threading clumps of cotton-wood and and alder, lying white along the spine of bolder ridges.

Each day they grew more accustomed to their gypsy life. The prairie had begun to absorb them, cut them off from the influences of the old setting, break them to its will. They were going back over the footsteps of the race, returning to aboriginal conditions, with their backs to the social life of communities and their faces to the wild. Independence seemed a long way behind, California so remote that it was like thinking of Heaven when one was on earth, well fed and well faring. Their immediate surroundings began to make their world, they subsided into the encompassing immensity, unconsciously eliminating thoughts, words, habits, that did not harmonize with its uncomplicated design.

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On Sundays they halted and "lay off" all day. This was Dr. Gillespie's wish. He had told the young men at the start and they had agreed. It would be a good thing to have a day off for washing and general "redding up." But the doctor had other intentions. In his own words, he "kept the Sabbath," and each Sunday morning read the service of the Episcopal Church. Early in their acquaintance David had discovered that his new friend was religious; "a God-fearing man" was the term the doctor had used to describe himself. David, who had only seen the hysterical fanaticism of frontier revivals now for the first time encountered the sincere, unquestioning piety of a spiritual nature. The doctor's God was an all-pervading presence, who went before him as pillar of fire or cloud. Once speaking to the young man of the security of his belief in the Divine protection, he had quoted a line which recurred to David over and over—in the freshness of the morning, in the hot hush of midday, and in the night when the stars were out: "Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

Overcome by shyness the young men had stayed away from the first Sunday's service. David had gone hunting, feeling that to sit near by and not attend would offer a slight to the doctor. No such scruples restrained Leff, who squatted on his heels at the edge of the creek, washing his linen and listening over his shoulder. By the second Sunday they had mastered their bashfulness and both came

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shuffling their hats in awkward hands and sitting side by side on a log. Leff, who had never been to church in his life, was inclined to treat the occasion as one for furtive amusement, at intervals casting a sidelong look at his companion, which, on encouragement, would have developed into a wink. David had no desire to exchange glances of derisive comment. He was profoundly moved. The sonorous words, the solemn appeal for strength under temptation, the pleading for mercy with that stern, avenging presence who had said, "I, the Lord thy God am a jealous God," awed him, touched the same chord that Nature touched and caused an exaltation less exquisite but more inspiring.

The light fell flickering through the leaves of the cotton-woods on the doctor's gray head. He looked up from his book, for he knew the words by heart, and his quiet eyes dwelt on the distance swimming in morning light. His friend, the old servant, stood behind him, a picturesque figure in fringed buckskin shirt and moccasined feet. He held his battered hat in his hand, and his head with its spare locks of grizzled hair was reverently bowed. He neither spoke nor moved. It was Susan's voice who repeated the creed and breathed out a low "We beseech thee to hear us, Good Lord."

The tents and the wagons were behind her and back of them the long green splendors of the prairie. Flecks of sun danced over her figure, shot back and forth from her skirt to her hair as whiffs of wind caught the upper branches of the cotton

## The Emigrant Trail

woods. She had been sitting on the mess chest, but when the reading of the Litany began she slipped to her knees, and with head inclined answered the responses, her hands lightly clasped resting against her breast.

David, who had been looking at her, dropped his eyes as from a sight no man should see. To admire her at this moment, shut away in the sanctuary of holy thoughts, was a sacrilege. Men and their passions should stand outside in that sacred hour when a woman is at prayer. Leff had no such high fancies. He only knew the sight of Susan made him dumb and drove away all the wits he had. Now she looked so aloof, so far removed from all accustomed things, that the sense of her remoteness added gloom to his embarrassment. He twisted a blade of grass in his freckled hands and wished that the service would soon end.

The cotton-wood leaves made a light, dry pattering as if rain drops were falling. From the picketed animals, looping their trail ropes over the grass, came a sound of low, continuous cropping. The hum of insects swelled and sank, full of sudden life, then drowsily dying away as though the spurt of energy had faded in the hour's discouraging languor. The doctor's voice detached itself from this pastoral chorus intoning the laws that God gave Moses when he was conducting a stiff-necked and rebellious people through a wilderness:

"Thou shalt do no murder.

"Thou shalt not commit adultery.

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"Thou shalt not steal."

And to each command Susan's was the only voice that answered, falling sweet and delicately clear on the silence:

"Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law."

Susan praying for power to resist such scarlet sins! It was fantastic and David wished he dared join his voice to hers and not let her kneel there alone as if hers was the only soul that needed strengthening. Susan, the young, the innocent-eyed, the pure.

He had come again the next Sunday—Leff went hunting that morning—and felt that some day, not so far distant, he would dare to kneel too and respond. He thought of it when alone, another port that his dreams were taking him to—his voice and Susan's, the bass and the treble, strength and sweetness, symbol of the male and the female, united in one harmonious strain that would stream upward to the throne of the God who, watching over them, neither slumbered nor slept.

It was on the afternoon of this Sunday, that David started out to walk to an Indian village, of which a passing emigrant had told him, lying in a hollow a mile to the westward. He left the camp sunk in the somnolence of its seventh-day rest, Susan not to be seen anywhere, Leff asleep under the wagon, the doctor writing his diary in the shade of the cotton-woods, and Daddy John lying on the grass among the whiteness of the week's wash.

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The hour was hot and breathless, the middle distance quivering through a heat haze, and the remoter reaches of the prairie an opalescent blur.

The Indian village was deserted and he wandered through its scattered lodges of saplings wattled with the peeled bark of willows. The Indians had not long departed. The ash of their fires was still warm, tufts of buffalo hair and bright scraps of calico were caught on the bushes, yet it already had an air of desolation, the bleakness of the human habitation when the dweller has crossed the threshold and gone.

Shadows were filling the hollow like a thin cold wine rising on the edges of a cup, when he left it and gained the upper levels. Doubtful of his course he stood for a moment looking about, conscious of a curious change in the prospect, a deepening of its colors, a stillness no longer dreamy, but heavy with suspense. The sky was sapphire clear, but on the western horizon a rampart of cloud edged up, gray and ominous, against the blue. As he looked it mounted, unrolled and expanded, swelling into forms of monstrous aggression. A faint air, fresh and damp, passed across the grass, and the clouds swept, like smoke from a world on fire, over the sun.

With the sudden darkening, dread fell on the face of the land. It came first in a hush, like a holding of the breath, attentive, listening, expectant. Then this broke and a quiver, the goose-flesh thrill of fear, stirred across the long ridges. The small,

## The Prairie

close growing leafage cowered, a frightened trembling seized the trees. David saw the sweep of the landscape growing black under the blackness above. He began to run, the sky sinking lower like a lid shutting down on the earth. He thought that it was hard to get it on right, for in front of him a line of blue light shone over which the lid had not yet been pressed down. The ground was pale with the whitened tops of upturned leaves, the high branches of the cotton-woods whipping back and forth in wild agitation. He felt the first large drop far apart, falling with a reluctant splash, and he ran, a tiny figure in the tragic and tremendous scene.

When he reached the camp the rush of the rain had begun. Through a network of boughs he caught the red eye of the fire and beyond had a vision of stampeding mules with the men in pursuit. Then crashing through the bushes he saw why the fire still burned—Susan was holding an umbrella over it, the rain spitting in the hot ash, a pan of biscuits balanced in the middle. Behind her the tent, one side concave, the other bellying out from restraining pegs, leaped and jerked at its moorings. A rumble of thunder rolled across the sky and the rain came at them in a slanting wall.

"We're going to have biscuits for supper if the skies fall," Susan shouted at him, and he had a glimpse of her face, touched with firelight, laughing under the roof of the umbrella.

A furious burst of wind cut off his answer, the

## The Emigrant Trail

blue glare of lightning suddenly drenched them, and the crackling of thunder tore a path across the sky. The umbrella was wrenched from Susan and her wail as the biscuits fell pierced the tumult with the thin, futile note of human dole. He had no time to help her, for the tent with an exultant wrench tore itself free on one side, a canvas wing boisterously leaping, while the water dived in at the blankets. As he sped to its rescue he had an impression of the umbrella, handle up, filling with water like a large black bowl and Susan groveling in the ashes for her biscuits.

"The tent's going," he cried back; "all your things will be soaked. Never mind the supper, come and help me." And it seemed in this moment of tumult, that Susan ceased to be a woman to be cared for and protected and became his equal, fighting with him against the forces of the primitive world. The traditions of her helplessness were stripped from her, and he called her to his aid as the cave man called his woman when the storm fell on their bivouac.

They seized on the leaping canvas, he feeling in the water for the tent pegs, she snatching at the ropes. He tried to direct her, shouting orders, which were beaten down in the stuttering explosion of the thunder. Once a furious gust sent her against him. The wind wrapped her damp skirts round him and he felt her body soft and pliable. The grasp of her hands was tight on his arms and close to his ear he heard her laughing. For a sec-

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and the quick pulse of the lightning showed her to him, her hair glued to her cheeks, her wet bodice like a thin web molding her shoulders, and as the darkness shut her out he again heard her laughter broken by panting breaths.

"Isn't it glorious," she cried, struggling away from him. "That nearly took me off my feet. My skirts are all twined round you."

They got the tent down, writhing and leaping like a live thing frantic to escape. Conquered, a soaked mass on the ground, he pulled the bedding from beneath it and she grasped the blankets in her arms and ran for the wagon. She went against the rain, leaning forward on it, her skirts torn back and whipped up by the wind into curling eddies. Her head, the hair pressed flat to it, was sleek and wet as a seal's, and as she ran she turned and looked at him over her shoulder, a wild, radiant look that he never forgot.

They sat in the wagon and watched the storm. Soaked and tired they curled up by the rear opening while the rain threshed against the canvas and dribblets of water came running down the sides. The noise made talking difficult and they drew close together exclaiming as the livid lightning saturated the scene, and holding their breaths when the thunder broke and split its furious way over their heads. They watched it, conscious each in the other of an increased comforting friendliness, a gracious reassurance where Nature's transports made man seem so small.

## CHAPTER VII

THE Vermilion was swollen. With a bluff on one side and a wide bottom on the other it ran a prosperous, busy stream, brown and ripple-ridged. The trail lay like a line of tape along the high land, then down the slope, and across the bottom to the river. Here it seemed to slip under the current and come up on the other side where it climbed a steep bank, and thence went on, thin and pale, rising and dropping to the ridges till the tape became a thread.

They had been waiting a day for the water to fail. Camped in the bottom under a scattering of trees with the animals grazing on the juicy river grass and the song of the stream in their ears, it had been a welcome break in the monotony of the march. There was always a choice of occupation in these breathing spells. On the first afternoon everybody had sat on the grass at the tent doors mending. To-day the men had revolted and wandered off but Susan continued industriously intent over patches and darns. She sat on a log, her spools and scissors beside her, billows of homespun and calico about her feet.

As she sewed she sung in a low undertone, not looking up. Beyond her in the shade Daddy John mended a piece of harness. Daddy John was not

## The Prairie

a garrulous person and when she paused in her sewing to speak to him, he answered with a monosyllable. It was one of the old man's self-appointed duties to watch over her when the others were absent. If he did not talk much to his "Missy" he kept a vigilant eye upon her, and to-day he squatted in the shade beside her because the doctor and David had gone after antelope and Leff was off somewhere on an excursion of his own.

Susan, sewing, her face grave above her work, was not as pretty as Susan smiling. She drew her eyebrows, thick and black, low over her eyes with her habitual concentration in the occupation of the moment, and her lips, pressed together, pouted, but not the disarming baby pout which, when she was angry, made one forget the sullenness of her brows. Her looks however, were of that fortunate kind which lose nothing from the open air and large backgrounds. Dress added but little to such attractions as she had. Fineness and elegance were not hers, but her healthy, ripe brownness fitted into this sylvan setting where the city beauty would have soon become a pale and draggled thing.

The robust blood of her French Canadian forebears was quickening to the call of the trail. Was it the spirit of her adventurous ancestors that made her feel a kinship with the wild, an indifference to its privations, a joy in its rude liberty? She was thinner, but stronger and more vigorous than when the train had started. She talked less and yet her whole being seemed more vibrantly alive, her

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glance to have gained the gleaming quietness of those whose eyes scan vague horizons. She who had been heavy on her feet now stepped with a light noiselessness, and her body showed its full woman's outlines straightened and lengthened to the litheness of a boy. Her father noticed that the Gallic strain in her seemed to be crowding out the other. In Rochester, under city roofs, she had been at least half his. On the trail, with the arch of the sky above and the illimitable earth around her, she was throwing back to her mother's people.

Susan herself had no interest in these atavistic developments. She was a healthy, uncomplicated, young animal, and she was enjoying herself as she had never done before. Behind her the life of Rochester stretched in a tranquil perspective of dull and colorless routine. Nothing had ever happened. From her seventh year her father and Daddy John had brought her up, made her the pet and plaything of their lonely lives, rejoiced in her, wondered at her, delighted in the imperious ways she had learned from their spoiling. There had been teachers to educate her, but it was an open secret that they had not taught her much. Susan did not take kindly to books. No one had ever been able to teach her how to cipher and learning the piano had been a fruitless effort abandoned in her fifteenth year. It is only just to her to say that she had her little talents. She was an excellent housekeeper, and she could cook certain dishes better, the doctor

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said, than the chefs in some of the fine restaurants in New York City.

But what were the sober pleasures of housekeeping and cooking beside the rough, deep-living exhilaration of gypsy life on the plains! She looked back pityingly at those days of stagnant peace, compared the entertainment to be extracted from embroidering a petticoat frill to the exultant joy of a ride in the morning over the green swells. Who would sip tea in the close curtained primness of the parlor when they could crouch by the camp fire and eat a corn cake baked on the ashes or drink brown coffee from a tin cup? And her buffalo robe on the ground, the blanket tucked round her shoulder, the rustling of furtive animal life in the grass outside the tent wall—was there any comparison between its comfort and that of her narrow white bed at home, between the clean sheets of which she had snuggled so luxuriously?

There were other matters of charm and interest in the wilderness, matters that Susan did not speak about—hardly admitted to herself, for she was a modest maid. She had never yet had a lover; no man had ever kissed her or held her hand longer than a cool, impersonal respect dictated. In Rochester no one had turned to look at the doctor's daughter as she walked by, for, in truth, there were many girls much prettier and more piquant than Susan Gillespie. But, nevertheless, she had had her dreams about the lover that some day was to come and carry her off under a wreath of orange blos-

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soms and a white veil. She did not aspire to a struggling hoard of suitors, but she thought it would be only fair and entirely within the realm of the possible if she had two; most girls had two.

Now she felt the secret elation that follows on the dream realized. She did not tell herself that David and Leff were in love with her. She would have regarded all speculations on such a sacred subject as low and unmaidenly. But the consciousness of it permeated her being with a gratified sense of her worth as a woman. It made her feel her value. Like all girls of her primitive kind she estimated herself not by her own measure, but by the measure of a man's love for her. Now that men admired her she felt that she was taking her place as a unit of importance. Her sense of achievement in this advent of the desiring male was not alone pleased vanity, it went back through the ages to the time when woman won her food and clothing, her right to exist, through the power of her sex, when she whose attraction was strongest had the best corner by the fire, the choicest titbit from the hunt, and the strongest man to fight off rivals and keep her for himself.

Her perceptions, never before exercised on these subjects, were singularly keen. Neither of the young men had spoken a word of love to her, yet she intuitively knew that they were both under her spell. The young girl so stupid at her books, who could never learn arithmetic and found history a bore, had a deeper intelligence in the reading of the hu-

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man heart than anyone of the party. More than the doctor who was a man of education, more than David who thought so much and loved to read, more than Leff who, if his brain was not sharp, might be supposed to have accumulated some slight store of experience, more than Daddy John who was old and had the hoar of worldly knowledge upon him. Compared to her they were as novices to a nun who has made an excursion into the world and taken a bite from the apple Eve threw away.

She had no especial liking for Leff. It amused her to torment him, to look at him with an artless, inquiring stare when he was overwhelmed by confusion and did not know what to say. When she felt that he had endured sufficiently she would become merciful, drop her eyes, and end what was to her an encounter that added a new zest to her sense of growing power.

With David it was different. Here, too, she felt her mastery, but the slave was of another fiber. He acknowledged her rule, but he was neither clumsy nor dumb before her. She respected his intelligence and felt a secret jealousy of it, as of a part of him which must always be beyond her influence. His devotion was a very dear and gracious thing and she was proud that he should care for her. Love had not awakened in her, but sometimes when she was with him, her admiration softened to a warm, invading gentleness, a sense of weakness glad of itself, happy to acknowledge his greater strength. Had David's intuitions been as

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true as hers he would have known when these moments came and spoken the words. But on such matters he had no intuitions, was a mere, unenlightened male trying to win a woman by standing at a distance and kneeling in timid worship.

Now sitting, sewing on the log, Susan heard a step on the gravel, and without looking up gave it a moment's attention and knew it was Leff's. She began to sing softly, with an air of abstraction. The steps drew near her, she noted that they lagged as they approached, finally stopped. She gave her work a last, lingering glance and raised her eyes slowly as if politeness warred with disinclination. Leff was standing before her, scowling at her as at an object of especial enmity. He carried a small tin pail full of wild strawberries. She saw it at once, but forebore looking at it, keeping her eyes on his face, up which the red color ran.

"Oh, Leff," she said with careless amiability, "so you've got back."

Leff grunted an agreeing monosyllable and moved the strawberries to a position where they intruded into the conversation like a punctuation mark in the middle of a sentence. Her glance dropped to the pail, and she looked at it saying nothing, amused to thus tease him and covertly note his hopeless and impotent writhings.

He thrust the pail almost against her knee and she was forced to say:

"What fine strawberries, a whole pail full. Can I have one?"

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He nodded and she made a careful choice, giving the pail a little shake to stir its contents. Leff glared at the top of her head where her hair was twisted into a rough knot.

"Thank you," she said. "I've found a beauty. You must have been all afternoon getting so many," and she put the strawberry in her mouth and picked up her sewing as though that ended the matter.

Leff stood shifting from foot to foot, hoping that she might extend a helping hand.

"The river's falling," he said at length. "It's gone down two feet. We can cross this evening."

"Then I must hurry and finish my mending."

She evidently was not going to extend so much as the tip of a finger. In his bashful misery his mind worked suddenly and unexpectedly.

"I've got to go and get the horses," he said, and, setting the pail on the log beside her, turned and ran.

But Susan was prepared for this move. It was what she expected.

"Oh, Leff," she called, lazily. "Come back, you've forgotten your strawberries."

And he had to come back, furious and helpless, he had to come back. He had not courage for a word, did not dare even to meet her gaze lifted mildly to his. He snatched up the pail and lurched off and Susan returned to her sewing, smiling to herself.

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"He wanted you to take the berries," said Daddy John, who had been watching.

"Did he?" she queried with the raised brows of innocent surprise. "Why didn't he say so?"

"Too bashful!"

"He couldn't expect me to take them unless he offered them."

"I should think you'd have guessed it."

She laughed at this, dropping her sewing and looking at the old man with eyes almost shut.

"Oh, Daddy John," she gurgled. "How clever you are!"

An hour later they began the crossing. The ford of the Vermilion was one of the most difficult between the Kaw and the Platte Valley. After threading the swift, brown current, the trail zigzagged up a clay bank, channeled into deep ruts by the spring's fleet of prairie schooners. It would be a hard pull to get the doctor's wagon up and David rode over with Bess and Ben to double up with the mules. It was late afternoon and the bottom lay below the sunshine steeped in a still transparent light, where every tint had its own pure value. The air was growing cool after a noon of blistering heat and from an unseen backwater frogs had already begun a hoarse, tentative chanting.

The big wagon had already crossed when David on Bess, with Ben at the end of a trail rope, started into the stream. Susan watched him go, his tall, high-shouldered figure astride the mare's broad back, one arm flung outward with the rope dipping

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to the current. As the water rose round his feet, he gave a wild, jubilant shout and went forward, plowing deeper with every step, his cries swelling over the river's low song.

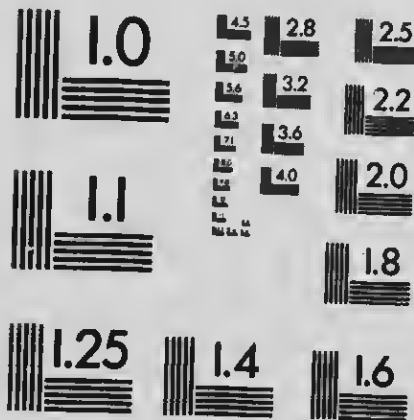
Susan, left on the near bank to wait till the wagons were drawn up, lifted herself into the crotch of a cottonwood tree. The pastoral simplicity of the scene, the men and animals moving through the silver-threaded water with the wagons waiting and after the work the camp to be pitched, exhilarated her with a conviction of true living, of existence flowing naturally as the stream. And for the moment David seemed the great figure in hers. With a thrill at her heart she watched him receding through the open wash of air and water, shouting in the jubilation of his manhood. The mischievous pleasure of her coqueties was forgotten, and in a rush of glad confidence she felt a woman's pride in him. This was the way she should see the man who was to win her, not in stuffy rooms, not dressed in stiff, ungainly clothes, not saying unmeaning things to fill the time. This tale of laborious days bounded by the fires of sunrise and sunset, this struggle with the primal forces of storm and flood, this passage across a panorama unrolling in ever wilder majesty, was the setting for her love idyl. The joy of her mounting spirit broke out in an answering cry that flew across the river to David like the call of an animal to its mate.

She watched them yoking on Bess and Ben and men and animals bracing their energies for the



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## The Emigrant Trail

start. David drove the horses, walking beside them, the reins held loose in hands that made upward, urging gestures as the team breasted the ascent. It was a savage pull. The valiant little mules bent their necks, the horses straining, iron muscled, hoofs grinding down to the solid clay. The first charge carried them half way up, then there was a moment of slackened effort, a relaxing, recuperative breath, and the wagon came to a standstill. Leff ran for the back, shouting a warning. The branch he thrust under the wheel was ground to splinters and the animals grew rigid in their effort to resist the backward drag.

Leff gripped the wheel, cursing, his hands knotted round the spokes, his back taut and muscle-ridged under the thin shirt. The cracked voice of Daddy John came from beyond the canvas hood and David's urgent cries filled the air. The mules, necks outstretched, almost squatting in the agony of their endeavor, held their ground, but could do no more. Bess and Ben began to plunge in a welter of slapping harness as the wheels ground slowly downward.

Susan watched, her neck craned, her eyes staring. Her sentimental thoughts had vanished. She was one with the struggling men and beasts, lending her vigor to theirs. Her eyes were on David, waiting to see him dominate them like a general carrying his troops to victory. She could see him, arms outstretched, haranguing his horses as if they were human beings, but not using the whip. A burst of

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astonishing profanity came from Leff and she heard him cry:

"Lay it on to 'em, David. What's the matter with you? Beat 'em like hell."

The mule drivers used a long-lashed whip which could raise a welt on the thickest hide. David flung the lash afar and brought it down on Ben's back. The horse leaped as if he had been burned, jerking ahead of his mate, and rearing in a madness of unaccustomed pain. With a passionate gesture David threw the whip down.

Susan saw that it was not accidental. She gave a sound of angry astonishment and stood up in the crotch of the tree.

"David!" she screamed, but he did not hear, and then louder: "Daddy John, quick, the whip, he's dropped it."

The old man came running round the back of the wagon, quick and eager as a gnome. He snatched up the whip and let the lash curl outward with a hissing rush. It flashed like the flickering dart of a snake's tongue, struck, and the horses sprang forward. It curled again, hung suspended for the fraction of a moment, then licked along the sweating flanks, and horses and mules, bowed in a supreme effort, wrenched the wagon upward. Susan slid from her perch, feeling a sudden apathy, not only as from a tension snapped, but as the result of a backwash of disillusion. David was no longer the proud conqueror, the driver of man and brute. The tide of pride had ebbed.

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Later, when the camp was pitched and she was building the fire, he came to offer her some wood which was scarce on this side of the river. He knelt to help her, and, his face close to hers, she said in a low voice:

"Why did you throw the whip down?"

He reddened consciously and looked quickly at her, a look that was apprehensive as if ready to meet an accusation.

"I saw you do it," she said, expecting a denial.

"Yes, I did it," he answered. "I wasn't going to say I didn't."

"Why did you?" she repeated.

"I can't beat a dumb brute when it's doing its best," he said, looking away from her, shy and ashamed.

"But the wagon would have gone down to the bottom of the hill. It was going."

"What would that have mattered? We could have taken some of the things out and carried them up afterwards. When a horse does his best for you, what's the sense of beating the life out of him when the load's too heavy. I can't do that."

"Was that why you threw it down?"

He nodded.

"You'd rather have carried the things up?"

"Yes."

She laid the sticks one on the other without replying and he said with a touch of pleading in his tone:

"You understand that, don't you?"

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She answered quickly:

"Oh, of course, perfectly."

But nevertheless she did not quite. Daddy John's action was the one she really did understand, and she even understood why Leff swore so violently.

## CHAPTER VIII

It was Sunday again and they lay encamped near the Little Blue. The country was changing, the trees growing thin and scattered and sandy areas were cropping up through the trail. At night they unfolded the maps and holding them to the firelight measured the distance to the valley of the Platte. Once there the first stage of the journey would be over. When they started from Independence the Platte had shone to the eyes of their imaginations as a threadlike streak almost as far away as California. Now they would soon be there. At sunset they stood on eminences and pointed in its direction, let their mental vision conjure up Grand Island and sweep forward to the buffalo-darkened plains and the river sunk in its league-wide bottom, even peered still further and saw Fort Laramie, a faint, white dot against the cloudy peaks of mountains.

The afternoon was hot and the camp drowsed. Susan moving away from it was the one point of animation in the encircling quietude. She was not in spirit with its lethargy, stepping rapidly in a stirring of light skirts, her hat held by one string, fanning back and forth from her hanging hand. Her goal was a spring hidden in a small arroyo that

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made a twisted crease in the land's level face. It was a little dell in which the beauty they were leaving had taken a last stand, decked the ground with a pied growth of flowers, spread a checkered roof of loughs against the sun. From a shelf on one side the spring bubbled, clear as glass, its waters caught and held quivering in a natural basin of rock.

As she slipped over the margin, the scents imprisoned in the sheltered depths rose to meet her, a sweet, cool tide of fragrance into which she sank. After the glaring heat above it was like stepping into a perfumed bath. She lay by the spring, her hands clasped behind her head, looking up at the trees. The segments of sky between the boughs were as blue as a turquoise and in this thick intense color the little leaves seemed as if inlaid. Then a breeze came and the bits of inlaying shook loose and trembled into silvery confusion. Small secretive noises came from them as if minute confidences were passing from bough to bough, and through their murmurous undertone the drip of the spring fell with a thin, musical tinkle.

Nature was dreaming and Susan dreamed with it. But her dreaming had a certain definiteness, a distinct thought sustained its diffused content. She was not self-consciously thinking of her lovers, not congratulating herself on their acquirement, but the consciousness that she had achieved them lay graciously round her heart, gave the soft satisfaction to her musings that comes to one who has accom-

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plished a duty. With all modesty she felt the gratification of the being who approaches his Destiny. She had advanced a step in her journey as a woman.

A hail from the bank above broke upon her reverie, but when she saw it was David, she sat up smiling. That he should find out her hiding place without word or sign from her was an action right and fitting. It was a move in the prehistoric game of flight and pursuit, in which they had engaged without comprehension and with the intense earnestness of children at their play. David dropped down beside her, a spray of wild roses in his hand, and began at once to chide her for thus stealing away. Did she not remember they were in the country of the Pawnees, the greatest thieves on the plains? It was not safe to stray alone from the camp.

Susan smiled:

"The Pawnees steal horses, but I never heard anyone say they stole girls."

"They steal anything they can get," said the simple young man.

"Oh, David,"—now she was laughing—"so they might steal me if they couldn't get a horse, or a blanket, or a side of bacon! Next time I go wandering I'll take the bacon with me and then I'll be perfectly safe."

"Your father wouldn't like it. I've heard him tell you not to go off this way alone."

"Well, who could I take? I don't like to ask

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father to go out into the sun and Daddy John was asleep, and Leff—I didn't see Leff anywhere."

"I was there," he said, dropping his eyes.

"You were under the wagon reading Byron. I wouldn't for the world take you away from Byron."

She looked at him with a candid smile, her eyes above it dancing with delighted relish in her teasing.

"I would have come in a minute," he said low, sweeping the surface of the spring with the spray of roses. Susan's look dwelt on him, gently thoughtful in its expression in case he should look up and catch it.

"Leave Byron," she said, "leave the Isles of Greece where that lady, whose name I've forgotten, 'loved and sung,' and walk in the sun with me just because I wanted to see this spring! Oh, David, I would never ask it of you."

"You know I would have loved to do it."

"You would have been polite enough to do it. You're always polite."

"I would have done it because I wanted to," said the victim with the note of exasperation in his voice.

She stretched her hand forward and very gently took the branch of roses from him.

"Don't tell stories," she said in the cajoling voice used to children. "This is Sunday."

"I never tell stories," he answered, goaded to open irritation, "on Sunday or any other day. You

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know I would have liked to come with you and Byron could have—have——”

“What?” the branch upright in her hand.

“Gone to the devil!”

“David!” in horror, “I never thought *you’d* talk that way.”

She gave the branch a shake and a shower of drops fell on him.

“There, that’s to cool your anger. For I see you’re angry though I haven’t got the least idea what it’s about.”

He made no answer, wounded by her lack of understanding. She moved the rose spray against her face, inhaling its fragrance, and watching him through the leaves. After a moment she said with a questioning inflection:

“You *were* angry?”

He gave her a quick glance, met her eyes, shining between the duller luster of the leaves, and suddenly dumb before their innocent provocation, turned his head away. The sense of his disturbance trembled on the air and Susan’s smile died. She dropped the branch, trailing it lightly across the water, and wondering at the confusion that had so abruptly upset her self-confident gayety. Held in inexplicable embarrassment she could think of nothing to say. It was he who broke the silence with a change of subject:

“In a few days more we’ll be at the Platte. When we started that seemed as if it was half the journey, didn’t it?”

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"We'll get there just about a month from the time we left Independence. Before we started I thought a month out of doors this way would be like a year. But it really hasn't seemed long at all. I suppose it's because I've enjoyed it so."

This again stirred him. Was there any hope that his presence might have been the cause of some small fraction of that enjoyment? He put out a timid feeler:

"I wonder why you enjoyed it. Perhaps Leff and I amused you a little."

It was certainly a humble enough remark, but it caused a slight stiffening and withdrawal in the young girl. She instinctively felt the pleading for commendation and resented it. It was as if a slave, upon whose neck her foot rested, were to squirm round and recommend himself to her tolerance. David, trying to extort from her flattering admissions, roused a determination to keep the slave with his face in the dust.

"I just like being out of doors," she said carelessly. "And it's all the more odd as I was always wanting to hurry on and catch up the large train."

This was a grinding in of the heel. The large train into which the Gillespies were to be absorbed and an end brought to their independent journeying, had at first loomed gloomily before David's vision. But of late it had faded from the conversation and his mind. The present was so good it must continue, and he had come to accept that first bright dream of his in which he and Susan were to

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go riding side by side across the continent as a permanent reality. His timidity was swept away in a rush of stronger feeling and he sat erect, looking sharply at her:

"I thought you'd given up the idea of joining with that train?"

Susan raised the eyebrows of mild surprise:

"Why did you think that?"

"You've not spoken of it for days."

"That doesn't prove anything. There are lots of important things I don't speak of."

"You ought to have spoken of that."

The virile note of authority was faint in his words, the first time Susan had ever heard it. Her foot was in a fair way to be withdrawn from the slave's neck. The color in her cheeks deepened and it was she who now dropped her eyes.

"We had arranged to join the train long before we left Rochester," she answered. "Everybody said it was dangerous to travel in a small party. Dr. Whitman told my father that."

"There's been nothing dangerous so far."

"No, it's later when we get into the country of the Sioux and the Black-feet. They often attack small parties. It's a great risk that people oughtn't to run. They told us that in Independence, too."

He made no answer and she eyed him with stealthy curiosity. He was looking on the ground, his depression apparent. At this evidence of her ability to bring joy or sorrow to her slave she relented.

## The Prairie

"You'll join it, too, won't you?" she said gently.

"I don't know. The big trains move so slowly."

"Oh, you must. It would be dreadfully dreary to separate our parties after we'd traveled so long together."

"Maybe I will. I haven't thought about it."

"But you *must* think about it. There's no knowing now when we may come upon them—almost any day. You don't want to go on and leave us behind, do you?"

He again made no answer and she stole another quick look at him. This mastery of a fellow creature was by far the most engrossing pastime life had offered her. There was something about him, a suggestion of depths hidden and shut away from her that filled her with the venturesome curiosity of Fatima opening the cupboards in Bluebeard's castle.

"We'd feel so lonely if you went on and left us behind with a lot of strange people," she said, with increasing softness. "We'd miss you so."

The young man turned quickly on her, leaned nearer, and said huskily:

"Would you?"

The movement brought his face close to hers, and she shrank back sharply, her hand ready to hold him at a distance. Her laughing expression changed into one of offended dignity, almost aversion. At the same time his agitation, which had paled his cheeks and burst through his shy reserve,

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filled her with repulsion. For the moment she disliked him. If he had tried to put his hand upon her she would have struck him in quick rage at his presumption. He had not the slightest intention of doing so, but the sudden rush of feeling that her words had evoked, made him oblivious to the startled withdrawal of her manner.

"Answer me," he said. "Would you miss me? Am I anything to you?"

She leaped to her feet, laughing not quite naturally, for her heart was beating hard and she had suddenly shrunk within herself, her spirit alert and angrily defensive in its maiden stronghold.

"Miss you," she said in a matter-of-fact tone that laid sentiment dead at a blow, "of course I'd miss you," then backed away from him, brushing off her skirt.

He rose and stood watching her with a lover's hang-dog look. She glanced at him, read his face and once more felt secure in her ascendancy. Her debonair self-assurance came back with a lowering of her pulse and a remounting to her old position of condescending command. But a parting lesson would not be amiss and she turned from him, saying with a carefully tempered indifference:

"And Leff, too. I'd miss Leff dreadfully. Come, it's time to go."

Before he could answer she was climbing the bank, not looking back, moving confidently as one who had no need of his aid. He followed her slowly, sore and angry, his eyes on her figure which

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flitted in advance clean-cut against the pale, enormous sky.

He had just caught up with her when from a hollow near the roadside Leff came into view. He had been after antelope and carried his rifle and a hunting knife in his belt. During the chase he had come upon a deserted Pawnee settlement in a depression of the prairie. Susan was instantly interested and wanted to see it and David stood by, listening in sulky silence while Leff pointed out the way. The sun was sinking and they faced it, the young man's indicating finger moving back and forth across the vagaries of the route. The prairie was cut by long undulations, naked of verdure, save a spot in the foreground where, beside a round greenish pool, a single tree lifted thinly clad boughs. Something of bleakness had crept into the prospect, its gay greenness was giving place to an austere pallor of tint, a dry economy of vegetation. The summits of the swells were bare, the streams shrunk in sandy channels. It was like a face from which youth is withdrawing.

The Indian encampment lay in a hollow, the small wattled huts gathered on both sides of a runlet that cozed from the slope and slipped between a line of stepping stones. The hollow was deep for the level country, the grassed sides sweeping abruptly to the higher reaches above. They walked through it, examining the neatly made huts and speculating on the length of time the Indians had left. David remembered that the day before,

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the trail had been crossed by the tracks of a village in transit, long lines graven in the dust by the dragging poles of the *travaux*. He felt uneasy. The Indians might not be far and they themselves were at least a mile from the camp, and but one of them armed. The others laughed and Susan brought the blood into his face by asking him if he was afraid.

He turned from her, frankly angry and then stood rigid with fixed glance. On the summit of the opposite slope, black against the yellow west, were a group of mounted figures. They were massed together in a solid darkness, but the outlines of the heads were clear, heads across which bristled an upright crest of hair like the comb of a rooster.

For a long, silent moment the two parties remained immovable, eying each other across the hollow. Then David edged closer to the girl. He felt his heart thumping, but his first throttling grip of fear loosened as his mind realized their helplessness. Leff was the only one with arms. They must get in front of Susan and tell her to run and the camp was a mile off! He felt for her hand and heard her whisper:

"Indians—there are six of them."

As she spoke the opposite group broke and figures detached themselves. Three, hunched in shapeless sack-forms, were squaws. They made no movement, resting immobile as statues, the sunset shining between the legs of their ponies. The men spoke together, their heads turning from the trio

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below to one another. David gripped the hand he held and leaned forward to ask Leff for his knife.

"Don't be frightened," he said to Susan. "It's all right."

"I'm not frightened," she answered quietly.

"Your knife," he said to Leff and then stopped, staring. Leff very slowly, step pressing stealthily behind step, was creeping backward up the slope. His face was chalk white, his eyes fixed on the Indians. In his hand he held his rifle ready, and the long knife gleamed in his belt. For a moment David had no voice wherewith to arrest him, but Susan had.

"Where are you going?" she said loudly.

It stopped him like a blow. His terrified eyes shifted to her face.

"I wasn't going," he faltered.

"Come back," she said. "You have the rifle and the knife."

He wavered, his loosened lips shaking.

"Back here to us," she commanded, "and give David the rifle."

He crept downward to them, his glance always on the Indians. They had begun to move forward, leaving the squaws on the ridge. Their approach was prowlingly sinister, the ponies stepping gingerly down the slope, the snapping of twigs beneath their hoofs clear in the waiting silence. As they dipped below the blazing sunset the rider's figures developed in detail, their bodies bare and bronzed in the subdued light. Each face, held high

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on a craning neck, was daubed with vermilion, the high crest of hair bristling across the shaven crowns. Grimly impassive they came nearer, not speaking nor moving their eyes from the three whites. One of them, a young man, naked save for a breech clout and moccasins, was in the lead. As he approached David saw that his eyelids were painted scarlet and that a spot of silver on his breast was a medal hanging from a leathern thong.

At the bottom of the slope they reined up, standing in a group, with lifted heads staring. The trio opposite stared as fixedly. Behind Susan's back Leff had passed David the rifle. He held it in one hand, Susan by the other. He was conscious of her rigidity and also of her fearlessness. The hand he held was firm. Once, breathing a phrase of encouragement, he met her eyes, steady and unafraid. All his own fear had passed. The sense of danger was thrillingly acute, but he felt it only in its relation to her. Dropping her hand he stepped a pace forward and said loudly:

"How!"

The Indian with the medal answered him, a deep, guttural note.

"Pawnee?" David asked.

The same man replied with a word that none of them understood.

"My camp is just here," said David, with a backward jerk of his head. "There are many men there."

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There was no response to this and he stepped back and said to Susan:

"Go slowly up the hill backward and keep your eyes on them. Don't look afraid."

She immediately began to retreat with slow, short steps. Leff, gasping with fear, moved with her, his speed accelerating with each moment. David a few paces in advance followed them. The Indians watched in a tranced intentness of observation. At the top of the slope the three squaws sat as motionless as carven images. The silence was profound.

Into it, dropping through it like a plummet through space, came the report of a rifle. It was distant but clear, and as if the bullet had struck a taut string and severed it, it cut the tension sharp and life flowed back. A movement, like a resumed quiver of vitality, stirred the bronze stillness of the squaws. The Indians spoke together—a low murmur. David thought he saw indecision in their colloquy, then decision.

"They're going," he heard Susan say a little hoarse.

"Oh, God, they're going!" Leff gasped, as one reprieved of the death sentence.

Suddenly they wheeled, and a rush of wild figures, galloped up the slope. The group of squaws broke and fled with them. The light struck the bare backs, and sent splinters from the gun barrels and the noise of breaking bushes was loud under the ponies' feet.

## The Emigrant Trail

Once again on the road David and Susan stood looking at one another. Each was pale and short of breath, and it was difficult for the young girl to force her stiffened lips into a smile. The sunset struck with fierce brilliancy across the endless plain, and against it, the Indians bending low, fled in a streak of broken color. In the other direction Leff's running figure sped toward the camp. From the distance a rifle shot again sundered the quiet. After silence had reclosed over the rift a puff of smoke rose in the air. They knew now it was Daddy John, fearing they had lost the way, showing them the location of the camp.

Spontaneously, without words, they joined hands and started to where the trail of smoke still hung, dissolving to a thread. The fleeing figure of Leff brought no comments to their lips. They did not think about him, his cowardice was as unimportant to them in their mutual engrossment as his body was to the indifferent self-sufficiency of the landscape. They knew he was hastening that he might be first in the camp to tell his own story and set himself right with the others before they came. They did not care. They did not even laugh at it. They would do that later when they had returned to the plane where life had regained its familiar aspect.

Silently, hand in hand, they walked between the low bushes and across the whitened patches of sandy soil. When the smoke was gone the pool with the lone tree guided them, the surface now

## The Prairie

covered with a glaze of gold. A deep content lay upon them. The shared peril had torn away a veil that hung between them and through which they had been dodging to catch glimpses of one another. Susan's pride in her ascendancy was gone. She walked docilely beside the man who, in the great moment, had not failed. She was subdued, not by the recent peril, but by the fact that the slave had shown himself the master. David's chance had come, but the moment was too completely beautiful, the sudden sense of understanding too lovely for him to break it with words. He wanted to savor it, to take joy of its delicate sweetness. It was his voluptuousness to delight in it, not brush its bloom away with a lover's avowal. He was the idealist, moving in an unexpectedly realized dream, too exquisite for words to intrude upon. So they walked onward, looking across the long land, hand clasped in hand.

END OF PART I



PART II

The River

## CHAPTER I

THE Emigrant Trail struck the Platte at Grand Island. From the bluffs that walled in the river valley the pioneers could look down on the great waterway, a wide, thin current, hardly more than a glistening veil, stretched over the sandy bottom. Sometimes the veil was split by islands, its transparent tissue passing between them in sparkling strands as if it were sewn with silver threads. These separated streams slipped along so quietly, so without noise or hurry, they seemed to share in the large unconcern of the landscape. It was a still, unpeopled, spacious landscape, where there was no work and no time and the morning and the evening made the day.

Many years ago the Frenchmen had given the river its name, Platte, because of its lack of depths. There were places where a man could walk across it and not be wet above the middle; and, to make up for this, there were quicksands stirring beneath it where the same man would sink in above his waist, above his shoulders, above his head. The islands that broke its languid currents were close grown with small trees, riding low in the water like little ships freighted deep with greenery. Toward evening, looking to the West, with the dazzle

## The River

of the sun on the water, they were a fairy fleet drifting on the silver tide of dreams.

The wide, slow stream ran in the middle of a wide, flat valley. Then came a line of broken hills, yellowish and sandy, cleft apart by sharp indentations, and dry, winding arroyos, down which the buffalo trooped, thirsty, to the river. When the sun sloped westward, shadows lay clear in the hollows, violet and amethyst and sapphire blue, transparent washes of color as pure as the rays of the prism. The hills rolled back in a turbulence of cone and bluff and then subsided, fell away as if all disturbance must cease before the infinite, subduing calm of The Great Plains.

Magie words, invoking the romance of the unconquered West, of the earth's virgin spaces, of the buffalo and the Indian. In their idle silence, treeless, waterless, clothed as with a dry pale hair with the feathered yellow grasses, they looked as if the monstrous creatures of dead epochs might still haunt them, might still sun their horny sides among the sand hills, and wallow in the shallows of the river. It was a bit of the early world, as yet beyond the limit of the young nation's energies, the earth as man knew it when his eye was focused for far horizons, when his soul did not shrink before vast solitudes.

Against this sweeping background the Indian loomed, ruler of a kingdom whose borders faded into the sky. He stood, a blanketed figure, watching the flight of birds across the blue; he rode, a

## The Emigrant Trail

painted savage, where the cloud shadows blotted the plain, and the smoke of his lodge rose over the curve of the earth. Here tribe had fought with tribe, old scores had been wiped out till the grass was damp with blood, wars of extermination had raged. Here the migrating villages made a moving streak of color like a bright patch on a map where there were no boundaries, no mountains, and but one gleaming thread of water. In the quietness of evening the pointed tops of the tepees showed dark against the sky, the blur of smoke tarnishing the glow in the West. When the darkness came the stars shone on this spot of life in the wilderness, circled with the howling of wolves.

The buffalo, driven from the East by the white man's advance and from the West by the red man's pursuit, had congregated in these pasture lands. The herds numbered thousands upon thousands, diminishing in the distance to black dots on the fawn-colored face of the prairie. Twice a day they went to the river to drink. Solemnly, in Indian file, they passed down the trails among the sand hills, worn into gutters by their continuous hoofs. From the wall of the bluffs they emerged into the bottom, line after line, moving slowly to the water. Then to the river edge the valley was black with them, a mass of huge, primordial forms, from which came bellowings and a faint, sharp smell of musk.

The valley was the highway to the West—the far West, the West of the great fur companies. It

## The River

led from the Missouri, whose turbid current was the boundary between the frontier and the wild, to the second great barrier, the mountains which blocked the entrance to the unknown distance, where the lakes were salt and there were deserts rimed with alkali. It stretched a straight, plain path, from the river behind it to the peaked white summits in front.

Along it had come a march of men, first a scattered few, then a broken line, then a phalanx—the winners of the West.

They were bold men, hard men, men who held life lightly and knew no fear. In the van were the trappers and fur traders with their heavier traps and their long-barreled rifles. They went far up into the mountains where the rivers rose snow-chilled and the beavers built their dams. There were mountain men in fringed and beaded buckskins, long haired, gaunt and weather scarred; men whose pasts were unknown and unasked, who trapped and hunted and lived in the lodges with their squaws. There were black-eyed Canadian voyageurs in otter-skin caps and coats made of blankets, hardy as Indian ponies, gay and light of heart, who poled the keel boats up the rivers to the chanting of old French songs. There were swarthy half-breeds, still of tongue, stolid and eagle-featured, wearing their blankets as the Indians did, noiseless in their moccasins as the lynx creeping on its prey.

And then came the emigrants, the first white-covered wagons, the first white women, looking out

## The Emigrant Trail

from the shade of their sunbonnets. The squaw wives wondered at their pale faces and bright hair. They came at intervals, a few wagons crawling down the valley and then the long, bare road with the buffaloes crossing it to the river and the occasional red spark of a trapper's camp fire. In '43 came the first great emigration, when 1,000 people went to Oregon. The Indians, awed and uneasy, watched the white line of wagon tops. "Were there so many pale faces as this in the Great Father's country?" one of the chiefs asked.

Four years later the Mormons emigrated. It was like the moving of a nation, an exodus of angry fanatics, sullen, determined men burning with rage at the murder of their prophet, cursing his enemies and quoting his texts. The faces of women and children peered from the wagons, the dust of moving flocks and herds rose like a column at the end of the caravan. Their camps at night were like the camps of the patriarchs, many women to work for each man, thousands of cattle grazing in the grass. From the hills above the Indians watched the red circle of their fires and in the gray dawn saw the tents struck and the trains "roll out." There were more people from the Great Father's country, more people each year, till the great year, '49, when the cry of gold went forth across the land like a trumpet call.

Then the faces on the Emigrant Trail were as the faces on the populous streets of cities. The trains of wagons were unbroken, one behind the

## The River

other, straight to the sunset. A cloud of dust moved with them, showed their coming far away as they wheeled downward at Grand Island, hid their departure as they doubled up for the fording of the Platte. All the faces were set westward, all the eyes were strained to that distant goal where the rivers flowed over golden beds and the flakes lay yellow in the prospector's pan.

The Indians watched them, cold at the heart, for the people in the Great Father's Country were numerous as the sands of the sea, terrible as an army with banners.

## CHAPTER II

THE days were very hot. Brilliant, dewless mornings, blinding middays, afternoons held breathless in the remorseless torrent of light. The caravan crawled along the river's edge at a footspace, the early shadows shooting far ahead of it, then dwindling to a blot beneath each moving body, then slanting out behind. There was speech in the morning which died as the day advanced, all thought sinking into torpor in the monotonous glare. In the late afternoon the sun, slipping down the sky, peered through each wagon's puckered canvas opening smiting the drivers into lethargy. Propped against the roof supports, hats drawn low over their brows they slept, the riders pacing on ahead stooped and silent on their sweating horses. There was no sound but the creaking of the wheels, and the low whispcrings of the river into which, now and then, an undermined length of sand dropped with a splash.

But in the evening life returned. When the dusk stole out of the hill rifts and the river flowed thick gold from bank to bank, when the bluffs grew black against the sunset fires, the little party shook off its apathy and animation revived. Coolness came with the twilight, sharpening into coldness as the West burned from scarlet and gold

## The River

to a clear rose. The fire, a mound of buffalo chips into which glowing tunnels wormed, was good. Overcoats and blankets were shaken out and the fragrance of tobacco was on the air. The recrudescence of ideas and the need to interchange them came on the wanderers. Hemmed in by Nature's immensity, unconsciously oppressed by it, they felt the want of each other, of speech, of sympathy, and crouched about the fire telling anecdotes of their life "back home," that sounded trivial but drew them closer in the bond of a nostalgic wistfulness.

One night they heard a drum beat. It came out of the distance faint but distinct, throbbing across the darkness like a frightened heart terrified by its own loneliness. The hand of man was impelling it, an unseen hand, only telling of its presence by the thin tattoo it sent through the silence. Words died and they sat rigid in the sudden alarm that comes upon men in the wilderness. The doctor clutched his daughter's arm, Daddy John reached for his rifle. Then, abruptly as it had come, it stopped and they broke into suggestions—emigrants on the road beyond them, an Indian war drum on the opposite bank.

But they were startled, their apprehensions roused. They sat uneasy, and half an hour later the pad of horses' hoofs and approaching voices made each man grip his gun and leap to his feet. They sent a hail through the darkness and an answering voice came back:

"It's all right. Friends."

## The Emigrant Trail

The figures that advanced into the firelight were those of four men with a shadowy train of pack mules extending behind them. In fringed and greasy buckskins, with long hair and swarthy faces, their feet noiseless in moccasins, they were so much of the wild, that it needed the words, "Trappers from Laramie," to reassure the doctor and make Leff put down his rifle.

The leader, a lean giant, bearded to the cheek bones and with lank locks of hair falling from a coon-skin cap, gave his introduction briefly. They were a party of trappers en route from Fort Laramie to St. Louis with the winter's catch of skins. In skirted, leather hunting shirt and leggings, knife and pistols in the belt and powder horn, bullet mold, screw and awl hanging from a strap across his chest, he was the typical "mountain man." While he made his greetings, with as easy an assurance as though he had dropped in upon a party of friends, his companions picketed the animals which moved on the outskirts of the light in a spectral band of drooping forms.

The three other men, were an ancient trapper with a white froth of hair framing a face, brown and wrinkled as a nut, a Mexican, Indian-dark, who crouched in his serape, rolled a cigarette and then fell asleep, and a French Canadian voyageur in a coat made of blanketing and with a scarlet handkerchief tied smooth over his head. He had a round ruddy face, and when he smiled, which he did all the time, his teeth gleamed square and white

## The River

from the curly blackness of his beard. He got out his pans and buffalo meat, and was dropping pieces of hardtack into the spitting tallow when Susan addressed him in his own tongue, the patois of the province of Quebec. He gave a joyous child's laugh and a rattling fire of French followed, and then he must pick out for her the daintiest morsel and gallantly present it on a tin plate, wiped clean on the grass.

They ate first and then smoked and over the pipes engaged in the bartering which was part of the plainsman's business. The strangers were short of tobacco and the doctor's party wanted buffalo skins. Fresh meat and bacon changed hands. David threw in a measure of corn meal and the old man—they called him Joe—bid for it with a hind quarter of antelope. Then, business over, they talked of themselves, their work, the season's catch, and the life far away across the mountains where the beaver streams are.

They had come from the distant Northwest, threaded with ice-cold rivers and where lakes, sunk between rocky bulwarks, mirrored the whitened peaks. There the three Tetons raised their giant heads and the hollows were spread with a grassy carpet that ran up the slopes like a stretched green cloth. There had once been the trapper's paradise where the annual "rendezvous" was held and the men of the mountains gathered from creek and river and spent a year's earnings in a wild week. But the streams were almost empty now and the

## The Emigrant Trail

great days over. There was a market but no furs. Old Joe could tell what it had once been like, old Joe who years ago had been one of General Ashley's men.

The old man took his pipe out of his mouth and shook his head.

"The times is dead," he said, with the regret of great days gone, softened by age which softens all things. "There ain't anything in it now. When Ashley and the Sublettes and Campbell ran the big companies it was a fine trade. The rivers was swarmin' with beaver and if the Indians 'ud let us alone every man of us 'ud come down to rendezvous with each mule carrying two hundred pound of skins. Them was the times."

The quick, laughing patter of the voyageur's French broke in on his voice, but old Joe, casting a dim eye back over the splendid past, was too pre-occupied to mind.

"I've knowed the time when the Powder River country and the rivers that ran into Jackson's Hole was as thick with beaver as the buffalo range is now with buffalo. We'd follow up a new stream and where the ground was marshy we'd know the beaver was there, for they'd throw dams across till the water'd soak each side, squeezin' through the willow roots. Then we'd cut a tree and scoop out a canoe, and when the shadders began to stretch go nosin' along the bank, keen and cold and the sun settin' red and not a sound but the dip of the paddle. We'd set the traps—seven to a man—and at

## The River

sun-up out again in the canoe, clear and still in the gray of the morning, and find a beaver in every trap."

"Nothin' but buffalo now to count on," said the other man. "And what's in that?"

David said timidly, as became so extravagant a suggestion, that a mountain man he had met in Independence told him he thought the buffalo would be eventually exterminated. The trappers looked at one another, and exchanged satiric smiles. Even the Canadian stopped in his chatter with Susan to exclaim in amaze: "Sacré Tonnerre!"

Old Joe gave a lazy cast of his eye at David.

"Why, boy," he said, "if they'd been killin' them varmints since Bunker Hill they couldn't do no more with 'em than you could with your little pop-gun out here on the plains. The Indians has druv 'em from the West and the white man's druv 'em from the East and it don't make no difference. I knowed Captain Bonneville and he's told me how he stood on the top of Scotts Bluffs and seen the country black with 'em—millions of 'em. That's twenty-five years ago and he ain't seen no more than I have on these plains not two seasons back. Out as far as your eye could reach, crawlin' with buffalo, till you couldn't see cow nor bull, but just a black mass of 'em, solid to the horizon."

David felt abashed and the doctor came to his rescue with a question about Captain Bonneville and Joe forgot his scorn of foolish young men in reminiscences of that hardy pathfinder.

## The Emigrant Trail

The old trapper seemed to have known everyone of note in the history of the plains and the fur trade, or if he didn't know them he said he did which was just as good. Lying on a buffalo skin, the firelight gilding the bony ridges of his face, a stub of black pipe gripped between his broken teeth, he told stories of the men who had found civilization too cramped and taken to the wilderness. Some had lived and died there, others come back, old and broken, to rest in a corner of the towns they had known as frontier settlements. Here they could look out to the West they loved, strain their dim eyes over the prairie, where the farmer's plow was tracing its furrow, to the Medicine Way of The Pale Face that led across the plains and up the long bright river and over the mountains to the place of the trapper's rendezvous.

He had known Jim Beckwourth, the mulatto who was chief of the Crows, fought their battles and lived in their villages with a Crow wife. Joe described him as "a powerful liar," but a man without fear. Under his leadership the Crows had become a great nation and the frontiersmen laid it to his door that no Crow had ever attacked a white man except in self-defense. Some said he was still living in California. Joe remembered him well—a tall man, strong and fleet-footed as an Indian, with mighty muscles and a skin like bronze. He always wore round his neck a charm of a perforated bullet set between two glass beads hanging from a thread of sinew.

## The River

He had known Rose, another white chief of the Crows, an educated man who kept his past secret and of whom it was said that the lonely places and the Indian trails were safer for him than the populous ways of towns. The old man had been one of the garrison in Fort Union when the terrible Alexander Harvey had killed Isidoro, the Mexican, and standing in the courtyard cried to the assembled men: "I, Alexander Harvey, have killed the Spaniard. If there are any of his friends who want to take it up let them come on"; and not a man in the fort dared to go. He had been with Jim Bridger, when, on a wager, he went down Bear River in a skin boat and came out on the waters of the Great Salt Lake.

Susan, who had stopped her talk with the voyageur to listen to this minstrel of the plains, now said:

"Aren't you lonely in those quiet places where there's no one else?"

The old man nodded, a gravely assenting eye on hers:

"Powerful lonely, sometimes. There ain't a mountain man that ain't felt it, some of 'em often, others of 'em once and so scairt that time they won't take the risk again. It comes down suddint, like a darkness—then everything round that was so good and fine, the sound of the pines and the bubble of the spring and the wind blowing over the grass, seems like they'd set you crazy. You'd give a year's peltries for the sound of a man's voice.

## The Emigrant Trail

Just like when some one's dead that you set a heap on and you feel you'd give most everything you got to see 'em again for a minute. There ain't nothin' you wouldn't promise if by doin' it you could hear a feller hail you—just one shout—as he comes ridin' up the trail."

"That was how Jim Cockrell felt when he prayed for the dog," said the tall man.

"Did he get the dog?"

He nodded.

"That's what he said anyway. He was took with just such a lonesome spell once when he was trapping in the Mandans country. He was a pious critter, great on prayer and communing with the Lord. And he felt—I've heard him tell about it—just as if he'd go wild if he didn't get something for company. What he wanted was a dog and you might just as well want an angel out there with nothin' but the Indian villages breakin' the dazzle of the snow and you as far away from them as you could get. But that didn't stop Jim. He just got down and prayed, and then he waited and prayed some more and 'ud look around for the dog, as certain he'd come as that the sun 'ud set. Bimeby he fell asleep and when he woke there was the dog, a little brown varmint, curled up beside him on the blanket. Jim used to say an angel brought it. I'm not contradictin', but——"

"Wal," said old Joe, "he most certainly come back into the fort with a dog. I was there and seen him."

## The River

Leff snickered, even the doctor's voice showed the incredulous note when he asked:

"Where could it have come from?"

The tall man shrugged.

"Don't ask me. All I know is that Jim Cockrell swore to it and I've heard him tell it drunk and sober and always the same way. He held out for the angel. I'm not saying anything against that, but whatever it was it must have had a pretty powerful pull to get a dog out to a trapper in the dead o' winter."

They wondered over the story, offering explanations, and as they talked the fire died low and the moon, a hemisphere clean-halved as though sliced by a sword, rose serene from a cloud bank. Its coming silenced them and for a space they watched the headlands of the solemn landscape blackening against the sky, and the river breaking into silvery disquiet. Separating the current, which girdled it with a sparkling belt, was the dark blue of an island, thick plumed with trees, a black and mysterious oblong. Old Joe pointed to it with his pipe.

"Brady's Island," he said. "Ask Hy to tell you about that. He knew Brady."

The tall man looked thoughtfully at the crested shape.

"That's it," he said. "That's where Brady was murdered."

And then he told the story:

"It was quite a while back in the 30's, and the free trappers and mountain men brought their pelts

## The Emigrant Trail

down in bull boats and mackinaws to St. Louis. There were a bunch of men workin' down the river and when they got to Brady's Island, that's out there in the stream, the water was so shallow the boats wouldn't float, so they camped on the island. Brady was one of 'em, a cross-tempered man, and he and another feller'd been pickin' at each other day by day since leavin' the mountains. They'd got so they couldn't get on at all. Men do that sometimes on the trail, get to hate the sight and sound of each other. You can't tell why.

"One day the others went after buffalo and left Brady and the man that hated him alone on the island. When the hunters come home at night Brady was dead by the camp fire, shot through the head and lyin' stiff in his blood. The other one had a slick story to tell how Brady cleanin' his gun, discharged it by accident and the bullet struck up and killed him. They didn't believe it, but it weren't their business. So they buried Brady there on the island and the next day each man shouldered his pack and struck out to foot it to the Missouri.

"It was somethin' of a walk and the ones that couldn't keep up the stride fell behind. They was all strung out along the river bank and some of 'em turned off for ways they thought was shorter, and first thing you know the party was scattered, and the man that hated Brady was left alone, lopin' along on a side trail that slanted across the prairie to the country of the Loup Fork Pawnees.

## The River

"That was the last they saw of him and it was a long time—news traveled slow on the plains in them days—before anybody heard of him for he never come to St. Louis to tell. Some weeks later a party of trappers passin' near the Pawnee villages on the Loup Fork was hailed by some Indians and told they had a paleface sick in the chief's tent. The trappers went there and in the tent found a white man, clear headed, but dyin' fast.

"It was the man that killed Brady. Lyin' there on the buffalo skin, he told them all about it—how he done it and the lie he fixed up. Death was comin', and the way he'd hated so he couldn't keep his hand from murder was all one now. He wanted to get it off his mind and sorter square himself. When he'd struck out alone he went on for a spell, killin' enough game and always hopin' for the sight of the river. Then one day he caught his gun in a willow tree and it went off, sending the charge into his thigh and breaking the bone. He was stunned for a while and then tried to move on, tried to crawl. He crawled for six days and at the end of the sixth found a place with water and knowed he'd come to the end of his rope. He tore a strip off his blanket and tied it to the barrel of his rifle and stuck it end up. The Pawnees found him there and treated him kind, as them Indians will do sometimes. They took him to their village and cared for him, but it was too late. He wanted to see a white man and tell and then die peaceful, and that's what he done. While the trappers was with him he

## The Emigrant Trail

died and they buried him there decent outside the village."

The speaker's voice ceased and in the silence the others turned to look at the black shape of the island riding the gleaming waters like a funeral barge. In its dark isolation, cut off from the land by the quiet current, it seemed a fitting theater for the grim tragedy. They gazed at it, chilled into dumbness, thinking of the murderer moving to freedom under the protection of his lie, then overtaken, and in his anguish, alone in the silence, meeting the question of his conscience.

Once more the words came back to David: "Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

Susan pressed against her father, awed and cold, and from old Joe, stretched in his blanket, came a deep and peaceful snore.

### CHAPTER III

SUSAN was riding alone on the top of the bluffs. The evening before, three men returning from the Oregon country to the States, had bivouacked with them and told them that the New York Company was a day's march ahead, so she had gone to the highlands to reconnoiter.

Just here the bluffs swept inward toward the river, contracting the bottom to a valley only a few miles in width. Through it the road lay, a well-worn path crossed as with black stripes by the buffalo runs. Susan's glance, questing ahead for the New York train, ran to the distance where the crystal glaze of the stream shrunk to a silver thread imbedded in green velvet. There was a final point where green and silver converged in a blinding dazzle, and over this the sun hung, emerging from a nebulous glare to a slowly defining sphere.

Turning to the left her gaze lost itself in the endlessness of the plains. It was like looking over the sea, especially at the horizon where the land was drawn in a straight, purplish line. She could almost see sails there, small sails dark against a sky that was so remote its color had faded to an aerial pallor. As the journey had advanced the influence of these spacious areas had crept upon her. In the

## The Emigrant Trail

beginning there had been times when they woke in her an unexplained sadness. Now that was gone and she loved to ride onward, the one item of life in the silence, held in a new correspondence with the solemn immensity. It affected her as prayer does the devotee. Under its inspiration she wondered at old worries and felt herself impervious to new ones.

With eyes on the purple horizon her thoughts went back to her home in Rochester with the green shutters and the brasses on the door. How far away it seemed! Incidents in its peaceful routine were like the resurgences of memory from a previous incarnation. There was no tenderness in her thoughts of the past, no sentiment clung to her recollections of what was now a dead phase of her life. She was slightly impatient of its contented smallness, of her satisfaction with such things as her sewing, her cake making, her childish conferences with girl friends on the vine-grown porch. They seemed strangely trivial and unmeaning compared to the exhilarating present. She was living now, feeling the force of a rising growth, her horizon widening to suit that which her eyes sought, the dependence of her sheltered girlhood gone from her as the great adventure called upon untouched energies and untried forces. It was like looking back on another girl, or like a woman looking back on a child.

She had often spoken to David of these past days, and saw that her descriptions charmed him.

## The River

He had asked her questions about it and been surprised that she did not miss the old existence more. To him it had seemed ideal, and he told her that that was the way he should like to live and some day would, with just such a servant as Daddy John, and a few real friends, and a library of good books. His enthusiasm made her dimly realize the gulf between them—the gulf between the idealist and the materialist—that neither had yet recognized and that only she, of the two, instinctively felt. The roughness of the journey irked David. The toil of the days wore on his nerves. She could see that it pained him to urge the tired animals forward, to lash them up the stream banks and drive them past the springs. And only half understanding his character—fine where she was obtuse, sensitive where she was invulnerable, she felt the continued withdrawal from him, the instinctive shrinking from the man who was not her mate.

She had silently acquiesced in the idea, entertained by all the train, that she would marry him. The doctor had intimated to her that he wished it and from her childhood her only real religion had been to please her father. Yet half a dozen times she had stopped the proposal on the lover's lips. And not from coquetry either. Loth and reluctant she clung to her independence. A rival might have warmed her to a more coming-on mood, but there was no rival. When by silence or raillery she had shut off the avowal she was relieved and yet half despised him for permitting her to take the lead.

## The Emigrant Trail

Why had he not forced her to listen? Why had he not seized her and even if she struggled, held her and made her hear him? She knew little of men, nothing of love, but she felt, without putting her thoughts even to herself, that to a man who showed her he was master she would have listened and surrendered.

Riding back to the camp she felt a trifle remorseful about her behavior. Some day she would marry him—she had got far enough to admit that—and perhaps it was unkind of her not to let the matter be settled. And at that she gave a petulant wriggle of her shoulders under her cotton blouse. Wasn't that his business? Wasn't he the one to end it, not wait on her pleasure? Were all men so easily governed, she wondered.

Looking ahead across the grassed bottom land, she saw that the train had halted and the camp was pitched. She could see David's tall stooping figure, moving with long strides between the tents and the wagons. She laid a wager with herself that he would do certain things and brought her horse to a walk that she might come upon him noiselessly and watch. Of course he did them, built up her fire and kindled it, arranged her skillets beside it and had a fresh pail of water standing close by. It only remained for him to turn as he heard the sound of her horse's hoofs and run to help her dismount. This, for some reason, he did not do and she was forced to attract his attention by saying in a loud voice:

## The River

"There was nothing to be seen. Not a sign of a wagon from here to the horizon."

He looked up from his cooking and said: "Oh, you're back, Susan," and returned to the pan of buffalo tallow.

This was a strange remissness in the slave and she was piqued. Contrary to precedent it was her father who helped her off. She slid into his arms laughing, trying to kiss him as she slipped down, then standing with her hands on his shoulders told him of her ride. She was very pretty just then, her hair loose on her sunburned brow, her face all love and smiles. But David bent over his fire, did not raise his eyes to the charming tableau, that had its own delightfulness to the two participants, and that one of the participants intended should show him how sweet Susan Gillespie could be when she wanted.

All of which trivial matter combined to the making of momentous matter, momentous in the future for Susan and David. Shaken in her confidence in the subjugation of her slave, Susan agreed to his suggestion to ride to the bluffs after supper and see the plains under the full moon. So salutary had been his momentary neglect of her that she went in a chastened spirit, a tamed and gentle maiden. They had orders not to pass out of sight of the twin fires whose light followed them like the beams of two, watchful, unwinking eyes.

They rode across the bottom to where the bluffs rose, a broken bulwark. That afternoon Susan had

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found a ravine up which they could pass. She knew it by a dwarfed tree, a landmark in the naked country. The moonlight lay white on the barrier indented with gulfs of darkness, from each of which ran the narrow path of the buffalo. The line of hills, silver-washed and black-caverned, was like a rampart thrown across the entrance to the land of mystery, and they like the pygmy men of fairyland come to gain an entry. It was David who thought of this. It reminded him of Jack and the Beanstalk, where Jack, reaching the top of the vine, found himself in a strange country. Susan did not remember much about Jack. She was engrossed in recognizing the ravine, scanning the darkling hollows for the dwarf tree.

It was a steep, winding cut, the tree, halfway up its length, spreading skeleton arms against a sky clear as a blue diamond. They turned into it and began a scrambling ascent, the horses' hoofs slipping into the gutter that the buffaloes had trodden out. It was black dark in the depths with the moonlight slanting white on the walls.

"We're going now to find the giants," David called over his shoulder. "Doesn't this seem as if it ought to lead us up right in front of Blunderbore's Castle?"

"The buffalo runs are like trenches," she answered. "If you don't look out your horse may fall."

They tied their horses to the tree and climbed on foot to the levels above. On the earth's floor, un-

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broken by tree or elevation, there was not a shadow. It lay silver frosted in the foreground, darkening as it receded. In the arch above no cloud filmed the clearness, the moon, huge and mottled, dominating the sky. The silence was penetrating; not a breath or sound disturbed it. It was the night of the primitive world, which stirred the savage to a sense of the infinite and made him, from shell or clay or stone, carve out a God.

Without speaking they walked forward to a jutting point and looked down on the river. The current sparkled like a dancer's veil spread on the grass. They could not hear its murmur or see the shifting disturbance of its shallows, only received the larger impression of the flat, gleaming tide split by the black shapes of islands. David pointed to the two sparks of the camp fires.

"See, they're looking after us as if they were alive and knew they mustn't lose sight of us."

"They look quite red in the moonlight," she answered, interested.

"As if they belonged to man and a drop of human blood had colored them."

"What a queer idea. Let's walk on along the bluffs."

They turned and moved away from the lights, slipping down into the darkness of the channeled ravines and emerging onto the luminous highlands. The solemnity of the night, its brooding aloofness in which they held so small a part, chilled the girl's high self-reliance. Among her fellows, in a setting

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of light and action, she was all proud independence. Deprived of them she suffered a diminution of confidence and became if not clinging, at least a feminine creature who might some day be won. Feeling small and lonely she insensibly drew closer to the man beside her, at that moment the only connecting link between her and the living world with which her liens were so close.

The lover felt the change in her, knew that the barrier she had so persistently raised was down. They were no longer mistress and slave, but man and maid. The consciousness of it gave him a new boldness. The desperate daring of the suitor carried him beyond his familiar tremors, his dread of defeat. He thrust his hand inside her arm, timidly, it is true, ready to snatch it back at the first rebuff. But there was none, so he kept it there and they walked on. Their talk was fragmentary, murmured sentences that they forgot to finish, phrases trailing off into silence as if they had not clear enough wits to fit words together, or as if words were not necessary when at last their spirits communed. Responding to the instigation of the romantic hour the young girl felt an almost sleepy content. The arm on which she leaned spoke of strength, it symbolized a protection she would have repudiated in the practical, sustaining sunshine, but that now was very sweet.

David walked in a vision. Was it Susan, this soft and docile being, close against his side, her head moving slowly as her eyes ranged over the

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magical prospect? He was afraid to speak for fear the spell would break. He did not know which way his feet bore him, but blindly went on, looking down at the profile almost against his shoulder, at the hand under which his had slid, small and white in the transforming light. His silence was not like hers, the expression of a temporary, lulled tranquility. He had passed the stage when he could delay to rejoice in lovely moments. He was no longer the man fearful of the hazards of his fate, but a vessel of sense ready to overflow at the slightest touch.

It came when a ravine opened at their feet and she drew herself from him to gather up her skirts for the descent. Then the tension broke with a tremulous "Susan, wait!" She knew what was coming and braced herself to meet it. The mystical hour, the silver-bathed wonder of the night, a girl's frightened curiosity, combined to win her to a listening mood. She felt on the eve of a painful but necessary ordeal, and clasped her hands together to bear it creditably. Through the perturbation of her mind the question flashed—Did all women feel this way? and then the comment, How much they had to endure that they never told!

It was the first time any man had made the great demand of her. She had read of it in novels and other girls had told her. From this data she had gathered that it was a happy if disturbing experience. She felt only the disturbance. Seldom in her life had she experienced so distracting a sense

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of discomfort. When David was half way through she would have given anything to have stopped him, or to have run away. But she was determined now to stand it, to go through with it and be engaged as other girls were and as her father wished her to be. Besides there was nowhere to run to and she could not have stopped him if she had tried. He was launched, the hour had come, the, to him, supreme and awful hour, and all the smothered passion and hope and yearning of the past month burst out.

Once she looked at him and immediately looked away, alarmed and abashed by his appearance. Even in the faint light she could see his pallor, the drops on his brow, the drawn desperation of his face. She had never in her life seen anyone so moved and she began to share his agitation and wish that anything might happen to bring the interview to an end.

"Do you care? Do you care?" he urged, trying to look into her face. She held it down, not so much from modesty as from an aversion to seeing him so beyond himself, and stammered:

"Of course I care. I always have. Quite a great deal. You know it."

"I never knew," he cried. "I never was sure. Sometimes I thought so and the next day you were all different. Say you do. Oh, Susan, say you do."

He was as close to her as he could get without touching her, which, the question now fairly put,

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he carefully avoided doing. Taller than she he loomed over her, bending for her answer, quivering and sweating in his anxiety.

The young girl was completely subdued by him. She was frightened, not of the man, but of the sudden revelation of forces which she did not in the least comprehend and which made him another person. Though she vaguely understood that she still dominated him, she saw that her dominion came from something much more subtle than verbal command and imperious bearing. All confusion and bewildered meekness, she melted, partly because she had meant to, partly because his vehemence overpowered her, and partly because she wanted to end the most trying scene she had ever been through.

"Will you say yes? Oh, you must say yes," she heard him imploring, and she emitted the monosyllable on a caught breath and then held her head even lower and felt an aggrieved amazement that it was all so different from what she had thought it would be.

He gave an exclamation, a sound almost of pain, and drew away from her. She glanced up at him, her eyes full of scared curiosity, not knowing what extraordinary thing was going to happen next. He had dropped his face into his hands, and stood thus for a moment without moving. She peered at him uneasily, like a child at some one suffering from an unknown complaint and giving evidence of the suffering in strange ways. He let his hands fall, closed his eyes for a second, then opened

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them and came toward her with his face beatified. Delicately, almost reverently, he bent down and touched her cheek with his lips.

The lover's first kiss! This, too, Susan had heard about, and from what she had heard she had imagined that it was a wonderful experience causing unprecedented joy. She was nearly as agitated as he, but through her agitation, she realized with keen disappointment that she had felt nothing in the least resembling joy. An inward shrinking as the bearded lips came in contact with her skin was all she was conscious of. There was no rapture, no up-gush of anything lovely or unusual. In fact, it left her with the feeling that it was a duty duly discharged and accepted—this that she had heard was one of life's crises, that you looked back on from the heights of old age and told your grandchildren about.

They were silent for a moment, the man so filled and charged with feeling that he had no breath to speak, no words, if he had had breath, to express the passion that was in him. Inexperienced as she, he thought it sweet and beautiful that she should stand away from him with averted face. He gazed at her tenderly, wonderingly, won, but still a thing too sacred for his touch.

Susan, not knowing what to do and feeling blankly that something momentous had happened and that she had not risen to it, continued to look on the ground. She wished he would say something simple and natural and break the intolerable

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silence. Finally, she felt that she could endure it no longer, and putting her hand to her forehead, pushed back her hair and heaved a deep sigh. He instantly moved to her all brooding, possessive inquiry. She became alarmed lest he meant to kiss her again and edged away from him, exclaiming hastily:

"Shall we go back? We've been a long time away."

Without speech he slid his hand into the crook of her arm and they began to retrace their steps. She could feel his heart beating and the warm, sinewy grasp of his fingers clasped about hers. The plain was a silver floor for their feet, in the starless sky the great orb soared. The girl's embarrassment left her and she felt herself peacefully settling into a contented acquiescence. She looked up at him, a tall shape, black between her and the moon. Her glance called his and he gazed down into her eyes, a faint smile on his lips. His arm was strong, the way was strangely beautiful, and in the white light and the stillness, romance walked with them.

There was no talk between them till they reached the horses. In the darkness of the cleft, hidden from the searching radiance, he drew her to him, pressing her head with a trembling hand against his heart. She endured it patiently but was glad when he let her go and she was in the saddle, a place where she felt more at home than in a man's arms with her face crushed against his shirt, turning to

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avoid its rough texture and uncomfortably conscious of the hardness of his lean breast. She decided not to speak to him again, for she was afraid he might break forth into those protestations of love that so embarrassed her.

At the camp Daddy John was up, sitting by the fire, waiting for them. Of this, too, she was glad. Good-bys between lovers, even if only to be separated by a night, were apt to contain more of that distressful talk. She called a quick "Good night" to him, and then dove into her tent and sat down on the blankets. The firelight shone a nebulous blotch through the canvas and she stared at it, trying to concentrate her thoughts and realize that the great event had happened.

"I'm engaged," she kept saying to herself, and waited for the rapture, which, even if belated, ought surely to come. But it did not. The words obstinately refused to convey any meaning, brought nothing to her but a mortifying sensation of being inadequate to a crisis. She heard David's voice exchanging a low good night with the old man, and she hearkened anxiously, still hopeful of the thrill. But again there was none, and she could only gaze at the blurred blot of light and whisper "I'm engaged to be married," and wonder what was the matter with her that she should feel just the same as she did before.

## CHAPTER IV

THE dawn was gray when Susan woke the next morning. It was cold and she cowered under her blankets, watching the walls of the tent grow light, and the splinter between the flaps turn from white to yellow. She came to consciousness quickly, waking to an unaccustomed depression.

At first it had no central point of cause, but was reasonless and all-permeating like the depression that comes from an unlocated physical ill. Her body lay limp under the blankets as her mind lay limp under the unfamiliar cloud. Then the memory of last night took form, her gloom suddenly concentrated on a reason, and she sunk beneath it, staring fixedly at the crack of growing light. When she heard the camp stirring and sat up, her heart felt so heavy that she pressed on it with her finger tips as if half expecting they might encounter a strange, new hardness through the soft envelope of her body.

She did not know that this lowering of her crest, hitherto held so high and carried so proudly, was the first move of her surrender. Her liberty was over, she was almost in the snare. The strong feminine principle in her impelled her like an inexorable fate toward marriage and the man. The

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children that were to be, urged her toward their creator. And the unconquered maidenhood that was still hers, recoiled with trembling reluctance from its demanded death. Love had not yet come to lead her into a new and wonderful world. She only felt the sense of strangeness and fear, of leaving the familiar ways to enter new ones that led through shadows to the unknown.

When she rode out beside her father in the red splendors of the morning, a new gravity marked her. Already the first suggestion of the woman—like the first breath of the season's change—was on her face. The humility of the great abdication was in her eyes.

David left them together and rode away to the bluffs. She followed his figure with a clouded glance as she told her father her news. Her depression lessened when he turned upon her with a radiant face.

"If you had searched the world over you couldn't have found a man to please me better. Seeing David this way, day by day, I've come to know him through and through and he's true, straight down to the core."

"Of course he is," she answered, tilting her chin with the old sauciness that this morning looked a little forlorn. "I wouldn't have liked him if he hadn't been."

"Oh, Missy, you're such a wise little woman."

She glanced at him quickly, recognizing the tone, and to-day, with her new heavy heart, dreading it.

## The River

"Now, father, don't laugh at me. This is all very serious."

"Serious! It's the most serious thing that ever happened in the world, in our world. And if I was smiling—I'll lay a wager I wasn't laughing—it was because I'm so happy. You don't know what this means to me. I've wanted it so much that I've been afraid it wasn't coming off. And then I thought it must, for it's my girl's happiness and David's and back of theirs mine."

"Well, then, if you're happy, I'm happy."

This time his smile was not bantering, only loving and tender. He did not dream that her spirit might not be as glad as his looking from the height of middle-age to a secured future. He had been a man of a single love, ignorant save of that one woman, and she so worshiped and wondered at that there had been no time to understand her. Insulated in the circle of his own experience he did not guess that to an unawakened girl the engagement morn might be dark with clouds.

"Love and youth," he said dreamily, "oh, Susan, it's so beautiful! It's Eden come again when God walked in the garden. And it's so short. *Eheu Fugaces!* You've just begun to realize how wonderful it is, just said to yourself 'This is life—this is what I was born for,' when it's over. And then you begin to understand, to look back, and see that it was not what you were born for. It was only the beginning that was to give you strength for the

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rest—the prairie all trees and flowers, with the sunlight and the breeze on the grass.”

“It sounds like this journey, like the Emigrant Trail.”

“That’s what I was thinking. The beautiful start gives you courage for the mountains. The memory of it carries you over the rough places, gives you life in your heart when you come to the desert where it’s all parched and bare. And you and your companion go on, fighting against the hardships, bound closer and closer by the struggle. You learn to give up, to think of the other one, and then you say, ‘*This* is what I was born for,’ and you know you’re getting near the truth. To have some one to go through the fight for, to do the hard work for—that’s the reality after the vision and the dream.”

The doctor, thinking of the vanished years of his married life, and his daughter, of the unknown ones coming, were not looking at the subject from the same points of view.

“I don’t think you make it sound very pleasant,” she said, from returning waves of melancholy.

“It’s nothing but hardships and danger.”

“California’s at the end of it, dearie, and they say that’s the most beautiful country in the world.”

“It will be a strange country,” she said wistfully, not thinking alone of California.

“Not for long.”

“Do you think we’ll ever feel at home in it?”

The question came in a faint voice. Why did

## The River

California, once the goal of her dreams, now seem an alien land in which she always would be a stranger?

"We're bringing our home with us—carrying some of it on our backs like snails and the rest in our hearts like all pioneers. Soon it will cease being strange, when there are children in it. Where there's a camp fire and a blanket and a child, that's home, Missy."

He leaned toward her and laid his hand on hers as it rested on the pommel.

"You'll be so happy in it," he said softly.

A sudden surge of feeling, more poignant than anything she had yet felt, sent a pricking of tears to her eyes. She turned her face away, longing in sudden misery for some one to whom she could speak plainly, some one who once had felt as she did now. For the first time she wished that there was another woman in the train. Her instinct told her that men could not understand. Unable to shake her father's glad assurance she said a hasty word about going back and telling Daddy John and wheeled her horse toward the prairie schooner behind them.

Daddy John welcomed her by pushing up against the roof prop and giving her two thirds of the driver's seat. With her hands clipped between her knees she eyed him sideways.

"What do you think's going to happen?" she said, trying to compose her spirits by teasing him.

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"It's going to rain," he answered.

This was not helpful or suggestive of future sympathy, but at any rate, it was not emotional.

"Now, Daddy John, don't be silly. Would I get off my horse and climb up beside you to ask you about the weather?"

"I don't know what you'd do, Missy, you've got that wild out here on the plains—just like a little buffalo calf."

He glimpsed obliquely at her, his old face full of whimsical tenderness. She smiled bravely and he saw above the smile, her eyes, untouched by it. He instantly became grave.

"Well, what's goin' to happen?" he asked soberly.

"I'm going to be married."

He raised his eyebrows and gave a whistle.

"That is somethin'! And which is it?"

"What a question! David, of course. Who else could it be?"

"Well, he's the best," he spoke slowly, with considering phlegm. "He's a first-rate boy as far as he goes."

"I don't think that's a very nice way to speak of him. Can't you say something better?"

The old man looked over the mules' backs for a moment of inward cogitation. He was not surprised at the news but he was surprised at something in his Missy's manner, a lack of the joyfulness, that he, too, had thought an attribute of all intending brides.

## The River

"He's a good boy," he said thoughtfully. "No one can say he ain't. But some way or other, I'd rather have had a bigger man for you, Missy."

"Bigger!" she exclaimed indignantly. "He's nearly six feet. And girls don't pick out their husbands because of their height."

"I ain't meant it that way. Bigger in what's in him—can get hold o' more, got a bigger reach."

"I don't know what you mean. If you're trying to say he's not got a big mind you're all wrong. He knows more than anybody I ever met except father. He's read hundreds and hundreds of books."

"That's it—too many books. Books is good enough but they ain't the right sort 'er meat for a feller that's got to hit out for himself in a new country. They're all right in the city where you got the butcher and the police and a kerosene lamp to read 'em by. David 'ud be a fine boy in the town just as his books is suitable in the town. But this ain't the town. And the men that are the right kind out here ain't particularly set on books. I'd 'a' chose a harder feller for you, Missy, that could have stood up to anything and didn't have no soft feelings to hamper him."

"Rubbish," she snapped. "Why don't you encourage me?"

Her tone drew his eyes, sharp as a squirrel's and charged with quick concern. Her face was partly turned away. The curve of her cheek was devoid of its usual dusky color, her fingers played on her under lip as if it were a little flute.

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"What do you want to be encouraged for?" he said low, as if afraid of being overheard.

She did not move her head, but looked at the bluffs.

"I don't know," she answered, then hearing her voice hoarse cleared her throat. "It's all—so—so—sort of new. I—I—feel—I don't know just how—I think it's homesick."

Her voice broke in a bursting sob. Her control gone, her pride fell with it. Wheeling on the seat she cast upon him a look of despairing appeal.

"Oh, Daddy John," was all she could gasp, and then bent her head so that her hat might hide the shame of her tears.

He looked at her for a nonplused moment, at her brown arms bent over her shaken bosom, at the shield of her broken hat. He was thoroughly discomfited for he had not the least idea what was the matter. Then he shifted the reins to his left hand and edging near her laid his right on her knee.

"Don't you want to marry him?" he said gently.

"It isn't that, it's something else."

"What else? You can say anything you like to me. Ain't I carried you when you were a baby?"

"I don't know what it is." Her voice came cut by sobbing breaths. "I don't understand. It's like being terribly lonesome."

The old frontiersman had no remedy ready for this complaint. He, too, did not understand.

## The River

"Don't you marry him if you don't like him," he said. "If you want to tell him so and you're afraid, I'll do it for you."

"I do like him. It's not that."

"Well, then, what's making you cry?"

"Something else, something way down deep that makes everything seem so far away and strange."

He leaned forward and spat over the wheel, then subsided against the roof prop.

"Are you well?" he said, his imagination exhausted.

"Yes, very."

Daddy John looked at the backs of the mules. The off leader was a capricious female by name Julia who required more management and coaxing than the other five put together, and whom he loved beyond them all. In his bewildered anxiety the thought passed through his mind that all creatures of the feminine gender, animal or human, were governed by laws inscrutable to the male, who might never aspire to comprehension and could only strive to please and placate.

A footfall struck on his ear and, thrusting his head beyond the canvas hood, he saw Leff loafing up from the rear.

"Saw her come in here," thought the old man, drawing his head in, "and wants to hang round and snoop."

Since the Indian episode he despised Leff. His contempt was unveiled, for the country lout who had shown himself a coward had dared to raise his

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eyes to the one star in Daddy John's firmament. He would not have hidden his dislike if he could. Leff was of the outer world to which he relegated all men who showed fear or lied.

He turned to Susan:

"Go back in the wagon and lie down. Here comes Leff and I don't want him to see you."

The young girl thought no better of Leff than he did. The thought of being viewed in her abandonment by the despised youth made her scramble into the back of the wagon where she lay concealed on a pile of sacks. In the forward opening where the canvas was drawn in a circle round a segment of sky, Daddy John's figure fitted like a picture in a circular frame. As a step paused at the wheel she saw him lean forward and heard his rough tones.

"Yes, she's here, asleep in the back of the wagon."

Then Leff's voice, surprised:

"Asleep? Why, it ain't an hour since we started."

"Well, can't she go to sleep in the morning if she wants? Don't you go to sleep every Sunday under the wagon?"

"Yes, but that's afternoon."

"Mebbe, but everybody's not as slow as you at getting at what they want."

This appeared to put Susan's retirement in a light that gave rise to pondering. There was a pause, then came the young man's heavy footsteps

## The River

slouching back to his wagon. Daddy John settled down on the seat.

"I'm almighty glad it weren't him, Missy," he said, over his shoulder. "I'd 'a' known then why you cried."

## CHAPTER V

LATE the same day Leff, who had been riding on the bluffs, came down to report a large train a few miles ahead of them. It was undoubtedly the long-looked-for New York Company.

The news was as a tonic to their slackened energies. A cheering excitement ran through the train. There was stir and loud talking. Its contagion lifted Susan's spirits and with her father she rode on in advance, straining her eyes against the glare of the glittering river. Men and women, who daily crowded by them unnoted on city streets, now loomed in the perspective as objective points of avid interest. No party Susan had ever been to called forth such hopeful anticipation. To see her fellows, to talk with women over trivial things, to demand and give out the human sympathies she wanted and that had lain withering within herself, drew her from the gloom under which she had lain weeping in the back of Daddy John's wagon.

They were nearing the Forks of the Platte where the air was dryly transparent and sound carried far. While yet the encamped train was a congeries of broken white dots on the river's edge, they could hear the bark of a dog and then singing, a thin thread of melody sent aloft by a woman's voice.

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It was like a handclasp across space. Drawing nearer the sounds of men and life reached forward to meet them—laughter, the neighing of horses, the high, broken cry of a child. They felt as if they were returning to a home they had left and that sometimes, in the stillness of the night or when vision lost itself in the vague distances, they still longed for.

The train had shaped itself into its night form, the circular coil in which it slept, like a thick, pale serpent resting after the day's labors. The white arched prairie schooners were drawn up in a ring, the defensive bulwark of the plains. The wheels, linked together by the yoke chains, formed a barrier against Indian attacks. Outside this interlocked rampart was a girdle of fires, that gleamed through the twilight like a chain of jewels flung round the night's bivouac. It shone bright on the darkness of the grass, a cordon of flame that some kindly magician had drawn about the resting place of the tired camp.

With the night pressing on its edges it was a tiny nucleus of life dropped down between the immemorial plains and the ancient river. Home was here in the pitched tents, a hearthstone in the flame lapping on the singed grass, humanity in the loud welcome that rose to meet the newcomers. The doctor had known but one member of the Company, its organizer, a farmer from the Mohawk Valley. But the men, dropping their ox yokes and war pails, crowded forward, laughing deep-mouthed

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greetings from the bush of their beards, and extending hands as hard as the road they had traveled.

The women were cooking. Like goddesses of the waste places they stood around the fires, a line of half-defined shapes. Films of smoke blew across them, obscured and revealed them, and round about them savory odors rose. Fat spit in the pans, coffee bubbled in blackened pots, and strips of buffalo meat impaled on sticks sent a dribble of flame to the heat. The light was strong on their faces, lifted in greeting, lips smiling, eyes full of friendly curiosity. But they did not move from their posts for they were women and the men and the children were waiting to be fed.

Most of them were middle-aged, or the trail had made them look middle-aged. A few were very old. Susan saw a face carved with seventy years of wrinkles mumbling in the framing folds of a shawl. Nearby, sitting on the dropped tongue of a wagon, a girl of perhaps sixteen, sat ruminant, nursing a baby. Children were everywhere, helping, fighting, rolling on the grass. Babies lay on spread blankets with older babies sitting by to watch. It was the woman's hour. The day's march was over, but the intimate domestic toil was at its height. The home makers were concentrated upon their share of the activities—cooking food, making the shelter habitable, putting their young to bed.

Separated from Susan by a pile of scarlet embers stood a young girl, a large spoon in her hand. The

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light shot upward along the front of her body, painting with an even red glow her breast, her chin, the under side of her nose and finally transforming into a coppery cloud the bright confusion of her hair. She smiled across the fire and said:

"I'm glad you've come. We've been watching for you ever since we struck the Platte. There aren't any girls in the train. I and my sister are the youngest except Mrs. Peebles over there," with a nod in the direction of the girl on the wagon tongue, "and she's married."

The woman beside her, who had been too busy over the bacon pan to raise her head, now straightened herself, presenting to Susan's eye a face more buxom and mature but so like that of the speaker that it was evident they were sisters. A band of gold gleamed on her wedding finger and her short skirt and loose calico jacket made no attempt to hide the fact that another baby was soon to be added to the already well-supplied train. She smiled a placid greeting and her eye, lazily sweeping Susan, showed a healthy curiosity tempered by the self-engrossed indifference of the married woman to whom the outsider, even in the heart of the wilderness, is forever the outsider.

"Lucy'll be real glad to have a friend," she said. "She's lonesome. Turn the bacon, Lucy, it makes my back ache to bend"; and as the sister bowed over the frying pan, "move, children, you're in the way."

This was directed to two children who lay on the

## The Emigrant Trail

grass by the fire, with blinking eyes, already half asleep. As they did not immediately obey she assisted them with a large foot, clad in a man's shoe. The movement though peremptory was not rough. It had something of the quality of the mother tiger's admonishing pats to her cubs, a certain gentleness showing through force. The foot propelled the children into a murmurous drowsy heap. One of them, a little girl with a shock of white hair and a bunch of faded flowers wilting in her tight baby grasp, looked at her mother with eyes glazed with sleep, a deep look as though her soul was gazing back from the mysteries of unconsciousness.

"Now lie there till you get your supper," said the mother, having by gradual pressure pried them out of the way. "And you," to Susan, "better bring your things over and camp here and use our fire. We've nearly finished with it."

In the desolation of the morning Susan had wished for a member of her own sex, not to confide in but to feel that there was some one near, who, if she did know, could understand. Now here were two. Their fresh, simple faces on which an artless interest was so naively displayed, their pleasant voices, not cultured as hers was but women's voices for all that, gave her spirits a lift. Her depression quite dropped away, the awful lonely feeling, all the more whelming because nobody could understand it, departed from her. She ran back to the camp singing and for the first time that day looked

## The River

at David, whose presence she had shunned, with her old, brilliant smile.

An hour later and the big camp rested, relaxed in the fading twilight that lay a yellow thread of separation between the day's high colors and the dewless darkness of the night. It was like a scene from the migrations of the ancient peoples when man wandered with a woman, a tent, and a herd. The barrier of the wagons, with its girdle of fire sparks, incased a grassy oval green as a lawn. Here they sat in little groups, collecting in tent openings as they were wont to collect on summer nights at front gates and piazza steps. The crooning of women putting babies to sleep fell in with the babblings of the river. The men smoked in silence. Nature had taught them something of her large reticence in their day-long companionship. Some few lounged across the grass to have speech of the pilot, a grizzled mountain man, who had been one of the Sublette's trappers, and had wise words to say of the day's travel and the promise of the weather. But most of them lay on the grass by the tents where they could see the stars through their pipe smoke and hear the talk of their wives and the breathing of the children curled in the blankets.

A youth brought an accordion from his stores and, sitting cross-legged on the ground, began to play. He played "Annie Laurie," and a woman's voice, her head a black outline against the west, sang the words. Then there was a clamor of applause, sounding thin and futile in the evening's

## The Emigrant Trail

suave quietness, and the player began a Scotch reel in the production of which the accordion uttered asthmatic gasps as though unable to keep up with its own proud pace. The tune was sufficiently good to inspire a couple of dancers. The young girl called Lucy rose with a partner—her brother-in-law some one told Susan—and facing one another, hand on hip, heads high, they began to foot it lightly over the blackening grass.

Seen thus Lucy was handsome, a tall, long-limbed sapling of a girl, with a flaming crest of copper-colored hair and movements as lithe and supple as a cat's. She danced buoyantly, without losing breath, advancing and retreating with mincing steps, her face grave as though the performance had its own dignity and was not to be taken lightly. Her partner, a tanned and long-haired man, took his part in a livelier spirit, laughing at her, bending his body grotesquely and growing red with his caperings. Meanwhile from the tent door the wife looked on and Susan heard her say to the doctor with whom she had been conferring:

"And when will it be my turn to dance the reel again? There wasn't a girl in the town could dance it with me."

Her voice was weighted with the wistfulness of the woman whose endless patience battles with her unwillingness to be laid by.

Susan saw David's fingers feeling in the grass for her hand. She gave it, felt the hard stress of his grip, and conquered her desire to draw the hand

## The River

away. All her coquetry was gone. She was cold and subdued. The passionate hunger of his gaze made her feel uncomfortable. She endured it for a space and then said with an edge of irritation on her voice:

"What are you staring at me for? Is there something on my face?"

He breathed in a roughened voice:

"No, I love you."

Her discomfort increased. Tumult and coldness make uncongenial neighbors. The man, all passion, and the woman, who has no answering spark, grope toward each other through devious and unilluminated ways.

He whispered again:

"I love you so. You don't understand."

She did not and looked at him inquiringly, hoping to learn something from his face. His eyes, meeting hers, were full of tears. It surprised her so that she stared speechlessly at him, her head thrown back, her lips parted.

He looked down, ashamed of his emotion, murmuring:

"You don't understand. It's so sacred. Some day you will."

She did not speak to him again, but she let him hold her hand because she thought she ought to and because she was sorry.

## CHAPTER VI

THE next morning the rain was pouring. The train rolled out without picturesque circumstance, the men cursing, the oxen, with great heads swinging under the yokes, plodding doggedly through lakes fretted with the downpour. Breakfast was a farce; nobody's fire would burn and the women were wet through before they had the coffee pots out. One or two provident parties had stoves fitted up in their wagons with a joint of pipe coming out through holes in the canvas. From these, wafts of smoke issued with jaunty assurance, to be beaten down by the rain, which swept them fiercely out of the landscape.

There was no perspective, the distance invisible, nearer outlines blurred. The world was a uniform tint, walls of gray marching in a slant across a foreground embroidered with pools. Water ran, or dripped, or stood everywhere. The river, its surface roughened by the spit of angry drops, ran swollen among its islands, plumed shapes seen mistily through the veil. The road emerged in oases of mud from long, inundated spaces. Down the gullies in the hills, following the beaten buffalo tracks, streams percolated through the grass of the bottom, feeling their way to the river.

Notwithstanding the weather a goodly company

## The River

of mounted men rode at the head of the train. They were wet to the skin and quite indifferent to it. They had already come to regard the vagaries of the weather as matters of no import. Mosquitoes and Indians were all they feared. On such nights many of them slept in the open under a tarpaulin, and when the water grew deep about them scooped out a drainage canal with a hand that sleep made heavy.

When the disorder of the camping ground was still in sight, Susan, with the desire of social intercourse strong upon her, climbed into the wagon of her new friends. They were practical, thrifty people, and were as comfortable as they could be under a roof of soaked canvas in a heavily weighted prairie schooner that every now and then bumped to the bottom of a chuck hole. The married sister sat on a pile of sacks disposed in a form that made a comfortable scat. A blanket was spread behind her, and thus enthroned she knitted at a stocking of gray yarn. Seen in the daylight she was young, fresh-skinned, and not uncomely. Placidity seemed to be the dominating note of her personality. It found physical expression in the bland parting of her hair, drawn back from her smooth brow, her large plump hands with their deliberate movements and dimples where more turbulent souls had knuckles, and her quiet eyes, which turned upon anyone who addressed her a long ruminating look before she answered. She had an air of almost oracular profundity but she was merely in the qui-

## The Emigrant Trail

escent state of the woman whose faculties and strength are concentrated upon the coming child. Her sister called her Bella and the people in the train addressed her as Mrs. McMurdo.

Lucy was beside her also knitting a stocking, and the husband, Glen McMurdo, sat in the front driving, his legs in the rain, his upper half leaning back under the shelter of the roof. He looked sleepy, gave a grunt of greeting to Susan, and then lapsed against the saddle propped behind him, his hat pulled low on his forehead hiding his eyes. In this position, without moving or evincing any sign of life, he now and then appeared to be roused to the obligations of his position and shouted a drowsy "Gee Haw," at the oxen.

He did not interfere with the women and they broke into the talk of their sex, how they cooked, which of their clothes had worn best, what was the right way of jerking buffalo meat. And then on to personal matters: where they came from, what they were at home, whither they were bound. The two sisters were Scotch girls, had come from Scotland twenty years ago when Lucy was a baby. Their home was Cooperstown where Glen was a carpenter. He had heard wonderful stories of California, how there were no carpenters there and people were flocking in, so he'd decided to emigrate.

"And once he'd got his mind set on it, he had to start," said his wife. "Couldn't wait for anything but must be off then and there. That's the way men are."

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"It's a hard trip for you," said Susan, wondering at Mrs. McMurdo's serenity.

"Well, I suppose it is," said Bella, as if she did not really think it was, but was too lazy to disagree.

"I hope I'll last till we get to Fort Bridger."

"What's at Fort Bridger?"

"It's a big place with lots of trains coming and going and there'll probably be a doctor among them. And they say it's a good place for the animals—plenty of grass—so it'll be all right if I'm laid up for long. But I have my children very easily."

It seemed to the doctor's daughter a desperate outlook and she eyed, with a combination of pity and awe, the untroubled Bella reclining on the throne of sacks. The wagon gave a creaking lurch and Bella nearly lost count of her stitches which made her frown as she was turning the heel. The lurch woke her husband who pushed back his hat, shouted "Gee Haw" at the oxen, and then said to his wife:

"You got to cut my hair, Bella. These long tags hanging down round my ears worry me."

"Yes, dear, as soon as the weather's fine. I'll borrow a bowl from Mrs. Peeble's mother so that it'll be cut evenly all the way round."

Here there was an interruption, a breathless, baby voice at the wheel, and Glen leaned down and dragged up his son Bob, wet, wriggling, and muddy. The little fellow, four years old, had on a homespun shirt and drawers, both dripping. His

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hair was a wet mop, hanging in rat tails to his eyes. Under its thatch his face, pink and smiling, was as fresh as a dew-washed rose. Tightly gripped in a dirty paw were two wild flowers, and it was to give these to his mother that he had come.

He staggered toward her, the wagon gave a jolt, and he fell, clasping her knees and filling the air with the sweetness of his laughter. Then holding to her arm and shoulder, he drew himself higher and pressed the flowers close against her nose.

"Is it a bu'full smell?" he inquired, watching her face with eyes of bright inquiry.

"Beautiful," she said, trying to see the knitting.

"Aren't you glad I brought them?" still anxiously inquiring.

"Very"—she pushed them away. "You're soaked. Take off your things."

And little Bob, still holding his flowers, was stripped to his skin.

"Now lie down," said his mother. "I'm turning the heel."

He obeyed, but turbulently, and with much pretense, making believe to fall and rolling on the sacks, a naked cherub writhing with laughter. Finally, his mother had to stop her heel-turning to seize him by one leg, drag him toward her, roll him up in the end of the blanket and with a silencing slap say, "There, lie still." This quieted him. He lay subdued save for a waving hand in which the flowers were still imbedded and with which he made passes at the two girls, murmuring with the

## The River

thick utterance of rising sleep "Bu'full flowers." And in a moment he slept, curled against his mother, his face angelic beneath the wet hair.

When Susan came to the giving of her personal data—the few facts necessary to locate and introduce her—her engagement was the item of most interest. A love story even on the plains, with the rain dribbling in through the cracks of the canvas, possessed the old, deathless charm. The doctor and his philanthropies, on which she would have liked to dilate, were given the perfunctory attention that politeness demanded. By himself the good man is dull, he has to have a woman on his arm to carry weight. David, the lover, and Susan, the object of his love, were the hero and heroine of the story. Even the married woman forgot the turning of the heel and fastened her mild gaze on the young girl.

"And such a handsome fellow," she said. "I said to Lucy—she'll tell you if I didn't—that there wasn't a man to compare with him in our train. And so gallant and polite. Last night, when I was heating the water to wash the children, he carried the pails for me. None of the men with us do that. They'd never think of offering to carry our buckets."

Her husband who had appeared to be asleep said:

"Why should they?" and then shouted "Gee Haw" and made a futile kick toward the nearest ox.

Nobody paid any attention to him and Lucy said:

"Yes, he's very fine looking. And you'd never

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met till you started on the trail? Isn't that romantic?"

Susan was gratified. To hear David thus commended by other women increased his value. If it did not make her love him more, it made her feel the pride of ownership in a desirable possession. There was complacency in her voice as she cited his other gifts.

"He's very learned. He's read all kinds of books. My father says it's wonderful how much he's read. And he can recite poetry, verses and verses, Byron and Milton and Shakespeare. He often recites to me when we're riding together."

This acquirement of the lover's did not elicit any enthusiasm from Bella.

"Well, did you ever!" she murmured absently, counting stitches under her breath and then pulling a needle out of the heel, "Reciting poetry on horseback!"

But it impressed Lucy, who, still in the virgin state with fancy free to range, was evidently inclined to romance:

"When you have a little log house in California and live in it with him he'll recite poetry to you in the evening after the work's done. Won't that be lovely?"

Susan made no response. Instead she swallowed silently, looking out on the rain. The picture of herself and David, alone in a log cabin somewhere on the other side of the world, caused a sudden return of yesterday's dejection. It rushed back upon

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her in a flood under which her heart declined into bottomless depths. She felt as if actually sinking into some dark abyss of loneliness and that she must clutch at her father and Daddy John to stay her fall.

"We won't be alone," with a note of protest making her voice plaintive. "My father an' Daddy John will be there. I couldn't be separated from them. I'd never get over missing them. They've been with me always."

Bella did not notice the tone, or maybe went beyond it.

"You won't miss them when you're married," she said with her benign content. "Your husband will be enough."

Lucy, with romance instead of a husband, agreed to this, and arranged the programme for the future as she would have had it:

"They'll probably live near you in tents. And you'll see them often; ride over every few days. But you'll want your own log house just for yourselves."

This time Susan did not answer, for she was afraid to trust her voice. She pretended a sudden interest in the prospect while the unbearable picture rose before her mind—she and David alone, while her father and Daddy John were somewhere else in tents, somewhere away from her, out of reach of her hands and her kisses, not there to laugh with her and tease her and tell her she was a tyrant, only David loving her in an unintelligible, discom-

## The Emigrant Trail

forting way and wanting to read poetry and admire sunsets. The misery of it gripped down into her soul. It was as the thought of being marooned on a lone sand bar to a free buccaneer. They never could leave her so; they never could have the heart to do it. And anger against David, the cause of it, swelled in her. It was he who had done it all, trying to steal her away from the dear, familiar ways and the people with whom she had been so happy.

Lucy looked at her with curious eyes, in which there was admiration and a touch of envy.

"You must be awfully happy?" she said.

"Awfully," answered Susan, swallowing and looking at the rain.

When she went back to her own wagon she found a consultation in progress. Daddy John, streaming from every fold, had just returned from the head of the caravan, where he had been riding with the pilot. From him he had heard that the New York Company on good roads, in fair weather, made twenty miles a day, and that in the mountains, where the fodder was scarce and the trail hard, would fall to a slower pace. The doctor's party, the cow long since sacrificed to the exigencies of speed, had been making from twenty-five to thirty. Even with a drop from this in the barer regions ahead of them they could look forward to reaching California a month or six weeks before the New York Company.

There was nothing to be gained by staying with them, and, so far, the small two-wagon caravan had

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moved with a speed and absence of accident, which gave its members confidence in their luck and generalship. It was agreed that they should leave the big train the next morning and move on as rapidly as they could, stopping at Fort Laramie to repair the wagons which the heat had warped, shoe the horses, and lay in the supplies they needed.

Susan heard it with regret. The comfort of dropping back into the feminine atmosphere, where obvious things did not need explanation, and all sorts of important communications were made by mental telepathy, was hard to relinquish. She would once again have to adjust herself to the dull male perceptions which saw and heard nothing that was not visible and audible. She would have to shut herself in with her own problems, getting no support or sympathy unless she asked for it, and then, before its sources could be tapped, she would have to explain why she wanted it and demonstrate that she was a deserving object.

And it was hard to break the budding friendship with Lucy and Bella, for friendships were not long making on the Emigrant Trail. One day's companionship in the creaking prairie schooner had made the three women more intimate than a year of city visiting would have done. They made promises of meeting again in California. Neither party knew its exact point of destination—somewhere on that strip of prismatic color, not too crowded and not too wild but that wanderers of the same blood and birth might always find each other.

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In the evening the two girls sat in Susan's tent enjoying a last exchange of low-toned talk. The rain had stopped. The thick, bluish wool of clouds that stretched from horizon to horizon was here and there rent apart, showing strips of lemon-colored sky. The ground was soaked, the footprints round the wagons filled with water, the ruts brimming with it. There was a glow of low fires round the camp, for the mosquitoes were bad and the brown smudge of smoldering buffalo chips kept them away.

Susan gave the guest the seat of honor—her saddle spread with a blanket—and herself sat on a pile of skins. The tent had been pitched on a rise of ground and already the water was draining off. Through the looped entrance they could see the regular lights of the fires, spotted on the twilight like the lamps of huge, sedentary glow worms, and the figures of men recumbent near where the slow smoke spirals wound languidly up. Above the sweet, moist odor of the rain, the tang of the burning dung rose, pungent and biting.

Here as the evening deepened they comfortably gossiped, their voices dropping lower as the camp sunk to rest. They exchanged vows of the friendship that was to be renewed in California, and then, drawing closer together, watching the fires die down to sulky red sparks and the sentinel's figure coming and going on its lonely beat, came to an exchange of opinions on love and marriage.

Susan was supposed to know most, her proprie-

## The River

torship of David giving her words the value of experience, but Lucy had most to say. Her tongue loosened by the hour and a pair of listening ears, she revealed herself as much preoccupied with all matters of sentiment, and it was only natural that a love story of her own should be confessed. It was back in Cooperstown, and he had been an apprentice of Glen's. She hadn't cared for him at all, judging by excerpts from the scenes of his courtship he had been treated with unmitigated harshness. But her words and tones—still entirely scornful with half a continent between her and the adorer—gave evidence of a regret, of self-accusing, uneasy doubt, as of one who looks back on lost opportunities. The listener's ear was caught by it, indicating a state of mind so different from her own.

"Then you did like him?"

"I didn't like him at all. I couldn't bear him."

"But you seem sorry you didn't marry him."

"Well— No, I'm not sorry. But"—it was the hour for truth, the still indifference of the night made a lie seem too trivial for the effort of telling—"I don't know out here in the wilds whether I'll ever get anyone else."

## CHAPTER VII

By noon the next day the doctor's train had left the New York Company far behind. Looking back they could see it in gradual stages of diminishment—a white serpent with a bristling head of scattered horsemen, then a white worm, its head a collection of dark particles, then a white thread with a head too insignificant to be deciphered. Finally it was gone, absorbed into the detailless distance where the river coiled through the green.

Twenty-four hours later they reached the Forks of the Platte. Here the trail crossed the South Fork, slanted over the plateau that lay between the two branches, and gained the North Fork. Up this it passed, looping round the creviced backs of mighty bluffs, and bearing northwestward to Fort Laramie. The easy faring of the grassed bottom was over. The turn to the North Fork was the turn to the mountains. The slow stream with its fleet of islands would lose its dreamy deliberateness and become a narrowed rushing current, sweeping round the bases of sandstone walls as the pioneers followed it up and on toward the whitened crests of the Wind River Mountains, where the snows never melted and the lakes lay in the hollows green as jade.

It was afternoon when they reached the ford.

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The hills had sunk away to low up-sweepings of gray soil, no longer hiding the plain which lay yellow against a cobalt sky. As the wagons rolled up on creaking wheels the distance began to darken with the buffalo. The prospect was like a bright-colored map over which a black liquid has been spilled, here in drops, there in creeping streams. Long files flowed from the rifts between the dwarfed bluffs, unbroken herds swept in a wave over the low barrier, advanced to the river, crusted its surface, passed across, and surged up the opposite bank. Finally all sides showed the moving mass, blackening the plateau, lining the water's edge in an endless undulation of backs and heads, foaming down the faces of the sand slopes. Where the train moved they divided giving it right of way, streaming by, bulls, cows, and calves intent on their own business, the earth tremulous under their tread. Through breaks in their ranks the blue and purple of the hills shone startlingly vivid and beyond the prairie lay like a fawn-colored sea across which dark shadows trailed.

The ford was nearly a mile wide, a shallow current, in some places only a glaze, but with shifting sands stirring beneath it. Through the thin, glass-like spread of water the backs of sand bars emerged, smooth as the bodies of recumbent monsters. On the far side the plateau stretched, lilac with the lupine flowers, the broken rear line of the herd receding across it.

The doctor, feeling the way, was to ride in the

## The Emigrant Trail

lead, his wagon following with Susan and Daddy John on the driver's seat. It seemed an easy matter, the water chuckling round the wheels, the mules not wet above the knees. Half way across, grown unduly confident, the doctor turned in his saddle to address his daughter when his horse walked into a quicksand and unscated him. It took them half an hour to drag it out, Susan imploring that her father come back to the wagon and change his clothes. He only laughed at her which made her angry. With frowning brows she saw him mount again, and a dripping, white-haired figure, set out debonairly for the opposite bank.

The sun was low, the night chill coming on when they reached it. Their wet clothes were cold upon them and the camp pitching was hurried. Susan bending over her fire, blowing at it with expanded cheeks and, between her puffs, scolding at her father, first, for having got wet, then for having stayed wet, and now for being still wet, was to David just as charming as any of the other and milder apotheoses of the Susan he had come to know so well. It merely added a new tang a fresh spice of variety, to a personality a less ravished observer might have thought unattractively masterful for a woman.

Her fire kindled, the camp in shape, she lay down by the little blaze with her head under a lupine plant. Her wrath had simmered to appeasement by the retirement of the doctor into his wagon, and David, glimpsing at her, saw that her eyes, a thread of

## The River

observation between black-fringed lids, dwelt mus-  
ingly on the sky. She looked as if she might be  
dreaming a maiden's dream of love. He hazarded  
a tentative remark. Her eyes moved, touched him  
indifferently, and passed back to the sky, and an  
unformed murmur, interrogation, acquiescence,  
casual response, anything he pleased to think it,  
escaped her lips. He watched her as he could when  
she was not looking at him. A loosened strand of  
her hair lay among the lupine roots, one of her  
hands rested, brown and upcurled, on a tiny weed  
its weight had broken. She turned her head with  
a nestling movement, drew a deep, soft breath and  
her eyelids drooped.

"David," she said in a drowsy voice, "I'm go-  
ing to sleep. Wake me at supper time."

He became rigidly quiet. When she had sunk  
deep into sleep, only her breast moving with the  
ebb and flow of her quiet breath, he crept nearer  
and drew a blanket over her, careful not to touch  
her. He looked at the unconscious face for a mo-  
ment, then softly dropped the blanket and stole back  
to his place ready to turn at the first foot fall and  
lift a silencing hand.

It was one of the beautiful moments that had  
come to him in his wooing. He sat in still reverie,  
feeling the dear responsibilities of his ownership.  
That she might sleep, sweet and soft, he would  
work as no man ever worked before. To guard,  
to comfort, to protect her—that would be his life.  
He turned and looked at her, his sensitive face

## The Emigrant Trail

softening like a woman's watching the sleep of her child. Susan, all unconscious, with her rich young body showing in faint curves under the defining blanket, and her hair lying loose among the roots of the lupine bush, was so devoid of that imperious quality that marked her when awake, was so completely a tender feminine thing, with peaceful eyelids and innocent lips, that it seemed a desecration to look upon her in such a moment of abandonment. Love might transform her into this—in her waking hours when her body and heart had yielded themselves to their master.

David turned away. The sacred thought that some day he would be the owner of this complex creation of flesh and spirit, so rich, so fine, with depths unknown to his groping intelligence, made a rush of supplication, a prayer to be worthy, rise in his heart. He looked at the sunset through half-shut eyes, sending his desire up to that unknown God, who, in these wild solitudes, seemed leaning down to listen:

"Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

The sun, falling to the horizon like a spinning copper disk, was as a sign of promise and help. The beauty of the hour stretched into the future. His glance, shifting to the distance, saw the scattered dots of the disappearing buffalo, the shadows sloping across the sand hills, and the long expanse of lupines blotting into a thick foam of lilac blue.

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Susan stirred, and he woke from his musings with a start. She sat up, the blanket falling from her shoulders, and looking at him with sleep-filled eyes, smiled the sweet, meaningless smile of a half-awakened child. Her consciousness had not yet fully returned, and her glance, curiously clear and liquid, rested on his without intelligence. The woman in her was never more apparent, her seduction never more potent. Her will dormant, her bounding energies at low ebb, she looked a thing to nestle, soft and yielding, against a man's heart.

"Have I slept long?" she said stretching, and then, "Isn't it cold."

"Come near the fire," he answered. "I've built it up while you were asleep."

She came, trailing the blanket in a languid hand, and sat beside him. He drew it up about her shoulders and looked into her face. Meeting his eyes she broke into low laughter, and leaning nearer to him murmured in words only half articulated:

"Oh, David, I'm so sleepy."

He took her hand, and it stayed unresisting against his palm. She laughed again, and then yawned, lifting her shoulders with a supple movement that shook off the blanket.

"It takes such a long time to wake up," she murmured apologetically.

David made no answer, and for a space they sat silent looking at the sunset. As the mists of sleep dispersed she became aware of his hand pressure, and the contentment that marked her awakening

## The Emigrant Trail

was marred. But she felt in a kindly mood and did not withdraw her hand. Instead, she wanted to please him, to be as she thought he would like her to be, so she made a gallant effort and said:

"What a wonderful sunset—all yellow to the middle of the sky."

He nodded, looking at the flaming west. She went on:

"And there are little bits of gold cloud floating over it, like the melted lead that you pour through a key on all Hallowe'en."

He again made no answer, and leaning nearer to spy into his face, she asked naïvely:

"Don't you think it beautiful?"

He turned upon her sharply, and she drew back discomposed by his look.

"Let me kiss you," he said, his voice a little husky.

He was her betrothed and had never kissed her but once in the moonlight. It was his right, and after all, conquering the inevitable repugnance, it did not take long. Caught thus in a yielding mood she resolved to submit. She had a comforting sense that it was a rite to which in time one became accustomed. With a determination to perform her part graciously she lowered her eyelids and presented a dusky cheek. As his shoulder touched hers she felt that he trembled and was instantly seized with the antipathy that his emotion woke in her. But it was too late to withdraw. His arms closed round her and he crushed her against

## The River

his chest. When she felt their strength and the beating of his heart against the unstirred calm of her own, her good resolutions were swept away in a surge of abhorrence. She struggled for freedom, repelling him with violent, pushing hands, and exclaiming breathlessly:

"Don't, David! Stop! I won't have it! Don't!"

He instantly released her, and she shrunk away, brushing off the bosom of her blouse as if he had left dust there. Her face was flushed and frowning.

"Don't. You mustn't," she repeated, with heated reproof. "I don't want you to."

David smiled a sheepish smile, looking foolish, and not knowing what to say. At the sight of his crestfallen expression she averted her eyes, sorry that she had hurt him but not sufficiently sorry to risk a repetition of the unpleasant experience. He, too, turned his glance from her, biting his lip to hide the insincerity of his smile, irritated at her unmanageableness, and in his heart valuing her more highly that she was so hard to win. Both were exceedingly conscious, and with deepened color sat gazing in opposite directions like children who have had a quarrel.

A step behind them broke upon their embarrassment, saving them from the necessity of speech. Daddy John's voice came with it:

"Missy, do you know if the keg of whisky was moved? It ain't where I put it."

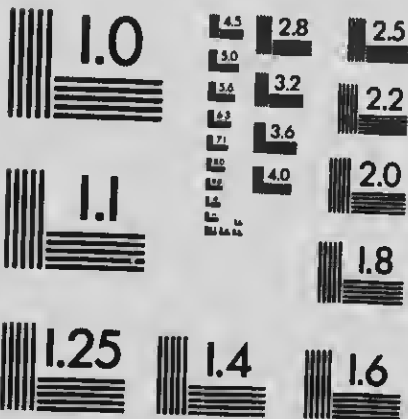
She turned with a lightning quickness.

"Whisky! Who wants whisky?"



# MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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## The Emigrant Trail

Daddy John looked uncomfortable.

"Well, the doctor's took sort of cold, got a shiver on him like the ague, and he thought a nip o' whisky'd warm him up."

She jumped to her feet.

"There!" flinging out the word with the rage of a disregarded prophet, "a chill! I knew it!"

In a moment all the self-engrossment of her bashfulness was gone. Her mind had turned on another subject with such speed and completeness that David's kiss and her anger might have taken place in another world in a previous age. Her faculties leaped to the sudden call like a liberated spring, and her orders burst on Daddy John:

"In the back of the wagon, under the corn meal. It was moved when we crossed the Big Blue. Take out the extra blankets and the medicine chest. That's in the front corner, near my clothes, under the seat. A chill—out here in the wilderness!"

David turned to soothe her:

"Don't be worried. A chill's natural enough after such a wetting."

She shot a quick, hard glance at him, and he felt ignominiously repulsed. In its preoccupation her face had no recognition of him, not only as a lover but as a human being. Her eyes, under low-drawn brows, stared for a second into his with the unseeing intentness of inward thought. Her struggles to avoid his kiss were not half so chilling. Further solacing words died on his lips.

"It's the worst possible thing that could happen

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to him. Everybody knows that"—then she looked after Daddy John. "Get the whisky at once," she called. "I'll find the medicines."

"Can't I help?" the young man implored.

Without answering she started for the wagon, and midway between it and the fire paused to cry back over her shoulder:

"Heat water, or if you can find stones heat them. We must get him warm."

And she ran on.

David looked about for the stones. The "we" consoled him a little, but he felt as if he were excluded into outer darkness, and at a moment when she should have turned to him for the aid he yearned to give. He could not get over the suddenness of it, and watched them forlornly, gazing enviously at their conferences over the medicine chest, once straightening himself from his search for stones to call longingly:

"Can't I do something for you over there?"

"Have you the stones?" she answered without raising her head, and he went back to his task.

In distress she had turned from the outside world, broken every lien of interest with it, and gone back to her own. The little circle in which her life had always moved snapped tight upon her, leaving the lover outside, as completely shut out from her and her concerns as if he had been a stranger camped by her fire.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE doctor was ill. The next day he lay in the wagon, his chest oppressed, fever burning him to the dryness of an autumn leaf. To the heads that looked upon him through the circular opening with a succession of queries as to his ailment, he invariably answered that it was nothing, a bronchial cold, sent to him as a punishment for disobeying his daughter. But the young men remembered that the journey had been undertaken for his health, and Daddy John, in the confidential hour of the evening smoke, told them that the year before an attack of congestion of the lungs had been almost fatal.

Even if they had not known this, Susan's demeanor would have told them it was a serious matter. She was evidently wracked by anxiety which transformed her into a being so distant, and at times so cross, that only Daddy John had the temerity to maintain his usual attitude toward her. She would hardly speak to Leff, and to David, the slighting coldness that she had shown in the beginning continued, holding him at arm's length, freezing him into stammering confusion. When he tried to offer her help or cheer her she made him feel like a foolish and tactless intruder, forcing his

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way into the place that was hers alone. He did not know whether she was prompted by a cruel perversity, or held in an absorption so intense she had no warmth of interest left for anybody. He tried to explain her conduct, but he could only feel its effect, wonder if she had grown to dislike him, review the last week in a search for a cause. In the daytime he hung about the doctor's wagon, miserably anxious for a word from her. He was grateful if she asked him to hunt for medicine in the small, wooden chest, or to spread the blankets to air on the tops of the lupine bushes.

And while she thus relegated him to the outer places where strangers hovered, a sweetness, so gentle, so caressing, so all pervading that it made of her a new and lovely creature, marked her manner to the sick man. There had always been love in her bearing to her father, but this new tenderness was as though some hidden well of it, sunk deep in the recesses of her being, had suddenly overflowed. David saw the hardness of the face she turned toward him transmute into a brooding passion of affection as she bent over the doctor's bed. The fingers he did not dare to touch lifted the sick man's hand to her cheek and held it there while she smiled down at him, her eyes softening with a light that stirred the lover's soul. The mystery of this feminine complexity awed him. Would she ever look at him like that? What could he do to make her? He knew of no other way than by serving her, trying unobtrusively to lighten her burden,

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effacing himself, as that seemed to be what she wanted. And in the night as he lay near the wagon, ready to start at her call, he thought with exalted hope that some day he might win such a look for himself.

The doctor was for going on. There was no necessity to stay in camp because one man happened to wheeze and cough, he said, and anyway, he could do that just as well when they were moving. So they started out and crossed the plateau to where the road dropped into the cleft of Ash Hollow. Here they stopped and held a conference. The doctor was worse. The interior of the wagon, the sun beating on the canvas roof, was like a furnace, where he lay sweltering, tossed this way and that by the jolting wheels. Their dust moved with them, breezes lifting it and carrying it careening back to them where it mingled with new dust, hanging dense like a segment of fog in the scene's raw brilliancy.

Ash Hollow looked a darkling descent, the thin pulsations of the little leaves of ash trees flickering along its sides. The road bent downward in sharp zigzags, and somewhere below the North Fork ran. The plain was free, blue clothed and blue vaulted, with "the wonderful winds of God" flowing between. The conference resulted in a unanimous decision to halt where they were, and stay in camp till the doctor improved, moving him from the wagon to a tent.

For four days he lay parched with fever, each

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breath drawn with a stifled inner rustling, numerous fine wrinkles traced in a network on his dried cheeks. Then good care, the open air, and the medicine chest prevailed. He improved, and Susan turned her face again to the world and smiled. Such was the changefulness of her mood that her smiles were as radiant and generously bestowed as her previous demeanor had been repelling. Even Leff got some of them, and they fell on David prodigal and warming as the sunshine. Words to match went with them. On the morning of the day when the doctor's temperature fell and he could breathe with ease, she said to her betrothed:

"Oh, David, you've been so good, you've made me so fond of you."

It was the nearest she had yet come to the language of lovers. It made him dizzy; the wonderful look was in his mind.

"You wouldn't let me be good," was all he could stammer. "You didn't seem as if you wanted me at all."

"Stupid!" she retorted with a glance of beaming reproach, "I'm always like that when my father's sick."

It was noon of the fifth day that a white spot on the plain told them the New York Company was in sight. The afternoon was yet young when the dust of the moving column tarnished the blue-streaked distance. Then the first wagons came into view, creeping along the winding ribbon of road. As soon as the advance guard of horsemen saw the

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camp, pieces of it broke away and were deflected toward the little group of tents from which a tiny spiral of smoke went up in an uncoiling, milky skein. Susan had many questions to answer, and had some ado to keep the inquirers away from the doctor, who was still too weak to be disturbed. She was sharp and not very friendly in her efforts to preserve him from their sympathizing curiosity.

Part of the train had gone by when she heard from a woman who rode up on a foot-sore nag that the McMurdo's were some distance behind. A bull boat in which the children were crossing the river had upset, and Mrs. McMurdo had been frightened and "took faint." The children were all right—only a wetting—but it was a bad time for their mother to get such a scare.

"I'm not with the women who think it's all right to take such risks. Stay at home *then*," she said, giving Susan a sage nod out of the depths of her sunbonnet.

The news made the young girl uneasy. A new reticence, the "grown-up" sense of the wisdom of silence that she had learned on the trail, made her keep her own council. Also, there was no one to tell but her father, and he was the last person who ought to know. The call of unaided suffering would have brought him as quickly from his buffalo skins in the tent as from his bed in the old home in Rochester. Susan resolved to keep it from him, if she had to stand guard over him and fight them off. Her philosophy was primitive—her own

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first, and if, to save her own, others must be sacrificed, then she would aid in the sacrifice and weep over its victims, weep, but not yield.

When the train had disappeared into the shadows of Ash Hollow, curses, shouts, and the cracking of whips rising stormily over its descent, the white dot of the McMurdo's wagon was moving over the blue and green distance. As it drew near they could see that Glen walked beside the oxen, and the small figure of Bob ran by the wheel. Neither of the women were to be seen. "Lazy and riding," Daddy John commented, spying at them with his far-sighted old eyes. "Tired out and gone to sleep," David suggested. Susan's heart sank and she said nothing. It looked as if something was the matter, and she nerved herself for a struggle.

When Glen saw them, his shout came through the clear air, keen-edged as a bird's cry. They answered, and he raised a hand in a gesture that might have been a beckoning or merely a hail. David leaped on a horse and went galloping through the bending heads of the lupines to meet them. Susan watched him draw up at Glen's side, lean from his saddle for a moment's parley, then turn back. The gravity of his face increased her dread. He dismounted, looking with scared eyes from one to the other. Mrs. McMurdo was sick. Glen was glad—he couldn't say how glad—that it was their camp. He'd camp there with them. His wife wasn't able to go on.

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Susan edged up to him, caught his eye and said stealthily:

"Don't tell my father."

He hesitated.

"They—they—seemed to want him."

"I'll see to that," she answered. "Don't you let him know that anything's the matter, or I'll never forgive you."

It was a command, and the glance that went with it accented its authority.

The prairie schooner was now close at hand, and they straggled forward to meet it, one behind the other, through the brushing of the knee-high bushes. The child recognizing them ran screaming toward them, his hands out-stretched, crying out their names. Lucy appeared at the front of the wagon, climbed on the tongue and jumped down. She was pale, the freckles on her fair skin showing like a spattering of brown paint, her flaming hair slipped in a tousled coil to one side of her head.

"It's you!" she cried. "Glen didn't know whose camp it was till he saw David. Oh, I'm so glad!" and she ran to Susan, clutched her arm and said in a hurried lower key, "Bella's sick. She feels terribly bad, out here in this place with nothing. Isn't it dreadful?"

"I'll speak to her," said Susan. "You stay here."

The oxen, now at the outskirts of the camp, had come to a standstill. Susan stepping on the wheel

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drew herself up to the driver's seat. Bella sat within on a pile of sacks, her elbows on her knees, her forehead in her hands. By her side, leaning against her, stood the little girl, blooming and thoughtful, her thumb in her mouth. She withdrew it and stared fixedly at Susan, then smiled a slow, shy smile, full of meaning, as if her mind held a mischievous secret. At Susan's greeting the mother lifted her head.

"Oh, Susan, isn't it a merry we've found you?" she exclaimed. "We saw the camp hours ago, but we didn't know it was yours. It's as if God had delayed you. Yes, my dear, it's come. But I'm not going to be afraid. With your father it'll be all right."

The young girl said a few consolatory words and jumped down from the wheel. She was torn both ways. Bella's plight was piteous, but to make her father rise in his present state of health and attend such a case, hours long, in the chill, night breath of the open—it might kill him! She turned toward the camp, vaguely conscious of the men standing in awkward attitudes and looking thoroughly uncomfortable as though they felt a vicarious sense of guilt—that the entire male sex had something to answer for in Bella's tragic predicament. Behind them stood the doctor's tent, and as her eyes fell on it she saw Lucy's body standing in the opening, the head and shoulders hidden within the inclosure. Lucy was speaking with the doctor.

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Susan gave a sharp exclamation and stopped. It was too late to interfere. Lucy withdrew her head and came running back, crying triumphantly:

"Your father's coming. He says he's not sick at all. He's putting on his coat."

Following close on her words came the doctor, emerging slowly, for he was weak and unsteady. In the garish light of the afternoon he looked singularly white and bleached, like a man whose warm, red-veined life is dried into a sere grayness of blood and tissue. He was out of harmony with the glad living colors around him, ghostlike amid the brightness of the flowering earth and the deep-dyed heaven. He met his daughter's eyes and smiled.

"Your prisoner has escaped you, Missy."

She tried to control herself, to beat down the surge of anger that shook her. Meeting him she implored with low-toned urgency:

"Father, you can't do it. Go back. You're too sick."

He pushed her gently away, his smile gone.

"Go back, Missy? The woman is suffering, dear."

"I know it, and I don't care. You're suffering, you're sick. She should have known better than to come. It's her fault, not ours. Because she was so foolhardy is no reason why you should be victimized."

His gravity was crossed by a look of cold, displeased surprise, a look she had not seen directed

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upon her since once in her childhood when she had told him a lie.

"I don't want to feel ashamed of you, Missy," he said quietly, and putting her aside went on to the wagon.

She turned away blinded with rage and tears. She had a dim vision of David and fled from it, then felt relief at the sight of Daddy John. He saw her plight, and hooking his hand in her arm took her behind the tent, where she burst into furious words and a gush of stifled weeping.

"No good," was the old man's consolation. "Do you expect the doctor to lie comfortable in his blanket when there's some one around with a pain?"

"Why did she come? Why didn't she stay at home?"

"That ain't in the question," he said, patting her arm; "she's here, and she's got the pain, and you and I know the doctor."

The McMurdo's prairie schooner rolled off to a place where the lupines were high, and Glen pitched the tent. The men, not knowing what else to do to show their sympathy, laid the fires and cleaned the camp. Then the two younger ones shouldered their rifles and wandered away to try and get some fresh buffalo meat, they said; but it was obvious that they felt out of place and alarmed in a situation where those of their sex could only assume an apologetic attitude and admit the blame.

The children were left to Susan's care. She

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drew them to the cleared space about the fires, and as she began the preparations for supper asked them to help. They took the request very seriously, and she found a solace in watching them as they trotted up with useless pans, bending down to see the smile of thanks to which they were accustomed, and which made them feel proud and important. Once she heard Bob, in the masterful voice of the male, tell his sister the spoon she was so triumphantly bringing was not wanted. The baby's joy was stricken from her, she bowed to the higher intelligence, and the spoon slid from her limp hand to the ground, while she stood a figure of blank disappointment. Susan had to set down her pan and call her over, and kneeling with the soft body clasped close, and the little knees pressing against her breast, felt some of the anger there melting away. After that they gathered broken twigs of lupine, and standing afar threw them at the flames. There was a moment of suspense when they watched hopefully, and then a sad awakening when the twigs fell about their feet. They shuffled back, staring down at the scattered leaves in a stupor of surprise.

Sunset came and supper was ready. Daddy John loomed up above the lip of Ash Hollow with a load of roots and branches for the night. Lucy emerged from the tent and sat down by her cup and plate, harrassed and silent. Glen said he wanted no supper. He had been sitting for an hour on the pole of David's wagon, mute and round-shouldered in his

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dusty homespun. No one had offered to speak to him. It was he who had induced the patient woman to follow him on the long journey. They all knew this was now the matter of his thoughts. His ragged figure and down-drooped, miserable face were dignified with the tragedy of a useless remorse. As Lucy passed him he raised his eyes, but said nothing. Then, as the others drew together round the circle of tin cups and plates, a groan came suddenly from the tent. He leaped up, made a gesture of repelling something unendurable, and ran away, scudding across the plain not looking back. The group round the fire were silent. But the two children did not heed. With their blond heads touching, they held their cups close together and argued as to which one had the most coffee in it.

When the twilight came there was no one left by the fire but Susan and the children. She gathered them on a buffalo robe and tucked a blanket round them watching as sleep flowed over them, invaded and subdued them even while their lips moved with belated, broken murmurings. The little girl's hand, waving dreamily in the air, brushed her cheek with a velvet touch, and sank languidly, up-curved like a rose petal. With heads together and bodies nestled close they slept, exhaling the fragrance of healthy childhood, two sparks of matter incased in an envelope of exquisite flesh, pearly tissue upon which life would trace a pattern not yet selected.

Darkness closed down on the camp, pressing on

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the edges of the firelight like a curious intruder. There was no wind, and the mound of charring wood sent up a line of smoke straight as a thread, which somewhere aloft widened and dissolved. The stillness of the wilderness brooded close and deep, stifling the noises of the day. When the sounds of suffering from the tent tore the airy veil apart, it shuddered full of the pain, then the torn edges delicately adhered, and it was whole again. Once Lucy came, haggard and tight-lipped, and asked Susan to put on water to heat. Bella was terribly sick, the doctor wouldn't leave her. The other children were nothing to this. But the Emigrant Trail was molding Lucy. She made no complaints, and her nerves were steady as a taut string. It was one of the hazards of the great adventure to be taken as it came.

After she had gone, and the iron kettle was balanced on a bed of heat, Susan lay down on her blanket. Fear and loathing were on her. For the first time a shrinking from life and its requirements came coldly over her, for the first time her glad expectancy knew a check, fell back before tremendous things blocking the path. Her dread for her father was submerged in a larger dread—of the future and what it might bring, of what might be expected of her, of pains and perils once so far away they seemed as if she would never reach them, now suddenly close to her, laying a gripping hand on her heart.

Her face was toward the camp, and she could

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not see on the plain behind her a moving shadow bearing down on the fire's glow, visible for miles in that level country. It advanced noiselessly through the swaying bushes, till, entering the limits of the light, it detached itself from the darkness, taking the form of a mounted man followed by a pack animal. The projected rays of red played along the barrel of a rifle held across the saddle, and struck answering gleams from touches of metal on the bridle. So soundless was the approach that Susan heard nothing till a lupine stalk snapped under the horse's hoof. She sat up and turned. Over the horse's ears she saw a long swarthy face framed in hanging hair, and the glint of narrowed eyes looking curiously at her. She leaped to her feet with a smothered cry, Indians in her mind. The man raised a quick hand, and said:

"It's all right. It's a white man."

He slid off his horse and came toward her. He was so like an Indian, clad in a fringed hunting shirt and leggings, his movements lithe and light, his step noiseless, his skin copper dark, that she stood alert, ready to raise a warning cry. Then coming into the brighter light she saw he was white, with long red hair hanging from the edge of his cap, and light-colored eyes that searched her face with a hard look. He was as wild a figure as any the plains had yet given up, and she drew away looking fearfully at him.

"Don't be afraid," he said in a deep voice. "I'm the same kind as you."

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"Who are you?" she faltered.

"A mountain man. I'll camp with you." Then glancing about, "Where are the rest of them?"

"They're round somewhere," she answered.

"We have sickness here."

"Cholera?" quickly.

She shook her head.

Without more words he went back and picketed his horses, and took the pack and saddle off. She could see his long, pale-colored figure moving from darkness into light, and the animals drooping with stretched necks as their bonds were loosened. When he came back to the fire he dropped a blanket and laid his gun close to it, then threw himself down. The rattle of the powder horn and bullet mold he wore hanging from his shoulder came with the movement. He slipped the strap off and threw it beside the gun. Then drew one foot up and unfastened a large spur attached to his moccasined heel. He wore a ragged otter-skin cap, the animal's tail hanging down on one side. This he took off too, showing his thick red hair, damp and matted from the heat of the fur. With a knotted hand he pushed back the locks pressed down on his forehead. The skin there was untanned and lay like a white band above the darkness of his face, thin, edged with a fringe of red beard and with blue eyes set high above prominent cheek bones. He threw his spur on the other things, and looking up met Susan's eyes staring at him across the fire.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

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"To California."

"So am I."

She made no answer.

"Were you asleep when I came?"

"No, I was thinking."

A sound of anguish came from the tent, and Susan set her teeth on her underlip stiffening. He looked in its direction, then back at her.

"What's the matter there?" he asked.

"A child is being born."

He made no comment, swept the background of tents and wagon roofs with an investigating eye that finally came to a stop on the sleeping children.

"Are these yours?"

"No, they belong to the woman who is sick."

His glance left them as if uninterested, and he leaned backward to pull his blanket out more fully. His body, in the sleekly pliant buckskins, was lean and supple. As he twisted, stretching an arm to draw out the crumpled folds, the lines of his long back and powerful shoulders showed the sinuous grace of a cat. He relaxed into easeful full length, propped on an elbow, his red hair coiling against his neck. Susan stole a stealthy glance at him. As if she had spoken, he instantly raised his head and looked into her eyes.

His were clear and light with a singularly penetrating gaze, not bold but intent, eyes not used to the detailed observation of the peopled ways, but trained to unimpeded distances and to search the faces of primitive men. They held hers, seeming

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to pierce the acquired veneer of reserve to the guarded places beneath. She felt a slow stir of antagonism, a defensive gathering of her spirit as against an intruder. Her pride and self-sufficiency responded, answering to a hurried summons. She was conscious of a withdrawal, a closing of doors, a shutting down of her defenses in face of aggression and menace. And while she rallied to this sudden call-to-arms the strange man held her glance across the fire. It was she who spoke slowly in a low voice:

"Where do you come from?"

"From Taos, and after that Bent's Fort."

"What is your name?"

"Low Courant."

Then with an effort she turned away and bent over the children. When she looked back at him he was rolled in his blanket, and with his face to the fire was asleep.

Lucy came presently for the hot water with a bulletin of progress growing each moment more direful. Her eyes fell on the sleeping man, and she said, peering through the steam of the bubbling water:

"Who's that?"

"A strange man."

"From where?"

"Taos, and after that Bent's Fort," Susan repeated, and Lucy forgot him and ran back to the tent.

There was a gray line in the east when she re-

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turned to say the child was born dying as it entered the world, and Bella was in desperate case. She fell beside her friend, quivering and sobbing, burying her face in Susan's bosom. Shaken and sickened by the dreadful night they clung together holding to each other, as if in a world where love claimed such a heavy due, where joy realized itself at such exceeding cost, nothing was left but the bond of a common martyrdom. Yet each of them, knowing the measure of her pain, would move to the head of her destiny and take up her heavy engagement without fear, obeying the universal law.

But now, caught in the terror of the moment, they bowed their heads and wept together while the strange man slept by the fire.



PART III  
The Mountains



## CHAPTER I

FORT LARAMIE stood where the eastern roots of the mountains start in toothed reef and low, premonitory sweep from the level of the plains. Broken chains and spurs edged up toward it. Far beyond, in a faint aerial distance, the soaring solidity of vast ranges hung on the horizon, cloudy crests painted on the sky. Laramie Peak loomed closer, a bold, bare point, gold in the morning, purple at twilight. And the Black Hills, rock-ribbed and somber, dwarf pines clutching their lodges, rose in frowning ramparts to the North and West.

It was a naked country, bleak and bitter. In winter it slept under a snow blanket, the lights of the fort encircled by the binding, breathless cold. Then the wandering men that trapped and traded with the Indians came seeking shelter behind the white walls, where the furs were stacked in store-rooms, and the bourgeois' table was hospitable with jerked meat and meat cakes. When the streams began to stir under the ice, and a thin green showed along the bottoms, it opened its gates and the men of the mountains went forth with their traps rattling at the saddle horn. Later, when the spring was in waking bloom, and each evening the light stayed longer on Laramie Peak, the Indians

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came in migrating villages moving to the summer hunting grounds, and in painted war parties, for there was a season when the red man, like the Hebrew kings, went forth to battle.

It was midsummer now, the chalk-white walls of the fort were bathed in a scorching sunshine, and the nomads of the wilderness met and picked up dropped threads in its courtyard. It stood up warlike on a rise of ground with the brown swiftness of a stream hurrying below it. Once the factors had tried to cultivate the land, but had given it up, as the Indians carried off the maize and corn as it ripened. So the short-haired grass grew to the stockade. At this season the surrounding plain was thick with grazing animals, the fort's own supply, the ponies of the Indians, and the cattle of the emigrants. Encampments were on every side, clustering close under the walls, whence a cannon poked its nose protectingly from the bastion above the gate. There was no need to make the ring of wagons here. White man and red camped together, the canvas peaks of the tents showing beside the frames of lodge poles, covered with dried skins. The pale face treated his red brother to coffee and rice cakes, and the red brother offered in return a feast of boiled dog.

Just now the fort was a scene of ceaseless animation. Its courtyard was a kaleidoscopic whirl of color, shifting as the sun shifted and the shadow of the walls offered shade. Indians with bodies bare above the dropped blankets, moved stately or

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squatted on their heels watching the emigrants as they bartered for supplies. Trappers in fringed and beaded leather played cards with the plainsmen in shady corners or lounged in the cool arch of the gateway looking aslant at the emigrant girls. Their squaws, patches of color against the walls, sat docile, with the swarthy, half-breed children playing about their feet. There were French Canadians, bearded like pirates, full of good humor, filling the air with their patois, and a few Mexicans, who passed the days sprawled on serapes and smoking sleepily. Over all the bourgeois ruled, kindly or crabber y, according to his make, but always absolutely the monarch of a little principality.

The doctor's train had reached the fort by slow stages, and now lay camped outside the walls. Bella's condition had been serious, and they had crawled up the valley of the North Platte at a snail's pace. The gradual change in the country told them of their advance—the intrusion of giant bluffs along the river's edge, the disappearance of the many lovely flower forms, the first glimpses of parched areas dotted with sage. From the top of Scotts Bluffs they saw the mountains, and stood, a way-worn company, looking at those faint and formidable shapes that blocked their path to the Promised Land. It was a sight to daunt the most lighthearted, and they stared, dropping ejaculations that told of the first decline of spirit. Only the sick woman said nothing. Her languid eye swept the prospect indifferently, her spark of life burning too

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feebly to permit of any useless expenditure. It was the strange man who encouraged them. They would pass the mountains without effort, the ascent was gradual, South Pass a plain.

The strange man had stayed with them, and all being well, would go on to Fort Bridger, probably to California, in their company. It was good news. He ; what they needed, versed in the lore of the wilderness, conversant with an environment of which they were ignorant. The train had not passed Ash Hollow when he fell into command, chose the camping grounds, went ahead in search of springs, and hunted with Daddy John, bringing back enough game to keep them supplied with fresh meat. They began to rely upon him, to defer to him, to feel a new security when they saw his light, lean-flanked figure at the head of the caravan.

One morning, as the doctor rode silently beside him, he broke into a low-toned singing. His voice was a mellow baritone, and the words he sung, each verse ending with a plaintive burden, were French:

"Il y a longtemps que je t'ai aimé jamais je ne t'oublierai."

Long ago the doctor had heard his wife sing the same words, and he turned with a start:

"Where did you learn that song?"

"From some voyageur over yonder," nodding toward the mountains. "It's one of their songs."

"You have an excellent accent, better than the Canadians."

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The stranger laughed and addressed his companion in pure and fluent French.

"Then you're a Frenchman?" said the elder man, surprised.

"Not I, but my people were. They came from New Orleans and went up the river and settled in St. Louis. My grandfather couldn't speak a sentence in English when he first went there."

When the doctor told his daughter this he was a little triumphant. They had talked over Courant and his antecedents, and had some argument about them, the doctor maintaining that the strange man was a gentleman, Susan quite sure that he was not. Dr. Gillespie used the word in its old-fashioned sense, as a term having reference as much to birth and breeding as to manners and certain, ineradicable instincts. The gentleman adventurer was not unknown on the plains. Sometimes he had fled from a dark past, sometimes taken to the wild because the restraints of civilization pressed too hard upon the elbows of his liberty.

"He's evidently of French creole blood," said the doctor. "Many of those people who came up from New Orleans and settled in St. Louis were of high family and station."

"Then why should he be out here, dressed like an Indian and wandering round with all sorts of waifs and strays? I believe he's just the same kind of person as old Joe, only younger. Or, if he does come from educated people, there's something

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wrong about him, and he's had to come out here and hide."

"Oh, what a suspicious little Missy! Nothing would make me believe that. He may be rough, but he's not crooked. Those steady, straight-looking eyes never belonged to any but an honest man. No, my dear, there's no discreditable past behind him, and he's a gentleman."

"Rubbish!" she said pettishly. "You'll be saying Leff's a gentleman next."

From which it will be seen that Low Courant had not been communicative about himself. Such broken scraps of information as he had dropped, when pieced together made a scanty narrative. His grandfather had been one of the early French settlers of St. Louis, and his father a prosperous fur trader there. But why he had cut loose from them he did not vouchsafe to explain. Though he was still young—thirty perhaps—it was evident that he had wandered far and for many years. He knew the Indian trails of the distant Northwest, and spoke the language of the Black Feet and Crows. He had passed a winter in the old Spanish town of Santa Fé, and from there joined a regiment of United States troops and done his share of fighting in the Mexican War. Now the wanderlust was on him, he was going to California.

"Maybe to settle," he told the doctor. "If I don't wake up some morning and feel the need to move once more."

When they reached the fort he was hailed joy-

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ously by the bourgeois himself. The men clustered about him, and there were loud-voiced greetings and much questioning, a rumor having filtered to his old stamping ground that he had been killed in the siege of the Alamo. The doctor told the bourgeois that Courant was to go with his train to California, and the apple-cheeked factor grinned and raised his eyebrows.

"Vous-avez de la chance! He's a good guide. Even Kit Carson, who conducted the General Frémont, is no better."

The general satisfaction did not extend to Susan. The faint thrill of antagonism that the man had roused in her persisted. She knew he was a gain to the party, and said nothing. She was growing rapidly in this new, toughening life, and could set her own small prejudices aside in the wider view that each day's experience was teaching her. The presence of such a man would lighten the burden of work and responsibility that lay on her father, and whatever was beneficial to the doctor was accepted by his daughter. But she did not like Low Courant. Had anyone asked her why she could have given no reason. He took little notice of any of the women, treating them alike with a brusque indifference that was not discourteous, but seemed to lump them as necessary but useless units in an important whole.

The train was the focus of his interest. The acceleration of its speed, the condition of the cattle, the combination of lightness and completeness in

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its make-up were the matters that occupied him. In the evening hour of rest these were the subjects he talked of, and she noticed that Daddy John was the person to whom he talked most. With averted eyes, her head bent to David's murmurings, she was really listening to the older men. Her admiration was reluctantly evoked by the stranger's dominance and vigor of will, his devotion to the work he had undertaken. She felt her own insignificance and David's also, and chafed under the unfamiliar sensation.

The night after leaving Ash Hollow, as they sat by the fire, David at her side, the doctor had told Courant of the betrothal. His glance passed quickly over the two conscious faces, he gave a short nod of comprehension, and turning to Daddy John, inquired about the condition of the mules' shoes. Susan reddened. She saw something of disparagement, of the slightest gleam of mockery, in that short look, which touched both faces and then turned from them as from the faces of children playing at a game. Yes, she disliked him, disliked his manner to Lucy and herself, which set them aside as beings of a lower order, that had to go with them and be taken care of like the stock, only much less important and necessary. Even to Bella he was off-hand and unsympathetic, unmoved by her weakness, as he had been by her sufferings the night he came. Susan had an idea that he thought Bella's illness a misfortune, not so much for Bella as for the welfare of the train.

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They had been at the fort now for four days and were ready to move on. The wagons were repaired, the mules and horses shod, and Bella was mending, though still unable to walk. The doctor had promised to keep beside the McMurdos till she was well, then his company would forge ahead.

In the heat of the afternoon, comfortable in a rim of shade in the courtyard, the men were arranging for the start the next morning. The sun beat fiercely on the square opening roofed by the blue of the sky and cut by the black shadow of walls. In the cooling shade the motley company lay sprawling on the ground or propped against the doors of the store rooms. The open space was brilliant with the blankets of Indians, the bare limbs of brown children, and the bright serapes of the Mexicans, who were too lazy to move out of the sun. In a corner the squaws played a game with polished cherry stones which they tossed in a shallow, saucerlike basket and let drop on the ground.

Susan, half asleep on a buffalo skin, watched them idly. The game reminded her of the jack-stones of her childhood. Then her eye slanted to where Lucy stood by the gate talking with a trapper called Xavier Leroux. The sun made Lucy's splendid hair shine like a flaming nimbus, and the dark men of the mountains and the plain watched her with immovable looks. She was laughing, her head drooped sideways. Above the collar of her blouse a strip of neck, untouched by tan, showed

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in a milk-white band. Conscious of the admiring observation, she instinctively relaxed her muscles into lines of flowing grace, and lowered her eyes till her lashes shone in golden points against her freckled cheeks. With entire innocence she spread her little lure, following an elemental instinct, that, in the normal surroundings of her present life, released from artificial restraints, was growing stronger.

Her companion was a voyageur, a half-breed, with coarse black hair hanging from a scarlet handkerchief bound smooth over his head. He was of a sinewy, muscular build, his coppery skin, hard black eyes, and high cheek bones showing the blood of his mother, a Crow squaw. His father, long forgotten in the obscurity of mountain history, had evidently bequeathed him the French Canadian's good-humored gayety. Xavier was a light-hearted and merry fellow, and where he came laughter sprang up. He spoke English well, and could sing French songs that were brought to his father's country by the adventurers who crossed the seas with Jacques Cartier.

The bourgeois, who was aloft on the bastion sweeping the distance with a field glass, suddenly threw an announcement down on the courtyard:

"Red Feather's village is coming and an emigrant train."

The space between the four walls immediately seethed into a whirlpool of excitement. It eddied there for a moment, then poured through the gate-

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way into the long drainlike entrance passage and spread over the grass outside.

Down the face of the opposite hill, separated from the fort by a narrow river, came the Indian village, streaming forward in a broken torrent. Over its barbaric brightness, beads and glass caught the sun, and the nervous fluttering of eagle feathers that fringed the upheld lances played above its shifting pattern of brown and scarlet. It descended the slope in a broken rush, spreading out fanwise, scattered, disorderly, horse and foot together. On the river bank it paused, the web of color thickening, then rolled over the edge and plunged in. The current, beaten into sudden whiteness, eddied round the legs of horses, the throats of swimming dogs, and pressed up to the edges of the travaux where frightened children sat among litters of puppies. Ponies bestrode by naked boys struck up showers of spray, squaws with lifted blankets waded stolidly in, mounted warriors, feathers quivering in their inky hair, indifferently splashing them. Here a dog, caught by the current, was seized by a sinewy hand; there a horse, struggling under the weight of a travaux packed with puppies and old women, was grasped by a lusty brave and dragged to shore. The water round them frothing into silvery turmoil, the air above rent with their cries, they climbed the bank and made for the camping ground near the fort.

Among the first came a young squaw. Her white doeskin dress was as clean as snow, barbar-

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ically splendid with cut fringes and work of bead and porcupine quills. Her mien was sedate, and she swayed to her horse lightly and flexibly as a boy, holding aloft a lance edged with a flutter of feathers, and bearing a round shield of painted skins. Beside her rode the old chief, his blanket falling away from his withered body, his face expressionless and graven deep with wrinkles.

"That's Red Feather and his favorite squaw," said the voice of Courant at Susan's elbow.

She made no answer, staring at the Indian girl, who was handsome and young, younger than she.

"And look," came the voice again, "there are the emigrants."

A long column of wagons had crested the summit and was rolling down the slope. They were in single file, hood behind hood, the drivers, bearded as cave men, walking by the oxen. The line moved steadily, without sound or hurry, as if directed by a single intelligence possessed of a single idea. It was not a congeries of separated particles, but a connected whole. As it wound down the face of the hill, it suggested a vast Silurian monster, each wagon top a vertebra, crawling forward with definite purpose.

"That's the way they're coming," said the voice of the strange man. "Slow but steady, an endless line of them."

"Who?" said Susan, answering him for the first time.

"The white men. They're creeping along out of

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their country into this, pushing the frontier forward every year, and going on ahead of it with their tents and their cattle and their women. Watch the way that train comes after Red Feather's village. That was all scattered and broken, going every way like a lot of glass beads rolling down the hill. This comes slow, but it's steady and sure as fate."

She thought for a moment, watching the emigrants, and then said:

"It moves like soldiers."

"Conquerors. That's what they are. They're going to roll over everything—crush them out."

"Over the Indians?"

"That's it. Drive 'em away into the cracks of the mountains, wipe them out the way the trappers are wiping out the beaver."

"Cruel!" she said hotly. "I don't believe it."

"Cruel?" he gave her a look of half-contemptuous amusement. "Maybe so, but why should you blame them for that? Aren't you cruel when you kill an antelope or a deer for supper? They're not doing you any harm, but you just happen to be hungry. Well, those fellers are hungry—land hungry—and they've come for the Indian's land. The whole world's cruel. You know it, but you don't like to think so, so you say it isn't. You're just lying because you're afraid of the truth."

She looked angrily at him and met the gray eyes. In the center of each iris was a dot of pupil so

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clearly defined a . . . nard that they looked to Susan like the heads of black pins. "That's exactly what he'd say," she thought; "he's no better than a savage." What she said was:

"I don't agree with you at all."

"I don't expect you to," he answered, and making an ironical bow turned on his heel and swung off.

The next morning, in the pallor of the dawn, they started, rolling out into a gray country with the keen-edged cold of early day in the air, and Laramie Peak, gold tipped, before them. As the sky brightened and the prospect began to take on warmer hues, they looked ahead toward the profiles of the mountains and thought of the journey to come. At this hour of low vitality it seemed enormous, and they paced forward a silent, lifeless caravan, the hoof beats sounding hollow on the beaten track.

Then from behind them came a sound of singing, a man's voice caroling in the dawn. Both girls wheeled and saw Xavier Leroux ambling after them on his rough-haired pony, the pack horse behind. He waved his hand and shouted across the silence:

"I come to go with you as far as South Pass," and then he broke out again into his singing. It was the song Courant had sung, and as he heard it he lifted up his voice at the head of the train, and the two strains blending, the old French chanson swept out over the barren land:

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"A la claire fontaine!  
M'en allant promener  
J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle  
Que je me suis baigné!"

Susan waved a beckoning hand to the voyageur, then turned to Lucy and said joyously:

"What fun to have Xavier! He'll keep us laughing all the time. Aren't you glad he's coming?"

Lucy gave an unenthusiastic "Yes." After the first glance backward she had bent over her horse smoothing its mane her face suddenly dyed with a flood of red.

## CHAPTER II

EVERYBODY was glad Xavier had come. He brought a spirit of good cheer into the party which had begun to feel the pressure of the long march behind them, and the still heavier burden that was to come. His gayety was irrepressible, his high spirits unflagging. When the others rode silent in the lifeless hours of the afternoon or drooped in the midday heats, Xavier, a dust-clouded outline on his shaggy pony, lifted up his voice in song. Then the chanting melody of French verses issued from the dust cloud, rising above the rattling of the beaver traps and the creaking of the slow wheels.

He had one especial favorite that he was wont to sing when he rode between the two girls. It recounted the adventures of *trois cavalières*, and had so many verses that Xavier assured them neither he nor any other man had ever arrived at the end of them. Should he go to California with them and sing a verse each day, he thought there would still be some left over to give away when he got there. Susan learned the first two stanzas, and Lucy picked up the air and a few words. When the shadows began to slant and the crisp breath of the mountains came cool on their faces, they sang, first Xavier and Susan, then Lucy joining in

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in a faint, uncertain treble, and finally from the front of the train the strange man, not turning his head, sitting straight and square, and booming out the burden in his deep baritone:

" Dans mon chemin j'ai rencontré  
Trois cavalières bien montées,  
L'on, ton laridon danée  
L'on, ton laridon dai.

" Trois cavalières bien montées  
L'une a cheval, l'autre à pied  
L'on, ton, laridon danée  
L'on ton laridon dai."

Zavier furnished another diversion in the monotony of the days, injected into the weary routine, a coloring drop of romance, for, as he himself would have said, he was *diablement épris* with Lucy. This was regarded as one of the best of Xavier's jokes. He himself laughed at it, and his extravagant compliments and gallantries were well within the pale of the burlesque. Lucy laughed at them, too. The only one that took the matter seriously was Bella. She was not entirely pleased.

"Talk about it's being just a joke," she said to Susan in the bedtime hour of confidences. "You can joke too much about some things. Xavier's a man just the same as the others, and Lucy's a nice-looking girl when she gets rested up and the freckles go off. But he's an Indian if he does speak

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French, and make good money with his beaver trapping."

"He's not *all* Indian," Susan said soothingly. "He's half white. There are only a few Indian things about him, his dark skin and something high and flat about his cheek bones and the way he turns in his toes when he walks."

"Indian enough," Bella fumed. "And nobody knows anything about his father. We're respectable people and don't want a man with no name hanging round. I've no doubt he was born in a lodge or under a pine tree. What right's that kind of man to come ogling after a decent white girl whose father and mother were married in the Presbyterian Church?"

Susan did not take it so much to heart. What was the good when Lucy obviously didn't care? As for Xavier, she felt sorry for him, for those keen observing faculties of hers had told her that the voyageur's raillery hid a real feeling. Poor Xavier was in love. Susan was pensive in the contemplation of his hopeless passion. He was to leave the train near South Pass and go back into the mountains, and there, alone, camp on the streams that drained the Powder River country. In all probability he would never see one of them again. His trapping did not take him West to the great deserts, and he hated the civilization where man became a luxurious animal of many needs. Like the buffalo and the red man he was restricted to the wild lands that sloped away on either side of

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the continent's mighty spine. His case was sad, and Susan held forth on the subject of Lucy, whom she thought callous and unkind.

"It's terrible to think you'll never see him again," she said, looking for signs of compassion. "Don't you feel sorry?"

Lucy looked down. She had been complaining to her friend of Xavier's follies of devotion.

"There are lots of other men in the world," she said indifferently.

Susan fired up. If not yet the authorized owner of a man, she felt her responsibilities as a coming proprietor. The woman's passion for interference in matters of sentiment was developing in her.

"Lucy, you're the most hard-hearted girl! Poor Xavier, who's going off into the mountains and may be killed by the Indians. Don't you feel any pity for him? And he's in love with you—truly in love. I've watched him and I know."

She could not refrain from letting a hint of superior wisdom, of an advantage over the unengaged Lucy, give solemnity to her tone.

Lucy's face flushed.

"He's half an Indian," she said with an edge on her voice. "Doesn't everyone in the train keep saying that every ten minutes? Do you want me to fall in love with a man like that?"

"Why no, of course not. You couldn't. That's the sad part of it. He seems as much like other men as those trappers in the fort who were all white. Just because he had a Crow mother it seems

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unjust that he should be so sort of on the outside of everything. But of course you couldn't marry him. Nobody ever heard of a girl marrying a half-breed."

Lucy bent over the piece of deer meat that she was cutting apart. They were preparing supper at the flaring end of a hot day, when the wagons had crawled through a loose alkaline soil and over myriads of crickets that crushed sickeningly under the wheels. Both girls were tired, their throats parched, their hair as dry as hemp, and Lucy was irritable, her face unsmiling, her movement quick and nervous.

"What's it matter what a man's parents are if he's kind to you?" she said, cutting viciously into the meat. "It's a lot to have some one fill the kettles for you and help you get the firewood, and when you're tired tell you to go back in the wagon and go to sleep. Nobody does that for me but Xavier."

It was the first time she had shown any appreciation of her swain's attentions. She expressed the normal, feminine point of view that her friend had been looking for, and as soon as she heard it Susan adroitly vaulted to the other side:

"But, Lucy, you *can't* marry him!"

"Who says I'm going to?" snapped Lucy. "Do I have to marry every Indian that makes eyes at me? All the men in the fort were doing it. They hadn't a look for anyone else."

Susan took this with reservations. A good many

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of the men in the fort had made eyes at her. It was rather grasping of Lucy to take it all to herself, and in her surprise at the extent of her friend's claims she was silent.

"As for me," Lucy went on, "I'm dead sick of this journey. I wish we could stop or go back or do something. But we've got to keep on and on to the end of nowhere. It seems as if we were going forever in these tiresome old wagons or on horses that get lame every other day, and then you have to walk. I don't mind living in a tent. I like it. But I hate always going on, never having a minute to rest, getting up in the morning when I'm only half awake, and having to cook at night when I'm so tired I'd just like to lie down on the ground without taking my clothes off and go to sleep there. I wish I'd never come. I wish I'd married the man in Cooperstown that I wouldn't have wiped my feet on then."

She slapped the frying pan on the fire and threw the meat into it. Her voice and lips were trembling. With a quick, backward bend she stooped to pick up a fork, and Susan saw her face puckered and quivering like a child's about to cry.

"Oh, Lucy," she cried in a burst of sympathy. "I didn't know you felt like that," and she tried to clasp the lithe uncorseted waist that flinched from her touch. Lucy's elbow, thrown suddenly out, kept her at a distance, and she fell back repulsed, but with consolations still ready to be offered.

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"Let me alone," said Lucy, her face averted. "I'm that tired I don't know what I'm saying. Go and get the children for supper, and don't let them stand round staring at me or they'll be asking questions."

She snatched the coffee pot and shook it upside down, driblets of coffee running out. With her other hand she brushed the tears off her cheeks.

"Don't stand there as if you never saw a girl cry before," she said, savagely. "I don't do it often, and it isn't such a wonderful sight. Get the children, and if you tell anyone that I feel this way I'll murder you."

The children were at some distance lying on the ground. Such unpromising materials as dust and sage brush had not quenched their inventive power or hampered their imaginations. They played with as an absorbed an industry here as in their own garden at home. They had scraped the earth into mounded shapes marked with the print of baby fingers and furrowed with paths. One led to a central mound crowned with a wild sunflower blossom. Up the path to this Bob conducted twigs of sage, murmuring the adventures that attended their progress. When they reached the sunflower house he laid them carefully against its sides, continuing the unseen happenings that befell them on their entrance. The little girl lay beside him, her cheek resting on an outflung arm, her eyes fixed wistfully on the personally conducted party. Her creative genius had not risen to the heights of his,

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and her fat little hands were awkward and had pushed the sunflower from its perch. So she had been excluded from active participation, and now looked on, acquiescing in her exclusion, a patient and humble spectator.

"Look," Bob cried as he saw Susan approaching. "I've builded a house and a garden, and these are the people," holding up one of the sage twigs, "they walk fru the garden an' then go into the house and have coffee and buf'lo meat."

Susan admired it and then looked at the baby, who was pensively surveying her brother's creation.

"And did the baby play, too?" she asked.

"Oh, no, she couldn't. She doesn't know nuffing, she's too small," with the scorn of one year's superiority.

The baby raised her solemn eyes to the young girl and made no attempt to vindicate herself. Her expression was that of subdued humility, of one who admits her short-comings. She rose and thrust a soft hand into Susan's, and maintained her silence as they walked toward the camp. The only object that seemed to have power to rouse her from her dejected reverie were the broken sage stalks in the trail. At each of these she halted, hanging from Susan's sustaining grasp, and stubbed her toe accurately and carefully against the protruding root.

They would have been silent that evening if it had not been for Xavier. His mood was less merry than usual, but a stream of frontier anecdote and story flowed from him, that held them listening

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with charmed attention. His foreign speech interlarded with French words added to the picturesqueness of his narratives, and he himself sitting crosslegged on his blanket, his hair hanging dense to his shoulders, his supple body leaning forward in the tension of a thrilling climax, was a fitting minstrel for these lays of the wild.

His final story was that of Antoine Godin, one of the classics of mountain history. Godin was the son of an Iroquois hunter who had been brutally murdered by the Blackfeet. He had become a trapper of the Sublette brothers, then mighty men of the fur trade, and in the expedition of Milton Sublette against the Blackfeet in 1832 joined the troop. When the two bands met, Godin volunteered to hold a conference with the Blackfeet chief. He chose as his companion an Indian of the Flathead tribe, once a powerful nation, but almost exterminated by wars with the Blackfeet. From the massed ranks of his warriors the chief rode out for the parley, a pipe of peace in his hand. As Godin and the Flathead started to meet him, the former asked the Indian if his piece was charged, and when the Flathead answered in the affirmative told him to cock it and ride alongside.

Midway between the two bands they met. Godin clasped the chief's hand, and as he did so told the Flathead to fire. The Indian levelled his gun, fired, and the Blackfeet chief rolled off his horse. Godin snatched off his blanket and in a rain of bullets fled to the Sublette camp.

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"And so," said the voyageur with a note of exultation in his voice, "Godin got revenge on those men who had killed his father."

For a moment his listeners were silent, suffering from a sense of bewilderment, not so much at the story, as at Xavier's evident approval of Godin's act.

It was Susan who first said in a low tone, "What an awful thing to do!" This loosened Bella's tongue, who lying in the opening of her tent had been listening and now felt emboldened to express her opinion, especially as Glen, stretched on his face nearby, had emitted a snort of indignation.

"Well, of all the wicked things I've heard since I came out here that's the worst."

Xavier shot a glance at them in which for one unguarded moment, race antagonism gleamed.

"Why is it wicked?" he said gently.

David answered heatedly, the words bursting out:

"Why, the treachery of it, the meanness. The chief carried the pipe of peace. That's like our flag of truce. You never heard of any civilized man shooting another under the flag of truce."

Xavier looked stolid. It was impossible to tell whether he comprehended their point of view and pretended ignorance, or whether he was so restricted to his own that he could see no other.

"The Blackfeet had killed his father," he answered. "They were treacherous too. Should he wait to be murdered? It was his chance and he took it."

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Sounds of dissent broke out round the circle. All the eyes were trained on him, some with a wide, expectant fixity, others bright with combative fire. Even Glen sat up, scratching his head, and remarking sotto voce to his wife:

"Ain't I always said he was an Indian?"

"But the Blackfeet chief wasn't the man who killed his father," said the doctor.

"No, he was chief of the tribe who did."

"But why kill an innocent man who probably had nothing to do with it?"

"It was for vengeance," said Xavier with unmoved patience and careful English. "Vengeance for his father's death."

Several pairs of eyes sought the ground giving up the problem. Others continued to gaze at him either with wonder, or hopeful of extracting from his face some clue to his involved and incomprehensible moral attitude. They suddenly felt as if he had confessed himself of an alien species, a creature as remote from them and their ideals as a dweller in the moon.

"He had waited long for vengeance," Xavier further explained, moving his glittering glance about the circle, "and if he could not find the right man, he must take such man as he could. The chief is the biggest man, and he comes where Godin has him. 'My father is avenged at last,' he says, and bang!"—Xavier levelled an imaginary engine of destruction at the shadows—"it is done and Godin gets the blanket."

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The silence that greeted this was one of hopelessness; the blanket had added the final complication. It was impossible to make Xavier see, and this new development in what had seemed a boyish and light-hearted being, full to the brim with the milk of human kindness, was a thing to sink before in puzzled speechlessness. Courant tried to explain:

"You can't see it Xavier's way because it's a different way from yours. It comes out of the past when there weren't any laws, or you had to make 'em yourself. You've come from where the courthouse and the police take care of you, and if a feller kills your father, sees to it that he's caught and strung up. It's not your business to do it, and so you've got to thinking that the man that takes it into his own hands is a desperate kind of criminal. Out here in those days you wiped out such scores yourself or no one did. It seems to you that Godin did a pretty 'ow down thing, but he thought he was doing the right thing for him. He'd had a wrong done him and he'd got to square it. And it didn't matter to him that the chief wasn't the man. Kill an Indian and it's the tribe's business to settle the account. The Blackfeet killed his father and it was Godin's business to kill a Blackfeet whenever he got the chance. I guess when he saw the chief riding out to meet him what he felt most was, that it was the best chance he'd ever get."

The faces turned toward Courant—a white man

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like themselves! So deep was their disapproving astonishment that nobody could say anything. For a space they could only stare at him as though he, too, were suddenly dropping veils that had hidden unsuspected, baleful depths.

Then argument broke out and the clamor of voices was loud on the night. Courant bore the brunt of the attack, Xavier's ideas being scanty, his mode of procedure a persistent, reiteration of his original proposition. Interruptions were furnished in a sudden, cracked laugh from Daddy John, and phrases of dissent or approval from Glen and Bella stretching their ears from the front of the tent. Only Lucy said nothing, her head wrapped in a shawl, her face down-drooped and pale.

Late that night Susan was waked by whispering sounds which wound stealthily through her sleep feeling for her consciousness. At first she lay with her eyes shut, breathing softly, till the sounds percolated through the stupor of her fatigue and she woke, disentangling them from dreams. She threw back her blankets and sat alert thinking of Indians.

The moon was full, silver tides lapping in below the tent's rim. She stole to the flap listening, then drew it softly open. Her tent had been pitched beneath a group of trees which made a splash of shadow broken with mottlings of moonlight. In the depths of this shadow she discerned two figures, the white flecks and slivers sliding along the dark oblong of their shapes as they strayed with loitering steps or stood whispering. The straight edge

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of their outline, the unbroken solidity of their bulk, told her they were wrapped in the same blanket, a custom in the Indian lover's courtship. Their heads were toward her, the two heads rising from the blanket's folds, showing as a rounded pyramidal finish. As she looked they paced beyond the shadow into the full unobscured light, and she saw that the higher head was dark, the other fair, crowned with a circlet of shining hair.

Her heart gave an astounded leap. Her first instinct was to draw back, her second to stand where she was, seemingly traditions overwhelmed in amazement. The whispering ceased, the heads inclined to each other, the light one drooping backward, the dark one leaning toward it, till they rested together for a long, still moment. Then they separated, the woman drawing herself from the blanket and with a whispered word stealing away, a furtive figure flitting through light and shade to the McMurdo tents. The man turned and walked to the fire, and Susan saw it was Xavier. He threw on a brand and in its leaping ray stood motionless, looking at the flame, a slight, fixed smile on his lips.

She crept back to her bed and lay there with her heart throbbing and her eyes on the edges of moonlight that slipped in over the trampled sage leaves. Xavier was on sentry duty that night, and she could hear the padding of his step as he moved back and forth through the sleeping camp. On the dark walls of the tent the vision she had seen kept re-

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peating itself, and as it returned upon her mental sight, new questions surged into her mind. A veil had been raised, and she had caught a glimpse of something in life, a new factor in the world, she had never known of. The first faint comprehension of it, the first stir of sympathy with it, crept toward her understanding and tried to force an entrance. She pushed it out, feeling frightened, feeling as if it were an intruder, that once admitted would grow dominant and masterful, and she would never be her own again.

### CHAPTER III

The next morning Susan could not help stealing inquiring looks at Lucy. Surely the participant in such a nocturnal adventure must bear some signs of it upon her face. Lucy had suddenly become a disturbing and incomprehensible problem. In trying to readjust her conception of the practical and energetic girl, Susan found herself confronted with the artifices of a world-old, feminine duplicity that she had never before encountered, and knew no more of than she did of the tumult that had possession of poor Lucy's tormented soul. Here was the heroine of a midnight rendezvous going about her work with her habitual nervous capability, dressing the children, preparing the breakfast, seeing that Bella was comfortably disposed on her mattress in the wagon. She had not a glance for Xavier. Could a girl steal out to meet and kiss a man in the moonlight and the next morning look at him with a limp, undrooping eye as devoid of consciousness as the eye of a preoccupied cat?

The standards of the doctor's daughter were comparative and their range limited. All she had to measure by was herself. Her imagination in trying to compass such a situation with Susan Gillespie as the heroine, could picture nothing as her

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portion but complete abasement and, of course, a confession to her father. And how dreadful that would have been! She could feel humiliation stealing on her at the thought of the doctor's frowning displeasure. But Lucy had evidently told no one. Why had she not? Why had she pretended not to like Xavier? Why? Why? Susan found her thoughts trailing off into a perspective of questions that brought up against a wall of incomprehension above which Lucy's clear eyes looked at her with baffling secretiveness.

It was a warm morning, and the two girls sat in the doctor's wagon. Lucy was knitting one of the everlasting stockings. In the heat she had unfastened the neck of her blouse and turned the edges in, a triangle of snowy skin visible below her sunburned throat. She looked thin, her arms showing no curve from wrist to elbow, the lines of her body delicately angular under the skimpy dress of faded lilac cotton. The sun blazing through the canvas cast a tempered yellow light over her that toned harmoniously with the brown coating of freckles and the copper burnish of her hair. Her hands, vibrating over her work with little hovering movements like birds about to light, now and then flashing out a needle which she stabbed into her coiffure, were large-boned and dexterous, the strong, unresting hands of the frontierswoman.

Susan was lazy, leaning back on the up-piled sacks, watching the quick, competent movements and the darts of light that leaped along the needles.

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Before they had entered the wagon she had decided to speak to Lucy of what she had overseen. In the first place she felt guilty and wanted to confess. Besides that the need to give advice was strong upon her, and the natural desire to interfere in a matter of the heart was another impelling impulse. So she had determined to speak for conscience, for friendship, for duty, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility, for curiosity.

But it was a hard subject to approach, and she was uncomfortable. Diplomacy had not been one of the gifts the fairies gave her when they gathered at her cradle. Looking at the quivering needles she tried to think of a good beginning, and like most direct and candid people concluded there was no better one than that of the initial fact, before the complicating intrusion of inference:

"I woke up in the middle of the night last night."

Lucy knit unmoved.

"The moonlight was as bright as day. Out beyond the shadow where my tent was I could see the weeds and little bunches of grass."

"How could you see them when you were in your tent?" This without stopping her work or raising her head.

Susan, feeling more uncomfortable than ever, answered, her voice instinctively dropping, "I got up and looked out of my tent."

She kept her eyes on the busy hands and saw that the speed of their movements slackened.

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"Got up and looked out? What did you do that for?"

The time for revelation had come. Susan was a little breathless.

"I heard people whispering," she said.

The hands came to a stop. But the knitter continued to hold them in the same position, a suspended, waiting expectancy in their attitude.

"Whispering?" she said. "Who was it?"

"Oh, Lucy, you know."

There was a pause. Then Lucy dropped her knitting and, raising her head, looked at the anxious face opposite. Her eyes were quiet and steady, but their look was changed from its usual frankness by a new defiance, hard and wary.

"No, I don't know. How should I?"

"Why, why"—Susan now was not only breathless but pleading—"it was you."

"Who was me?"

"The woman—Lucy don't look at me like that, as if you didn't understand. I saw you, you and Xavier, wrapped in the blanket. You walked out into the moonlight and I *saw*."

Lucy's gaze continued unfaltering and growing harder. Under the freckles she paled, but she stood her ground.

"What do you mean? Saw me and Xavier? Where?"

"Under the trees first and then you went out into the moonlight with the blanket wrapped round your shoulders."

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"You didn't see me," the hardness was now in her voice. "It was some one else."

A feeling of alarm rose in the other girl. It was not the lie alone, it was the force behind it, the force that made it possible, that gave the teller will to hold her glance steady and deny the truth. A scaring sense of desperate powers in Lucy that were carrying her outside the familiar and established, seized her friend. It was all different from her expectations. Her personal repugnance and fastidiousness were swept aside in the menace of larger things. She leaned forward and clasped Lucy's knee.

"Don't say that. I saw you. Lucy, don't say I didn't. Don't bother to tell me a lie. What did it mean? Why did you meet him? What are you doing?"

Lucy jerked her knee away. Her hands were trembling. She took up the knitting, tried to direct the needles, but they shook and she dropped them. She made a sharp movement with her head in an effort to avert her face, but the light was merciless, there was no shade to hide in.

"Oh, don't bother me," she said angrily. "It's not your affair."

Susan's dread rose higher. In a flash of vision she had a glimpse into the storm-driven depths. It was as if a child brought up in a garden had unexpectedly looked into a darkling mountain abyss.

"What are you going to do?" she almost whispered. "You mustn't. You must stop. I thought

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you didn't care about him. You only laughed and everybody thought it was a joke. Don't go on that way. Something dreadful will happen."

Lucy did not answer. With her back pressed against the roof arch and her hands clinched in her lap—she sat rigid, looking down. She seemed gripped in a pain that stiffened her body and made her face pinched and haggard. Under the light cotton covering her breast rose and fell. She was an embodiment of tortured indecision.

Susan urged: "Let me tell my father and he'll send Xavier away."

Lucy raised her eyes and tried to laugh. The unnatural sound fell with a metallic harshness on the silence. Her mouth quivered, and putting an unsteady hand against it, she said brokenly,

"Oh, Missy, don't torment me. I feel bad enough already."

There was a longer pause. Susan broke it in a low voice:

"Then you're going to marry him?"

"No," loudly, "no. What a question!"

She made a grab at her knitting and started feverishly to work, the needles clicking, stitches dropping, the stocking leg trembling as it hung.

"Why, he's an Indian," she cried suddenly in a high, derisive key.

"But"—the questioner had lost her moment of vision and was once again floundering between ignorance and intuition—"Why did you kiss him then?"

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"I didn't. He kissed me."

"You let him. Isn't that the same thing?"

"No, no. You're so silly. You don't know anything." She gave a hysterical laugh and the bonds of her pride broke in a smothered cry: "I couldn't help it. I didn't want to. I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to go out and meet him and I went. I—" she gathered up the stocking and, needles and all, buried her face in it. It was the only thing she could find to hide behind. "I'm so miserable," she sobbed. "You don't know. It's such a terrible thing first feeling one way and then the other. I'm so mixed up I don't know what I feel. I wish I was dead."

There was a sound of men's voices outside, and the wagon came to a jolting halt. Daddy John, on the driver's seat, silhouetted against the circle of sky, slipped his whip into its ring of leather and turned toward the girls. Lucy threw herself backward and lay with her face on the sacks, stifling her tears.

"What are you two girls jawing about in there?" he asked, squinting blindly from the sun dazzle into the clear, amber light of the canvas cavern.

"We're just telling stories and things," said Susan.

The old man peered at Lucy's recumbent figure.

"Ain't she well?" he queried. "Thought I heard crying."

"Her head aches, it's so hot."

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"Let her stay there. We'll do her cooking for her. Just stay where you are, Lucy, and don't worrit about your work."

But the voices outside demanded her. It was the noon halt and Lucy was an important factor in the machinery of the train. Glen's call for her was mingled with the fresh treble of Bob's and Bella's at a farther distance, rose in a plaintive, bovine lowing. She stretched a hand sideways and gripped Susan's skirt.

"I can't go," she gasped in a strangled whisper. "I can't seem to get a hold on myself. Ask Xavier to build the fire and cook. He'll do it, and Courant will help him. And tell the others I'm sick."

Lucy's headache lasted all through the dinner hour, and when the train started she still lay in the back of the doctor's wagon. For once she seemed indifferent to the comfort of her relatives. The clamor that rose about their disorderly fire and unsavory meal came to her ears through the canvas walls, and she remained deaf and unconcerned. When Susan crept in beside her and laid a cool cheek on hers, and asked her if she wanted anything, she said no, she wanted to rest that was all. Daddy John turned his head in profile and said:

"Let her alone, Missy. She's all tuckered out. They've put too much work on her sence her sister took sick. You let her lie there and I'll keep an eye to her."

Then he turned away and spat, as was his wont when thoughtful. He had seen much of the world,

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and in his way was a wise old man, but he did not guess the secret springs of Lucy's trouble. Women on the trail should be taken care of as his Missy was. Glen McMurdo was the kind of man who let the women take care of him, and between him and the children and the sick woman they'd half killed the girl with work. Daddy John had his opinion of Glen, but like most of his opinions he kept it to himself.

Susan had no desire for talk that afternoon. She wanted to be alone to muse on things. As the train took the road for the second stage, she drew her horse back among the sage and let the file of wagons pass her. She saw hope gleaming in Leff's eye, and killed it with a stony glance, then called to her father that she was going to ride behind. David was hunting in the hills with Courant, Xavier driving in his stead. The little caravan passed her with the dust hovering dense around it and the slouching forms of the pack horses hanging fringe-like in its rear.

They were nearing the end of their passage by the river, shrunk to a clear, wild stream which they came upon and lost as the trail bore westward. Their route lay through an interminable sequence of plains held together by channels of communication that filtered through the gaps in hills. The road was crossed by small streams, chuckling at the bottom of gullies, the sides of which were cracked open like pale, parched lips gasping for air. The limpid transparency of the prospect was blotted by

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the caravan's moving dust cloud. Beyond this the plain stretched, empty as the sky, a brown butte rising here and there.

Susan heard hoof beats behind her and turned. Courant was riding toward her, his rifle across his saddle. She made a motion of recognition with her hand and turned away thinking how well he matched the surroundings, his buckskins melting into the fawn-colored shading of the earth, his red hair and bronzed face toning with the umber buttes and rustlike stains across the distance. He was of a piece with it, even in its suggestion of an unfeeling, confident hardness.

He joined her and they paced forward. It was the first time he had ever sought any conversation with her and she was conscious and secretly shy. Heretofore it had been his wont to speak little to her, to sweep an indifferent eye over her which seemed to include her in the unimportant baggage that went to the making of the train. Now, though his manner was brusque, he spoke simply and not discourteously of the hunt in the hills. He had got nothing, but David had killed a black-tailed deer, and possessed by the passion of the chase, was following the tracks of a second. The girl flushed with pleasure.

"David's a very good shot," she said complacently, not at all sure of her statement, for David did not excel in the rôle of Nimrod. "He kept us supplied with buffalo meat all the way up the Platte."

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This was a falsehood. Daddy John and Leff had been the hunters of the party. But Susan did not care. Courant had never said a word in her hearing derogatory to David, but she had her suspicions that the romantic nature of her betrothed was not of the stuff the mountain man respected.

"First rate," he said heartily. "I didn't know it. I thought he generally rode with you or drove the wagon."

To an outsider the tone would have seemed all that was frank and open. But Susan read irony into it. She sat her horse a little squarer and allowed the muse to still further possess her:

"David can shoot anything, an antelope even. He constantly brought them in when we were on the Platte. It was quite easy for him. Daddy John, who's been in all sorts of wild places, says he's never seen a better shot."

A slight uneasiness disturbed the proud flow of her imagination at the thought that Daddy John, questioned on this point, might show a tendency to contradict her testimony. But it didn't matter. The joy of proving David's superiority compensated. And she was setting Courant in his place which had a separate and even rarer charm.

His answer showed no consciousness of the humbling process:

"You think a lot of David, don't you?"

Susan felt her color rising. This time she not only sat squarer in her saddle, but raised her shoulders and chin a trifle.

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"Yes. I am engaged to be married to him."

"When will you be married?" said the uncrushable man.

She inclined her head from its haughty pose just so far that she could command his face from an austere eye. Words were ready to go with the quelling glance, but they died unspoken. The man was regarding her with grave, respectful attention. It is difficult to suddenly smite a proud crest when the owner of the crest shows no consciousness of its elevation.

"When we get to California," she said shortly.

"Not till then? Oh, I supposed you were going to marry him at Bridger or along the road if we happened to meet a missionary."

The suggestion amazed, almost appalled her. It pierced through her foolish little play of pride like a stab, jabbing down to her secret, sentient core. Her anger grew stronger, but she told herself she was talking to one of an inferior, untutored order, and it was her part to hold herself in hand.

"We will be married when we get to California," she said, seeing to it that her profile was calm and carried high. "Sometime after we get there and have a home and are settled."

"That's a long time off."

"I suppose so—a year or two."

"A year or two!" he laughed with a careless jovial note. "Oh, you belong to the old towns back there," with a jerk of his head toward the

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rear. "In the wilderness we don't have such long courtships."

"We? Who are we?"

"The mountain men, the trappers, the voyageurs."

"Yes," she said, her tone flashing into sudden scorn, "they marry squaws."

At this the man threw back his head and burst into a laugh, so deep, so rich, so exuberantly joyous, that it fell upon the plain's grim silence with the incongruous contrast of sunshine on the dust of a dungeon. She sat upright with her anger boiling toward expression. Before she realized it he had leaned forward and laid his hand on the pommel of her saddle, his face still red and wrinkled with laughter.

"That's all right, little lady, but you don't know quite all about us."

"I know enough," she answered.

"Before you get to California you'll know more. There's a mountain man and a voyageur now in the train. Do you think Xavier and I have squaw wives?"

With the knowledge that Xavier was just then so far from contemplating union with a squaw, she could not say the contemptuous "yes" that was on her tongue. As for the strange man—she shot a glance at him and met the gray eyes still twinkling with amusement. "Savage!" she thought, "I've no doubt he has"—and she secretly felt a great desire to know. What she said was,

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"I've never thought of it, and I haven't the least curiosity about it."

They rode on in silence, then he said,

"What's made you mad?"

"Mad? I'm not mad."

"Not at all?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"That's what I want to know. You don't like me, little lady, is that it?"

"I neither like nor dislike you. I don't think of you."

She immediately regretted the words. She was so completely a woman, so dowered with the instinct of attraction, that she realized they were not the words of indifference.

"My thoughts are full of other people," she said hastily, trying to amend the mistake, and that was spoiled by a rush of color that suddenly dyed her face.

She looked over the horse's head, her anger now turned upon herself. The man made no answer, but she knew that he was watching her. They paced on for a silent moment then he said:

"Why are you blushing?"

"I am not," she cried, feeling the color deepening.

"You've told two lies," he answered. "You said you weren't angry, and you're mad all through, and now you say you're not blushing, and your face is as pink as one of those little flat roses that grow on the prairie. It's all right to get mad and

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blush, but I'd like to know why you do it. I made you mad someway or other, I don't know how. Have *I* made you blush, too?" he leaned nearer trying to look at her. "How'd I do that?"

She had a sidelong glimpse of his face, quizzical, astonished, full of piqued interest. She struggled with the mortification of a petted child, suddenly confronted by a stranger who finds its caprices only ridiculous and displeasing. Under the new sting of humiliation she writhed, burning to retaliate and make him see the height of her pedestal.

"Yes, I *have* told two lies," she said. "I *was* angry and I *am* blushing, and it's because I'm in a rage with you."

The last touch was given when she saw that his surprise contained the bitter and disconcerting element of amusement.

"Isn't that just what I said, and you denied it?" he exclaimed. "Now *why* are you in a rage with me?"

"Because—because—well, if you're too stupid to know why, or are just pretending, I won't explain. I don't intend to ride with you any more. Please don't try and keep up with me."

She gave her reins a shake and her horse started on a brisk canter. As she sped away she listened for his following hoof beats, for she made no doubt he would pursue her, explain his conduct, and ask her pardon. The request not to keep up with her he would, of course, set aside. David would have obeyed it, but this man of the mountains, at once

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domineering and stupid, would take no command from any woman. She kept her ear trained for the rhythmic beat in the distance and decided when she heard it she would increase her speed and not let him catch her till she was up with the train. Then she would coldly listen to his words of apology and have the satisfaction of seeing him look small, and probably not know what to say.

Only it didn't happen that way. He made no attempt to follow. As she galloped across the plain he drew his horse to a walk, his face dark and frowning. Her scorn and blush had left his blood hot. Her last words had fired his anger. He had known her antagonism, seen it in her face on the night when Bella was sick, felt its sting when she turned from him to laugh with the others. And it had stirred him to a secret irritation. For he told himself she was only a baby, but a pretty baby, on whose brown and rosy face and merry slits of eyes a man might like to look. Now he gazed after her swearing softly through his beard and holding his horse to its slowest step. As her figure receded he kept his eyes upon it. They were long-sighted eyes, used to great distances, and they watched, intent and steady, to see if she would turn her head.

"Damn her," he said, when the dust of the train absorbed her. "Does she think she's the only woman in the world?"

After supper that evening Susan called David over to sit on the edge of her blanket. This was a rare favor. He came hurrying, all alight with

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smiles, cast himself down beside her and twined his fingers in her warm grasp. She answered his hungry glance with a sidelong look, glowingly tender, and David drew the hand against his cheek. Nobody was near except Daddy John and Courant, smoking pipes on the other side of the fire.

"Do you love me?" he whispered, that lover's text for every sermon which the unloving find so irksome to answer, almost to bear.

But now she smiled and whispered,

"Of course, silly David."

"Ah, Susan, you're awakening," he breathed in a shaken undertone.

She again let the soft look touch his face, sweet as a caress. From the other side of the fire Courant saw it, and through the film of pipe smoke, watched. David thought no one was looking, leaned nearer, and kissed her cheek. She gave a furtive glance at the man opposite, saw the watching eyes, and with a quick breath like a runner, turned her face to her lover and let him kiss her lips.

She looked back at the fire, quiet, unflurried, then slowly raised her lids. Courant had moved his pipe and the obscuring film of smoke was gone. Across the red patch of embers his eyes gazed steadily at her with the familiar gleam of derision. Her tenderness died as a flame under a souse of water, and an upwelling of feeling that was almost hatred, rose in her against the strange man.

## CHAPTER IV

THE last fording of the river had been made, and from the summit of the Red Buttes they looked down on the long level, specked with sage and flecked with alkaline incrustings, that lay between them and the Sweetwater. Across the horizon the Wind River mountains stretched a chain of majestic, snowy shapes. Desolation ringed them round, the swimming distances fusing with the pallor of ever-receding horizons, the white road losing itself in the blotting of sage, red elevations rising lonely in extending circles of stillness. The air was so clear that a tiny noise broke it, crystal-sharp like the ring of a smitten glass. And the sense of isolation was intensified as there was no sound from anywhere, only a brooding, primordial silence that seemed to have remained unbroken since the first floods drained away.

Below in the plain the white dots of an encampment showed like a growth of mushrooms. Near this, as they crawled down upon it, the enormous form of Independence Rock detached itself from the faded browns and grays to develop into a sleeping leviathan, lost from its herd and fallen exhausted in a sterile land.

Courant was curious about the encampment, and

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after the night halt rode forward to inspect it. He returned in the small hours reporting it a train of Mormons stopped for sickness. A boy of fifteen had broken his leg ten days before and was now in a desperate condition. The train had kept camp hoping for his recovery, or for the advent of help in one of the caravans that overhauled them. Courant thought the boy beyond hope, but in the gray of the dawn the doctor mounted, and with Susan, David, and Courant, rode off with his case of instruments strapped to his saddle.

The sun was well up when they reached the Mormon camp. Scattered about a spring mouth in the litter of a three days' halt, its flocks and herds spread wide around it, it was hushed in a sullen dejection. The boy was a likely lad for the new Zion, and his mother, one of the wives of an elder, had forgotten her stern training, and fallen to a common despair. Long-haired men lolled in tent doors cleaning their rifles, and women moved between the wagons and the fires, or sat in rims of shade sewing and talking low. Children were everywhere, their spirits undimmed by disaster, their voices calling from the sage, little, light, half-naked figures circling and bending in games that babies played when men lived in cliffs and caves. At sight of the mounted figures they fled, wild as rabbits, scurrying behind tent flaps and women's skirts, to peep out in bright-eyed curiosity at the strangers.

The mother met them and almost dragged the doctor from his horse. She was a toil-worn woman

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of middle age, a Mater Dolorosa now in her hour of anguish. She led them to where the boy lay in a clearing in the sage. The brush was so high that a blanket had been fastened to the tops of the tallest bushes, and under its roof he was stretched, gray-faced and with sharpened nose. The broken leg had been bound between rough splints of board, and he had traveled a week in the wagons in uncomplaining agony. Now, spent and silent, he awaited death, looking at the newcomers with the slow, indifferent glance of those whose ties with life are loosening. But the mother, in the ruthless unbearableness of her pain, wanted something done, anything. An Irishman in the company, who had served six months as a helper in a New York hospital, had told her he could amputate the leg, as he had seen the operation performed. Now she clamored for a doctor—a real doctor—to do it.

He tried to persuade her of its uselessness, covering the leg in which gangrene was far advanced, and telling her death was at hand. But her despair insisted on action, her own suffering made her remorseless. The clamor of their arguing voices surrounded the moribund figure lying motionless with listless eyes as though already half initiated into new and profound mysteries. Once, his mother's voice rising strident, he asked her to let him rest in peace, he had suffered enough.

Unable to endure the scene Susan left them and joined a woman whom she found sewing in the

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shade of a wagon. The woman seemed unmoved, chatting as she stitched on the happenings of the journey and the accident that had caused the delay. Here presently David joined them, his face pallid, his lips loose and quivering. Nothing could be done with the mother. She had insisted on the operation, and the Irishman had undertaken it. The doctor and Courant would stay by them; Courant was to hold the leg. He, David, couldn't stand it. It was like an execution—barbarous—with a hunting knife and a saw.

In a half hour Courant came walking round the back of the wagon and threw himself on the ground beside them. The leg had been amputated and the boy was dying. Intense silence fell on the camp, only the laughter and voices of the children rising clear on the thin air. Then a wail arose, a penetrating, fearful cry, Rachel mourning for her child. Courant raised his head and said with an unemotional air of relief, "he's dead." The Mormon woman dropped her sewing, gave a low exclamation, and sat listening with bitten lip. Susan leaned against the wagon wheel full of horror and feeling sick, her eyes on David, who, drawing up his knees, pressed his forehead on them. He rested thus, his face hidden, while the keening of the mother, the cries of an animal in pain, fell through the hot brightness of the morning like the dropping of agonized tears down blooming cheeks.

When they ceased and the quiet had resettled, the Mormon woman rose and put away her sewing.

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"I don't seem to have no more ambition to work," she said and walked away.

"She's another of his wives," said Courant.

"She and the woman whose son is dead, wives of the same man?"

He nodded.

"And there's a younger one, about sixteen. She was up there helping with water and rags—a strong, nervy girl. She had whisky all ready in a tin cup to give to the mother. When she saw it was all up with him she went round collecting stones to cover the grave with and keep the wolves off."

"Before he was dead?"

"Yes. They've got to move on at once. They can't lose any more time. When we were arguing with that half-crazy woman, I could see the girl picking up the stones and wiping off her tears with her apron."

"What dreadful people," she breathed.

"Dreadful? What's dreadful in having some sense? Too bad about the boy. He set his teeth and didn't make a sound when that fool of an Irishman was sawing at him as if he was a log. I never saw such grit. If they've got many like him they'll be a great people some day."

David gave a gasping moan, his arms relaxed, and he fell limply backward on the ground. They sprang toward him and Susan seeing his peaked white face, the eyes half open, thought he was dead, and dropped beside him, a crouched and staring shape of terror.

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"What is it? What's the matter?" she cried, raising wild eyes to Courant.

"Nothing at all," said that unmoved person, squatting down on his heels and thrusting his hand inside David's shirt. "Only a faint. Why, where's your nerve? You're nearly as white as he is."

His eyes were full of curiosity as he looked across the outstretched figure at her frightened face.

"I—I—thought for a moment he was dead," she faltered.

"And so you were going to follow his example and die on his body?" He got up. "Stay here and I'll go and get some water." As he turned away he paused and, looking back, said, "Why didn't you do the fainting? That's more your business than his," gave a sardonic grin and walked off.

Susan raised the unconscious head and held it to her bosom. Alone, with no eye looking, she pressed her lips on his forehead. Courant's callousness roused a fierce, perverse tenderness in her. He might sneer at David's lack of force, but she understood. She crooned over him, moved his hair back with caressing fingers, pressing him against herself as if the strength of her hold would assure her of the love she did not feel and wanted to believe in. Her arms were close round him, his head on her shoulder when Courant came back with a dipper of water.

"Get away," he said, standing over them. "I don't want to wet you."

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But she curled round her lover, her body like a protecting shield between him and danger.

"Leave go of him," said Courant impatiently.

"Do you think I'm going to hurt him with a cup full of water?"

"Let me alone," she answered sullenly. "He'll be all right in a minute."

"You can be any kind of a fool you like, but you can't make me one. Come, move." He set the dipper on the ground.

He leaned gently over her and grasped her wrists. The power of his grip amazed her; she was like a mouse in the paws of a lion. Her puny strength matched against his was conquered in a moment of futile resistance.

"Don't be a fool," he said softly in her ear. "Don't act like a silly baby," and the iron hands unclasped her arms and drew her back till David's head slid from her knees to the ground.

"There! We're all right now." He let her go, snatched up the dipper and sent a splash of water into David's face.

"Poor David," he said. "This'll spoil his good looks."

"Stop," she almost screamed. "I'd rather have him lie in a faint for an hour than have you speak so about him."

Without noticing her, he threw another jet of water and David stirred, drew a deep breath and opened his eyes. They touched the sky, the wagon, the nearby sage, and then Susan's face.

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There they rested, recognition slowly suffusing them.

"What happened?" he said in a husky voice.

"Fainted, that was all," said Courant.

David closed his eyes.

"Oh, yes, I remember now."

Susan bent over him.

"You frightened me so!"

"I'm sorry, Missy, but it made me sick—the leg and those awful cries."

Courant emptied the dipper on the ground.

"I'll see if they've got any whisky. You'll have to get your grit up, David, for the rest of the trail," and he left them.

A half hour later the cry of "Roll out" sounded, and the Mormon camp broke. The rattling of chains and ox yokes, and the cursing of men ruptured the stillness that had gathered round the moment of death. Life was a matter of more immediate importance. Tents were struck, the pots and pans thrown into the wagons, the children collected, the stock driven in. With ponderous strain and movement the great train formed and took the road. As it drew away the circle of its bivouac showed in trampled sage and grass bitten to the roots. In the clearing where the boy had lain was the earth of a new-made grave, a piece of wood thrust in at the head, the mound covered with stones gathered by the elder's young wife. The mountain tragedy was over.

By the fire that evening Xavier employed himself scraping the dust from a buffalo skull. He wiped

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the frontal bone clean and white, and when asked why he was expending so much care on a useless relic, shrugged his shoulders and laughed. Then he explained with a jerk of his head in the direction of the vanished Mormons that they used buffalo skulls to write their letters on. In the great emigration of the year before their route was marked by the skulls set up in prominent places and bearing messages for the trains behind.

"And are you going to write a letter on that one?" Susan asked.

"No; I do not write English good, and French very bad. But maybe some one else will use it," and he laughed boyishly and laid the skull by the fire.

In the depth of the night Susan was wakened by a hand on her shoulder that shook her from a dreamless sleep. She started up with a cry and felt another hand, small and cold on her mouth, and heard a whispering voice at her ear,

"Hush. Don't make a sound. It's Lucy."

She gripped at the figure, felt the clasp of trembling arms, and a cheek chill with the night cold, against her own.

"Lucy," she gasped, "what's the matter?"

"I want to speak to you. Be quiet."

"Has anything happened? Is some one sick?"

"No. It's not that. I'm going."

"Going? Going where—" She was not yet fully awake, filaments of sleep clouded her clearness.

"Into the mountains with Xavier."

## The Mountains

The filaments were brushed away in a rough sweep. But her brain refused to accept the message. In the dark, she clutched at the body against her, felt the beat of pulses distinct through the clothing, the trembling of the hands going down through her flesh and muscle to her heart.

"What do you mean? Where?"

"I don't know, into the mountains somewhere."

"With Xavier? Why?"

"Because he wants me to and I must."

"But— Oh, Lucy—" she struggled from the blanket to her knees—"Oh, Lucy!"

Her voice rose high and the hand felt for her mouth. She caught it and held it off, her head bent back straining her eyes for the face above her.

"Running away with him?"

"Yes. I couldn't go without telling you. I had to say good-by."

"Going with him forever, not coming back?"

"No, never!"

"But where—where to?"

"I don't know. In the mountains somewhere. There's a trail here he knows. It branches off to the north and goes up to the places where they get the skins."

"I don't believe you."

"It's true. The horses are waiting outside."

"Lucy, you've gone crazy. Don't—don't"—  
She clung to the hand she held, grasped upward at the arm. Both were cold and resistant. Her plead-

## The Emigrant Trail

ing struck back from the hardness of the mind made up, the irrevocable resolution.

"But he's not your husband."

Even at this moment, keyed to an act of lawlessness that in the sheltered past would have been as impossible as murder, the great tradition held fast. Lucy's answer came with a sudden flare of shocked repudiation:

"He will be. There are priests and missionaries up there among the Indians. The first one we meet will marry us. It's all right. He loves me and he's promised."

Nothing of her wild courage came to the other girl, no echo of the call of life and passion. It was a dark and dreadful fate, and Susan strained her closer as if to hold her back from it.

"It's been fixed for two days. We had to wait till we got here and crossed the trail. We're going right into the mountains and it's summer, and there's plenty of game."

"The Indians?"

"We'll be in the Crow's country, and Xavier's mother was a Crow."

The words proved the completeness of her estrangement—the acceptance of the alien race as no longer alien.

"Oh, Lucy, don't, don't. Wait till we get to Fort Bridger and marry him there. Make him come to California with us. Don't do such an awful thing—run away into the mountains with a half-breed."

## The Mountains

"I don't care what he is. There's no one else for me but him. He's my man and I'll go with him wherever he wants to take me."

"Wait and tell Bella."

"She wouldn't let me go. There'd be nothing but fighting and misery. When you've made up your mind to do a thing you've got to do it yourself, not go by what other people think."

There was a silence and they hung upon each other. Then Lucy put her face against her friend's and kissed her.

"Good-by," she whispered, loosening her arms.

"I can't let you go. I won't. It'll kill you."

"I must. He's waiting."

She struggled from the embrace, pulling away the clasping hands noiselessly, but with purpose. There was something of coldness, of the semblance but not the soul of affection, in the determined softness with which she sought release. She stole to the tent flap and peered out. Her thoughts were already outside, flown to the shape hiding in the shadow like birds darting from a cage. She did not turn at Susan's strangled whisper.

"We'll never see you again, Bella, nor I, nor the children."

"Perhaps, some day, in California. He's there. I must go."

"Lucy!" She leaped after her. In the tent opening they once more clasped each other.

"I can't let you go," Susan moaned.

## The Emigrant Trail

But Lucy's kiss had not the fervor of hers. The strength of her being had gone to her lover. Friendship, home, family, all other claims hung loose about her, the broken trappings of her maidenhood. The great primal tie had claimed her.

A black figure against the pallor of the night, she turned for a last word.

"If you tell them and they come after us, Xavier'll fight them. He'll fight if he kills them. They'll know to-morrow. Good-by," and she was gone, a noiseless shadow, flitting toward the denser group of shadow where her heart was.

Susan, crouched at the tent flap, saw her melt into the waiting blackness, and then heard the muffled hoof beats growing thinner and fainter as the silence absorbed them.

She sat thus till the dawn came. Once or twice she started up to give the alarm, but fell back. Under the tumult of her thoughts a conviction lay that Lucy must follow her own wild way. In the welter of confused emotion it was all that was clear. It may have come from that sense of Lucy's detachment, that consciousness of cords and feelers stretching out to a new life which commanded and held closer than the old had ever done. All she knew was that Lucy was obeying some instinct that was law to her, that was true for her to obey. If they caught her and brought her back it would twist her life into a broken form. Was it love? Was that what had drawn her over all obstacles, away from the

## The Mountains

established joys and comforts, drawn her like a magnet to such a desperate course? With wide eyes the girl saw the whiteness of the dawn, and sat gripped in her resolution of silence, fearful at the thought of what that mighty force must be.

## CHAPTER V

THE cross, drowsy bustle of the camp's uprising was suddenly broken by a piercing cry. It came from Bella, who, standing by the mess chest, was revealed to her astonished companions with a buffalo skull in her hands, uttering as dolorous sounds as ever were emitted by that animal in the agony of its death throes. Her words were unintelligible, but on taking the skull from her the cause of her disturbance was made known. Upon the frontal bone were a few words scrawled in pencil—Lucy's farewell.

It came upon them like a thunderbolt, and they took it in different ways—amazed silence, curses, angry questionings. The skull passed from hand to hand till Courant dropped it and kicked it to one side where Leff went after it, lifted it by the horns and stood spelling out the words with a grin. The children, at first rejoicing in the new excitement, soon recognized the note of dole, lifted up their voices and filled the air with cries for Lucy upon whom, in times of tribulation, they had come to look. Glen broke into savage anger, called down curses on his sister-in-law, applying to her certain terms of a scriptural simplicity till the doctor asked him to go afield and vent his passion in the seclu-

## The Mountains

sion of the sage. Bella, sunk in heavy, uncorseted despair upon the mess chest, gripped her children to her knees as though an army of ravishers menaced the house of McMurdo. Her words flowed with her tears, both together in a choked and bitter flood of wrath, sorrow, and self-pity. She bewailed Lucy, not only as a vanished relative but as a necessary member of the McMurdo escort. And doubts of Xavier's lawful intentions shook her from the abandon of her grief, to furious invective against the red man of all places and tribes where-so'er he be.

"The dirty French-Indian," she wailed, "to take her off where he knows fast enough there's no way of marrying her."

Courant tried to console her by telling her there was a good chance of the fugitives meeting a Catholic missionary, but that, instead of assuaging, intensified her woe.

"A Catholic!" she cried, raising a drenched face from her apron. "And ain't that just as bad? My parents and hers were decent Presbyterians. Does their daughter have to stand up before a priest? Why don't you say a Mormon elder at once?"

The McMurdos' condition of grief and rage was so violent, that the doctor suggested following the runaways. Bella rose in glad assent to this. Catch Lucy and bring her back! She was cheered at the thought and shouted it to Glen, who had gone off in a sulky passion and stood by his oxen swearing to himself and kicking their hoofs. The men talked

## The Emigrant Trail

it over. They could lay off for a day and Courant, who knew the trails, could lead the search party. He was much against it, and Daddy John was with him. Too much time had been lost. Xavier was an experienced mountain man and his horses were good. Besides, what was the use of bringing them back? They'd chosen each other, they'd taken their own course. It wasn't such a bad lookout for Lucy. Xavier was a first-rate fellow and he'd treat her well. What was the sense of interfering? Bella was furious, and shouted,

"The sense is to get her back here and keep her where it's civilized, since she don't seem to know enough to keep there herself."

Daddy John, who had been listening, flashed out:

"It don't seem to me so d—d civilized to half kill her with work."

Then Bella wept and Glen swore, and the men had pulled up the picket stakes, cinched their girths tight and started off in Indian file toward the distant spurs of the hills.

Susan had said little. If it did not violate her conscience to keep silent, it did to pretend a surprise that was not hers. She sat at her tent door most of the day watching for the return of the search party. She was getting supper when she looked up and saw them, gave a low exclamation, and ran to the outskirts of the camp. Here she stood watching, heard Daddy John lounge up behind her and, turning, caught his hand.

## The Mountains

"Is she there?" she said in an eager whisper.  
"I can't see her."

They both scrutinized the figures, small as toy horsemen, loping over the leathern distance.

"Ain't there only four?" he said. "You can see better'n I."

"Yes," she cried. "Four. I can count them. She isn't there. Oh, I'm glad!"

The old man looked surprised:

"Glad! Why?"

"I don't know. Oh, don't tell, Daddy John, but I wanted her to get away. I don't know why, I suppose it's very wicked. But—but—it seemed so—so—as if she was a slave—so unfair to drag her away from her own life and make her lead some one else's."

Lucy gone, lost as by shipwreck in the gulfs and windings of the mountains, was a fact that had to be accepted. The train moved on, for on the Emigrant Trail there was no leisure for fruitless repining. Only immediate happenings could fill the minds of wanderers struggling across the world, their energies matched against its primal forces.

The way was growing harder, the animals less vigorous, and the strain of the journey beginning to tell. Tempers that had been easy in the long, bright days on the Platte now were showing sharp edges. Leff had become surly, Glen quarrelsome. One evening Susan saw him strike Bob a blow so savage that the child fell screaming in pain and terror. Bella rushed to her first born, gathered him

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in her arms and turned a crimsoned face of battle on her spouse. For a moment the storm was furious, and Susan was afraid that the blow would be repeated on the mother. She tried to pacify the enraged woman, and David and the doctor coaxed Glen away. The child had struck against an edge of stone and was bleeding, and after supper the father rocked him to sleep crooning over him in remorseful tenderness. But the incident left an ugly impression.

They were passing up the Sweetwater, a mountain stream of busy importance with a current that was snow-cold and snow-pure. It wound its hurrying way between rock walls, and then relaxed in lazy coils through meadows where the grass was thick and juicy and the air musical with the cool sound of water. These were the pleasant places. Where the rocks crowded close about the stream the road left it and sought the plain again, splinding away into the arid desolation. The wheels ground over myriads of crickets that caked in the loose soil. There was nothing to break the eyesweep but the cones of rusted buttes, the nearer ones showing every crease and shadow thread, the farther floating detached in the faint, opal shimmer of the mirage.

One afternoon, in a deep-grassed meadow they came upon an encamped train outflung on the stream bank in wearied disarray. It was from Ohio, bound for California, and Glen and Bella decided to join it. This was what the doctor's party

## The Mountains

had been hoping for, as the slow pace of the Mc-Murdo oxen held them back. Bella was well and the doctor could conscientiously leave her. It was time to part.

Early in the morning the two trains rolled out under a heavy drizzle. Rain fell within the wagons even as it did without, Susan weeping among the sacks behind Daddy John and Bella with her children whimpering against her sides, stopping in her knitting to wipe away her tears with the long strip of stocking leg. They were to meet again in California—that everyone said. But California looked a long way off, and now.—For some reason or other it did not gleam so magically bright at the limit of their vision. Their minds had grown tired of dwelling on it and sank down wearied to each day's hard setting.

By midday the doctor's wagons had left the others far behind. The rain fell ceaselessly, a cold and penetrating flood. The crowding crowns and crests about them loomed through the blur, pale and slowly whitening with falling snow. Beyond, the greater masses veiled themselves in cloud. The road skirted the river, creeping through a series of gorges with black walls down which the moisture spread in a ripple-edged, glassy glaze. Twice masses of fallen rock blocked the way, and the horses had to be unhitched and the wagons dragged into the stream bed. It was heavy work; and when they camped, ferociously hungry, no fire could be kindled, and there was nothing for it but to eat the

## The Emigrant Trail

hard-tack damp and bacon raw. Leff cursed and threw his piece away. He had been unusually morose and ill-humored for the last week, and once, when obliged to do sentry duty on a wet night, had flown into a passion and threatened to leave them. No one would have been sorry. Under the stress of mountain faring, the farm boy was not developing well.

In the afternoon the rain increased to a deluge. The steady beat on the wagon hoods filled the interior with a hollow drumming vibration. Against the dimmed perspective the flanks of the horses undulated under a sleek coating of moisture. Back of the train, the horsemen rode, heads lowered against the vicious slant, shadowy forms like drooping, dispirited ghosts. The road wound into a gorge where the walls rose straight, the black and silver of the river curbed between them in glossy outspreadings and crisp, bubbling flashes. The place was full of echoes, held there and buffeted from wall to wall as if flying back and forth in a distracted effort to escape.

David was driving in the lead, Susan under cover beside him. The morning's work had exhausted him and he felt ill, so she had promised to stay with him. She sat close at his back, a blanket drawn over her knees against the intruding wet, peering out at the darkling cleft. The wagon, creaking like a ship at sea, threw her this way and that. Once, as she struck against him he heard her low laugh at his ear.

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"It's like a little earthquake," she said, steadying herself with a grab at his coat.

"There must have been a big earthquake here once," he answered. "Look at the rocks. They've been split as if a great force came up from underneath and burst them open."

She craned her head forward to see and he looked back at her. Her face was close to his shoulder, glowing with the dampness. It shone against the shadowed interior rosily fresh as a child's. Her eyes, clear black and white, were the one sharp note in its downy softness. He could see the clean upspringing of her dark lashes, the little whisps of hair against her temple and ear. He could not look away from her. The grinding and slipping of the horses' hoofs did not reach his senses, held captive in a passionate observation.

"You don't curl your hair any more?" he said, and the intimacy of this personal query added to his entrancement.

She glanced quickly at him and broke into shamefaced laughter. A sudden lurch threw her against him and she clutched his arm.

"Oh, David," she said, gurgling at the memory. "Did *you* know that? I curled it for three nights on bits of paper that I tore out of the back of father's diary. And now I don't care what it looks like. See how I've changed!"

And she leaned against him, holding the arm and laughing at her past frivolity. His eyes slid back to the horses, but he did not see them. With a

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slight, listening smile he gave himself up to the intoxication of the moment, feeling the pressure of her body soft against his arm.

The reins which hung loose suddenly jerked through his fingers and the mare fell crashing to her knees. She was down before he knew it, head forward, and then with a quivering subsidence, prone in a tangle of torn harness. He urged her up with a jerked rein, she made a struggling effort, but fell back, and a groan, singularly human in its pain, burst from her. The wagon behind pounded almost on them, the mules crowding against each other, Daddy John's voice rising in a cracked hail. Courant and Leff came up from the rear, splashing through the river.

"What's happened?" said the former.

"It's Bess," said David, his face pallid with contrition. "I hope to God she's not hurt. Up, Bess, there! Up on your feet, old girl!"

At her master's voice the docile brute made a second attempt to rise, but again sank down, her sides panting, her head strained up.

Leff leaped off his horse.

"Damn her, I'll make her get up," he said, and gave her a violent kick on the ribs. The mare rolled an agonized eye upon him and with a sudden burst of fury he rained kick after kick on her face.

David gave a strange sound, a pinched, thin cry, as if wrung from him by unbearable suffering, and leaped over the wheel. He struck Leff on the chest,

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a blow so savage and unexpected that it sent him staggering back into the stream, where, his feet slipping among the stones, he fell sprawling.

"Do that again and I'll kill you," David cried, and moving to the horse stood over it with legs spread and fists clinched for battle.

Leff scrambled to his knees, his face ominous, and Courant, who had been looking at the mare, apparently indifferent to the quarrel, now slipped to the ground.

"Let that hound alone," he said. "I'm afraid it's all up with Bess."

David turned and knelt beside her, touching her with hands so tremulous he could hardly direct them. His breath came in gasps, he was shaken and blinded with passion, high-pitched and nerve-wracking as a woman's.

Leff rose, volleying curses.

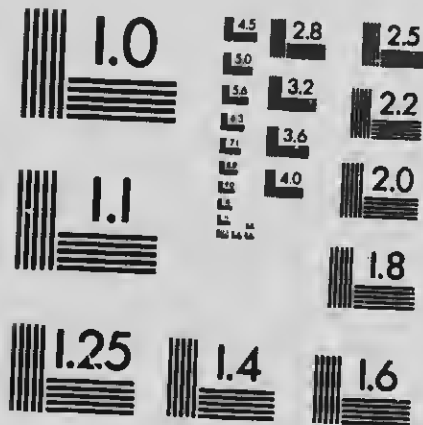
"Here you," Courant shifted a hard eye on him, "get out. Get on your horse and go," then turning to Bess, "Damn bad luck if we got to lose her."

Leff stood irresolute, his curses dying away in smothered mutterings. His skin was gray, a trickle of blood ran down from a cut on his neck, his face showed an animal ferocity, dark and lowering as the front of an angry bull. With a slow lift of his head he looked at Susan, who was still in the wagon. She met the glance stonily with eyes in which her dislike had suddenly crystallized into open abhorrence. She gave a jerk of her head toward his horse, a movement of contemptuous



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command, and obeying it he mounted and rode away.

She joined the two men, who were examining Bess, now stretched motionless and uttering pitiful sounds. David had the head, bruised and torn by Leff's kicks, on his knees, while Courant with expert hands searched for her hurt. It was not hard to find. The left foreleg had been broken at the knee, splinters of bone penetrating the skin. There was nothing to do with Bess but shoot her, and Courant went back for his pistols, while Daddy John and the doctor came up to listen with long faces. It was the first serious loss of the trip.

Later in the day the rain stopped and the clouds that had sagged low with its weight, began to dissolve into vaporous lightness, float airily and disperse. The train debouched from the gorge into one of the circular meadows and here found Leff lying on a high spot on the ground, his horse cropping the grass near him. He made no remark, and as they came to a halt and began the work of camping, he continued to lie without moving or speaking, his eyes fixed on the mountains.

These slowly unveiled themselves, showing in patches of brilliant color through rents in the mist which drew off lingeringly, leaving filaments caught delicately in the heights. The sky broke blue behind them, and clarified by the rain, the shadows brimmed high in the clefts. The low sun shot its beams across the meadow, leaving it un-

## The Mountains

touched, and glittering on the remote, immaculate summits.

In exhaustion the camp lay resting, tents unpitched, the animals nosing over the grass. David and Daddy John slept a dead sleep rolled in blankets on the teeming ground. Courant built a fire, called Susan to it, and bade her dry her wet skirts. He lay near it, not noticing her, his glance ranging the distance. The line of whitened peaks began to take on a golden glaze, and the shadows in the hollow mounted till the camp seemed to be at the bottom of a lake in which a tide of some gray, transparent essence was rising.

"That's where Lucy's gone," he said suddenly without moving his head.

Susan's eyes followed his.

"Poor Lucy!" she sighed.

"Why is she poor?"

"Why?" indignantly. "What a question!"

"But why do you call her poor? Is it because she has no money?"

"Of course not. Who was thinking of money? I meant she was unfortunate to run away to such a life with a half-breed."

"She's gone out into the mountains with her lover. I don't call that unfortunate, and I'll bet you she doesn't. She was brave enough to take her life when it came. She was a gallant girl, that Lucy."

"I suppose that's what you'd think."

And in scorn of more words she gave her attention to her skirt, spreading its sodden folds to the

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heat. Courant clasped his hands behind his head and gazed ruminantly before him.

"Do you know how she'll live, that 'poor Lucy'?"

"Like a squaw."

He was unshaken by her contempt, did not seem to notice it.

"They'll go by ways that wind deep into the mountains. It's wonderful there, peaks and peaks and peaks, and down the gorges and up over the passes, the trails go that only the trappers and the Indians know. They'll pass lakes as smooth as glass and green as this hollow we're in. You never saw such lakes, everything's reflected in them like a mirror. And after a while they'll come to the beaver streams and Xavier'll set his traps. At night they'll sleep under the stars, great big stars. Did you ever see the stars at night through the branches of the pine trees? They look like lanterns. It'll seem to be silent, but the night will be full of noises, the sounds that come in those wild places, a wolf howling in the distance, the little secret bubbling of the spring, and the wind in the pine trees. That's a sad sound, as if it was coming through a dream."

The girl stirred and forgot her skirt. The solemn beauty that his words conjured up called her from her petty irritation. She looked at the mountains, her face full of a wistful disquiet.

"And it'll seem as if there was no one else but them in the world. Two lovers and no one else,

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between the sunrise and the sunset. There won't be anybody else to matter, or to look for, or to think about. Just those two alone, all day by the river where the traps are set and at night under the blanket in the dark of the trees."

Susan said nothing. For some inexplicable reason her spirits sank and she felt a bleak loneliness. A sense of insignificance fell heavily upon her, bearing down her high sufficiency, making her feel that she was a purposeless spectator on the outside of life. She struggled against it, struggled back toward cheer and self-assertion, and in her effort to get back, found herself seeking news of less picturesque moments in Lucy's lot.

"But the winter," she said in a small voice like a pleading child's, "the winter won't be like that?"

"When the winter comes Xavier'll build a hut. He'll make it out of small trees, long and thin, bent round with their tops stuck in the ground, and he'll thatch it with skins, and spread buffalo robes on the floor of it. There'll be a hole for the smoke to get out, and near the door'll be his grain-ing block and stretching frame to cure his skins. On a tree nearby he'll hang his traps, and there'll be a brace of elkhorns fastened to another tree that they'll use for a rack to hang the meat and maybe their clothes on. They'll have some coffee and sugar and salt. That's all they'll need in the way of eatables, for he'll shoot all the game they want, *les aliments du pays*, as the fur men call it. It'll be cold, and maybe for months they'll see no one.

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But what will it matter? They'll have each other, snug and warm way off there in the heart of the mountains, with the big peaks looking down at them. Isn't that a good life for a man and a woman?"

She did not answer, but sat as if contemplating the picture with fixed, far-seeing gaze. He raised himself on his elbow and looked at her.

"Could you do that, little lady?" he said.

"No," she answered, beating down rebellious inner whisperings.

"Wouldn't you follow David that way?"

"David wouldn't ask it. No civilized man would."

"No, David wouldn't," he said quietly.

She glanced quickly at him. Did she hear the note of mockery which she sensed whenever he alluded to her lover? She was ready at once to take up arms for David, but the face opposite was devoid of any expression save an intent, expectant interest. She dropped her eyes to her dress, perturbed by the closeness of her escape from a foolish exhibition which would have made her ridiculous. She always felt with Courant that she would be swept aside as a trivial thing if she lost her dignity. He watched her and she grew nervous, plucking at her skirt with an uncertain hand.

"I wonder if you could?" he said after a pause.

"Of course not," she snapped.

"Aren't you enough of a woman?"

"I'm not enough of a fool."

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"Aren't all women in love fools—anyway for a while?"

She made no answer, and presently he said, his voice lowered:

"Not enough of a woman to know how to love a man. Doesn't even for a moment understand it. It's 'poor Susan.'"

Fury seized her, for she had not guessed where he was leading her, and now saw herself not only shorn of her dignity but shorn of her woman's prerogative of being able to experience a mad and unreasonable passion.

"You're a liar," she burst out before she knew what words were coming.

"Then you think you could?" he asked without the slightest show of surprise at her violence, apparently only curious.

"Don't I?" she cried, ready to proclaim that she would follow David to destruction and death.

"I don't know," he answered. "I've been wondering."

"What business have you got to wonder about me?"

"None—but," he leaned toward her, "you can't stop me doing that, little lady; that's one of the things you *can't* control."

For a moment they eyed each other, glance held glance in a smoldering challenge. The quizzical patronage had gone from his, the gleam of a subdued defiance taken its place. Hers was defiant too, but it was openly so, a surface thing that she

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had raised like a defense in haste and tremor to hide weakness.

David moved in his blanket, yawned and threw out a languid hand. She leaped to her feet and ran to him.

"David, are you better?" she cried, kneeling beside him. "Are you better, dear?"

He opened his eyes, blinking, saw the beloved face, and smiled.

"All right," he said sleepily. "I was only tired."

She lifted one of the limp hands and pressed it to her cheek.

"I've been so worried about you," she purred. "I couldn't put my mind on anything else. I haven't known what I was saying, I've been so worried."

## CHAPTER VI

SOUTH PASS, that had been pictured in their thoughts as a cleft between snow-cruled summits, was a wide, gentle incline with low hills sweeping up on either side. From here the waters ran westward, following the sun. Pacific Spring seeped into the ground in an oasis of green whence whispering threads felt their way into the tawny silence and subdued by its weight lost heart and sank into the unrecording earth.

Here they found the New York Company and a Mormon train filling up their water casks and growing neighborly in talk of Sublette's cut off and the route by the Big and Little Sandy. A man was a man even if he was a Mormon, and in a country so intent on its own destiny, so rapt in the calm of contemplation, he took his place as a human unit on whom his creed hung like an unnoticed tag.

They filled their casks, visited in the two camps, and then moved on. Plain opened out of plain in endless rotation, rings of sun-scorched earth brushed up about the horizon in a low ridge like the raised rim on a plate. In the distance the thin skein of a water course drew an intricate pattern that made them think of the thread of slime left by a wandering snail. In depressions where the

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soil was webbed with cracks, a livid scurf broke out as if the face of the earth were scarred with the traces of inextinguishable foulness. An even subdual of tint marked it all. White had been mixed on the palette whence the colors were drawn. The sky was opaque with it; it had thickened the red-browns and yellows to ocher and pale shades of putty. Nothing moved and there were no sounds, only the wheeling sun changed the course of the shadows. In the morning they slanted from the hills behind, eagerly stretching after the train, straining to overtake and hold it, a living plaything in this abandoned land. At midday a blot of black lay at the root of every sage brush. At evening each filigreed ridge, each solitary cone rising detached in the sealike circle of its loneliness, showed a slant of amethyst at its base, growing longer and finer, tapering prodigiously, and turning purple as the earth turned orange.

There was little speech in the moving caravan. With each day their words grew fewer, their laughter and light talk dwindled. Gradual changes had crept into the spirit of the party. Accumulations of habit and custom that had collected upon them in the dense life of towns were dropping away. As the surface refinements of language were dying, so their faces had lost a certain facile play of expression. Delicate nuances of feeling no longer showed, for they no longer existed. Smiles had grown rarer, and harder characteristics were molding their features into sterner lines. The ac-

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quired deceptiveness of the world of men was leaving them. Ugly things that they once would have hidden cropped out unchecked by pride or fear of censure. They did not care. There was no standard, there was no public opinion. Life was resolving itself into a few great needs that drove out all lesser and more delicate desires. Beings of a ruder make were usurping their bodies. The primitive man in them was rising to meet the primitive world.

In the young girl the process of elimination was as rapid if not as radical as in the case of the men. She was unconsciously ridding herself of all that hampered and made her unfit. From the soft feminine tissue, intricacies of mood and fancy were being obliterated. Rudimentary instincts were developing, positive and barbaric as a child's. In the old days she had been dainty about her food. Now she cooked it in blackened pans and ate with the hunger of the men. Sleep, that once had been an irksome and unwelcome break between the pleasures of well-ordered days, was a craving that she satisfied, unwashed, often half-clad. In Rochester she had spent thought and time upon her looks, had stood before her mirror matching ribbons to her complexion, wound and curled her hair in becoming ways. Now her hands, hardened and callous as a boy's, were coarse-skinned with broken nails, sometimes dirty, and her hair hung rough from the confining teeth of a comb and a few bent pins. When in flashes of retrospect she saw her old

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self, this pampered self of crisp fresh frocks and thoughts moving demurely in the narrow circle of her experience, it did not seem as if it could be the same Susan Gillespie.

All that made up the little parcel of her personality seemed gone. In those days she had liked this and wanted that and forgotten and wanted something else. Rainy weather had sent its ashen sheen over her spirit, and her gladness had risen to meet the sun. She remembered the sudden sweeps of depression that had clouded her horizon when she had drooped in an unintelligible and not entirely disagreeable melancholy, and the contrasting bursts of gayety when she laughed at anything and loved everybody. Hours of flitting fancies flying this way and that, hovering over chance incidents that were big by contrast with the surrounding uneventfulness, the idleness of dropped hands and dreaming eyes, the charmed peerings into the future—all were gone. Life had seized her in a mighty grip, shaken her free of it all, and set her down where she felt only a few imperious sensations, hunger, fatigue, fear of danger, love of her father, and— She pulled her thoughts to obedience with a sharp jerk and added—love of David and hatred of Courant.

These two latter facts stood out sentinel-wise in the foreground. In the long hours on horseback she went over them like a lesson she was trying to learn. She reviewed David's good points, dwelt on them, held them up for her admiration, and told

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herself no girl had ever had a finer or more gallant lover. She was convinced of it and was quite ready to convince anybody who denied it. Only when her mental vision—pressed on by some inward urge of obscure self-distrust—carried her forward to that future with David in the cabin in California, something in her shrank and failed. Her thought leaped back as from an abhorrent contact, and her body, caught by some mysterious internal qualm, felt limp and faintly sickened.

She dwelt even more persistently on Courant's hatefulness, impressed upon herself his faults. He was hard and she had seen him brutal, a man without feeling, as he had shown when the Mormon boy died, a harsh and remorseless leader urging them on, grudging them even their seventh day rest, deaf to their protests, lashing them forward with contempt of their weakness. This was above and apart from his manner to her. That she tried to feel was a small, personal matter, but, nevertheless, it stung, did not cease to sting, and left an unhealed sore to rankle in her pride. He did not care to hide that he held her cheaply, as a useless futile thing. Once she had heard him say to Daddy John, "It's the women in the train that make the trouble. They're always in the way." And she was the only woman. She would like to see him conquered, beaten, some of his heady confidence stricken out of him, and when he was humbled have stood by and smiled at his humiliation.

So she passed over the empty land under the

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empty sky, a particle of matter carrying its problem with it.

It was late afternoon when they encamped by the Big Sandy. The march had been distressful, bitter in their mouths with the clinging clouds of powdered alkali, their heads bowed under the glaring ball of the sun. All day the circling rim of sky line had weaved up and down, undulating in the uncertainty of the mirage, the sage had blotted into indistinct seas that swam before their strained vision. When the river cleft showed in black tracings across the distance, they stiffened and took heart, coolness and water were ahead. It was all they had hope or desire for just then. At the edge of the clay bluff, they dipped and poured down a corrugated gully, the dust sizzling beneath the braked wheels, the animals, the smell of water in their nostrils, past control. The impetus of the descent carried them into the chill, purling current. Man and beast plunged in, laved in it, drank it, and then lay by it resting, spent and inert.

They camped where a grove of alders twinkled in answer to the swift, telegraphic flashes of the stream. Under these the doctor pitched his tents, the hammering of the pegs driving through the sounds of man's occupation into the quietude that lapped them like sleeping tides. The others hung about the center of things where wagons and mess chests, pans and fires, made the nucleus of the human habitation.

Susan, sitting on a box, with a treasure of dead

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branches at her feet, waited yet a space before setting them in the fire form. She was sunk in the apathy of the body surrendered to restoring processes. The men's voices entered the channels of her ears and got no farther. Her vision acknowledged the figure of Leff nearby sewing up a rent in his coat, but her brain refused to accept the impression. Her eye held him in a heavy vacuity, watched with a trancelike fixity his careful stitches and the armlong stretch of the drawn thread.

Had she shifted it a fraction, it would have encountered David squatting on the bank washing himself. His long back, the red shirt drawn taut across its bowed outline, showed the course of his spine in small regular excrescences. The water that he raised in his hands and rinsed over his face and neck made a pleasant, clean sound, that her ear noted with the other sounds. Somewhere behind her Daddy John and Courant made a noise with skillets and picket pins and spoke a little, a sentence mutteringly dropped and monosyllabically answered.

David turned a streaming face over his shoulder, blinking through the water. The group he looked at was as idyllically peaceful as wayfarers might be after the heat and burden of the day. Rest, fellowship, a healthy simplicity of food and housing were all in the picture either visibly or by implication.

"Throw me the soap, Leff," he called, "I forgot it."

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The soap lay on the top of a meal sack, a yellow square, placed there by David on his way to the water. It shone between Susan and Leff, standing forth as a survival of a pampered past. Susan's eye shifted toward it, fastened on it, waiting for Leff's hand to come and bear it away. But the hand executed no such expected maneuver. It planted the needle deliberately, pushed it through, drew it out with its long tail of thread. Surprise began to dispel her lethargy. Her eye left the soap, traveled at a more sprightly speed back to Leff, lit on his face with a questioning intelligence.

David called again.

"Hurry up. I want to light the fire."

Leff took another considered stitch.

"I don't know where it is," he answered without looking up.

The questioning of Susan's glance became accusative.

"It's there beside you on the meal sack," she said. "Throw it to him."

Leff raised his head and looked at her. His eyes were curiously pale and wide. She could see the white round the fixed pupil.

"Do it yourself," he answered, his tone the lowest that could reach her. "Do it or go to Hell."

She rested without movement, her mouth falling slightly open. For the moment there was a stoppage of all feeling but amazement, which invaded her till she seemed to hold nothing else. David's voice came from a far distance, as if she had floated

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away from him and it was a cord jerking her back to her accustomed place.

"Hurry up," it called. "It's right there beside you."

Leff threw down his sewing and leaped to his feet. Leaning against the bank behind him was his gun, newly cleaned and primed.

"Get it yourself and be d—d to you!" he roared.

The machinery of action stopped as though by the breaking of a spring. Their watches ticked off a few seconds of mind paralysis in which there was no expectancy or motive power, all action inhibited. Sight was all they used for those seconds. Leff spoke first, the only one among them whose thinking process had not been snapped:

"If you keep on shouting for me to do your errands, I'll show you"—he snatched up the gun and brought it to his shoulder with a lightning movement—"I'll send you where you can't order me round—you and this d—d —— here."

The inhibition was lifted and the three men rushed toward him. Daddy John struck up the gun barrel with a tent pole. The charge passed over David's head, spat in the water beyond, the report crackling sharp in the narrow ravine. David staggered, the projection of smoke reaching out toward him, his hands raised to ward it off, not knowing whether he was hurt or not.

"That's a great thing to do," he cried, dazed, and stubbing his foot on a stone stumbled to his knees

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The two others fell on Leff. Susan saw the gun ground into the dust under their trampling feet and Leff go down on top of it. Daddy John's tent pole battered at him, and Courant on him, a writhing body, grappled and wrung at his throat. The doctor came running from the trees, the hammer in his hand, and Susan grabbed at the descending pole, screaming:

"You're killing him. Father, stop them. They'll murder him."

The sight of his Missy clinging to the pole brought the old man to his senses, but it took David and the doctor to drag Courant away. For a moment they were a knot of struggling bodies, from which oaths and sobbing breaths broke. Upright he shook them off and backed toward the bank, leaving them looking at him, all expectant. He growled a few broken words, his face white under the tan, the whole man shaken by a passion so transforming that they forgot the supine figure and stood alert, ready to spring upon him. He made a movement of his head toward Leff.

"Why didn't you let me kill him?" he said huskily.

It broke the tension. Their eyes dropped to Leff, who lay motionless and unconscious, blood on his lips, a slip of white showing under his eyelids. The doctor dropped on his knees beside him and opened his shirt. Daddy John gave him an investigating push with the tent pole, and David eyed him with an impersonal, humane concern. Only Susan's

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glance remained on Courant, unfaltering as the beam of a fixed star.

His savage excitement was on the ebb. He pulled his hunting shirt into place and felt along his belt for his knife, while his broad breast rose like a wave coming to its breakage then dropped as the wave drops into its hollow. The hand he put to his throat to unfasten the band of his shirt shook, it had difficulty in manipulating the button, and he ran his tongue along his dried lips. She watched every movement, to the outward eye like a child fascinated by an unusual and terrifying spectacle. But her gaze carried deeper than the perturbed envelope. She looked through to the man beneath, felt an exultation in his might, knew herself kindred with him, fed by the same wild strain.

His glance moved, touched the unconscious man at his feet, then lifting met hers. Eye held eye. In each a spark leaped, ran to meet its opposing spark and flashed into union.

When she looked down again the group of figures was dim. Their talk came vaguely to her, like the talk of men in a dream. David was explaining. Daddy John made a grimace at him which was a caution to silence. The doctor had not heard and was not to hear the epithet that had been applied to his daughter.

"He's sun mad," the old man said. "Half crazy. I've seen 'em go that way before. How'll he get through the desert I'm asking you?"

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There were some contusions on the head that looked bad, the doctor said, but nothing seemed to be broken. He'd been half strangled; they'd have to get him into the wagon.

"Leave him at Fort Bridger," came Courant's voice through the haze. "Leave him there to rot."

The doctor answered in the cold tones of authority:

"We'll take him with us as we agreed in the beginning. Because he happens not to be able to stand it, it's not for us to abandon him. It's a physical matter—sun and hard work and irritated nerves. Take a hand and help me lift him into the wagon."

They hoisted him in and disposed him on a bed of buffalo robes spread on sacks. He groaned once or twice, then settled on the softness of the skins, gazing at them with blood-shot eyes of hate. When the doctor offered him medicine, he struck the tin, sending its contents flying. However serious his hurts were they had evidently not mitigated the ferocity of his mood.

For the three succeeding days he remained in the wagon, stiff with bruises and refusing to speak. Daddy John was detailed to take him his meals, and the doctor dressed his wounds and tried to find the cause of his murderous outburst. But Leff was obdurate. He would express no regret for his action, and would give no reason for it. Once when the questioner asked him if he hated David, he said

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"Yes." But to the succeeding "Why did he?" he offered no explanation, said he "didn't know why."

"Hate never came without a reason," said the physician, curious and puzzled. "Has David wronged you in any way?"

"What's that to you?" answered the farm boy. "I can hate him if I like, can't I?"

"Not in my train."

"Well there are other trains where the men aren't all fools, and the women——"

He stopped. The doctor's eye held him with a warning gleam.

"I don't know what's the matter with that boy," he said afterwards in the evening conference. "I can't get at him."

"Sun mad," Daddy John insisted.

Courant gave a grunt that conveyed disdain of a question of such small import.

David couldn't account for it at all.

Susan said nothing.

At Green River the Oregon Trail broke from the parent road and slanted off to the northwest. Here the Oregon companies mended their wagons and braced their yokes for the long pull across the broken teeth of mountains to Fort riall, and from there onward to the new country of great rivers and virgin forests. A large train was starting as the doctor's wagons came down the slope. There was some talk, and a little bartering between the two companies, but time was precious, and the

## The Emigrant Trail

head of the Oregon caravan had begun to roll out when the California party were raising their tents on the river bank.

It was a sere and sterile prospect. Drab hills rolled in lazy waves toward the river where they reared themselves into bolder forms, a line of ramparts guarding the precious thread of water. The sleek, greenish current ate at the roots of lofty bluffs, striped by bands of umber and orange, and topped with out-croppings of rock as though a vanished race had crowned them with now crumbling fortresses. At their feet, sucking life from the stream, a fringe of alder and willows decked the sallow landscape with a trimming of green.

Here the doctor's party camped for the night, rising in the morning to find a new defection in their ranks. Leff had gone. Nailed to the mess chest was a slip of paper on which he had traced a few words announcing his happiness to be rid of them, his general dislike of one and all, and his intention to catch up the departed train and go to the Oregon country. This was just what they wanted, the desired had been accomplished without their intervention. But when they discovered that, beside his own saddle horse, he had taken David's, their gladness suffered a check. It was a bad situation, for it left the young man with but one horse, the faithful Ben. There was nothing for it but to abandon the wagon, and give David the doctor's extra mount for a pack animal. With silent pangs

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the student saw his books thrown on the banks of the river while his keg of whisky, sugar and coffee were stored among the Gillespies' effects. Then they started, a much diminished train—one wagon, a girl, and three mounted men.

## CHAPTER VII

It was Sunday afternoon, and the doctor and his daughter were sitting by a group of alders on the banks of the little river called Ham's Fork. On the uplands above, the shadows were lengthening, and at intervals a light air caught up swirls of dust and carried them careening away in staggering spirals.

The doctor was tired and lay stretched on the ground. He looked bloodless and wan, the grizzled beard not able to hide the thinness of his face. The healthful vigor he had found on the prairie had left him, each day's march claiming a dole from his hoarded store of strength. He knew—no one else—that he had never recovered the vitality expended at the time of Bella's illness. The call then had been too strenuous, the depleted reservoir had filled slowly, and now the demands of unrelenting toil were draining it of what was left. He said nothing of this, but thought much in his feverish nights, and in the long afternoons when his knees felt weak against the horse's sides. As the silence of each member of the little train was a veil over secret trouble, his had hidden the darkest, the most sinister.

Susan, sitting beside him, watching him with an

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anxious eye, noted the languor of his long, dry hands, the network of lines, etched deep on the loose skin of his cheeks. Of late she had been shut in with her own preoccupations, but never too close for the old love and the old habit to force a way through. She had seen a lessening of energy and spirit, asked about it, and received the accustomed answers that came with the quick, brisk cheeriness that now had to be whipped up. She had never seen his dauntless belief in life shaken. Faith and a debonair courage were his message. They were still there, but the effort of the unbroken spirit to maintain them against the body's weakness was suddenly revealed to her and the pathos of it caught at her throat. She leaned forward and passed her hand over his hair, her eyes on his face in a long gaze of almost solemn tenderness.

"You're worn out," she said.

"Not a bit of it," he answered stoutly. "You're the most uncomplimentary person I know. I was just thinking what a hardy pioneer I'd become, and that's the way you dash me to the ground."

She looked at the silvery meshes through which her fingers were laced.

"It's quite white and there were lots of brown hairs left when we started."

"That's the Emigrant Trail," he smothered a sigh, and his trouble found words: "It's not for old men, Missy."

"Old!" scornfully; "you're fifty-three. That's only thirty-two years older than I am. When I'm

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fifty-three you'll be eighty-five. Then we'll begin to talk about your being old."

"My little Susan fifty-three!" He moved his head so that he could command her face and dwell upon its blended bloom of olive and clear rose, "With wrinkles here and here," an indicating finger helped him, "and gray hairs all round here, and thick eyebrows, and—" he dropped the hand and his smile softened to reminiscence, "It was only yesterday you were a baby, a little, fat, crowing thing all creases and dimples. Your mother and I used to think everything about you so wonderful that we each secretly believed—and we'd tell each other so when nobody was round—that there *had* been other babies in the world, but never before one like ours. I don't know but what I think that yet."

"Silly old doctor-man!" she murmured.

"And now my baby's a woman with all of life before her. From where you are it seems as if it was never going to end, but when you get where I am and begin to look back, you see that it's just a little journey over before you've got used to the road and struck your gait. We ought to have more time. The first half's just learning and the second's where we put the learning into practice. And we're busy over that when we have to go. It's too short."

"Our life's going to be long. Out in California we're going to come into a sort of second childhood, be perennials like those larkspurs I had in the garden at home."

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They were silent, thinking of the garden behind the old house in Rochester with walks outlined by shells and edged by long flower beds. The girl looked back on it with a detached interest as an unregretted feature of a past existence in which she had once played her part and that was cut from the present by a chasm never to be bridged. The man held it cherishingly as one of many lovely memories that stretched from this river bank in a strange land back through the years, a link in the long chain.

"Wasn't it pretty!" she said dreamily, "with the line of hollyhocks against the red brick wall, and the big, bushy pine tree in the corner. Everything was bright except that tree."

His eyes narrowed in wistful retrospect:

"It was as if all the shadows in the garden had concentrated there—huddled together in one place so that the rest could be full of color and sunshine. And when Daddy John and I wanted to cut it down you wouldn't let us, cried and stamped, and so, of course, we gave it up. I actually believe you had a sentiment about that tree."

"I suppose I had, though I don't know exactly what you mean by a sentiment. I loved it because I'd once had such a perfect time up there among the branches. The top had been cut off and a ring of boughs was left round the place, and it made the most comfortable seat, almost like a cradle. One day you went to New York and when you came back you brought me a box of candy. Do

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you remember it—burnt almonds and chocolate drops with a dog painted on the cover? Well, I wanted to get them at their very best, enjoy them as much as I could, so I climbed to the seat in the top of the pine and ate them there. I can remember distinctly how lovely it was. They tasted better than any candies I've ever had before or since, and I leaned back on the boughs, rocking and eating and looking at the clouds and feeling the wind swaying the trunk. I can shut my eyes and feel again the sense of being entirely happy, sort of limp and forgetful and *so* contented. I don't know whether it was only the candies, or a combination of things that were just right that day and never combined the same way again. For I tried it often afterwards, with cake and fruit tart and other candies, but it was no good. But I couldn't have the tree cut down, for there was always a hope that I might get the combination right and have that perfectly delightful time once more."

The doctor's laughter echoed between the banks, and hers fell in with it, though she had told her story with the utmost sedateness.

"Was there ever such a materialist?" he chuckled. "It all rose from a box of New York candy, and I thought it was sentiment. Twenty-one years old and the same baby, only not quite so fat."

"Well, it was the truth," she said defensively. "I suppose if I'd left the candy out it would have sounded better."

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"Don't leave the candy out. It was the candy and the truth that made it all Susan's."

She picked up a stone and threw it in the river, then as she watched its splash: "Doesn't it seem long ago when we were in Rochester?"

"We left there in April and this is June."

"Yes, a short time in weeks, but some way or other it seems like ages. When I think of it I feel as if it was at the other side of the world, and I'd grown years and years older since we left. If I go on this way I'll be fully fifty-three when we get to California."

"What's made you feel so old?"

"I don't exactly know. I don't think it's because we've gone over so much space, but that has something to do with it. It seems as if the change was more in me."

"How have you changed?"

She gathered up the loose stones near her and dropped them from palm to palm, frowning a little in an effort to find words to clothe her vague thought.

"I don't know that either, or I can't express it. I liked things there that I don't care for any more. They were such babyish things and amounted to nothing, but they seemed important then. Now nothing seems important but things that are—the things that would be on a desert island. And in getting to think that way, in getting so far from what you once were, a person seems to squeeze a good many years into a few weeks." She looked

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sideways at him, the stones dropping from a slanting palm. "Do you understand me?"

He nodded:

"When I was a child I thought as a child—now I have put away childish things.' Is that it?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Then you wouldn't like to go back to the old life?"

She scattered the stones with an impatient gesture:

"I couldn't. I'd hate it. I wouldn't squeeze back into the same shape. I'd be all cramped and crowded up. You see every day out here I've been growing wider and wider," she stretched her arms to their length, "widening out to fit these huge, enormous places."

"The new life will be wide enough for you. You'll grow like a tree, a beautiful, tall, straight tree that has plenty of room for its branches to spread and plenty of sun and air to nourish it. There'll be no crowding or cramping out there. It's good to know you'll be happy in California. In the beginning I had fears."

She picked up a stone and with its pointed edge drew lines on the dust which seemed to interest her, for she followed them with intent eyes, not answering. He waited for a moment, then said with an undernote of pleading in his voice, "You think you will be happy, dearie?"

"I—I—don't—know," she stammered. "Nobody can tell. We're not there yet."

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"I can tell." He raised himself on his elbow to watch her face. She knew that he expected to see the maiden's bashful happiness upon it, and the difference between his fond imaginings and the actual facts sickened her with an intolerable sense of deception. She could never tell him, never strike out of him his glad conviction of her contentment.

"We're going back to the Golden Age, you and —, and David. We'll live as we want, not the way other people want us to. When we get to California we'll build a house somewhere by a river and we'll plant our seeds and have vines growing over it and a garden in the front, and Daddy John will break Julia's spirit and harness her to the plow. Then when the house gets too small—houses have a way of doing that—I'll build a little cabin by the edge of the river, and you and David will have the house to yourselves where the old, white-headed doctor won't be in the way."

He smiled for the joy of his picture, and she turned her head from him, seeing the prospect through clouded eyes.

"You'll never go out of my house," she said in a low voice.

"Other spirits will come into it and fill it up."

A wish that anything might stop the slow advance to this roseate future choked her. She sat with averted face wrestling with her sick distaste, and heard him say:

"You don't know how happy you're going to be, my little Missy."

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She could find no answer, and he went on: "You have everything for it, health and youth and a pure heart and David for your mate."

She had to speak now and said with urgency, trying to encourage herself, since no one else could do it for her,

"But that's all in the future, a long time from now."

"Not so very long. We ought to be in California in five or six weeks."

To have the dreaded reality suddenly brought so close, set at the limit of a few short weeks, grimly waiting at a definite point in the distance, made her repugnance break loose in alarmed words.

"Longer than that," she cried. "The desert's the hardest place, and we'll go slow, very slow, there."

"You sound as if you wanted to go slow," he answered, his smile indulgently quizzical, as completely shut away from her, in his man's ignorance, as though no bond of love and blood held them together.

"No, no, of course not," she faltered. "But I'm not at all sure we'll get through it so easily. I'm making allowance for delays. There are always delays."

"Yes, there may be delays, but we'll hope to be one of the lucky trains and get through on time."

She swallowed dryly, her heart gone down too far to be plucked up by futile contradiction. He mused a moment, seeking the best method of

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broaching a subject that had been growing in his mind for the past week. Frankness seemed the most simple, and he said:

"I've something to suggest to you. I've been thinking of it since we left the Pass. Bridger is a large post. They say there are trains there from all over the West and people of all sorts, and quite often there are missionaries."

"Missionaries?" in a faint voice.

"Yes, coming in and going out to the tribes of the Northwest. Suppose we found one there when we arrived?"

He stopped, watching her.

"Well?" her eyes slanted sideways in a fixity of attention.

"Would you marry David? Then we could all go on together."

Her breath left her and she turned a frightened face on him.

"Why?" she gasped. "What for?"

He laid his hand on hers and said quietly:

"Because, as you say, the hardest part of the journey is yet to come, and I am—well—not a strong man any more. The trip hasn't done for me what I hoped. If by some mischance—if anything should happen to me—then I'd know you'd be taken care of, protected and watched over by some one who could be trusted, whose right it was to do that."

"Oh, no. Oh, no," she cried in a piercing note of protest. "I couldn't, I couldn't."

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She made as if to rise, then sank back, drawn down by his grasping hand. He thought her reluctance natural, a girl's shrinking at the sudden intrusion of marriage into the pretty comedy of courtship.

"Susan, I would like it," he pleaded.

"No," she tried to pull her hand away, as if wishing to draw every particle of self together and shut it all within her own protecting shell.

"Why not?"

"It's—it's—I don't want to be married out here in the wilds. I want to wait and marry as other girls do, and have a real wedding and a house to go to. I should hate it. I couldn't. It's like a squaw. You oughtn't to ask it."

Her terror lent her an unaccustomed subtlety. She eluded the main issue, seizing on objections that did not betray her, but that were reasonable, what might have been expected by the most unsuspecting of men:

"And as for your being afraid of falling sick in these dreadful places, isn't that all the more reason why I should be free to give all my time and thought to you? If you don't feel so strong, then marrying is the last thing I'd think of doing. I'm going to be with you all the time, closer than I ever was before. No man's going to come between us. Marry David and push you off into the background when you're not well and want me most—that's perfectly ridiculous."

She meant all she said. It was the truth, but it

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was the truth reinforced, given a fourfold strength by her own unwillingness. The thought that she had successfully defeated him, pushed the marriage away into an indefinite future, relieved her so that the dread usually evoked by his ill health was swept aside. She turned on him a face, once again bright, all clouds withdrawn, softened into dimpling assurance.

"What an idea!" she said. "Men have no sense."

"Very well, spoiled girl. I suppose we'll have to put it off till we get to California."

She dropped back full length on the ground, and in the expansion of her relief laid her cheek against the hand that clasped hers.

"And until we get the house built," she cried, beginning to laugh.

"And the garden laid out and planted, I suppose?"

"Of course. And the vines growing over the front porch."

"Why not over the second story? We'll have a second story by that time."

"Over the whole house, up to the chimneys."

They both laughed, a cheerful bass and a gay treble, sweeping out across the unquiet water.

"It's going to be the Golden Age," she said, in the joy of her respite pressing her lips on the hand she held. "A cottage covered with vines to the roof and you and I and Daddy John inside it."

"And David, don't forget David."

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"Of course, David," she assented lightly, for David's occupancy was removed to a comfortable distance.

After supper she and David climbed to the top of the bank to see the sunset. The breeze had dropped, the dust devils died with it. The silence of evening lay like a cool hand on the heated earth. Dusk was softening the hard, bright colors, wiping out the sharpness of stretching shadows the baked reflection of sun on clay. The West blazed above the mountains, but the rest of the sky was a thick, pure blue. Against it to the South, a single peak rose, snow-enameled on a turquoise background.

Susan felt at peace with the moment and her own soul. She radiated the good humor of one who has faced peril and escaped. Having postponed the event that was to make her David's forever, she felt bound to offer recompense. Her conscience went through one of those processes by which the consciences of women seek ease through atonement, prompting them to actions of a baleful kindliness. Contrition made her tender to the man she did not love. The thought that she had been unfair added a cruel sweetness to her manner.

He lay on the edge of the bluff beside her, not saying much, for it was happiness to feel her within touch of his hand, amiable and gentle as she had been of late. It would have taken an eye shrewder than David's to have seen into the secret springs of her conduct. He only knew that she had been kinder, friendlier, less withdrawn into the sanctu-

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ary of her virgin coldness, round which in the beginning he had hovered. His heart was high, swelled by the promise of her beaming looks and ready smiles. At last, in this drama of slow winning she was drawing closer, shyly melting, her whims and perversities mellowing to the rich, sweet yielding of the ultimate surrender.

"We ought to be at Fort Bridger now in a few days," he said. "Courant says if all goes well we can make it by Thursday and of course he knows."

"Courant!" she exclaimed with the familiar note of scorn. "He knows a little of everything, doesn't he?"

"Why don't you like him, Missy? He's a fine man for the trail."

"Yes, I dare say he is. But that's not everything."

"Why don't you like him? Come, tell the truth."

They had spoken before of her dislike of Courant. She had revealed it more frankly to David than to anyone else. It was one of the subjects over which she could become animated in the weariest hour. She liked to talk to her betrothed about it, to impress it upon him, warming to an eloquence that allayed her own unrest.

"I don't know why I don't like him. You can't always tell why you like or dislike a person. It's just something that comes and you don't know why."

"But it seems so childish and unfair. I don't

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like my girl to be unfair. Has he ever done anything or said anything to you that offended you?"

She gave a petulant movement: "No, but he thinks so much of himself, and he's hard and has no feeling, and— Oh, I don't know—it's just that I don't like him."

David laughed:

"It's all prejudice. You can't give any real reason."

"Of course I can't. Those things don't always have reasons. You're always asking for reasons and I never have any to give you."

"I'll have to teach you to have them."

She looked slantwise at him smiling. "I'm afraid that will be a great undertaking. I'm very stupid about learning things. You ask father and Daddy John what a terrible task it was getting me educated. The only person that didn't bother about it was this one"—she laid a finger on her chest—

"She never cared in the least."

"Well I'll begin a second education. When we get settled I'll teach you to reason."

"Begin now." She folded her hands demurely in her lap and lifting her head back laughed: "Here I am waiting to learn."

"No. We want more time. I'll wait till we're married."

Her laughter diminished to a smile that lay on her lips, looking stiff and uncomfortable below the fixity of her eyes.

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"That's such a long way off," she said faintly.

"Not so very long."

"Oh, California's hundreds of miles away yet. And then when we get there we've got to find a place to settle, and till the land, and lay out the garden and build a house, quite a nice house; I don't want to live in a cabin. Father and I have just been talking about it. Why it's months and months off yet."

He did not answer. She had spoken this way to him before, wafting the subject away with evasive words. After a pause he said slowly: "Why need we wait so long?"

"We must. I'm not going to begin my married life the way the emigrant women do. I want to live decently and be comfortable."

He broke a sprig off a sage bush and began to pluck it apart. She had receded to her defenses and peeped nervously at him from behind them.

"Fort Bridger," he said, his eyes on the twig, "is a big place, a sort of rendezvous for all kinds of people."

She stared at him, her face alert with apprehension, ready to dart into her citadel and lower the drawbridge.

"Sometimes there are missionaries stopping there."

"Missionaries?" she exclaimed in a high key. "I hate missionaries!"

This was a surprising statement. David knew the doctor to be a supporter and believer in the In-

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dian missions, and had often heard his daughter acquiesce in his opinions.

"Why do you hate them?"

"I don't know. There's another thing you want a reason for. It's getting cold up here—let's go down by the fire."

She gathered herself together to rise, but he turned quickly upon her, and his face, while it made her shrink, also arrested her. She had come to dread that expression, persuasion hardened into desperate pleading. It woke in her a shocked repugnance, as though something had been revealed to her that she had no right to see. She felt shame for him, that he must beg where a man should conquer and subdue.

"Wait a moment," he said. "Why can't one of those missionaries marry us there?"

She had scrambled to her knees, and snatched at her skirt preparatory to the jump to her feet.

"No," she said vehemently. "No. What's the matter with you all talking about marriages and missionaries when we're in the middle of the wilds?"

"Susan," he cried, catching at her dress, "just listen a moment. I could take care of you then, take care of you properly. You'd be my own, to look after and work for. It's seemed to me lately you loved me enough. I wouldn't have suggested such a thing if you were as you were in the beginning. But you seem to care now. You seem as if—as if—it wouldn't be so hard for you to live with me and let me love you."

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She jerked her skirt away and leaped to her feet crying again, "No, David, no. Not for a minute."

He rose too, very pale, the piece of sage in his hand shaking. They looked at each other, the yellow light clear on both faces. Hers was hard and combative, as if his suggestion had outraged her and she was ready to fight it. Its expression sent a shaft of terror to his soul, for with all his unselfishness he was selfish in his man's longing for her, hungered for her till his hunger had made him blind. Now in a flash of clairvoyance he saw truly, and feeling the joy of life slipping from him, faltered:

"Have I made a mistake? Don't you care?"

It was her opportunity, she was master of her fate. But her promise was still a thing that held, the moment had not come when she saw nothing but her own desire, and to gain it would have sacrificed all that stood between. His stricken look, his expression of nerving himself for a blow, pierced her, and her words rushed out in a burst of contrition.

"Of course, of course, I do. Don't doubt me. Don't. But— Oh, David, don't torment me. Don't ask anything like that now. I can't, I can't. I'm not ready—not yet."

Her voice broke and she put her hand to her mouth to hide its trembling. Over it, her eyes, suddenly brimming with tears, looked imploringly into his.

It was a heart-tearing sight to the lover. He

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forgot himself and, without knowing what he did, opened his arms to inclose her in an embrace of pity and remorse.

"Oh, dearest, I'll never ask it till you're willing to come to me," he cried, and saw her back away, with upheld shoulders raised in defense against his hands.

"I won't touch you," he said, quickly dropping his arms. "Don't draw back from me. If you don't want it I'll never lay a finger on you."

The rigidity of her attitude relaxed. She turned away her head and wiped her tears on the end of the kerchief knotted round her neck. He stood watching her, struggling with passion and foreboding, reassured and yet with the memory of the seeing moment, chill at his heart.

Presently she shot a timid glance at him, and met his eyes resting questioningly upon her. Her face was tear stained, a slight, frightened smile on the lips.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Susan, do you truly care for me?"

"Yes," she said, looking down. "Yes—but—let me wait a little while longer."

"As long as you like. I'll never ask you to marry me till you say you're willing."

She held out her hand shyly, as if fearing a repulse. He took it, and feeling it relinquished to his with trust and confidence, swore that never again would he disturb her, never demand of her till she was ready to give.

## CHAPTER VIII

FORT BRIDGER was like a giant magnet perpetually revolving and sweeping the western half of the country with its rays. They wheeled from the west across the north over the east and down to the south. Ox teams, prairie schooners, pack trains, horsemen came to it from the barren lands that guarded the gates of California, from the tumultuous rivers and fragrant forests of the Oregon country, from the trapper's paths and the thin, icy streams of the Rockies, from the plains where the Platte sung round its sand bars, from the sun-drenched Spanish deserts. All roads led to it, and down each one came the slow coil of the long trains and the pacing files of mounted men. Under its walls they rested and repaired their waste, ere they took the trail again intent on the nation's work of conquest.

The fort's centripetal attraction had caught the doctor's party, and was drawing it to the focus. They reckoned the days on their fingers and pressed forward with a feverish hurry. They were like wayworn mariners who sight the lights of a port. Dead desires, revived, blew into a glow extinguished vanities. They looked at each other, and for the first time realized how ragged and unkempt they

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were, then dragged out best clothes from the bottom of their chests and hung their looking-glasses to the limbs of trees. They were coming to the surface after a period of submersion.

Susan fastened her mirror to the twig on an alder trunk and ransacked her store of finery. It yielded up a new red merino bodice, and the occasion was great enough to warrant breaking into her reserve of hairpins. Then she experimented with her hair, parted and rolled it in the form that had been the fashion in that long dead past—was it twenty years ago?—when she had been a girl in Rochester. She inspected her reflected image with a fearful curiosity, as if expecting to find gray hairs and wrinkles. It was pleasant to see that she looked the same—a trifle thinner may be. And as she noted that her cheeks were not as roundly curved, the fullness of her throat had melted to a more muscular, less creased and creamy firmness, she felt a glow of satisfaction. For in those distant days—twenty-five years ago it must be—she had worried because she was a little *too* fat. No one could say that now. She stole a look over her shoulder to make sure she was not watched—it seemed an absurdly vain thing to do—and turned back the neck of her blouse. The faintest rise of collar bone showed under the satiny skin, fine as a magnolia petal, the color of faintly tinted meerschäum. She ran her hand across it and it was smooth as curds yielding with an elastic resistance over its bedding of firm flesh. The young girl's

## The Mountains

pride in her beauty rose, bringing with it a sense of surprise. She had thought it gone forever, and now it still held, the one surviving sensation that connected her with that other Susan Gillespie who had lived a half century ago in Rochester.

It was the day after this recrudescence of old coquetry that the first tragedy of the trail, the tragedy that was hers alone, smote her.

The march that morning had been over a high level across which they headed for a small river they would follow to the Fort. Early in the afternoon they saw its course traced in intricate embroidery across the earth's leathern carpet. The road dropped into it, the trail grooved deep between ramparts of clay. On the lip of the descent the wayward Julia, maddened with thirst, plunged forward, her obedient mates followed, and the wagon went hurling down the slant, dust rising like the smoke of an explosion. The men struggled for control and, seized by the contagion of their excitement, the doctor laid hold of a wheel. It jerked him from his feet and flung him sprawling, stunned by the impact, a thin trickle of blood issuing from his lips. The others saw nothing, in the tumult did not hear Susan's cry. When they came back the doctor was lying where he had fallen, and she was sitting beside him wiping his lips with the kerchief she had torn from her neck. She looked up at them and said:

"It's a hemorrhage."

Her face shocked them into an understanding of

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the gravity of the accident. It was swept clean of its dauntless, rosy youth, had stiffened into an unelastic skin surface, taut over rigid muscles. But her eyes were loopholes through which anguish escaped. Bending them on her father a hungry solicitude suffused them, too all-pervading to be denied exit. Turned to the men an agonized questioning took its place. It spoke to them like a cry, a cry of weakness, a cry for succor. It was the first admission of their strength she had ever made, the first look upon them which had said, "You are men, I am a woman. Help me."

They carried the doctor to the banks of the stream and laid him on a spread robe. He protested that it was nothing, it had happened before, several times, Missy would remember it, last winter in Rochester? Her answering smile was pitiable, a grimace of the lips that went no farther. She felt its failure and turned away plucking at a weed near her. Courant saw the trembling of her hand and the swallowing movement of her throat, bared of its sheltering kerchief. She glanced up with a stealthy side look, fearful that her moment of weakness was spied upon, and saw him, the pity surging from his heart shining on his face like a softening light. She shrank from it, and, as he made an involuntary step toward her, warned him off with a quick gesture. He turned to the camp and set furiously to work, his hands shaking as he drove in the picket pins, his throat dry. He did not dare to look at her again. The desire to snatch her in his

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arms, to hold her close till he crushed her in a passion of protecting tenderness, made him fear to look at her, to hear her voice, to let the air of her moving body touch him.

The next morning, while lifting the doctor into the wagon, there was a second hemorrhage. Even the sick man found it difficult to maintain his cheery insouciance. Susan looked pinched, her tongue seemed hardened to the consistency of leather that could not flex for the ready utterance of words. The entire sum of her consciousness was focused on her father. "Breakfast?"—with a blank glance at the speaker—"is it breakfast time?" The men cooked for her and brought her a cup of coffee and her plate of food. She set them on the driver's seat, and when the doctor, keeping his head immovable, and turning sniling eyes upon her, told her to eat she felt for them like a blind woman. It was hard to swallow the coffee, took effort to force it down a channel that was suddenly narrowed to a parched, resistent tube. She would answer no one, seemed to have undergone an ossifying of all faculties turned to the sounds and sights of life. David remembered her state when the doctor had been ill on the Platte. But the exclusion of the outer world was then an obsession of worry, a jealous distraction, as if she resented the well-being of others when hers were forced to suffer. This was different. She did not draw away from him now. She did not seem to see or hear him. Her glance lit unknowing on his face, her hand lay in his,

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passive as a thing of stone. Sometimes he thought she did not know who he was.

"Can't we do anything to cheer her or take her mind off it?" he said to Daddy John behind the wagon.

The old man gave him a glance of tolerant scorn.

"You can't take a person's mind off the only thing that's in it. She's got nothing inside her but worry. She's filled up with it, level to the top. You might as well try and stop a pail from overflowing that's too full of water."

They fared on for two interminable, broiling days. The pace was of the slowest, for a jolt or wrench of the wagon might cause another hemorrhage. With a cautious observance of stones and chuck holes they crawled down the road that edged the river. The sun was blinding, beating on the canvas hood till the girl's face was beaded with sweat, and the sick man's blankets were hot against the intenser heat of his body. Outside the world held its breath spellbound in a white dazzle. The river sparkled like a coat of mail, the only unquiet thing on the earth's incandescent surface. When the afternoon declined, shadows crept from the opposite bluffs, slanted across the water, slipped toward the little caravan and engulfed it. Through the front opening Susan watched the road. There was a time when each dust ridge showed a side of bright blue. To half-shut eyes they were like painted stripes weaving toward the distance. Following them to where the trail bent round a buttress, her glance

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brought up on Courant's mounted figure. He seemed the vanishing point of these converging stripes, the object they were striving toward, the end they aimed for. Reaching him they ceased as though they had accomplished their purpose, led the woman's eyes to him as to a symbolical figure that piloted the train to succor.

With every hour weakness grew on the doctor, his words were fewer. By the ending of the first day, he lay silent looking out at the vista of bluffs and river, his eyes shining in sunken orbits. As dusk fell Courant dropped back to the wagon and asked Daddy John if the mules could hold the pace all night. Susan heard the whispered conference, and in a moment was kneeling on the seat, her hand clutched like a spread starfish on the old man's shoulder.

Courant leaned from his saddle to catch the driver's ear with his lowered tones. "With a forced march we can get there to-morrow afternoon. The animals can rest up and we can make him comfortable and maybe find a doctor."

Her face, lifted to him, was like a transparent medium through which anxiety and hope that was almost pain, shone. She hung on his words and breathed back quick agreement. It would have been the same if he had suggested the impossible, if the angel of the Lord had appeared and barred the way with a flaming sword.

"Of course they can go all night. They must. We'll walk and ride by turns. That'll lighten the

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wagon. I'll go and get my horse," and she was out and gone to the back of the train where David rode at the head of the pack animals.

The night was of a clear blue darkness, suffused with the misty light of stars. Looking back, Courant could see her upright slenderness topping the horse's black shape. When the road lay pale and unshaded behind her he could decipher the curves of her head and shoulders. Then he turned to the trail in front, and her face, as it had been when he first saw her and as it was now, came back to his memory. Once, toward midnight, he drew up till they reached him, her horse's muzzle nosing soft against his pony's flank. He could see the gleam of her eyes, fastened on him, wide and anxious.

"Get into the wagon and ride," he commanded.

"Why? He's no worsel He's sleeping."

"I was thinking of you. This is too hard for you. It'll wear you out."

"Oh, I'm all right," she said with a slight movement of impatience. "Don't worry about me. Go on."

He returned to his post and she paced slowly on, keeping level with the wheels. It was very still, only the creaking of the wagon and the hoof beats on the dust. She kept her eyes on his receding shape, watched it disappear in dark turns, then emerge into faintly illumined stretches. It moved steadily, without quickening of gait, a lonely shadow that they followed through the unknown to hope. Her glance hung to it, her ear strained for

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the thud of his pony's feet, sight and sound of him came to her like a promise of help. He was the one strong human thing in this place of remote skies and dumb unfeeling earth.

It was late afternoon when the Fort came in sight. A flicker of animation burst up in them as they saw the square of its long, low walls, crowning an eminence above the stream. The bottom lay wide at its feet, the river slipping bright through green meadows sprinkled with an army of cattle. In a vast, irregular circle, a wheel of life with the fort as its hub, spread an engirdling encampment. It was scattered over plain and bottom in dottings of white, here drawn close in clustering agglomerations, there detached in separate spatterings. Coming nearer the white spots grew to wagon hoods and tent roofs, and among them, less easy to discern, were the pointed summits of the lodges with the bunched poles bristling through the top. The air was very still, and into it rose the straight threads of smoke from countless fires, aspiring upwards in slender blue lines to the bluer sky. They lifted and dispersed the smell of burning wood that comes to the wanderer with a message of home, a message that has lain in his blood since the first man struck fire and turned the dry heap of sticks to an altar to be forever fixed as the soul of his habitation.

They camped in the bottom withdrawn from the closer herding of tents. It was a slow settling, as noiseless as might be, for two at least of their num-

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ber knew that the doctor was dying. That afternoon Daddy John and Courant had seen the shadow of the great change. Whether Susan saw it they neither knew. She was full of a determined, cold energy, urging them at once to go among the camps and search for a doctor. They went in different directions, leaving her sitting by her father's feet at the raised flap of the tent. Looking back through the gathering dusk Courant could see her, a dark shape, her body drooping in relaxed lines. He thought that she knew.

When they came back with the word that there was no doctor to be found, darkness was closing in. Night came with noises of men and the twinkling of innumerable lights. The sky, pricked with stars, looked down on an earth alive with answering gleams, as though a segment of its spark-set shield had fallen and lay beneath it, winking back messages in an aerial telegraphy. The fires leaped high or glowed in smoldering mounds, painting the sides of tents, the flanks of ruminating animals, the wheels of wagons, the faces of men and women. Coolness, rest, peace brooded over the great bivouac, with the guardian shape of the Fort above it and the murmur of the river at its feet.

A lantern, standing on a box by the doctor's side, lit the tent. Through the opening the light from the fire outside poured in, sending shadows scurrying up the canvas walls. Close within call David sat by it, his chin on his knees, his eyes staring at the tongues of flames as they licked the fresh wood.

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There was nothing now for him to do. He had cooked the supper, and then to ease the pain of his unclaimed sympathies, cleaned the pans, and from a neighboring camp brought a piece of deer meat for Susan. It was the only way he could serve her, and he sat disconsolately looking now at the meat on a tin plate, then toward the tent where she and Daddy John were talking. He could hear the murmur of their voices, see their silhouettes moving on the canvas, gigantic and grotesque. Presently she appeared in the opening, paused there for a last word, and then came toward him.

"He wants to speak to Daddy John for a moment," she said and dropping on the ground beside him, stared at the fire.

David looked at her longingly, but he dared not intrude upon her somber abstraction. The voices in the tent rose and fell. Once at a louder phrase from Daddy John she turned her head quickly and listened, a sheaf of strained nerves. The voices dropped again, her eye came back to the light and touched the young man's face. It contained no recognition of him, but he leaped at the chance, making stammering proffer of such aid as he could give.

"I've got you some supper."

He lifted the plate, but she shook her head.

"Let me cook it for you," he pleaded. "You haven't eaten anything since morning."

"I can't eat," she said, and fell back to her fire-gazing, slipping away from him into the forbidding

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dumbness of her thoughts. He could only watch her, hoping for a word, an expressed wish. When it came it was, alas! outside his power to gratify:

"If there had only been a doctor here! That was what I was hoping for."

And so when she asked for the help he yearned to give, it was his fate that he should meet her longing with a hopeless silence.

When Daddy John emerged from the tent she leaped to her feet.

"Well?" she said with low eagerness.

"Go back to him. He wants you," answered the old man. "I've got something to do for him."

He made no attempt to touch her, his words and voice were brusque, yet David saw that she responded, softened, showed the ragged wound of her pain to him as she did to no one else. It was an understanding that went beneath all externals. Words were unnecessary between them, heart spoke to heart.

She returned to the tent and sunk on the skin beside her father. He smiled faintly and stretched a hand for hers, and her fingers slipped between his, cool and strong against the lifeless dryness of his palm. She gave back his smile bravely, her eyes steadfast. She had no desire for tears, no acuteness of sensation. A weight as heavy as the world lay on her, crushing out struggle and resistance. She knew that he was dying. When they told her there was no doctor in the camp her flickering hope had gone out. Now she was prepared to

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sit by him and wait with a lethargic patience beyond which was nothing.

He pressed her hand and said: "I've sent Daddy John on a hunt. Do you guess what for?"

She shook her head feeling no curiosity.

"The time is short, Missy."

The living's instinct to fight against the acquiescence of the dying prompted her to the utterance of a sharp "No."

"I want it all arranged and settled before it's too late. I sent him to see if there was a missionary here."

She was leaning against the couch of robes, resting on the piled support of the skins. In the pause after his words she slowly drew herself upright, and with her mouth slightly open inhaled a deep breath. Her eyes remained fixed on him, gleaming from the shadow of her brows, and their expression, combined with the amaze of the dropped underlip, gave her a look of wild attention.

"Why?" she said. The word came obstructed and she repeated it.

"I want you to marry David here to-night."

The doctor's watch on a box at the bed head ticked loudly in the silence. They looked at each other unconscious of the length of the pause. Death on the one hand, life pressing for its due on the other, were the only facts they recognized. Hostility, not to the man but to the idea, drove the amazement from her face and hardened its softness to stone.

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"Here, to-night?" she said, her comprehension stimulated by an automatic repetition of his words.

"Yes. I may not be able to understand tomorrow."

She moved her head, her glance touching the watch, the lantern, then dropping to the hand curled round her own. It seemed symbolic of the will against which hers was rising in combat. She made an involuntary effort to withdraw her fingers but his closed tighter on them.

"Why?" she whispered again.

"Some one must take care of you. I can't leave you alone."

She answered with stiffened lips: "There's Daddy John."

"Some one closer than Daddy John. I want to leave you with David."

Her antagonism rose higher, sweeping over her wretchedness. Worn and strained she had difficulty to keep her lips shut on it, to prevent herself from crying out her outraged protests. All her dormant womanhood, stirring to wakefulness in the last few weeks, broke into life, gathering itself in a passion of revolt, abhorrent of the indignity, ready to flare into vehement refusal. To the dim eyes fastened on her she was merely the girl, reluctant still. He watched her down-drooped face and said:

"Then I could go in peace. Am I asking too much?"

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She made a negative movement with her head and turned her face away from him.

"You'll do this for my happiness now?"

"Anything," she murmured.

"It will be also for your own."

He moved his free hand and clasped it on the mound made by their locked fingers. Through the stillness a man's voice singing Xavier's Canadian song came to them. It stopped at the girl's outer ear, but, like a hail from a fading land, penetrated to the man's brain and he stirred.

"Hist!" he said raising his brows, "there's that French song your mother used to sing."

The distant voice rose to the plaintive burden and he lay motionless, his eyes filmed with memories. As the present dimmed the past grew clearer. His hold on the moment relaxed and he slipped away from it on a tide of recollection, muttering the words.

The girl sat mute, her hand cold under his, her being passing in an agonized birth throes from unconsciousness to self-recognition. Her will — its strength till now unguessed — rose resistant, a thing of iron. Love was too strong in her for open opposition, but the instinct to fight, blindly but with caution, for the right to herself was stronger.

His murmuring died into silence and she looked at him. His eyes were closed, the pressure of his fingers loosened. A light sleep held him, and under its truce she softly withdrew her hand, then stole to the tent door and stood there a waiting mo-

## The Emigrant Trail

ment, stifling her hurried breathing. She saw David lying by the fire, gazing into its smoldering heart. With noiseless feet she skirted the encircling ropes and pegs, and stood, out of range of his eye, on the farther side. Here she stopped, withdrawn from the light that came amber soft through the canvas walls, slipping into shadow when a figure passed, searching the darkness with peering eyes.

Around her the noises of the camp rose, less sharp than an hour earlier, the night silence gradually hushing them. The sparks and shooting gleams of fires still quivered, imbued with a tenacious life. She had a momentary glimpse of a naked Indian boy flinging loose his blanket, a bronze statue glistening in a leap of flame. Nearer by a woman's figure bent over a kettle black on a bed of embers, then a girl's fire-touched form, with raised arms, shaking down a snake of hair, which broke and grew cloudy under her disturbing hands. A resounding smack sounded on a horse's flank, a low ripple of laughter came tangled with a child's querulous crying, and through the walls of tents and the thickness of smoke the notes of a flute filtered.

Her ear caught the pad of a footstep on the grass, and her eyes seized on a shadow that grew from dusky uncertainty to a small, bent shape. She waited, suffocated with heartbeats, then made a noiseless pounce on it.

"Daddy John," she gasped, clutching at him.

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The old man staggered, almost taken off his feet.

"Is he worse?" he said.

"He's told me. Did you find anyone?"

"Yes—two. One's Episcopal—in a train from St. Louis."

A sound came from her that he did not understand. She gripped at his shoulders as if she were drowning. He thought she was about to swoon and put his arm around her saying:

"Come back to the tent. You're all on a shake as if you had ague."

"I can't go back. Don't bring him. Don't bring him. Don't tell father. Not now. I will later, some other time. When we get to California, but not now—not to-night."

The sentences were cut apart by breaths that broke from her as if she had been running. He was frightened and tried to draw her to the light and see her face.

"Why, Missy!" he said with scared helplessness,

"Why, Missy! What's got you?"

"Don't get the clergyman. Tell him there isn't any. Tell him you've looked all over. Tell him a lie."

He guessed the trouble was something more than the grief of the moment, and urged in a whisper:

"What's the matter now? Go ahead and tell me. I'll stick by you."

She bent her head back to look into his face.

"I don't want to marry him now. I can't. I can't. I *can't*."

## The Emigrant Trail

Her hands on his shoulders shook him with each repetition. The force of the words was heightened by the suppressed tone. They should have been screamed. In these whispered breaths they burst from her like blood from a wound. With the last one her head bowed forward on his shoulder with a movement of burrowing as though she would have crawled up and hidden under his skin, and tears, the most violent he had ever seen her shed, broke from her. They came in bursting sobs, a succession of rending throes that she struggled to stifle, swaying and quivering under their stress.

He thought of nothing now but this new pain added to the hour's tragedy, and stroked her shoulder with a low "Keep quiet—keep quiet," then leaned his face against her hair and breathed through its tangles.

"It's all right, I'll do it. I'll say I couldn't find anyone. I'll lie for you, Missy."

She released him at once, dropped back a step and, lifting a distorted face, gave a nod. He passed on, and she fell on the grass, close to the tent ropes and lay there, hidden by the darkness.

She did not hear a step approaching from the herded tents. Had she been listening it would have been hard to discern, for the feet were moccasin shod, falling noiseless on the muffling grass. A man's figure with fringes wavering along its outline came round the tent wall. The head was thrust forward, the ear alert for voices. Faring softly his foot struck her and he bent, stretching

## The Mountains

down a feeling hand. It touched her shoulder, slipped along her side, and gripped at her arm. "What's the matter?" came a deep voice, and feeling the pull on her arm she got to her knees with a strangled whisper for silence. When the light fell across her, he gave a smothered cry, jerked her to her feet and thrust his hand into her hair, drawing her head back till her face was uplifted to his.

There was no one to see, and he let his eyes feed full upon it, a thief with the coveted treasure in his hands. She seemed unconscious of him, a broken thing without sense or volition, till a stir came from the tent. Then he felt her resist his grasp. She put a hand on his breast and pressed herself back from him.

"Hush," she breathed. "Daddy John's in there."

A shadow ran up the canvas wall, bobbing on it, huge and wavering. She turned her head toward it, the tears on her cheeks glazed by the light. He watched her with widened nostrils and immovable eyes. In the mutual suspension of action that held them he could feel her heart beating.

"Well?" came the doctor's voice.

The old servant answered:

"There weren't no parsons anywhere, I've been all over and there's not one."

"Parsons?" Courant breathed.

She drew in the fingers spread on his breast with a clawing movement and emitted an inarticulate sound that meant "Hush."

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"Not a clergyman or missionary among all these people?"

"Not one."

"We must wait till to-morrow, then."

"Yes—mebbe there'll be one to-morrow."

"I hope so."

Then silence fell and the shadow flickered again on the canvas.

She made a struggle against Courant's hold, which for a moment he tried to resist, but her fingers plucked against his hand, and she tore herself free and ran to the tent opening. She entered without speaking, threw herself at the foot of the couch, and laid her head against her father's knees.

"Is that you, Missy?" he said, feeling for her with a groping hand. "Daddy John couldn't find a clergyman."

"I know," she answered, and lay without moving, her face buried in the folds of the blanket.

They said no more, and Daddy John stole out of the tent.

The next day the doctor was too ill to ask for a clergyman, to know or to care. At nightfall he died. The Emigrant Trail had levied its first tribute on them, taken its toll.

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PART IV

The Desert



## CHAPTER I

THEY were camped on the edges of that harsh land which lay between the Great Salt Lake and the Sierra. Behind them the still, heavy reach of water stretched, reflecting in mirrored clearness the mountains crowding on its southern rim. Before them the sage reached out to dim infinities of distance. The Humboldt ran nearby, sunk in a stony bed, its banks matted with growths of alder and willow. The afternoon was drawing to the magical sunset hour. Susan, lying by the door of her tent, could see below the growing western blaze the bowl of the earth filling with the first, liquid oozeings of twilight.

A week ago they had left the Fort. To her it had been a blank space of time, upon which no outer interest had intruded. She had presented an invulnerable surface to all that went on about her, the men's care, the day's incidents, the setting of the way. Cold-eyed and dumb she had moved with them, an inanimate idol, unresponsive to the observances of their worship, aloof from them in somber uncommunicated musings.

The men respected her sorrow, did her work for her, and let her alone. To them she was set apart in the sanctuary of her mourning, and that her

## The Emigrant Trail

grief should express itself by hours of drooping silence was a thing they accepted without striving to understand. Once or twice David tried to speak to her of her father, but it seemed to rouse in her an irritated and despairing pain. She begged him to desist and got away from him as quickly as she could, climbing into the wagon and lying on the sacks, with bright, unwinking eyes fastened on Daddy John's back. But she did not rest stunned under an unexpected blow as they thought. She was acutely alive, bewildered, but with senses keen, as if the world had taken a dizzying revolution and she had come up panting and clutching among the fragments of what had been her life.

If there had been some one to whom she could have turned, relieving herself by confession, she might have found solace and set her feet in safer ways. But among the three men she was virtually alone, guarding her secret with that most stubborn of all silences, a girl's in the first wakening of sex. She had a superstitious hope that she could regain peace and self-respect by an act of reparation, and at such moments turned with expiatory passion to the thought of David. She would go to California, live as her father had wished, marry her betrothed, and be as good a wife to him as man could have. And for a space these thoughts brought her ease, consoled her as a compensating act of martyrdom.

She shunned Courant, rarely addressing him, keeping her horse to the rear of the train where the wagon hood hid him from her. But when his foot

## The Desert

fell on the dust beside her, or he dropped back for a word with Daddy John, a stealthy, observant quietude held her frame. She turned her eyes from him as from an unholy sight, but it was useless, for her mental vision called up his figure, painted in yellow and red upon the background of the sage. She knew the expression of the lithe body as it leaned from the saddle, the gnarled hand from which the rein hung loose, the eyes, diamond hard and clear, living sparks set in leathery skin wrinkled against the glare of the waste. She did not lie to herself any more. No delusions could live in this land stripped of all conciliatory deception.

The night before they left the Fort the men had had a consultation. Sitting apart by the tent she had watched them, David and Daddy John between her and the fire, Courant beyond it. His face, red lit between the hanging locks of hair, his quick eyes, shifting from one man to the other, was keen with a furtive anxiety. At a point in the murmured interview, he had looked beyond them to the darkened spot where she sat. Then Daddy John and David had come to her and told her that if she wished they would turn back, take her home to Rochester, and stay there with her always. There was money enough they said. The doctor had left seven thousand dollars in his chest, and David had three to add to it. It would be ample to live on till the men could set to work and earn a maintenance for them. No word was spoken of her

## The Emigrant Trail

marriage, but it lay in the offing of their argument as the happy finale that the long toil of the return journey and the combination of resources were to prelude.

The thought of going back had never occurred to her, and shocked her into abrupt refusal. It would be an impossible adaptation to outgrown conditions. She could not conjure up the idea of herself refitted into the broken frame of her girlhood. She told them she would go on, there was nothing now to go back for. Their only course was to keep to the original plan, emigrate to California and settle there. They returned to the fire and told Courant. She could see him with eager gaze listening. Then he smiled and, rising to his feet, sent a bold, exultant glance through the darkness to her. She drew her shawl over her head to shut it out, for she was afraid.

They rested now on the lip of the desert, gathering their forces for the last lap of the march. There had been no abatement in the pressure of their pace, and Courant had told them it must be kept up. He had heard the story of the Donner party two years before, and the first of September must see them across the Sierra. In the evenings he conferred with Daddy John on these matters and kept a vigilant watch on the animals upon whose condition the success of the journey depended.

David was not included in these consultations. Both men now realized that he was useless when

## The Desert

it came to the rigors of the trail. Of late he had felt a physical and spiritual impairment, that showed in a slighted observance of his share of the labor. He had never learned to cord his pack, and day after day it turned under his horse's belly, discharging its cargo on the ground. The men, growling with irritation, finally took the work from him, not from any pitying consideration, but to prevent further delay.

He was, in fact, coming to that Valley of Desolation where the body faints and only the spirit's dauntlessness can keep it up and doing. What dauntlessness his spirit once had was gone. He moved wearily, automatically doing his work and doing it ill. The very movements of his hands, slack and fumbling, were an exasperation to the other men, setting their strength to a herculean measure, and giving of it without begrudgment. David saw their anger and did not care. Fatigue made him indifferent, ate into his pride, brought down his self-respect. He plodded on doggedly, the alkali acrid on his lips and burning in his eyeballs, thinking of California, not as the haven of love and dreams, but as a place where there was coolness, water, and rest. When in the dawn he staggered up to the call of "Catch up," and felt for the buckle of his saddle girth, he had a vision of a place under trees by a river where he could sleep and wake and turn to sleep again, and go on repeating the performance all day with no one to shout at him if he was stupid and forgot things.

## The Emigrant Trail

Never having had the fine physical endowment of the others all the fires of his being were dying down to smoldering ashes. His love for Susan faded, if not from his heart, from his eyes and lips. She was as dear to him as ever, but now with a devitalized, undemanding affection in which there was something of a child's fretful dependence. He rode beside her not looking at her, contented that she should be there, but with the thought of marriage buried out of sight under the weight of his weariness. It did not figure at all in his mind, which, when roused from apathy, reached forward into the future to gloat upon the dream of sleep. She was grateful for his silence, and they rode side by side, detached from one another, moving in separated worlds of sensation.

This evening he came across to where she sat, dragging a blanket in an indolent hand. He dropped it beside her and threw himself upon it with a sigh. He was too empty of thought to speak, and lay outstretched, looking at the plain where dusk gathered in shadowless softness. In contrast with his, her state was one of inner tension, strained to the breaking point. Torturings of conscience, fears of herself, the unaccustomed bitterness of condemnation, melted her, and she was ripe for confession. A few understanding words and she would have poured her trouble out to him, less in hope of sympathy than in a craving for relief. The widening gulf would have been bridged and he would have gained the closest hold upon her he

## The Desert

had yet had. But if she were more a woman than ever before, dependent, asking for aid, he was less a man, wanting himself to rest on her and have his discomforts made bearable by her consolations.

She looked at him tentatively. His eyes were closed, the lids curiously dark, and fringed with long lashes like a girl's.

"Are you asleep?" she asked.

"No," he answered without raising them.

"Only tired."

She considered for a moment, then said:

"Have you ever told a lie?"

"A lie? I don't know. I guess so. Everybody tells lies sometime or other."

"Not little lies. Serious ones, sinful ones, to people you love."

"No. I never told that kind. That's a pretty low-down thing to do."

"Mightn't a person do it—to—to—escape from something they didn't want, something they suddenly—at that particular moment—dreaded and shrank from?"

"Why couldn't they speak out, say they didn't want to do it? Why did they have to lie?"

"Perhaps they didn't have time to think, and didn't want to hurt the person who asked it. And—and—if they were willing to do the thing later, sometime in the future, wouldn't that make up for it?"

"I can't tell. I don't know enough about it. I don't understand what you mean." He turned, try-

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ing to make himself more comfortable. "Lord, how hard this ground is! I believe it's solid iron underneath."

He stretched and curled on the blanket, elongating his body in a mighty yawn which subsided into the solaced note of a groan. "There, that's better. I ache all over to-night."

She made no answer, looking at the prospect from morose brows. More at ease he returned to the subject and asked, "Who's been telling lies?"

"I," she answered.

He gave a short laugh, that drew from her a look of quick protest. He was lying on his side, one arm crooked under his head, his eyes on her in a languid glance where incredulity shone through amusement.

"Your father told me once you were the most truthful woman he'd ever known, and I agree with him."

"It was to my father I lied," she answered.

She began to tremble, for part at least of the story was on her lips. She clasped her shaking hands round her knees, and, not looking at him, said "David," and then stopped, stifled by the difficulties and the longing to speak.

David answered by laughing outright, a pleasant sound, not guiltless of a suggestion of sleep, a laugh of good nature that refuses to abdicate. It brushed her back into herself as if he had taken her by the shoulders, pushed her into her prison, and slammed the door.

## The Desert

"That's all imagination," he said. "When some one we love dies we're always thinking things like that—that we neglected them, or slighted them, or told them what wasn't true. They stand out in our memories bigger than all the good things we did. Don't you worry about any lies you ever told your father. You've got nothing to accuse yourself of where he's concerned—or anybody else, either."

Her heart, that had throbbed wildly as she thought to begin her confession, sunk back to a forlorn beat. He noticed her dejected air, and said comfortingly:

"Don't be downhearted, Missy. It's been terribly hard for you, but you'll feel better when we get to California, and can live like Christians again."

"California!" Her intonation told of the changed mind with which she now looked forward to the Promised Land.

His consolatory intentions died before his own sense of grievance at the toil yet before them.

"Good Lord, it does seem far—farther than it did in the beginning. I used to be thinking of it all the time then, and how I'd get to work the first moment we arrived. And now I don't care what it's like or think of what I'm going to do. All I want to get there for is to stop this eternal traveling and rest."

She, too, craved rest, but of the spirit. Her outlook was blacker than his, for it offered none and drew together to a point where her tribulations focused in a final act of self-immolation. There

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was a pause, and he said, drowsiness now plain in his voice:

"But we'll be there some day unless we die on the road, and then we can take it easy. The first thing I'm going to do is to get a mattress to sleep on. No more blankets on the ground for me. Do you ever think what it'll be like to sleep in a room again under a roof, a good, waterproof roof, that the sun and the rain can't come through? The way I feel now that's my idea of Paradise."

She murmured a low response, her thoughts far from the flesh pots of his wearied longing.

"I think just at this moment," he went on dreamily, "I'd rather have a good sleep and a good meal than anything else in the world. I often dream of 'em, and then Daddy John's kicking me and it's morning and I got to crawl out of the blanket and light the fire. I don't know whether I feel worse at that time or in the evening when we're making the last lap for the camping ground." His voice dropped as if exhausted before the memory of these unendurable moments, then came again with a note of cheer: "Thank God, Courant's with us or I don't believe we'd ever get there."

She had no reply to make to this. Neither spoke for a space, and then she cautiously stole a glance at him and was relieved to see that he was asleep. Careful to be noiseless she rose, took up a tin water pail and walked to the river.

The Humboldt rushed through a deep-cut bed, nosing its way between strewings of rock. Up the

## The Desert

banks alders and willows grew thick, thrusting roots, hungry for the lean deposits of soil, into cracks and over stony ledges. By the edge the current crisped about a flat rock, and Susan, kneeling on this, dipped in her pail. The water slipped in in a silvery gush which, suddenly seething and bubbling, churned in the hollowed tin, nearly wrenching it from her. She leaned forward, dragging it awkwardly toward her, clutching at an alder stem with her free hand. Her head was bent, but she raised it with a jerk when she heard Courant's voice call, "Wait, I'll do it for you."

He was on the opposite bank, the trees he had broken through swishing together behind him. She lowered her head without answering, her face suddenly charged with color. Seized by an overmastering desire to escape him, she dragged at the pail, which, caught in the force of the current, leaped and swayed in her hand. She took a hurried upward glimpse, hopeful of his delayed progress, and saw him jump from the bank to a stone in mid-stream. His moccasined feet clung to its slippery surface, and for a moment he oscillated unsteadily, then gained his balance and, laughing, looked at her. For a breathing space each rested motionless, she with strained, outstretched arm, he on the rock, a film of water covering his feet. It was a moment of physical mastery without conscious thought. To each the personality of the other was so perturbing, that without words or touch, the heart beats of both grew harder, and their glances held in a gaze fixed

## The Emigrant Trail

and gleaming. The woman gained her self-possession first, and with it an animal instinct to fly from him, swiftly through the bushes.

But her flight was delayed. A stick, whirling in the current, caught between the pail's rim and handle and ground against her fingers. With an angry cry she loosed her hold, and the bucket went careening into midstream. That she had come back to harmony with her surroundings was attested by the wail of chagrin with which she greeted the accident. It was the last pail she had left. She watched Courant wade into the water after it, and forgot to run in her anxiety to see if he would get it. "Oh, good!" came from her in a gasp as he caught the handle. But when he came splashing back and set it on the rock beside her, it suddenly lost its importance, and as suddenly she became a prey to low-voiced, down-looking discomfort. A muttered "thank you," was all the words she had for him, and she got to her feet with looks directed to the arrangement of her skirt.

He stood knee-high in the water watching her, glad of her down-drooped lids, for he could dwell on the bloom that deepened under his eye.

"You haven't learned the force of running water yet," he said. "It can be very strong sometimes, so strong that a little woman's hand like yours has no power against it."

"It was because the stick caught in the handle," she muttered, bending for the pail. "It hurt my fingers."

## The Desert

"You've never guessed that I was called 'Running Water,' have you?"

"You?" she paused with look arrested in sudden interest. "Who calls you that?"

"Everybody—you. *L'eau courante* means running water, doesn't it? That's what you call me."

In the surprise of the revelation she forgot her unease and looked at him, repeating slowly, "*L'eau courante*, running water. Why, of course. But it's like an Indian's name."

"It is an Indian's name. The Blackfeet gave it to me because they said I could run so fast. They were after me once and a man makes the best time he can then. It was a fine race and I won it, and after that they called me, 'The man that goes like Running Water.' The voyageurs and coureurs des bois put it into their lingo and it stuck."

"But your real name?" she asked, the pail forgotten.

"Just a common French one, Duchesney, Napoleon Duchesney, if you want to know both ends of it. It was my father's. He was called after the emperor whom my grandfather knew years ago in France. He and Napoleon were students together in the military school at Brienne. In the Revolution they confiscated his lands, and he came out to Louisiana and never wanted to go back." He splashed to the stone and took up the bucket.

She stood absorbed in the discovery, her child's mind busy over this new conception of him as a man whose birth and station had evidently been so

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different to the present conditions of his life. When she spoke her mental attitude was naïvely displayed. "Why didn't you tell before?"

He shrugged.

"What was there to tell? The mountain men don't always use their own names."

The bucket, swayed by the movement, threw a jet of water on her foot. He moved back from her and said, "I like the Indian name best."

"It is pretty," and in a lower key, as though trying its sound, she repeated softly, "*L'eau Courante*, Running Water."

"It's something clear and strong, sometimes shallow and then again deeper than you can guess. And when there's anything in the way, it gathers all its strength and sweeps over it. It's a mighty force. You have to be stronger than it is—and more cunning too—to stop it in the way it wants to go."

Above their heads the sky glowed in red bars, but down in the stream's hollow the dusk had come, cool and gray. She was suddenly aware of it, noticed the diminished light, and the thickening purplish tones that had robbed the trees and rocks of color. Her warm vitality was invaded by chill that crept inward and touched her spirit with an eerie dread. She turned quickly and ran through the bushes calling back to him, "I must hurry and get supper. They'll be waiting. Bring the pail."

Courant followed slowly, watching her as she climbed the bank.

## CHAPTER II

FOR some days their route followed the river, then they would leave it and strike due west, making marches from spring to spring. The country was as arid as the face of a dead planet, save where the water's course was marked by a line of green. Here and there the sage was broken by bare spaces where the alkali cropped out in a white encrusting. Low mountains edged up about the horizon, thrusting out pointed scarps like capes protruding into slumbrous, gray-green seas. These capes were objects upon which they could fix their eyes, goals to reach and pass. In the blank monotony they offered an interest, something to strive for, something that marked an advance. The mountains never seemed to retreat or come nearer. They encircled the plain in a crumpled wall, the same day after day, a low girdle of volcanic shapes, cleft with moving shadows.

The sun was the sun of August. It reeled across a sky paled by its ardor, at midday seeming to pause and hang vindictive over the little caravan. Under its fury all color left the blanched earth, all shadows shrunk away to nothing. The train alone, as if in desperate defiance, showed a black blot beneath the wagon, an inky snake sliding over the

## The Emigrant Trail

ground under each horse's sweating belly. The air was like a stretched tissue, strained to the limit of its elasticity, in places parting in delicate, glassy tremblings. Sometimes in the distance the mirage hung brilliant, a blue lake with waves crisping on a yellow shore. They watched it with hungry eyes, a piece of illusion framed by the bleached and bitter reality.

When evening came the great transformation began. With the first deepening of color the desert's silent heart began to beat in expectation of its hour of beauty. Its bleak detail was lost in shrouding veils and fiery reflection. The earth floor became a golden sea from which the capes reared themselves in shapes of bronze and copper. The ring of mountains in the east flushed to the pink of the topaz, then bending westward shaded from rosy lilac to mauve, and where the sunset backed them, darkened to black. As the hour progressed the stillness grew more profound, the naked levels swept out in wilder glory, inundated by pools of light, lines of fire eating a glowing way through sinks where twilight gathered. With each moment it became a more tremendous spectacle. The solemnity attendant on the passage of a miracle held it. From the sun's mouth the voice of God seemed calling the dead land to life.

Each night the travelers gazed upon it, ragged forms gilded by its radiance, awed and dumb. Its splendors crushed them, filling them with nostalgic longings. They bore on with eyes that were sick

## The Desert

for a sight of some homely, familiar thing that would tell them they were still human, still denizens of a world they knew. The life into which they fitted and had uses was as though perished from the face of the earth. The weak man sunk beneath the burden of its strangeness. Its beauty made no appeal to him. He felt lost and dazed in its iron-ringed ruthlessness, dry as a skeleton by daylight, at night transformed by witchfires of enchantment. The man and woman, in whom vitality was strong, combatted its blighting force, refused to be broken by its power. They desired with vehemence to assert themselves, to rebel, not to submit to the sense of their nothingness. They turned to one another hungry for the life that now was only within themselves. They had passed beyond the limits of the accustomed, were like detached particles gone outside the law of gravity, floating undirected through spaces where they were nothing and had nothing but their bodies, their passions, themselves.

To a surface observation they would have appeared as stolid as savages, but their nerves were taut as drawn violin strings. Strange self-assertions, violences of temper, were under the skin ready to break out at a jar in the methodical routine. Had the train been larger, its solidarity less complete, furious quarrels would have taken place. With an acknowledged leader whom they believed in and obeyed, the chances of friction were lessened. Three of them could meet the physical demands of

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the struggle. It was David's fate that, unable to do this, he should fall to a position of feeble uselessness, endurable in a woman, but difficult to put up with in a man.

One morning Susan was waked by angry voices. An oath shook sleep from her, and thrusting her head out of the wagon where she now slept, she saw the three men standing in a group, rage on Courant's face, disgust on Daddy John's, and on David's an abstraction of aghast dismay that was not unlike despair. To her question Daddy John gave a short answer. David's horses, insecurely picketed, had pulled up their stakes in the night and gone. A memory of the young man's exhaustion the evening before, told the girl the story; David had forgotten to picket them and immediately after supper had fallen asleep. He had evidently been afraid to tell and invented the explanation of dragged picket pins. She did not know whether the men believed it, but she saw by their faces they were in no mood to admit extenuating circumstances. The oath had been Courant's. When he heard her voice he shut his lips on others, but they welled up in his eyes, glowering furiously on the culprit from the jut of drawn brows.

"What am I to do?" said the unfortunate young man, sending a despairing glance over the prospect. Under his weak misery, rebellious ill humor was visible.

"Go after them and bring them back."

Susan saw the leader had difficulty in confining

## The Desert

himself to such brief phrases. Dragging a blanket round her shoulders she leaned over the seat. She felt like a woman who enters a quarrel to protect a child.

"Couldn't we let them go?" she cried. "We've still my father's horse. David can ride it and we can put his things in the wagon."

"Not another ounce in the wagon," said Lady John. "The mules are doing their best now." The wagon was his kingdom over which he ruled an absolute monarch.

Courant looked at her and spoke curtly, ignoring David. "We can't lose a horse now. We need every one of them. It's not here. It's beyond in the mountains. We've got to get over by the first of September, and we want every animal we have to do it. *He's* not able to walk."

He shot a contemptuous glance at David that in less bitter times would have made the young man's blood boil. But David was too far from his normal self to care. He was not able to walk and was glad that Courant understood it.

"I've got to go after them, I suppose," he said sullenly and turned to where the animals looked on with expectant eyes. "But it's the last time I'll do it. If they go again they'll stay gone."

There was a mutter from the other men. Susan, full of alarm, scrambled into the back of the wagon and pulled on her clothes. When she emerged David had the doctor's horse saddled and was about

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to mount. His face, heavy-eyed and unwashed, bore an expression of morose anger, but fatigue spoke pathetically in his slow, lifeless movements, the droop of his thin, high shoulders.

"David," she called, jumping out over the wheel, "wait."

He did not look at her or answer, but climbed into the saddle and gathered his rein. She ran toward him crying, "Wait and have some breakfast. I'll get it for you."

He continued to pay no attention to her, glancing down at his foot as it felt for the stirrup. She stopped short, repulsed by his manner, watching him as he sent a forward look over the tracks of the lost horses. They wound into the distance fading amid the sweep of motionless sage. It would be a long search and the day was already hot. Pity rose above all other feelings, and she said:

"Have they told you what they're going to do? Whether we'll wait here or go on and have you catch us up?"

"I don't know what they're going to do and don't care," he answered, and touching the horse with his spur rode away between the brushing bushes.

She turned to Daddy John, her eyes full of alarmed question.

"He knows all about it," said the old man with slow phlegm, "I told him myself. There's food and water for him packed on behind the saddle. I

## The Desert

done that too. He'd have gone without it just to spite himself. We'll rest here this morning, and if he ain't back by noon move on slow till he catches us up. Don't you worry. He done the wrong thing and he's got to learn."

No more was said about David, and after breakfast they waited doing the odd tasks that accumulated for their few periods of rest. Susan sat sewing where the wagon cast a cooling slant of shade. Daddy John was beyond her in the sun, his sere old body, from which time had stripped the flesh, leaving only a tenuous bark of muscle, was impervious to the heat. In the growing glare he worked over a broken saddle, the whitening reaches stretching out beyond him to where the mountains waved in a clear blue line as if laid on with one wash of a saturated paint brush. Courant was near him in the shadow of his horse, cleaning a gun, sharp clicks of metal now and then breaking into the stillness.

As the hours passed the shadow of the wagon shrunk and the girl moved with it till her back was pressed against the wheel. She was making a calico jacket, and as she moved it the crisp material emitted low cracklings. Each rustle was subdued and stealthy, dying quickly away as if it were in conspiracy with the silence and did not want to disturb it. Courant's back was toward her. He had purposely set his face away, but he could hear the furtive whisperings of the stirred calico. He was full of the consciousness of her, and this sound,

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which carried a picture of her drooped head and moving hands, came with a stealing unquiet, urgently intrusive and persistent. He tried to hold his mind on his work, but his movements slackened, grew intermittent, his ear attentive for the low rustling that crept toward him at intervals like the effervescent approach of waves. Each time he heard it the waves washed deeper to his inner senses and stole something from his restraining will. For days the desert had been stealing from it too. He knew it and was guarded and fearful of it, but this morning he forgot to watch, forgot to care. His reason was drugged by the sound, the stifled, whispering sound that her hands made moving the material from which she fashioned a covering for her body.

He sat with his back turned to her, his hands loose on the gun, his eyes fixed in an unseeing stare. He did not know what he looked at or that the shadow of the horse had slipped beyond him. When he heard her move his quietness increased to a trancelike suspension of movement, the inner concentration holding every muscle in spellbound rigidity. Suddenly she tore the calico with a keen, rending noise, and it was as if her hands had seized upon and so torn the tension that held him. His fists clinched on the gun barrel, and for a moment the mountain line undulated to his gaze. Had they been alone, speech would have burst from him, but the presence of the old man kept him silent. He bowed his head over the gun, making a pretense of

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giving it a last inspection, then, surer of himself, leaped to his feet and said gruffly:

"Let's move on. There's no good waiting here."

The other two demurred. Susan rose and walked into the glare sweeping the way David had gone. Against the pale background she stood out a vital figure, made up of glowing tints that reached their brightest note in the heated rose of her cheeks and lips. Her dark head with its curly crest of hair was defined as if painted on the opaque blue of the sky. She stood motionless, only her eyes moving as they searched the distance. All of life that remained in the famished land seemed to have flowed into her and found a beautified expression in the rich vitality of her upright form, the flushed bloom of her face. Daddy John bent to pick up the saddle, and the mountain man, safe from espial, looked at her with burning eyes.

"David's not in sight," she said. "Do you think we'd better go on?"

"Whether we'd better or not we will," he answered roughly. "Catch up, Daddy John."

They were accustomed to obeying him like children their master. So without more parley they pulled up stakes, loaded the wagon, and started. As Susan fell back to her place at the rear, she called to Courant:

"We'll go as slowly as we can. We mustn't get too far ahead. David can't ride hard the way he is now."

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The man growled an answer that she did not hear, and without looking at her took the road.

They made their evening halt by the river. It had dwindled to a fragile stream which, wandering away into the dryness, would creep feebly to its sink and there disappear, sucked into secret subways that no man knew. To-morrow they would start across the desert, where they could see the road leading straight in a white seam to the west. David had not come. The mules stood stripped of their harness, the wagon rested with dropped tongue, the mess chest was open and pans shone in mingled fire and sunset gleams, but the mysteries of the distance, over which twilight veils were thickening, gave no sign of him. Daddy John built up the desert fire as a beacon—a pile of sage that burned like tinder. It shot high, tossed exultant flames toward the dimmed stars and sent long jets of light into the encircling darkness. Its wavering radiance, red and dancing, touched the scattered objects of the camp, revealing and then losing them as new flame ran along the leaves or charred branches dropped. Outside the night hung, deep and silent. Susan hovered on the outskirts of the glow. Darkness was thickening, creeping from the hills that lay inky-edged against the scarlet of the sky. Once she sent up a high cry of David's name. Courant, busy with his horses, lifted his head and looked at her, scowling over his shoulder.

"Why are you calling?" he said. "He can see the fire."

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She came back and stood near him, her eyes on him in uneasy scrutiny: "We shouldn't have gone on. We should have waited for him."

There was questioning and also a suggestion of condemnation in her voice. She was anxious and her tone and manner showed she thought it his fault.

He bent to loosen a girth.

"Are you afraid he's lost?" he said, his face against the horse.

"No. But if he was?"

"Well! And if he was?"

The girth was uncinched and he swept saddle and blanket to the ground.

"We'd have to go back for him, and you say we must lose no time."

He kicked the things aside and made no answer. Then as he groped for the picket pins he was conscious that she turned again with the nervous movement of worry and swept the plain.

"He was sick. We oughtn't to have gone on," she repeated, and the note of blame was stronger. "Oh, I wish he'd come!"

Their conversation had been carried on in a low key. Suddenly Courant, wheeling round on her, spoke in the raised tone of anger.

"And am I to stop the train because that fool don't know enough or care enough to picket his horses? Is it always to be him? Excuses made and things done for him as if he was a sick girl

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or a baby. Let him be lost, and stay lost, and be damned to him."

Daddy John looked up from the sheaf of newly gathered sage with the alertness of a scared monkey. Susan stepped back, feeling suddenly breathless. Courant made a movement as if to follow her, then stopped, his face rived with lines and red with rage. He was shaken by what to her was entirely inexplicable anger, and in her amazement she stared vacantly at him.

"What's that, what's that?" chirped Daddy John, scrambling to his feet and coming toward them with chin thrust belligerently forward and blinking eyes full of fight.

Neither spoke to him and he added sharply:

"Didn't I hear swearing? Who's swearing *now*?" as if he had his doubts that it might be Susan.

Courant with a stifled phrase turned from them, picked up his hammer and began driving in the stakes.

"What was it?" whispered the old man. "What's the matter with him? Is he mad at David?"

She shook her head, putting a finger on her lip in sign of silence, and moving away to the other side of the fire. She felt the strain in the men and knew it was her place to try and keep the peace. But a sense of forlorn helplessness amid these warring spirits lay heavily on her and she beckoned to the old servant, wanting him near her as one who,

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no matter how dire the circumstances, would never fail her.

"Yes, he's angry," she said when they were out of earshot. "I suppose it's about David. But what can we do? We can't make David over into another man, and we can't leave him behind just because he's not as strong as the rest of us. I feel as if we were getting to be savages."

The old man gave a grunt that had a note of cynical acquiescence, then held up his hand in a signal for quiet. The thud of a horse's hoofs came from the outside night. With a quick word to get the supper ready, she ran forward and stood in the farthest rim of the light waiting for her betrothed.

David was a pitiable spectacle. The dust lay thick on his face, save round his eyes, whence he had rubbed it, leaving the sockets looking unnaturally sunken and black. His collar was open and his neck rose bare and roped with sinews. There was but one horse at the end of the trail rope. As he slid out of the saddle, he dropped the rope on the ground, saying that the other animal was sick, he had left it dying he thought. He had found them miles off, miles and miles—with a weak wave of his hand toward the south—near an alkaline spring where he supposed they had been drinking. The other couldn't move, this one he had dragged along with him. The men turned their attention to the horse, which, with swollen body and drooping head, looked as if it might soon follow its mate.

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They touched it, and spoke together, brows knit over the trouble, not paying any attention to David, who, back in the flesh, was sufficiently accounted for.

Susan was horrified by his appearance. She had never seen him look so much a haggard stranger to himself. He was prostrate with fatigue, and throughout the day he had nursed a sense of bitter injury. Now back among them, seeing the outspread signs of their rest, and with the good smell of their food in his nostrils, this rose to the pitch of hysterical rage, ready to vent itself at the first excuse. The sight of the girl, fresh-skinned from a wash in the river, instead of soothing, further inflamed him. Her glowing well-being seemed bought at his expense. Her words of concern spoke to his sick ear with a note of smug, unfeeling complacence.

"David, you're half dead. Everything'll be ready in a minute. Sit down and rest. Here, take my blanket."

She spread her blanket for him, but he stood still, not answering, staring at her with dull, accusing eyes. Then, with a dazed movement, he pushed his hand over the crown of his head throwing off his hat. The hand was unsteady, and it fell, the hooked forefinger catching in the opening of his shirt, dragging it down and showing his bony breast. If he had been nothing to her she would have pitied him. Sense of wrongs done him made the pity passionate. She went to him, the consoling

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woman in her eyes, and laid her hand on the one that rested on his chest.

"David, sit down and rest. Don't move again. I'll get you everything. I never saw you look as you do to-night."

With an angry movement he threw her hand off.

"You don't care," he said. "What does it matter to you when you've been comfortable all day? So long as you and the others are all right I don't matter."

It was so unlike him, his face was so changed and charged with a childish wretchedness, that she felt no check upon her sympathy. She knew it was not David that spoke, but a usurping spirit born of evil days. The other men pricked their ears and listened, but she was indifferent to their watch, and tried again to take his hand, saying, pleadingly:

"Sit down. When I get your supper you'll be better. I'll have it ready in a few minutes."

This time he threw her hand off with violence. His face, under its dust mask, flamed with the anger that had been accumulating through the day.

"Let me alone," he cried, his voice strangled like a wrathful child's. "I don't want anything to do with you. Eat your supper. When I'm ready I'll get mine without any help from you. Let me be."

He turned from her, and moving over the blanket, stumbled on its folds. The jar was the breaking touch to his overwrought nerves. He staggered, caught his breath with a hiccupping gasp,

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and dropping his face into his hands burst into hysterical tears. Then in a sudden abandonment of misery he threw himself on the blanket, buried his head in his folded arms and rending sobs broke from him. For a moment they were absolutely still, staring at him in stupefied surprise. Daddy John, his neck craned round the blaze, surveyed him with bright, sharp eyes of unemotional query, then flopped the bacon pan on the embers, and said: "He's all done."

Courant advanced a step, looked down on him and threw a sidelong glance at Susan, bold with meaning. After her first moment of amazement, she moved to David's side, drew the edge of the blanket over him, touched his head with a light caress, and turned back to the fire. The plates and cups were lying there and she quietly set them out, her eye now and then straying for a needed object, her hand hanging in suspended search then dropping upon it, and noiselessly putting it in its place. Unconsciously they maintained an awed silence, as if they were sitting by the dead. Daddy John turned the bacon with stealthy care, the scrape of his knife on the pan sounding a rude and unseemly intrusion. Upon this scrupulously maintained quietude the man's weeping broke insistent, the stifled regular beat of sobs hammering on it as if determined to drive their complacency away and reduce them to the low ebb of misery in which he lay.

They had almost finished their meal when the

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sounds lessened, dwindling to spasmodic, staggering gasps with lengthening pauses that broke suddenly in a quivering intake of breath and a vibration of the recumbent frame. The hysterical paroxysm was over. He lay limp and turned his head on his arms, too exhausted to feel shame for the shine of tears on his cheek. Susan took a plate of food and a coffee cup and stole toward him, the two men watching her under their eyelids. She knelt beside him and spoke very gently, "Will you take this, David? You'll feel stronger after you've eaten."

"Put it down," he said hoarsely, without moving.

"Shall I give you the coffee?" She hung over him looking into his face. "I can hold the cup and you can drink it."

"By and by," he muttered.

She bent lower and laid her hand on his hair.

"David, I'm so sorry," she breathed.

Courant leaped to his feet and walked to where his horses stood. He struck one of them a blow on the flank that after the silence and the low tones of the girl's crooning voice sounded as violent as a pistol shot. They all started, even David lifted his head.

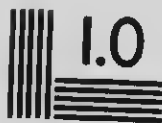
"What's the matter now?" said Daddy John, alert for any outbreak of man or beast.

But Courant made no answer, and moved away into the plain. It was some time before he came back, emerging from the darkness as noiselessly as



# MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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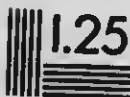
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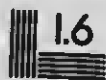
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he had gone. David had eaten his supper and was asleep, the girl sitting beyond him withdrawn from the fire glow. Daddy John was examining the sick horse, and Courant joined him, walking round the beast and listening to the old man's opinions as to its condition. They were not encouraging. It seemed likely that David's carelessness would cost the train two valuable animals.

To the outward eye peace had again settled on the camp. The low conferrings of the two men, the dying snaps of the charred twigs, were the only sounds. The night brooded serene about the bivouac, the large stars showing clear now that the central glare had sunk to a red heap of ruin. Far away, on the hills, the sparks of Indian fires gleamed. They had followed the train for days, watching it like the eyes of hungry animals, too timid to come nearer. But there was no cause for alarm, for the desert Indians were a feeble race, averse to bloodshed, thieves at their worst, descending upon the deserted camping grounds to carry away what the emigrants left.

Nevertheless, when the sound of hoof beats came from the trail both men made a quick snatch for their rifles, and Susan jumped to her feet with a cry of "Some one's coming." They could see nothing, the darkness hanging like a curtain across their vision. Courant, with his rifle in the hollow of his arm, moved toward the sounds, his hail reaching clear and deep into the night. An answer came in a man's voice, the hoof beats grew louder,

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and the reaching light defined approaching shapes. Daddy John threw a bunch of sage on the fire, and in the rush of flame that flew along its branches, two mounted men were visible.

They dropped to the ground and came forward. "From California to the States," the foremost said to Susan, seeing a woman with fears to be allayed. He was tall and angular with a frank, copper-tanned face, overtopped by a wide spread of hat, and bearded to the eyes. He wore a loose hickory shirt and buckskin breeches tucked into long boots, already broken from the soles. The other was a small and comical figure with an upstanding crest of sunburned blond hair, tight curled and thick as a sheep's fleece. When he saw Susan he delayed his advance to put on a ragged army overcoat that hung to his heels, and evidently hid discrepancies in his costume not meet for a lady's eye. Both men were powdered with dust, and announced themselves as hungry enough to eat their horses.

Out came pans and supplies, and the snapping of bacon fat and smell of coffee rose pungent. Though, by their own account, they had ridden hard and far, there was a feverish energy of life in each of them that roused the drooping spirits of the others like an electrifying current. They ate ravenously, pausing between mouthfuls to put quick questions on the condition of the eastward trail, its grazing grounds, what supplies could be had at the Forts. It was evident they were new to journeying on the great bare highways of the wilderness,

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but that fact seemed to have no blighting effect on their zeal. What and who they were came out in the talk that gushed in the intervals of feeding. The fair-haired man was a sailor, shipped from Boston round the Horn for California eight months before. The fact that he was a deserter dropped out with others. He was safe here—with a side-long laugh at Susan—no more of the sea for him.

He was going back for money, money and men. It was too late to get through to the States now? Well he'd wait and winter at Fort Laramie if he had to, but he guessed he'd make a pretty vigorous effort to get to St. Louis. His companion was from Philadelphia, and was going back for his wife and children, also money. He'd bring them out next spring, collect a big train, stock it well, and carry them across with him.

"And start early, not waste any time dawdling round and talking. Start with the first of 'em and get to California before the rush begins."

"Rush?" said Courant. "Are you looking for a rush next year?"

The man leaned forward with upraised, arresting hand, "The biggest rush in the history of this country. Friends, there's gold in California."

Gold! The word came in different keys, their flaccid bodies stiffened into upright eagerness—Gold in the Promised Land!

Then came the great story, the discovery of California's treasure told by wanderers to wanderers under the desert stars. Six months before gold

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had been found in the race of Sutter's mill in the foothills. The streams that sucked their life from the snow crests of the Sierras were yellow with it. It lay, a dusty sediment, in the prospector's pan. It spread through the rock cracks in sparkling seams.

The strangers capped story with story, chanted the tales of fantastic exaggeration that had already gone forth, and up and down California were calling men from ranch and seaboard. They were coming down from Oregon along the wild spine of the coast ranges and up from the Mission towns strung on highways beaten out by Spanish soldier and padre. The news was now en route to the outer world carried by ships. It would fly from port to port, run like fire up the eastern coast and leap to the inland cities and the frontier villages. And next spring, when the roads were open, would come the men, the regiments of men, on foot, mounted, in long caravans, hastening to California for the gold that was there for anyone who had the strength and hardihood to go.

The bearded man got up, went to his horse and brought back his pack. He opened it, pulled off the outer blanketing, and from a piece of dirty calico drew a black sock, bulging and heavy. From this in turn he shook a small buckskin sack. He smoothed the calico, untied a shoestring from the sack's mouth, and let a stream of dun-colored dust run out. It shone in the firelight in a slow sifting rivulet, here and there a bright flake like a spangle

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sending out a yellow spark. Several times a solid particle obstructed the lazy flow, which broke upon it like water on a rock, dividing and sinking in two heavy streams. It poured with unctious deliberation till the sack was empty, and the man held it up to show the powdered dust of dust clinging to the inside.

"That's three weeks' washing on the river across the valley beyond Sacramento," he said, "and it's worth four thousand dollars in the United States mint."

The pile shone yellow in the fire's even glow, and they stared at it, wonderstruck, each face showing a sudden kindling of greed, the longing to possess, to know the power and peace of wealth. It came with added sharpness in the midst of their bare distress. Even the girl felt it, leaning forward to gloat with brightened eyes on the little pyramid. David forgot his injuries and craned his neck to listen, dreams once more astir. California became suddenly a radiant vision. No longer a faint line of color, vaguely lovely, but a place where fortune waited them, gold to fill their coffers, to bring them ease, to give their aspirations definite shape, to repay them for their bitter pilgrimage. They were seized with the lust of it, and their attentive faces sharpened with the strain of the growing desire. They felt the onward urge to be up and moving, to get there and lay their hands on the waiting treasure.

The night grew old and still they talked, their

## The Desert

fatigue forgotten. They heard the tale of Marshall's discovery and how it flew right and left through the spacious, idle land. There were few to answer the call, ranches scattered wide over the unpeopled valleys, small traders in the little towns along the coast. In the settlement of Yerba Buena, fringing the edge of San Francisco Bay, men were leaving their goods at their shop doors and going inland. Ships were lying idle in the tide water, every sailor gone to find the golden river. The fair-haired man laughed and told how he'd swam naked in the darkness, his money in his mouth, and crawled up the long, shoal shore, waist high in mud.

The small hours had come when one by one they dropped to sleep as they lay. A twist of the blanket, a squirming into deeper comfort, and rest was on them. They sprawled in the caked dust like dead men fallen in battle and left as they had dropped. Even the girl forgot the habits of a life-long observance and sunk to sleep among them, her head on a saddle, the old servant curled at her feet.

### CHAPTER III

IN the even dawn light the strangers left. It was hail and farewell in desert meetings. They trotted off into the ghostlike stillness of the plain which for a space threw back their hoof beats, and then closed round them. The departure of the westward band was not so prompt. With unbound packs and unharnessed animals, they stood, a dismayed group, gathered round a center of disturbance. David was ill. The exertions of the day before had drained his last reserve of strength. He could hardly stand, complained of pain, and a fever painted his drawn face with a dry flush. Under their concerned looks, he climbed on his horse, swayed there weakly, then slid off and dropped on the ground.

"I'm too sick to go on," he said in the final collapse of misery. "You can leave me here to die."

He lay flat, looking up at the sky, his long hair raying like a mourning halo from the outline of his skull, his arms outspread as if his soul had submitted to its crucifixion and his body was in agreement. That he was ill was beyond question. The men had their suspicions that he, like the horses, had drunk of the alkaline spring.

Susan was for remaining where they were till he recovered, the others wanted to go on. He gave

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no ear to their debate, interrupting it once to announce his intention of dying where he lay. This called forth a look of compassion from the girl, a movement of exasperation from the mountain man. Daddy John merely spat and lifted his hat to the faint dawn air. It was finally agreed that David should be placed in the wagon, his belongings packed on his horse, while the sick animal must follow as best it could.

During the morning's march no one spoke. They might have been a picture moving across a picture for all the animation they showed. The exaltation of the evening before had died down to a spark, alight and warming still, but pitifully shrunk from last night's high-flaming buoyancy. It was hard to keep up hopes in these distressful hours. California had again receded. The desert and the mountains were yet to pass. The immediate moment hemmed them in so closely that it was an effort to look through it and feel the thrill of joys that lay so far beyond. It was better to focus their attention on the lone promontories that cut the distance and gradually grew from flat surfaces applied on the plain to solid shapes, 'hick-based and shadow cloven.

They made their noon camp at a spring, bubbling from a rim of white-rooted grass. David refused to take anything but water, groaning as he sat up in the wagon and stretching a hot hand for the cup that Susan brought. The men paid no attention to him. They showed more concern for the sick horse,

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which when not incapacitated did its part with good will, giving the full measure of its strength. That they refrained from open anger and upbraiding was the only concession they made to the conventions they had learned in easier times. Whether David cared or not he said nothing, lying fever-flushed, his wandering glance held to attention when Susan's face appeared at the canvas opening. He hung upon her presence, querulously exacting in his unfamiliar pain.

Making ready for the start their eyes swept a prospect that showed no spot of green, and they filled their casks neck high and rolled out into the dazzling shimmer of the afternoon. The desert was widening, the hills receding, shrinking away to a crenelated edge that fretted a horizon drawn as straight as a ruled line. The plain unrolled more spacious and grimmer, not a growth in sight save sage, not a trickle of water or leaf murmur, even the mirage had vanished leaving the distance bare and mottled with a leprous white. At intervals, outstretched like a pointing finger, the toothed summit of a ridge projected, its base uplifted in clear, mirrored reflection.

The second half of the day was as unbroken by speech or incident as the morning. They had nothing to say, as dry of thought as they were despoiled of energy. The shadows were beginning to lengthen when they came to a fork in the trail. One branch bore straight westward, the other slanted toward the south, and both showed signs of recent

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travel. Following them to the distance was like following the tracks of creeping things traced on a sandy shore. Neither led to anything—sage, dust, the up-standing comb of rocky reefs were all the searching eye could see till sight lost itself in the earth's curve. The girl and the two men stood in the van of the train consulting. The region was new to Courant, but they left it to him, and he decided for the southern route.

For the rest of the afternoon they followed it. The day deepened to evening and they bore across a flaming level, striped with gigantic shadows. Looking forward they saw a lake of gold that lapped the roots of rose and lilac hills. The road swept downward to a crimsoned butte, cleft apart, and holding in its knees a gleam of water. The animals, smelling it, broke for it, tearing the wagon over sand hummocks and crackling twigs. It was a feeble upwelling, exhausted by a single draught. Each beast, desperately nosing in its coolness, drained it, and there was a long wait ere the tiny depression filled again. Finally, it was dried of its last drop, and the constant ooze stopped. The animals, their thirst half slaked, drooped about it, looking with mournful inquiry at the disturbed faces of their masters.

It was a bad sign. They knew there were waterless tracts in the desert, but the emigrant must skirt. They mounted to the top of the butte and scanned their surroundings. A world shone a radiant floor out of which a brush rose

## The Emigrant Trail

a floating, feathered tuft, but of gleam or trickle of water there was none. When they came down David lay beside the spring his eyes on its basin, now a muddied hole, the rim patterned with hoof prints. When he heard them coming he rose on his elbow awaiting them with a haggard glance, then seeing their blank looks sank back groaning. To Susan's command that a cask be broached, Courant gave a sullen consent. She drew off the first cupful and gave it to the sick man, his lean hands straining for it, his fingers fumbling in a search for the handle. The leader, after watching her for a moment, turned away and swung off, muttering. David dropped back on the ground, his eyes closed, his body curved about the damp depression.

The evening burned to night, the encampment growing black against the scarlet sky. The brush fire sent a line of smoke straight up, a long milky thread, that slowly disentangled itself and mounted to a final outspreading. Each member of the group was still, the girl lying a dark oblong under her blanket, her face upturned to the stars which blossomed slowly in the huge, unclouded heaven. At the root of the butte, hidden against its shadowy base, the mountain man lay motionless, but his eyes were open and they rested on her, not closing or straying.

When no one saw him he kept this stealthy watch. In the daytime, with the others about, he still was careful to preserve his brusque indifference, to avoid her, to hide his passion with a jealous

## The Desert

subtlety. But beneath the imposed bonds it grew with each day, stronger and more savage as the way waxed fiercer. It was not an obsession of occasional moments, it was always with him. As pilot her image moved across the waste before him. When he fell back for words with Daddy John, he was listening through the old man's speech, for the fall of her horse's hoofs. Her voice made his heart stop, the rustle of her garments dried his throat. When his lowered eyes saw her hand on the plate's edge, he grew rigid, unable to eat. If she brushed by him in the bustle of camp pitching, his hands lost their strength and he was sick with the sense of her. Love, courtship, marriage, were words that no longer had any meaning for him. All the tenderness and humanity he had felt for her in the days of her father's sickness were gone. They were burned away, as the water and the grass were. When he saw her solicitude for David, his contempt for the weak man hardened into hatred. He told himself that he hated them both, and he told himself he would crush and kill them both before David should get her. The desire to keep her from David was stronger than the desire to have her for himself. He did not think or care what he felt. She was the prey to be won by cunning or daring, whose taste or wishes had no place in the struggle. He no longer looked ahead, thought, or reasoned. The elemental in him was developing to fit a scene in which only the elemental survived.

## The Emigrant Trail

They broke camp at four the next morning. For the last few days the heat had been unbearable, and they decided to start while the air was still cool and prolong the noon halt. The landscape grew barer. There were open areas where the soil was soft and sifted from the wheels like sand, and dried stretches where the alkali lay in a caked, white crust. In one place the earth humped into long, wavelike swells each crest topped with a fringe of brush, fine and feathery as petrified spray. At mid-day there was no water in sight. Courant, standing on his saddle, saw no promise of it, nothing but the level distance streaked with white mountain rims, and far to the south a patch of yellow—bare sand, he said, as he pointed a horny finger to where it lay.

They camped in the glare and opened the casks. After the meal they tried to rest, but the sun was merciless. The girl crawled under the wagon and lay there on the dust, sleeping with one arm thrown across her face. The two men sat near by, their hats drawn low over their brows. There was not a sound. The silence seemed transmuted to a slowly thickening essence solidifying round them. It pressed upon them till speech was as impossible as it would be under water. A broken group in the landscape's immensity, they were like a new expression of its somber vitality, motionless yet full of life, in consonance with its bare and brutal verity.

Courant left them to reconnoiter, and at mid

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afternoon came back to announce that farther on the trail bent to an outcropping of red rock where he thought there might be water. It was the hottest hour of the day. The animals strained at their harness with lolling tongues and white-rimmed eyeballs, their sweat making tracks on the dust. To lighten the wagon Daddy John walked beside it, plodding on in his broken moccasins, now and then chirruping to Julia. The girl rode behind him, her blouse open at the neck, her hair clinging in a black veining to her bedewed temples. Several times he turned back to look at her as the only other female of the party to be encouraged. When she caught his eye she nodded as though acknowledging the salutation of a passerby, her dumbness an instinctive hoarding of physical force.

The red rock came in sight, a nicked edge across the distance. As they approached, it drew up from the plain in a series of crumpled points like the comb of a rooster. The detail of the intervening space was lost in the first crepuscular softness, and they saw nothing but a stretch of darkening purple from which rose the scalloped crest painted in strange colors. Courant trotted forward crying a word of hope, and they pricked after him to where the low bulwark loomed above the plain's swimming mystery.

When they reached it he was standing at the edge of a caverned indentation. Dead grasses dropped against the walls, withered weeds thickened toward the apex in a tangled carpet. There had once been

## The Emigrant Trail

water there, but it was gone, dried, or sunk to some hidden channel in the rock's heart. They stood staring at the scorched herbage and the basin where the earth was cracked apart in its last gasping throes of thirst.

David's voice broke the silence. He had climbed to the front seat, and his face, gilded with the sunlight, looked like the face of a dead man painted yellow.

"Is there water?" he said, then saw the dead grass and dried basin, and met the blank looks of his companions.

Susan's laconic "The spring's dry," was not necessary. He fell forward on the seat with a moan, his head propped in his hands, his fingers buried in his hair. Courant sent a look of furious contempt over his abject figure, then gave a laugh that fell on the silence bitter as a curse. Daddy John without a word moved off and began unhitching the mules. Even in Susan pity was, for the moment, choked by a swell of disgust. Had she not had the other men to measure him by, had she not within her own sturdy frame felt the spirit still strong for conflict, she might still have known only the woman's sympathy for the feeble creature. But they were a trio steeled and braced for invincible effort, and this weakling, without the body and the spirit for the enterprise, was an alien among them.

She went to the back of the wagon and opened the mess chest. As she picked out the supper

## The Desert

things she began to repent. The lean, bent figure and sunken head kept recurring to her. She saw him not as David but as a suffering outsider, and for a second, motionless, with a blackened skillet in her hand, had a faint, clairvoyant understanding of his soul's desolation amid the close-knit unity of their endeavor. She dropped the tin and went back to the front of the wagon. He was climbing out, hanging tremulous to the roof support, a haggard spectacle, with wearied eyes and skin drawn into fine puckerings across the temples. Pity came back in a remorseful wave, and she ran to him and lifted his arm to her shoulder. It clasped her hard and they walked to where at the rock's base the sage grew high. Here she laid a blanket for him and spread another on the top of the bushes, fastening it to the tallest ones till it stretched, a sheltering canopy, over him. She tried to cheer him with assurances that water would be found at the next halting place. He was listless at first, seeming not to listen, then the life in her voice roused his sluggish faculties, his cheeks took color, and his dull glance lit on point after point in its passage to her face, like the needle flickering toward the pole.

"If I could get water enough to drink, I'd be all right," he said. "The pains are gone."

"They *must* find it soon," she answered, lifting the weight of his fallen courage, heavy as his body might have been to her arms. "This is a traveled road. There *must* be a spring somewhere along it."

## The Emigrant Trail

And she continued prying up the despairing spirit till the man began to respond, showing returning hope in the eagerness with which he hung on her words. When he lay sinking into drowsy quiet, she stole away from him to where the camp was spread about the unlit pyre of Daddy John's sage brush. It was too early for supper, and the old man, with the accouterments of the hunt slung upon his person and his rifle in his hand, was about to go afield after jack rabbit.

"It's a bad business this," he said in answer to the worry she dared not express. "The animals can't hold out much longer."

"What are we to do? There's only a little water left in one of the casks."

"Low's goin' to strike across for the other trail. He's goin' after supper, and he says he'll ride all night till he gets it. He thinks if he goes due that way," pointing northward, "he can strike it sooner than by goin' back."

They looked in the direction he pointed. Each bush was sending a phenomenally long shadow from its intersection with the ground. There was no butte or hummock to break the expanse between them and the faint, far silhouette of mountains. Her heart sank, a sinking that fatigue and dread of thirst had never given her.

"He may lose us," she said.

The old man jerked his head toward the rock.

"He'll steer by that, and I'll keep the fire going till morning."

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"But how can he ride all night? He must be half dead now."

"A man like him don't die easy. It's not the muscle and the bones, it's the grit. He says it's him that made the mistake and it's him that's goin' to get us back on the right road."

"What will he do for water?"

"Take an empty cask behind the saddle and trust to God."

"But there's water in one of our casks yet."

"Yes, he knows it, but he's goin' to leave that for us. And we got to hang on to it, Missy. Do you understand that?"

She nodded, frowning and biting her underlip.

"Are you feelin' bad?" said the old man uneasily.

"Not a bit," she answered. "Don't worry about me."

He laid a hand on her shoulder and looked into her face with eyes that said more than his tongue could.

"You're as good a man as any of us. When we get to California we'll have fun laughing over this."

He gave the shoulder a shake, then drew back and picked up his rifle.

"I'll get you a rabbit for supper if I can," he said with his cackling laugh. "That's about the best I can do."

He left her trailing off into the reddened reaches of the sage, and she went back to the rock, thinking

## The Emigrant Trail

that in some overlooked hollow, water might linger. She passed the mouth of the dead spring, then skirted the spot where David lay, a motionless shape under the canopy of the blanket. A few paces beyond him a buttress extended and, rounding it, she found a triangular opening inclosed on three sides by walls, their summits orange with the last sunlight. There had once been water here for the grasses, and thin-leaved plants grew rank about the rock's base, then outlined in sere decay what had evidently been the path of a streamlet. She knelt among them, thrusting her hands between their rustling stalks, jerking them up and casting them away, the friable soil spattering from their roots.

The heat was torrid, the noon ardors still imprisoned between the slanting walls. Presently she sat back on her heels, and with an earthy hand pushed the moist hair from her forehead. The movement brought her head up, and her wandering eyes, roving in morose inspection, turned to the cleft's opening. Courant was standing there, watching her. His hands hung loose at his sides, his head was drooped forward, his chin lowered toward his throat. The position lent to his gaze a suggestion of animal ruminance and concentration.

"Why don't you get David to do that?" he said slowly.

The air in the little cleft seemed to her suddenly heavy and hard to breathe. She caught it into her lungs with a quick inhalation. Dropping her eyes

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to the weeds she said sharply, "David's sick. He can't do anything. You know that."

"He that ought to be out in the desert there looking for water's lying asleep under a blanket. That's your man."

He did not move or divert his gaze. There was something singularly sinister in the fixed and gleaming look and the rigidity of his watching face. She plucked at a weed, saw her hand's trembling and to hide it struck her palms together shaking off the dust. The sound filled the silent place. To her ears it was hardly louder than the terrified beating of her heart.

"That's the man you've chosen," he went on. "A feller that gives out when the road's hard, who hasn't enough backbone to stand a few days' heat and thirst. A poor, useless rag."

He spoke in a low voice, very slowly, each word dropping distinct and separate. His lowering expression, his steady gaze, his deliberate speech, spoke of mental forces in abeyance. It was another man, not the Courant she knew.

She tried to quell her tremors by simulating indignation. If her breathing shook her breast into an agitation he could see, the look she kept on him was bold and defiant.

"Don't speak of him that way," she cried scrambling to her feet. "Keep what you think to yourself."

"And what do you think?" he said and moved forward toward her.

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She made no answer, and it was very silent in the cleft. As he came nearer the grasses crackling under his soft tread were the only sound. She saw that his face was pale under the tan, the nostrils slightly dilated. Stepping with a careful lightness, his movements suggested a carefully maintained adjustment, a being quivering in a breathless balance. She backed away till she stood pressed against the rock. She felt her thoughts scattering and made an effort to hold them as though grasping at tangible, escaping things.

He stopped close to her, and neither spoke for a moment, eye hard on eye, then hers shifted and dropped.

"You think about him as I do," said the man.

"No," she answered, "no," but her voice showed uncertainty.

"Why don't you tell the truth? Why do you lie?"

"No," this time the word was hardly audible, and she tried to impress it by shaking her head.

He made a step toward her and seized one of her hands. She tried to tear it away and flattened herself against the rock, panting, her face gone white as the alkaline patches of the desert.

"You don't love him. You never did."

She shook her head again, gasping. "Let me out of here. Let go of me."

"You liar," he whispered. "You love me."

She could not answer, her knees shaking, the place blurring on her sight. Through a sick dizzi-

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ness she saw nothing but his altered face. He reached for the other hand, spread flat against the stone, and as she felt his grasp upon it, her words came in broken pleading:

"Yes, yes, it's true. I do. But I've promised. Let me go."

"Then come to me," he said huskily and tried to wrench her forward into his arms.

She held herself rigid, braced against the wall, and tearing one hand free, raised it, palm out, between his face and hers.

"No, no! My father—I promised him. I can't tell David now. I will later. Don't hold me. Let me go."

The voice of Daddy John came clear from outside. "Missy! Hullo, Missy! Where are you?"

She sent up the old man's name in a quavering cry and the mountain man dropped her arm and stepped back.

She ran past him, and at the mouth of the opening, stopped and leaned on a ledge, getting her breath and trying to control her trembling. Daddy John was coming through the sage, a jack rabbit held up in one hand.

"Here's your supper," he cried jubilant. "Ain't I told you I'd get it?"

She moved forward to meet him, walking slowly. When he saw her face, concern supplanted his triumph.

"We got to get you out of this," he said. "You're as peaked as one of them frontier women

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in sunbonnets," and he tried to hook a compassionate hand in her arm. But she edged away from him, fearful that he would feel her trembling, and answered:

"It's the heat. It seems to draw the strength all out of me."

"The rabbit'll put some of it back. I'll go and get things started. You sit by David and rest up," and he skurried away to the camp.

She went to David, lying now with opened eyes and hands clasped beneath his head. When her shadow fell across him he turned a brightened face on her.

"I'm better," he said. "If I could get some water I think I'd soon be all right."

She stood looking down on him with a clouded, almost sullen, expression.

"Did you sleep long?" she asked for something to say.

"I don't know how long. A little while ago I woke up and looked for you, but you weren't anywhere round, so I just lay here and looked out across to the mountains and began to think of California. I haven't thought about it for a long while."

She sat down by him and listened as he told her his thoughts. With a renewal of strength the old dreams had come back—the cabin by the river, the garden seeds to be planted, and now added to them was the gold they were to find. She hearkened with unresponsive apathy. The repugnance to this mutually shared future which had once made her re-

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coil from it was a trivial thing to the abhorrence of it that was now hers. Dislikes had become loathings, a girl's whims, a woman's passions. As David babbled on she kept her eyes averted for she knew that in them her fire withdrew shone coldly. Her thoughts kept coming to the scene in the cleft, and when she turned from it and forced them back on him, her conscience awoke and gnawed. She could no more turn this man, returning to life and love of her, than she could kill him as he lay there defenseless and trusting.

At supper they measured out the water, half a cup for each. There still remained a few inches in the cask. This was to be hoarded against the next day. If Courant on his night journey could not strike the upper trail and spring the trail could have to retrace their steps, and by this time, with the animals exhausted and their own strength diminished, the first water was a twelve day march off. Susan and Courant were silent, averting each other's eyes, torpid to the outward observation. But the old man was unusually garrulous, evidently attempting to raise their lowered spirits. He had much to say about California and the gold there, speculated on their chances of fortune, and then carried his speculations on to the joys of wealth and a future in which Susan was to say with the Biblical millionaire, "Now soul take thine ease." She rewarded him with a quick smile, then tipped her cup till the bottom faced the sky, and let the last drop run into her mouth.

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The night was falling when Courant rode out. She passed him as he was mounting, the canteen strapped to the back of his saddle. "Good-by, and good luck," she said in a low voice as she brushed by. His "good-by" came back to her instilled with a new meaning. The reserve between them was gone. Separated as the poles, they had suddenly entered within the circle of an intimacy that had snapped round them and shut them in. Her surroundings fell into far perspective, losing their menace. She did not care where she was or how she fared. An indifference to all that had seemed unbearable, uplifted her. It was like an emergence from cramped confines to wide, inspiring spaces. He and she were there—the rest was nothing.

Sitting beside David she could see the rider's figure grow small, as it receded across the plain. The night had come and the great level brooded solemn under the light of the first, serene stars. In the middle of the camp Daddy John's fire flared, the central point of illumination in a ring of fluctuant yellow. Touched and lost by its waverings the old man's figure came and went, absorbed in outer darkness, then revealed his arms extended round sheaves of brush. David turned and lay on his side looking at her. Her knees were drawn up, her hands clasped round her ankles. With the ragged detail of her dress obscured, the line of her profile and throat sharp in clear silhouette against the saffron glow, she was like a statue carved in black marble. He could not see what her glance fol-

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lowed, only felt the consolation of her presence, the one thing to which he could turn and meet a human response.

He was feverish again, his thirst returned in an insatiable craving. Moving restlessly he flung out a hand toward her and said querulously:

"How long will Low be gone?"

"Till the morning unless he finds water by the way."

Silence fell on him and her eyes strained through the darkness for the last glimpse of the rider. He sighed deeply, the hot hand stirring till it lay spread, with separated fingers on the hem of her dress. He moved each finger, their brushing on the cloth the only sound.

"Are you in pain?" she asked and shrunk before the coldness of her voice.

"No, but I am dying with thirst."

She made no answer, resting in her graven quietness. The night had closed upon the rider's figure, but she watched where it had been. Over a blackened peak a large star soared up like a bright eye spying on the waste. Suddenly the hand clinched and he struck down at the earth with it.

"I can't go without water till the morning."

"Try to sleep," she said. "We must stand it the best way we can."

"I can't sleep."

He moaned and turned over on his face and lying thus rolled from side to side as if in anguish that movement assuaged. For the first time she

## The Emigrant Trail

looked at him, turning upon him a glance of questioning anxiety. She could see his narrow, angular shape, the legs twisted, the arms bent for a pillow, upon which his head moved in restless pain.

"David, we've *got* to wait."

"The night through? Stay this way till morning? I'll be dead. I wish I was now."

She looked away from him seized by temptation that rose from contrition not pity.

"If you cared for me you could get it. Low's certain to find a spring."

"Very well. I will," she said and rose to her feet.

She moved softly to the camp the darkness hiding her. Daddy John was taking a cat nap by the fire, a barrier of garnered sage behind him. She knew his sleep was light and stole with a tiptoe tread to the back of the wagon where the water cask stood. She drew off a cupful, then, her eye alert on the old man, crept back to David. When he saw her coming he sat up with a sharp breath of satisfaction, and she knelt beside him and held the cup to his lips. He drained it and sank back in a collapse of relief, muttering thanks that she hushed, fearful of the old man. Then she again took her seat beside him. She saw Daddy John get up and pile the fire high, and watched its leaping flame throw out tongues toward the stars.

Midnight was past when David woke and again begged for water. This time she went for it without urging. When he had settled into rest she con-

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tinued her watch peaceful at the thought that she had given him what was hers and Courant's. Reparation of a sort had been made. Her mind could fly without hindrance into the wilderness with the lonely horseman. It was a luxury like dearly bought freedom, and she sat on lost in it, abandoned to a reverie as deep and solemn as the night.

## CHAPTER IV

SHE woke when the sun shot its first rays into her eyes. David lay near by, breathing lightly, his face like a pale carven mask against the blanket's folds. Down below in the camp the fire burned low, its flame looking ineffectual and tawdry in the flushed splendor of the sunrise. Daddy John was astir, moving about among the animals and pausing to rub Julia's nose and hearten her up with hopeful words.

Susan mounted to a ledge and scanned the distance. Her figure caught the old man's eye and he hailed her for news. Nothing yet, she signaled back, then far on the plain's rose-brown limit saw a dust blur and gave a cry that brought him running and carried him in nimble ascent to her side. His old eyes could see nothing. She had to point the direction with a finger that shook.

"There, there. It's moving—far away, as if a drop of water had been spilled on a picture and made a tiny blot."

They watched till a horseman grew from the nebulous spot. Then they climbed down and ran to the camp, got out the breakfast things and threw brush on the fire, speaking nothing but the essential word, for hope and fear racked them. When

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he was within hail Daddy John ran to meet him, but she stayed where she was, her hands making useless darts among the pans, moistening her lips that they might frame speech easily when he came. With down-bent head she heard his voice hoarse from a dust-dried throat: he had found the trail and near it a spring, the cask he carried was full, it would last them for twelve hours. But the way was heavy and the animals were too spent for a day's march in such heat. They would not start till evening and would journey through the night.

She heard his feet brushing toward her through the sage, and smelled the dust and sweat upon him as he drew up beside her. She was forced to raise her eyes and murmur a greeting. It was short and cold, and Daddy John marveled at the ways of women, who welcomed a man from such labors as if he had been to the creek and brought up a pail of water. His face, gaunt and grooved with lines, made her heart swell with the pity she had so freely given David, and the passion that had never been his. There was no maternal softness in her now. The man beside her was no helpless creature claiming her aid, but a conqueror upon whom she leaned and in whom she gloried.

After he had eaten he drew a saddle back into the rock's shade, spread a blanket and threw himself on it. Almost before he had composed his body in comfort he was asleep, one arm thrown over his head, his sinewy neck outstretched, his chest rising and falling in even breaths.

## The Emigrant Trail

At noon Daddy John in broaching the cask discovered the deficit in the water supply. She came upon the old man with the half-filled coffee-pot in his hand staring down at its contents with a puzzled face. She stood watching him, guilty as a thievish child, the color mounting to her forehead. He looked up and in his eyes she read the shock of his suspicions. Delicacy kept him silent, and as he rinsed the water round in the pot his own face reddened in a blush for the girl he had thought strong in honor and self-denial as he was.

"I took it," she said slowly.

He had to make allowances, not only to her, but to himself. He felt that he must reassure her, keep her from feeling shame for the first underhand act he had ever known her commit. So he spoke with all the cheeriness he could command:

"I guess you needed it pretty bad. Turning out as it has I'm glad you done it."

She saw he thought she had taken it for herself, and experienced relief in the consciousness of unjust punishment.

"You were asleep," she said, "and I came down and took it twice."

He did not look at her for he could not bear to see her humiliation. It was his affair to lighten her self-reproach.

"Well, that was all right. You're the only woman among us, and you've got to be kept up."

"I—I—couldn't stand it any longer," she fal-

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tered now, wanting to justify herself. "It was too much to bear."

"Don't say no more," he said tenderly. "Ain't you only a little girl put up against things that 'ud break the spirit of a strong man?"

The pathos of his efforts to excuse her shook her guarded self-control. She suddenly put her face against his shoulder in a lonely dreariness. He made a backward gesture with his head that he might toss off his hat and lay his cheek on her hair.

"There, there," he muttered comfortingly. "Don't go worrying about that. You ain't done no harm. It's just as natural for you to have taken it as for you to go to sleep when you're tired. And there's not a soul but you and me'll ever know it, and we'll forget by to-night."

His simple words, reminiscent of gentler days, when tragic problems lay beyond the confines of imagination, loosed the tension of her mood, and she clasped her arms about him, trembling and shaken. He patted her with his free hand, the coffee-pot in the other, thinking her agitation merely an expression of fatigue, with no more knowledge of its complex provocation than he had of the mighty throes that had once shaken the blighted land on which they stood.

David was better, much better, he declared, and proved it by helping clear the camp and pack the wagon for the night march. He was kneeling by Daddy John, who was folding the blankets, when he said suddenly:

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"If I hadn't got water I think I'd have died last night."

The old man, stopped in his folding to turn a hardening face on him.

"Water?" he said. "How'd you get it?"

"Susan did. I told her I couldn't stand it, and she went down twice to the wagon & I brought it to me. I was at the end of my rope."

Daddy John said nothing. His ideas were re-adjusting themselves to a new point of view. When they were established his Missy was back upon her pedestal, a taller one than ever before, and David was once and for all in the dust at its feet.

"There's no one like Susan," the lover went on, now with returning forces, anxious to give the mead of praise where it was due. "She tried to talk me out of it, and then when she saw I couldn't stand it she just went quietly off and got it."

"I guess you could have held out till the morning if you'd put your mind to it," said the old man dryly, rising with the blankets.

For the moment he despised David almost as bitterly as Courant did. It was not alone the weakness so frankly admitted; it was that his action had made Daddy John harbor secret censure of the being dearest to him. The old man could have spat upon him. He moved away for fear of the words that trembled on his tongue. And another and deeper pain tormented him—that his darling should so love this feeble creature that she

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could steal for him and take the blame of his misdeeds. This was the man to whom she had given her heart! He found himself wishing that David had never come back from his search for the lost horses. Then the other man, the real man that was her fitting mate, could have won her.

At sunset the train was ready. Every article that could be dispensed with was left, a rich find for the Indians whose watch fires winked from the hills. To the cry of "Roll out," and the snap of the long whip, the wagon lurched into motion, the thirst-racked animals straining doggedly as it crunched over sage stalks and dragged through powdery hummocks. The old man walked by the wheel, the long lash of his whip thrown afar, flashing in the upper light and descending in a lick of flame on the mules' gray flanks. With each blow fell a phrase of encouragement, the words of a friend who wounds and wounding himself suffers. David rode at the rear with Susan. The two men had told him he must ride if he died for it, and met his offended answer that he intended to do so with sullen silence. In advance, Courant's figure brushed between the bushes, his hair a moving patch of copper color in the last light.

Darkness quickly gathered round them. The bowl of sky became an intense Prussian blue that the earth reflected. In this clear, deep color the wagon hood showed a pallid arch, and the shapes of man and beast were defined in shadowless black. In the west a band of lemon-color lingered, and

## The Emigrant Trail

above the stars began to prick through, great scintillant sparks, that looked, for all their size, much farther away than the stars of the peopled places. Their light seemed caught and held in aerial gulfs above the earth, making the heavens clear, while the night clung close and undisturbed to the plain's face. Once from afar the cry of an animal arose, a long, swelling howl, but around the train all was still save for the crackling of the crushed sage stalks, and the pad of hoofs.

It was near midnight when Susan's voice summoned Daddy John. The wagon halted, and she beckoned him with a summoning arm. He ran to her, circling the bushes with a youth's alertness, and stretched up to hear her as she bent from the saddle. David must go in the wagon, he was unable to ride longer. The old man swept him with a look of inspection. The starlight showed a drooping figure, the face hidden by the shadow of his hat brim. The mules were at the limit of their strength, and the old man demurred, swearing under his breath and biting his nails.

"You've got to take him," she said, "if it kills them. He would have fallen off a minute ago if I hadn't put my arm around him."

"Come on, then," he answered with a surly look at David. "Come on and ride, while the rest of us get along the best way we can."

"He can't help it," she urged in an angry whisper. "You talk as if he was doing it on purpose."

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David slid off his horse and made for the wagon with reeling steps. The other man followed muttering.

"Help him," she called. "Don't you see he can hardly stand?"

At the wagon wheel Daddy John hoisted him in with vigorous and ungentle hands. Crawling into the back the sick man fell prone with a groan. Courant, who had heard them and turned to watch, came riding up.

"What is it?" he said sharply. "The mules given out?"

"Not they," snorted Daddy John, at once all belligerent loyalty to Julia and her mates, "it's this d—d cry baby again," and he picked up the reins exclaiming in tones of fond urgency:

"Come now, off again. Keep up your heart. There's water and grass ahead. Up there, Julia, honey!"

The long team, crouching in the effort to start the wagon, heaved it forward, and the old man, leaping over the broken sage, kept the pace beside them. Courant, a few feet in advance, said over his shoulder:

"What's wrong with him now?"

"Oh, played out, I guess. She," with a backward jerk of his head, "won't have it any other way. No good telling her it's nerve not body that he ain't got."

The mountain man looked back toward the pathway between the slashed and broken bushes. He

## The Emigrant Trail

could see Susan's solitary figure, David's horse following.

"What's *she* mind for?" he said.

"Because she's a woman and they're made that way. She's more set on that chump than she'd be on the finest man you could bring her if you hunted the world over for him."

They fared on in silence, the soft soil muffling their steps. The wagon lurched on a hummock and David groaned.

"Are you meaning she cares for him?" asked Courant.

"All her might," answered the old man. "Ain't she goin' to marry the varmint?"

It was an hour for understanding, no matter how bitter. Daddy John's own dejection made him unsparing. He offered his next words as confirmation of a condition that he thought would kill all hope in the heart of the leader.

"Last night he made her get him water—the store we had left if you hadn't found any. Twict in the night while I was asleep she took and gave it to him. Then when I found it out she let me think she took it for herself," he spat despondently. "She the same as lied for him. I don't want to hear no more after that."

The mountain man rode with downdrooped head. Daddy John, who did not know what he did, might well come to such conclusions. *He* knew the secret of the girl's contradictory actions. He looked into her perturbed spirit and saw how des-

## The Desert

perately she clung to the letter of her obligation, while she repudiated the spirit. Understanding her solicitude for David, he knew that it was strengthened by the consciousness of her disloyalty. But he felt no tenderness for these distracted feminine waverings. It exhilarated him to think that while she held to the betrothed of her father's choice and the bond of her given word, her hold would loosen at his wish. As he had felt toward enemies that he had conquered—crushed and subjected by his will—he felt toward her. It was a crowning joy to know that he could make her break her promise, turn her from her course of desperate fidelity, and make her his own, not against her inclination, but against her pity, her honor, her conscience.

The spoor left by his horse the night before was clear in the starlight. He told Daddy John to follow it and drew up beside the track to let the wagon pass him. Motionless he watched the girl's approaching figure, and saw her rein her horse to a standstill.

"Come on," he said softly. "I want to speak to you."

She touched the horse and it started toward him. As she came nearer he could see the troubled shine of her eyes.

"Why are you afraid?" he said, as he fell into place beside her. "We're friends now."

She made no answer, her head bent till her face was hidden by her hat. He laid his hand on her rein and brought the animal to a halt.

## The Emigrant Trail

"Let the wagon get on ahead," he whispered.  
"We'll follow at a distance."

The whisper, so low that the silence was unbroken by it, came to her, a clear sound carrying with it a thrill of understanding. She trembled and—his arm against hers as his hand held her rein—he felt the subdued vibration like the quivering of a frightened animal. The wagon lumbered away with the sifting dust gushing from the wheels. A stirred cloud rose upon its wake and they could feel it thick and stifling in their nostrils. She watched the receding arch cut down the back by the crack in the closed canvas, while he watched her. The sound of crushed twigs and straining wheels lessened, the stillness gathered between these noises of laboring life and the two mounted figures. As it settled each could hear the other's breathing and feel a mutual throb, as though the same leaping artery fed them both. In the blue night encircled by the waste, they were as still as vessels balanced to a hair in which passion brimmed to the edge.

"Come on," she said huskily, and twitched her reins from his hold.

The horses started, walking slowly. A strip of mangled sage lay in front, back of them the heavens hung, a star-strewn curtain. It seemed to the man and woman that they were the only living things in the world, its people, its sounds, its interests, were in some undescried distance where life progressed with languid pulses. How long the silence lasted neither knew. He broke it with a whisper:

## The Desert

"Why did you get David the water last night?"

Her answer came so low he had to bend to hear it.

"He wanted it. I had to."

"Why do you give him all he asks for? David is nothing to you."

This time no answer came, and he stretched his hand and clasped the pommel of her saddle. The horses, feeling the pull of the powerful arm, drew together. His knee pressed on the shoulder of her pony, and feeling him almost against her she bent sideways, flinching from the contact.

"Why do you shrink from me, Missy?"

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

They paced on for a moment in silence. When he tried to speak his lips were stiff, and he moistened them to murmur:

"Of what?"

She shrunk still further and raised a hand between them. He snatched at it, pulling it down, saying hoarsely:

"Of me?"

"Of something—I don't know what. Of something terrible and strange."

She tried to strike at her horse with the reins, but the man's hand dropped like a hawk on the pommel and drew the tired animal back to the foot pace.

"If you love me there's no need of fear," he said, then waited, the sound of her terrified breathing like the beating of waves in his ears, and murmured lower than before, "And you love me. I know it."

## The Emigrant Trail

Her face showed in dark profile against the deep sky. He stared at it, then suddenly set his teeth and gave the pommel a violent jerk that made the horse stagger and grind against its companion. The creaking of the wagon came faint from a wake of shadowy trail.

"You've done it for weeks. Before you knew. Before you lied to your father when he tried to make you marry David."

She dropped the reins and clinched her hands against her breast, a movement of repression and also of pleading to anything that would protect her, any force that would give her strength to fight, not the man alone, but herself. But the will was not within her. The desert grew dim, the faint sounds from the wagon faded. Like a charmed bird, staring straight before it, mute and enthralled, she rocked lightly to left and right, and then swayed toward him.

The horse, feeling the dropped rein, stopped, jerking its neck forward in the luxury of rest, its companion coming to a standstill beside it. Courant raised himself in his saddle and gathered her in an embrace that crushed her against his bony frame, then pressed against her face with his, till he pushed it upward and could see it, white, with closed eyes, on his shoulder. He bent till his long hair mingled with hers and laid his lips on her mouth with the clutch of a bee on a flower.

They stood a compact silhouette, clear in the luminous starlight. The crack in the canvas that

## The Desert

covered the wagon back widened and the eye that had been watching them, stared bright and wide, as if all the life of the feeble body had concentrated in that one organ of sense. The hands, damp and trembling, drew the canvas edges closer, but left space enough for the eye to dwell on this vision of a shattered world. It continued to gaze as Susan slid from the encircling arms, dropped from her horse, and came running forward, stumbling on the fallen bushes, as she ran panting out the old servant's name. Then it went back to the mountain man, a black shape in the loneliness of the night.

## CHAPTER V

A SLOWLY lightening sky, beneath it the transparent sapphire of the desert waking to the dawn, and cutting the blue expanse the line of the new trail. A long butte, a bristling outline on the paling north, ran out from a crumpled clustering of hills, and the road bent to meet it. The air came from it touched with a cooling freshness, and as they pressed toward it they saw the small, swift shine of water, a little pool, grass-ringed, with silver threads creeping to the sands.

They drank and then slept, sinking to oblivion as they dropped on the ground, not waiting to undo their blankets or pick out comfortable spots. The sun, lifting a bright eye above the earth's rim, shot its long beams over their motionless figures, "bundles of life," alone in a lifeless world.

David alone could not rest. Withdrawn from the others he lay in the shadow of the wagon, watching small points in the distance with a glance that saw nothing. All sense of pain and weakness had left him. Physically he felt strangely light and free of sensation. With his brain endowed with an abnormal activity he suffered an agony of spirit so poignant that there were moments when he drew back and looked at himself wondering how he en-

## The Desert

dured it. He was suddenly broken away from everything cherished and desirable in life. The bare and heart-rending earth about him was as the expression of his ruined hopes. And after these submergences in despair a tide of questions carried him to livelier torment: Why had she done it? What had changed her? When had she ceased to care?

All his deadened manhood revived. He wanted her, he owned her, she was his. Sick and unable to fight for her she had been stolen from him, and he writhed in spasms of self pity at the thought of the cruelty of it. How could he, disabled, broken by unaccustomed hardships, cope with the iron-fibered man whose body and spirit were at one with these harsh settings? *He* was unfitted for it, for the heroic struggle, for the battle man to man for a woman as men had fought in the world's dawn into which they had retraced their steps. He could not make himself over, become another being to appeal to a sense in her he had never touched. He could only plead with her, beg mercy of her, and he saw that these were not the means that won women grown half savage in correspondence with a savage environment.

Then came moments of exhaustion when he could not believe it. Closing his eyes he called up the placid life that was to have been his and Susan's, and could not think but that it still must be. Like a child he clung to his hope, to the belief that something would intervene and give her back to him;

## The Emigrant Trail

not he, he was unable to, but something that stood for justice and mercy. All his life he had abided by the law, walked uprightly, done his best. Was he to be smitten now through no fault of his own? It was all a horrible dream, and presently there would be an awakening with Susan beside him as she had been in the first calm weeks of their betrothal. The sweetness of those days returned to him with the intolerable pang of a fair time, long past and never to come again. He threw his head back as if in a paroxysm of pain. It could not be and yet in his heart he knew it was true. In the grip of his torment he thought of the God that watching over Israel slumbered not nor slept. With his eyes on the implacable sky he tried to pray, tried to drag down from the empty gulf of air the help that would bring back his lost happiness.

At Susan's first waking movement he started and turned his head toward her. She saw him, averted her face, and began the preparations for the meal. He lay watching her and he knew that her avoidance of his glance was intentional. He also saw that her manner of preoccupied bustle was affected. She was pale, her face set in hard lines. When she spoke once to Daddy John her voice was unlike itself, hoarse and throaty, its mellow music gone.

They gathered and took their places in silence, save for the old man, who tried to talk, but meeting no response gave it up. Between the three

## The Desert

others not a word was exchanged. A stifling oppression lay on them, and they did not dare to look at one another. The girl found it impossible to swallow and taking a piece of biscuit from her mouth threw it into the sand.

The air was sultry, light wisps of mist lying low over the plain. The weight of these vaporous films seemed to rest on them heavy as the weight of water, and before the meal was finished, Susan, overborne by a growing dread and premonition of tragedy, rose and left her place, disappearing round a buttress of the rock. Courant stopped eating and looked after her, his head slowly moving as his eye followed her. To anyone watching it would have been easy to read this pursuing glance, the look of the hunter on his quarry. David saw it and rose to his knees. A rifle lay within arm's reach, and for one furious moment he felt an impulse to snatch it and kill the man. But a rush of inhibiting instinct checked him. Had death or violence menaced her he could have done it, but without the incentive of the immediate horror he could never rise so far beyond himself.

Susan climbed the rock's side to a plateau on its western face. The sun beat on her like a furnace mouth. Here and there black filigrees of shade shrank to the bases of splintered ledges. Below the plain lay outflung in the stupor of midday. On its verge the mountains stretched, a bright blue, shadowless film. A mirage trembled to the south, a glassy vision, crystal clear amid the chalky streak-

## The Emigrant Trail

ings and the rings of parched and blanching sinks. Across the prospect the faint, unfamiliar mist hung as if, in the torrid temperature, the earth was steaming.

She sat down on a shelf of rock not feeling the burning sunshine or the heat that the baked ledges threw back upon her. The life within her was so intense that no impressions from the outside could enter, even her eyes took in no image of the prospect they dwelt on. Courant's kiss had brought her to a place toward which, she now realized, she had been moving for a long time, advancing upon it, unknowing, but impelled like a somnambulist willed toward a given goal. What was to happen she did not know. She felt a dread so heavy that it crushed all else from her mind. They had reached a crisis where everything had stopped, a dark and baleful focus to which all that had gone before had been slowly converging. The whole journey had been leading to this climax of suspended breath and fearful, inner waiting.

She heard the scraping of ascending feet, and when she saw David stared at him, her eyes unblinking in stony expectancy. He came and stood before her, and she knew that at last he had guessed, and felt no fear, no resistance against the explanation that must come. He suddenly had lost all significance, was hardly a human organism, or if a human organism, one that had no relation to her. Neither spoke for some minutes. He was afraid, and she waited, knowing what he was going to say,

## The Desert

wishing it was said, and the hampering persistence of his claim was ended.

At length he said tremulously:

"Susan, I saw you last night. What did you do it for? What am I to think?"

That he had had proof of her disloyalty relieved her. There would be less to say in this settling of accounts.

"Well," she answered, looking into his eyes. "You saw!"

He cried desperately, "I saw him kiss you. You let him. What did it mean?"

"Why do you ask? If you saw you know."

"I don't know. I want to know. Tell me, explain to me." He paused, and then cried with a pitiful note of pleading, "Tell me it wasn't so. Tell me I made a mistake."

He was willing, anxious, for her to lie. Against the evidence of his own senses he would have made himself believe her, drugged his pain with her falsehoods. What remnant of consideration she had vanished.

"You made no mistake," she answered. "It was as you saw."

"I don't believe it. I can't. You wouldn't have done it. It's I you're promised to. Haven't I your word? Haven't you been kind as an angel to me when the others would have let me die out here like a dog? What did you do it for if you didn't care?"

"I was sorry," and then with cold, measured slowness, "and I felt guilty."

## The Emigrant Trail

"That's it—you felt guilty. It's not your doing. You've been led away. While I've been sick that devil's been poisoning you against me. He's tried to steal you from me. But you're not the girl to let him do that. You'll come back to me—the man that you belong to, that's loved you since the day we started."

To her at this naked hour, where nothing lived but the truth, the thought that he would take her back with the other man's kisses on her lips, made her unsparing. She drew back from him, stiffening in shocked repugnance, and speaking with the same chill deliberation.

"I'll never come back to you. It's all over, that love with you. I didn't know. I didn't feel. I was a child with no sense of what she was doing. Now everything's different. It's he I must go with and be with as long as I live."

The hideousness of the discovery had been made the night before. Had her words been his first intimation they might have shocked him into stupefied dumbness and made him seem the hero who meets his fate with closed lips. But hours long he had brooded and knew her severance from him had taken place. With the mad insistence of a thought whirling on in fevered repetition he had told himself that he must win her back, urge, struggle, plead, till he had got her where she was before or lose her forever.

"You can't. You can't do it. It's a temporary thing. It's the desert and the wildness and because

## The Desert

he could ride and get water and find the trail. In California it will be different. Out there it'll be the same as it used to be back in the States. You'll think of this as something unreal that never happened and your feeling for him—it'll all go. When we get where it's civilized you'll be like you were when we started. You couldn't have loved a savage like that then. Well, you won't when you get where you belong. It's horrible. It's unnatural."

She shook her head, glanced at him and glanced away. The sweat was pouring off his face and his lips quivered like a weeping child's.

"Oh, David," she said with a deep breath like a groan, "*this* is natural for me. The other was not."

"You don't know what you're saying. And how about your promise? *You* gave that of your own free will. Was it a thing you give and take back whenever you please? What would your father think of your breaking your word—throwing me off for a man no better than a half-blood Indian? Is that your honor?" Then he was suddenly fearful that he had said too much and hurt his case, and he dropped to a wild pleading: "Oh, Susan, you can't, you can't. You haven't got the heart to treat me so."

She looked down not answering, but her silence gave no indication of a softened response. He seemed to throw himself upon its hardness in hopeless desperation.

## The Emigrant Trail

"Send him away. He needn't go on with us. Tell him to go back to the Fort."

"Where would we be now without him?" she said and smiled grimly at the thought of their recent perils with the leader absent.

"We're on the main trail. We don't need him now. I heard him say yesterday to Daddy John we'd be in Humboldt in three or four days. We can go on without him, there's no more danger."

She smiled again, a slight flicker of one corner of her mouth. The dangers were over and Courant could be safely dispensed with.

"He'll go on with us," she said.

"It's not necessary. We don't want him. I'll guide. I'll help. If he was gone I'd be all right again. Daddy John and I are enough. If I can get you back as you were before, we'll be happy again, and I *can* get you back if he goes."

"You'll never get me back," she answered, and rising moved away from him, aloof and hostile in the deepest of all aversions, the woman to the unloved and urgent suitor. He followed her and caught at her dress.

"Don't go. Don't leave me this way. I can't believe it. I can't stand it. If I hadn't grown into thinking you were going to be my wife maybe I could. But it's just unbearable when I'd got used to looking upon you as mine, almost as good as married to me. You can't do it. You can't make me suffer this way."

His complete abandonment filled her with pain,

## The Desert

the first relenting she had had. She could not look at him and longed to escape. She tried to draw her dress from his hands, saying:

"Oh, David, don't say any more. There's no good. It's over. It's ended. I can't help it. It's something stronger than I am."

He saw the repugnance in her face and loosened his hold, dropping back from her.

"It's the end of my life," he said in a muffled voice.

"I feel as if it was the end of the world," she answered, and going to the pathway disappeared over its edge.

She walked back skirting the rock's bulk till she found a break in its side, a small gorge shadowed by high walls. The cleft penetrated deep, its mouth open to the sky, its apex a chamber over which the cloven walls slanted like hands with finger tips touching in prayer. It was dark in this interior space, the floor mottled with gleaming sun-spots. Across the wider opening, unroofed to the pale blue of the zenith, the first slow shade was stretching, a creeping gray coolness, encroaching on the burning ground. Here she threw herself down, looking out through the entrance at the desert shimmering through the heat haze. The mist wreaths were dissolving, every line and color glassily clear. Her eyes rested vacantly on it, her body inert, her heart as heavy as a stone.

David made no movement to follow her. He had clung to his hope with the desperation of a

## The Emigrant Trail

weak nature, but it was ended now. No interference, no miracle, could restore her to him. He saw—he had to see—that she was lost to him as completely as if death had claimed her. More completely, for death would have made her a stranger. Now it was the Susan he had loved who had looked at him with eyes not even indifferent but charged with a hard hostility. She was the same and yet how different! Hopeless!—Hopeless! He wondered if the word had ever before voiced so abject a despair.

He turned to the back of the plateau and saw the faint semblance of a path leading upward to higher levels, a trail worn by the feet of other emigrants who had climbed to scan with longing eyes the weary way to the land of their desire. As he walked up it and the prospect widened on his sight, its message came, clearer with every mounting step. Thus forever would he look out on a blasted world uncheered by sound or color. The stillness that lapped him round was as the stillness of his own dead heart. The mirage quivered brilliant in the distance, and he paused, a solitary shape against the exhausted sky, to think that his dream of love had had no more reality. Beautiful and alluring it had floated in his mind, an illusion without truth or substance.

He reached the higher elevation, barren and iron hard, the stone hot to his feet. On three sides the desert swept out to the horizon, held in its awful silence. Across it, a white seam, the Emigrant Trail wound, splindling away into the west, a line

## The Desert

of tortuous curves, a loop, a straight streak, and then a tiny thread always pressing on to that wonderful land which he had once seen as a glowing rim on the world's remotest verge. It typified the dauntless effort of man, never flagging, never broken, persisting to its goal. He had not been able to thus persist, the spirit had not reached far enough to know its aim and grasp it. He knew his weakness, his incapacity to cope with the larger odds of life, a watcher not an actor in the battle, and understanding that his failure had come from his own inadequacy he wished that he might die.

On one side the eminence broke away in a sheer fall to the earth below. At its base a scattering of sundered boulders and fragments lay, veiled by a growth of small, bushy shrubs to which a spring gave nourishment. Behind this the long spine of the rock tapered back to the parent ridge that ran, a bristling rampart, east and west. He sat down on the edge of the precipice watching the trail. He had no idea how long he remained thus. A shadow falling across him brought him back to life. He turned and saw Courant standing a few feet from him.

Without speech or movement they eyed one another. In his heart each hated the other, but in David the hate had come suddenly, the hysteric growth of a night's anguish. The mountain man's was tempered by a process of slow-firing to a steely inflexibility. He hated David that he had ever been his rival, that he had ever thought to lay claim to

## The Emigrant Trail

the woman who was his, that he had ever aspired to her, touched her, desired her. He hated him when he saw that, all unconsciously, he had still a power to hold her from the way her passion led. And back of all was the ancient hatred, the heritage from ages lost in the beginnings of the race, man's of man in the struggle for a woman.

David rose from his crouching posture to his knees. The other, all his savage instincts primed for onslaught, saw menace in the movement, and stood braced and ready. Like Susan he understood that David had guessed the secret. He could judge him only by his own measure, and he knew the settling of the score had come. There was no right or justice in his claim, only the right of the stronger to win what he wanted, but that to him was the supreme right.

David's sick fury shot up into living flame. He judged Susan innocent, a tool in ruthless hands. He saw the destroyer of their lives, a devil who had worked subtly for his despoilment. The air grew dark and in the center of the darkness, his hate concentrated on the watching face, and an impulse, the strongest of his life, nerved him with the force to kill. For once he broke beyond himself, rose outside the restrictions that had held him cowering within his sensitive shell. His rage had the vehemence of a distracted woman's, and he threw himself upon his enemy, inadequate now as always, but at last unaware and unconscious.

They clutched and rocked together. From the

## The Desert

moment of the grapple it was unequal—a sick and wounded creature struggling in arms that were as iron bands about his puny frame. But as a furious child fights for a moment successfully with its enraged elder, he tore and beat at his opponent, striking blindly at the face he loathed, writhing in the grip that bent his body and sent the air in sobbing gasps from his lungs. Their trampling was muffled on the stone, their shadows leaped in contorted waverings out from their feet and back again. Broken and twisted in Courant's arms, David felt no pain only the blind hate, saw the livid plain heaving about him, the white ball of the sun, and twisting through the reeling distance the pale thread of the Emigrant Trail, glancing across his ensanguined vision like a shuttle weaving through a blood-red loom.

They staggered to the edge of the plateau and there hung. It was only for a moment, a last moment of strained and swaying balance. Courant felt the body against his weaken, wrenched himself free, and with a driving blow sent it outward over the precipice. It fell with the arms flung wide, the head dropped backward, and from the open mouth a cry broke, a shrill and dreadful sound that struck sharp on the plain's abstracted silence, spread and quivered across its surface like widening rings on the waters of a pool. The mountain man threw himself on the edge and looked down. The figure lay limp among the bushes thirty feet below. He watched it, his body still as a panther's crouched

## The Emigrant Trail

for a spring. He saw one of the hands twitch, a loosened sliver of slate slide from the wall, and cannoning on projections, leap down and bury itself in the outflung hair. The face looking up at him with half-shut eyes that did not wink as the rock dust sifted into them, was terrible, but he felt no sensation save a grim curiosity.

He stole down a narrow gulley and crept with stealthy feet and steadying hands toward the still shape. The shadows were cool down there, and as he touched the face its warmth shocked him. It should have been cold to have matched its look and the hush of the place. He thrust his hand inside the shirt and felt at the heart. No throb rose under his palm, and he sent it sliding over the upper part of the body, limp now, but which he knew would soon be stiffening. The man was dead.

Courant straightened himself and sent a rapid glance about him. The bushes among which the body lay were close matted in a thick screen. Through their roots the small trickle of the spring percolated, stealing its way to the parched sands outside. It made a continuous murmuring, as if nature was lifting a voice of low, insistent protest against the desecration of her peace.

The man standing with stilled breath and rigid muscles listened for other sounds. Reassured that there were none, his look swept right and left for a spot wherein to hide the thing that lay at his feet. At its base the rock wall slanted outward leaving a hollow beneath its eave where the thin veneer of

## The Desert

water gleamed from the shadows. He took the dead man under the arms and dragged him to it, careful of branches that might snap under his foot, pausing to let the echoes of rolling stones die away—a figure of fierce vitality with the long, limp body hanging from his hands. At the rock he crouched and thrust his burden under the wall's protecting cope, the trickle of the water dying into a sudden, scared silence. Stepping back he brushed the bushes into shape, hiding their breakage, and bent to gather the scattered leaves and crush them into crevices. When it was done the place showed no sign of the intruder, only the whispering of the streamlet told that its course was changed and it was feeling for a new channel.

Then he crept softly out to the plain's edge where the sunlight lay long and bright. It touched his face and showed it white, with lips close set and eyes gleaming like crystals. He skirted the rock, making a soft, quick way to where the camp lay. Here the animals stood, heads drooped as they cropped the herbage round the spring. Daddy John sat in the shade of the wagon, tranquilly cleaning a gun. The mountain man's passage was so soundless that he did not hear it. The animals raised slow eyes to the moving figure, then dropped them indifferently. He passed them, his step growing lighter, changing as he withdrew from the old man's line of vision, to a long, rapid glide. His blood-shot eyes nursed the extending buttresses, and as he came round them, with craned neck and

## The Emigrant Trail

body reaching forward, they sent a glance into each recess that leaped round it like a flame.

Susan had remained in the same place. She made no note of the passage of time, but the sky between the walls was growing deeper in color, the shadows lengthening along the ground. She was lying on her side looking out through the rift's opening when Courant stood there. He made an instant's pause, a moment when his breath caught deep, and, seeing him, she started to her knees with a blanching face. As he came upon her she held out her hands, crying in uprising notes of terror, "No! No! No!" But he gathered her in his arms, stilled her cries with his kisses, and bending low carried her back into the darkened cavern over which the rocks closed like hands uplifted in prayer.

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## CHAPTER VI

TILL the afternoon of the next day they held the train for David. When evening fell and he did not come Daddy John climbed the plateau and kindled a beacon fire that threw its flames against the stars. Then he took his rifle and skirted the rock's looming bulk, shattering the stillness with reports that let loose a shivering flight of echoes. All night they sat by the fire listening and waiting. As the hours passed their alarm grew and their speculations became gloomier and more sinister. Courant was the only one who had a plausible theory. The moving sparks on the mountains showed that the Indians were still following them and it was his opinion that David had strayed afar and been caught by a foraging party. It was not a matter for desperate alarm as the Diggers were harmless and David would no doubt escape from them and join a later train. This view offered the only possible explanation. It was Courant's opinion and so it carried with the other two.

Early in the evening the girl had shown no interest. Sitting back from the firelight, a shawl over her head, she seemed untouched by the anxiety that prompted the old man's restless roving. As the night deepened Daddy John had come back to

## The Emigrant Trail

Courant who was near her. He spoke his fears low, for he did not want to worry her. Glancing to see if she had heard him, he was struck by the brooding expression of her face, white between the shawl folds. He nodded cheerily at her but her eyes showed no responsive gleam, dwelling on him wide and unseeing. As he moved away he heard her burst into sudden tears, such tears as she had shed at the Fort, and turning back with arms ready for her comforting, saw her throw herself against Courant's knees, her face buried in the folds of her shawl. He stood arrested, amazed not so much by the outburst as by the fact that it was to Courant she had turned and not to him. But when he spoke to her she drew the shawl tighter over her head and pressed her face against the mountain man's knees. Daddy John had no explanation of her conduct but that she had been secretly fearful about David and had turned for consolation to the human being nearest her.

The next day her anxiety was so sharp that she could not eat and the men grew accustomed to the sight of her mounted on the rock's summit, or walking slowly along the trail searching with untiring eyes. When alone with her lover he kissed and caressed her fears into abeyance. As he soothed her, clasped close against him, her terrors gradually subsided, sinking to a quiescence that came, not alone from his calm and practical reassurances, but from the power of his presence to drug her reason and banish all thoughts save those of him. He wanted

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her mind free of the dead man, wanted him eliminated from her imagination. The spiritual image of David must fade from her thoughts as his corporeal part would soon fade in the desiccating desert airs. Alone by the spring, held against Courant's side by an arm that trembled with a passion she still only half understood, she told him of her last interview with David. In an agony of self-accusation she whispered:

"Oh, Low, could he have killed himself?"

"Where?" said the man. "Haven't we searched every hole and corner of the place? He couldn't have hidden his own body."

The only evidence that some mishap had befallen David was Daddy John's, who, on the afternoon of the day of the disappearance had heard a cry, a single sound, long and wild. It had seemed to come from the crest of the rock, and the old man had listened and hearing no more had thought it the yell of some animal far on the mountains. This gave color to Courant's theory that the lost man had been seized by the Diggers. Borne away along the summit of the ridge he would have shouted to them and in that dry air the sound would have carried far. He could have been overpowered without difficulty, weakened by illness and carrying no arms.

They spent the morning in a fruitless search and in the afternoon Courant insisted on the train moving on. They cached provisions by the spring and scratched an arrow on the rock pointing their way,

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and underneath it the first letters of their names. It was useless, the leader said, to leave anything in the form of a letter. As soon as their dust was moving on the trail the Diggers would sweep down on the camp and carry away every scrap of rag and bone that was there. This was why he overrode Susan's plea to leave David's horse. Why present to the Indians a horse when they had only sufficient for themselves? She wrung her hands at the gruesome picture of David escaping and stealing back to find a deserted camp. But Courant was inexorable and the catching-up went forward with grim speed.

She and the old man were dumb with depression as the train rolled out. To them the desertion seemed an act of appalling heartlessness. But the mountain man had overcome Daddy John's scruples by a picture of their own fate if they delayed and were caught in the early snows of the Sierras. The girl could do nothing but trust in the word that was already law to her. He rode beside her murmuring reassurances and watching her pale profile. Her head hung low on her breast, her hat casting a slant of shadow to her chin. Her eyes looked gloomily forward, sometimes as his words touched a latent chord of hope, turning quickly upon him and enveloping him in a look of pathetic trust.

At the evening halt she ate nothing, sitting in a muse against the wagon wheel. Presently she put her plate down and, mounting on the axle, scanned the way they had come. She could see the rock, rising like the clumsy form of a dismantled galleon

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from the waters of a darkling sea. For a space she stood, her hand arched above her eyes, then snatched the kerchief from her neck and, straining an arm aloft, waved it. The white and scarlet rag flapped with a languid motion, an infinitesimal flutter between the blaze of the sky and the purpling levels of the earth. Her arm dropped, her signal fallen futile on the plain's ironic indifference.

During the next day's march she constantly looked back, and several times halted, her hand demanding silence as if she were listening for pursuing footsteps. Courant hid a growing irritation, which once escaped him in a query as to whether she thought David, if he got away from the Indians, could possibly catch them up. She answered that if he had escaped with a horse he might, and fell again to her listening and watching. At the night camp she ordered Daddy John to build the beacon fire higher than ever, and taking a rifle moved along the outskirts of the light firing into the darkness. Finally, standing with the gun caught in the crook of her arm, she sent up a shrill call of "David." The cry fell into the silence, cleaving it with a note of wild and haunting appeal. Courant went after her and brought her back. When they returned to the fire the old man, who was busy with the cooking, looked up to speak but instead gazed in silence, caught by something unusual in their aspect, revivifying, illuminating, like the radiance of an inner glow. It glorified the squalor of their clothing, the drawn fatigue of their faces. It gave

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them the fleeting glamour of spiritual beauty that comes to those in whom being has reached its highest expression, the perfect moment of completion caught amid life's incompleteness.

In the following days she moved as if the dust cloud that inclosed her was an impenetrable medium that interposed itself between her and the weird setting of the way. She was drugged with the wine of a new life. She did not think of sin, of herself in relation to her past, of the breaking with every tie that held her to her old self. All her background was gone. Her conscience that, in her dealings with David, had been so persistently lively, now, when it came to herself, was dead. Question of right or wrong, secret communings, self judgment, had no place in the exaltation of her mood. To look at her conduct and reason of it, to do anything but feel, was as impossible for her as it would have been to disengage her senses from their tranced concentration and restore them to the composed serenity of the past.

It was not the sudden crumbling of a character, the collapse of a structure reared on a foundation of careful training. It was a logical growth, forced by the developing process of an environment with which that character was in harmony. Before she reached the level where she could surrender herself, forgetful of the rites imposed by law, unshocked by her lover's brutality, she had been losing every ingrafted and inherited modification that had united her with the world in which she had been an

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exotic. The trials of the trail that would have dried the soul and broken the mettle of a girl whose womanhood was less rich, drew from hers the full measure of its strength. Every day had made her less a being of calculated, artificial reserves, of inculcated modesties, and more a human animal, governed by instincts that belonged to her age and sex. She was normal and chaste and her chastity had made her shrink from the man whose touch left her cold, and yield to the one to whom her first antagonism had been first response. When she had given Courant her kiss she had given herself. There was no need for intermediary courtship. After that vacillations of doubt and conscience ended. The law of her being was all that remained.

She moved on with the men, dust-grimed, her rags held together with pins and lacings of deer hide. She performed her share of the work with automatic thoroughness, eating when the hour came, sleeping on the ground under the stars, staggering up in the deep-blue dawn and buckling her horse's harness with fingers that fatigue made clumsy. She was more silent than ever before, often when the old man addressed her making no reply. He set down her abstraction to grief over David. When he tried to cheer her, her absorbed preoccupation gave place to the old restlessness, and once again she watched and listened. These were her only moods—periods of musing when she rode in front of the wagon with vacant eyes fixed on the winding seam of the trail, and periods of

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nervous agitation when she turned in her saddle to sweep the road behind her and ordered him to build the night fire high and bright.

The old servant was puzzled. Something foreign in her, an inner vividness of life, a deeper current of vitality, told him that this was not a woman preyed upon by a gnawing grief. He noted, without understanding, a change in her bearing to Courant and his to her. Without words to give it expression he saw in her attitude to the leader a pliant, docile softness, a surreptitious leap of light in the glance that fell upon him in quick welcome before her lids shut it in. With Courant the change showed in a possessive tenderness, a brooding concern. When, at the morning start, he waited as she rode toward him, his face was irradiated with a look that made the old man remember the dead loves of his youth. It was going to be all right Daddy John thought. David gone, whether forever or for an unknown period, the mountain man might yet win her. And then again the old man fell a wondering at something in them that did not suggest the unassured beginnings of courtship, a settled security of relation as of complete unity in a mutual enterprise.

One afternoon a faint spot of green rose and lingered on the horizon. They thought it a mirage and watched it with eyes grown weary of the desert's delusions. But as the road bore toward it, it steadied to their anxious gaze, expanded into a patch that lay a living touch on the earth's dead face.

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By the time that dusk gathered they saw that it was trees and knew that Humboldt was in sight. At nightfall they reached it, the first outpost sent into the wilderness by the new country. The red light of fires came through the dusk like a welcoming hail from that unknown land which was to be theirs.

After supper Daddy John and Courant left the girl and went to the mud house round which the camps clustered. The darkness was diluted by the red glow of fires and astir with dusky figures. There were trains for California and Oregon and men from the waste lands to the eastward and the south, flotsam and jetsam thrown up on the desert's shore. Inside, where the air was thick with smoke and the reek of raw liquors, they heard again the great news from California. The old man, determined to get all the information he could, moved from group to group, an observant listener in the hubbub. Presently his ear was caught by a man who declared he had been on the gold river and was holding a circle in thrall by his tales. Daddy John turned to beckon to Courant and, not seeing him, elbowed his way through the throng spying to right and left. But the mountain man had gone. Daddy John went back to the gold seeker and drew him dry of information, then foregathered with a thin individual who had a humorous eye and was looking on from a corner. This stranger introduced himself as a clergyman, returning from the East to Oregon by way of California. They talked together, Daddy John finding his new acquaintance a tolerant cheery person

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versed in the lore of the trail. The man gave him many useful suggestions for the last lap of the journey and he decided to go after Courant, to whom the route over the Sierra was unknown ground.

The camps had sunk to silence, the women and children asleep. He skirted their tents, bending his course to where he saw the hood of his own wagon and the shadowy forms of Julia and her mates. The fire still burned bright and on its farther side he could make out the figures of Susan and Courant seated on the ground. They were quiet, the girl sitting with her feet tucked under her, idly throwing scraps of sage on the blaze. He was about to hail Courant when he saw him suddenly drop to a reclining posture beside her, draw himself along the earth and curl about her, his elbow on the ground, his head propped on a sustaining hand. With the other he reached forward, caught Susan's and drawing it toward him pressed it against his cheek. Daddy John watched the sacrilegious act with starting eyes. He would have burst in upon them had he not seen the girl's shy smile, and her body gently droop forward till her lips rested on the mountain man's. When she drew back the old servant came forward into the light. Its reflection hid his pallor, but his heart was thumping like a hammer and his throat was dry, for suddenly he understood. At his step Susan drew away from her companion and looked at the advancing shape with eyes darkly soft as those of an antelope.

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"Where have you been?" she said. "You were a long time away."

"In the mud house," said Daddy John.

"Did you find anyone interesting there?"

"Yes. When I was talkin' with him I didn't know he was so powerful interestin', but sence I come out o' there I've decided he was."

They both looked at him without much show of curiosity, merely, he guessed, that they might not look at each other and reveal their secret.

"What was he?" asked Courant.

"A clergyman."

This time they both started, the girl into sudden erectness, then held her head down as if in shame. For a sickened moment, he thought she was afraid to look at her lover for fear of seeing refusal in his face. Courant leaned near her and laid his hand on hers.

"If there's a clergyman here we can be married," he said quietly.

She drew her hand away and with its fellow covered her face. Courant looked across the fire and said:

"Go and get him, Daddy John. He can do the reading over us now."



PART V

The Promised Land



## CHAPTER I

IN the light of a clear September sun they stood and looked down on it—the Promised Land.

For days they had been creeping up through defiles in the mountain wall, crawling along ledges with murmurous seas of pine below and the snow lying crisp in the hollows. On the western slope the great bulwark dropped from granite heights to wooded ridges along the spines of which the road wound. Through breaks in the pine's close ranks they saw blue, vaporous distances, and on the far side of aerial chasms the swell of other mountains, clothed to their summits, shape undulating beyond shape.

Then on this bright September afternoon a sun-filled pallor of empty space shone between the tree trunks, and they had hurried to the summit of a knoll and seen it spread beneath them—California!

The long spurs, broken apart by ravines, wound downward to where a flat stretch of valley ran out to a luminous horizon. It was a yellow floor, dotted with the dark domes of trees and veined with a line of water. The trail, a red thread, was plain along the naked ridges, and then lost itself in the dusk of forests. Right and left summit and slope swelled and dropped, sun-tipped, shadow filled. Slants of

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light, rifts of shade, touched the crowded pine tops to gold, darkened them to sweeps of unstirred olive. The air, softly clear, was impregnated with a powerful aromatic scent, the strong, rich odor of the earth and its teeming growths. It lay placid and indolent before the way-worn trio, a new world waiting for their conquering feet.

The girl, with a deep sigh, dropped her head upon her husband's shoulder and closed her eyes. She weakened with the sudden promise of rest. It was in the air, soft as a caress, in the mild, beneficent sun, in the stillness which had nothing of the desert's sinister quiet. Courant put his arm about her, and looking into her face, saw it drawn and pinched, all beauty gone. Her closed eyelids were dark and seamed with fine folds, the cheek bones showed under her skin, tanned to a dry brown, its rich bloom withered. Round her forehead and ears her hair hung in ragged locks, its black gloss hidden under the trail's red dust. Even her youth had left her, she seemed double her age. It was as if he looked at the woman she would be twenty years from now.

Something in the sight of her, unbeautiful, enfeebled, her high spirit dimmed, stirred in him a new, strange tenderness. His arm tightened about her, his look lost its jealous ardor and wandering over her blighted face, melted to a passionate concern. The appeal of her beauty gave place to a stronger, more gripping appeal, never felt by him before. She was no longer the creature he owned

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and ruled, no longer the girl he had broken to an abject submission, but the woman he loved. Uplifted in the sudden realization he felt the world widen around him and saw himself another man. Then through the wonder of the revelation came the thought of what he had done to win her. It astonished him as a dart of pain would have done. Why had he remembered it? Why at this rich moment should the past send out this eerie reminder? He pushed it from him, and bending toward her murmured a lover's phrase.

She opened her eyes and they met an expression in his that she had felt the need of, hoped and waited for, an answer to what she had offered and he had not seen or wanted. It was completion, arrival at the goal, so longed for and despaired of, and she turned her face against his shoulder, her happiness too sacred even for his eyes. He did not understand the action, thought her spirit languished and, pointing outward, cried in his mounting gladness:

"Look—that's where our home will be."

She lifted her head and followed the directing finger. The old man stood beside them also gazing down.

"It's a grand sight," he said. "But it's as yellow as the desert. Must be almighty dry."

"There's plenty of water," said Courant. "Rivers come out of these mountains and go down there into the plain. And they carry the gold, the gold that's going to make us rich."

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He pressed her shoulder with his encircling arm and she answered dreamily:

"We are rich enough."

He thought she alluded to the Doctor's money that was hidden in the wagon.

"But we'll be richer. We've got here before the rest of 'em. We're the first comers and it's ours. You'll be queen here, Susan. I'll make you one." His glance ranged over the splendid prospect, eager with the man's desire to fight and win for his own. She thought little of what he said, lost in her perfect content.

"When we've got the gold we'll take up land and I'll build a house for you, a good house, my wife won't live in a tent. It'll be of logs, strong and water tight, and as soon as they bring things in—and the ships will be coming soon—we'll furnish it well. And that'll be only the beginning."

"Where will we build it?" she said, catching his enthusiasm and straining her eyes as if then and there to pick out the spot.

"By the river under a pine."

"With a place for Daddy John," she cried, stretching a hand toward the old man. "He must be there too."

He took it and stood linked to the embracing pair by the girl's warm grasp.

"I'll stick by the tent," he said; "no four walls for me."

"And you two," she looked from one to the other, "will wash for the gold and I'll take care of

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you. I'll keep everything clean and comfortable. It'll be a cozy little home—our log house under the pine."

She laughed, the first time in many weeks, and the clear sound rang joyously.

"And when we've got all the dust we want," Courant went on, his spirit expanding on the music of her laughter, "we'll go down to the coast. They'll have a town there soon for the shipping. We'll grow up with it, build it into a city, and as it gets richer so will we. It's going to be a new empire, out here by the Pacific, with the gold rivers back of it and the ocean in front. And it's going to be ours."

She looked over the foreground of hill and vale to the shimmering sweep of the rich still land. Her imagination, wakened by his words, passed from the log house to the busy rush of a city where the sea shone between the masts of ships. It was a glowing future they were to march on together, with no cloud to mar it now that she had seen the new look in his eyes.

A few days later they were in the Sacramento Valley camped near the walls of Sutter's Fort. The plain, clad with a drab grass, stretched to where the low-lying Sacramento slipped between oozy banks. Here were the beginnings of a town, shacks and tents dumped down in a helter skelter of slovenly hurry. Beyond, the American river crept from the mountains and threaded the parched land. Between the valley and the white sky-line of the Sierra, the

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foot hills swelled, indented with ravines and swathed in the matted robe of the chaparral.

While renewing their supplies at the fort they camped under a live oak. It was a mighty growth, its domed outline fretted with the fineness of horny leaves, its vast boughs outflung in contorted curves. The river sucked about its roots. Outside its shade the plain grew dryer under unclouded suns, huge trees casting black blots of shadow in which the Fort's cattle gathered. Sometimes vaqueros came from the gates in the adobe walls, riding light and with the long spiral leap of the lasso rising from an upraised hand. Sometimes groups of half-naked Indians trailed through the glare, winding a way to the spot of color that was their camp.

To the girl it was all wonderful, the beauty, the peace, the cessation of labor. When the men were at the Fort she lay beneath the great tree watching the faint, white chain of the mountains, or the tawny valley burning to orange in the long afternoons. For once she was idle, come at last to the end of all her journeyings. Only the present, the tranquil, perfect present, existed. What did not touch upon it, fit in and have some purpose in her life with the man of whom she was a part, was waste matter. She who had once been unable to endure the thought of separation from her father could now look back on his death and say, "How I suffered then," and know no reminiscent pang. She would have wondered at herself if, in the happiness in which she was lapped, she could have drawn

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her mind from its contemplation to wonder at anything. There was no world beyond the camp, no interest in what did not focus on Courant, no people except those who added to his trials or his welfare.

The men spent much of their time at the Fort, conferring with others en route to the river bed below Sutter's mill. When they came back to the camp there was lively talk under the old tree. The silence of the trail was at an end. The pendulum swung far, and now they were garrulous, carried away by the fever of speculation. The evening came and found them with scattered stores and uncleaned camp, their voices loud against the low whisperings of leaves and water.

Courant returned from these absences aglow with fortified purpose. Reestablished contact with the world brightened and humanized him, acting with an eroding effect on a surface hardened by years of lawless roving. In his voluntary exile he had not looked for or wanted the company of his fellows. Now he began to soften under it, shift his viewpoint from that of the all-sufficing individual to that of the bonded mass from which he had so long been an alien. The girl's influence had revived a side almost atrophied by disuse. Men's were aiding it. As her sympathies narrowed under the obsession of her happiness, his expanded, awaked by a reversion to forgotten conditions.

One night, lying beside her under the tent's roof, he found himself wakeful. It was starless and still, the song of the river fusing in a continuous flow

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of low sound with the secret, self-communings of the tree. The girl's light breathing was at his ear, a reminder of his ownership and its responsibilities. In the idleness of the unoccupied mind he mused on the future they were to share till death should come between. It was pleasant thinking, or so it began. Then, gradually, something in the darkness and the lowered utility of light caused it to lose its joy, become suffused by a curious, doubting uneasiness. He lay without moving, given up to the strange feeling, not knowing what induced it or from whence it came. It grew in poignancy, clearer and stronger, till it led him like a clew to the body of David.

For the first time that savage act came back to him with a surge of repudiation, of scared denial. He had a realizing sense of how it would look to other men—the men he had met at the Fort. Distinctly, as if their mental attitude were substituted for his, he saw it as they would see it, as the world he was about to enter would see it. His heart began to thump with something like terror and the palms of his hands grew moist. Turning stealthily that he might not wake her, he stared at the triangle of paler darkness that showed through the tent's raised flap. He had no fear that Susan would find out. Even if she did, he knew her securely his, till the end of time, her thoughts to take their color from him, her fears to be lulled at his wish. But the others—the active, busy, practical throng into which he would be absorbed. His action, in the

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heat of a brutal passion, had made him an outsider from the close-drawn ranks of his fellows. He had been able to do without them, defied their laws, scorned their truckling to public opinion—but now?

The girl turned in her sleep, pressing her head against his shoulder and murmuring drowsily. He edged away from her, flinching from the contact, feeling a grievance against her. She was the link between him and them. Hers was the influence that was sapping the foundations of his independence. She was drawing him back to the place of lost liberty outside which he had roamed in barbarous content. His love was riveting bonds upon him, making his spirit as water. He felt a revolt, a resistance against her power, which was gently impelling him toward home, hearth, neighbors—the life in which he felt his place was gone.

The next day the strange mood seemed an ugly dream. It was not he who had lain wakeful and questioned his right to bend Fate to his own demands. He rode beside his wife at the head of the train as they rolled out in the bright, dry morning on the road to the river. There were men behind them, and in front the dust rose thick on the rear of pack trains. They filed across the valley, watching the foot hills come nearer and the muffling robe of the chaparral separate into checkered shadings where the manzanita glittered and the faint, bluish domes of small pines rose above the woven greenery.

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Men were already before them, scattered along the river's bars, waist high in the pits. Here and there a tent showed white, but a blanket under a tree, a pile of pans by a blackened heap of fire marked most of the camps. Some of the gold-hunters had not waited to undo their packs which lay as they had been dropped, and the owners, squatting by the stream's lip, bent over their pans round which the water sprayed in a silver fringe. There were hails and inquiries, answering cries of good or ill luck. Many did not raise their eyes, too absorbed by the hope of fortune to waste one golden moment.

These were the vanguard, the forerunners of next year's thousands, scratching the surface of the lower bars. The sound of their voices was soon left behind and the river ran free of them. Pack trains dropped from the line, spreading themselves along the rim of earth between the trail and the shrunken current. Courant's party moved on, going higher, veiled in a cloud of brick-colored dust. The hills swept up into bolder lines, the pines mounted in sentinel files crowding out the lighter leafage. At each turn the vista showed a loftier uprise, crest peering above crest, and far beyond, high and snow-touched, the summits of the Sierra. The shadows slanted cool from wall to wall, the air was fresh and scented with the forest's resinous breath. Across the tree tops, dense as the matted texture of moss, the winged shadows of hawks floated, and paused, and floated again.

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Here on a knoll under a great pine they pitched the tent. At its base the river ran, dwindled to a languid current, the bared mud banks waiting for their picks. The walls of the cañon drew close, a drop of naked granite opposite, and on the slopes beyond were dark-aisled depths, golden-moted, and stirred to pensive melodies. The girl started to help, then kicked aside the up-piled blankets, dropped the skillets into the mess chest, and cried:

"Oh, I can't, I want to look and listen. Keep still—" The men stopped their work, and the music of the murmurous boughs and the gliding water filled the silence. She turned her head, sniffing the forest's scents, her glance lighting on the blue shoulders of distant hills.

"And look at the river, yellow, yellow with gold! I can't work now, I want to see it all—and feel it too," and she ran to the water's edge where she sat down on a rock and gazed up and down the cañon.

When the camp was ready Courant joined her. The rock was wide enough for two and he sat beside her.

"So you like it, Missy?" he said, sending a side-long glance at her flushed face.

"Like it!" though there was plenty of room she edged nearer to him, "I'm wondering if it really is so beautiful or if I just think it so after the trail."

"You'll be content to stay here with me till we've made our pile?"

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She looked at him and nodded, then slipped her fingers between his and whispered, though there was no one by to hear, "I'd be content to stay anywhere with you."

He was growing accustomed to this sort of reply. Deprived of it he would have noticed the omission, but it had of late become so common a feature in the conversation he felt no necessity to answer in kind. He glanced at the pine trunks about them and said:

"If the claim's good, we'll cut some of those and build a cabin. You'll see how comfortable I can make you, the way they do on the frontier."

She pressed his fingers for answer and he went on:

"When the winter comes we can move farther down. Up here we may get snow. But there'll be time between now and then to put up something warm and waterproof."

"Why should we move down? With a good cabin we can be comfortable here. The snow won't be heavy this far up. They told Daddy John all about it at the Fort. And you and he can ride in there sometimes when we want things."

These simple words gratified him more than she guessed. It was as if she had seen into the secret springs of his thought and said what he was fearful she would not say. That was why—in a spirit of testing a granted boon to prove its genuineness—he asked with tentative questioning:

"You won't be lonely? There are no people here."

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She made the bride's answer and his contentment increased, for again it was what he would have wished her to say. When he answered he spoke almost sheepishly, with something of uneasy confession in his look:

"I'd like to live in places like this always. I feel choked and stifled where there are walls shutting out the air and streets full of people. Even in the Fort I felt like a trapped animal. I want to be where there's room to move about and nobody bothering with different kinds of ideas. It's only in the open, in places without men, that I'm myself."

For the first time he had dared to give expression to the mood of the wakeful night. Though it was dim in the busy brightness of the present—a black spot on the luster of cheerful days—he dreaded that it might come again with its scaring suggestions. With a nerve that had never known a tremor at any menace from man, he was frightened of a thought, a temporary mental state. In speaking thus to her, he recognized her as a helpmeet to whom he could make a shamed admission of weakness and fear no condemnation or diminution of love. This time, however, she made the wrong reply:

"But we'll go down to the coast after a while, if our claim's good and we get enough dust out of it. I think of it often. It will be so nice to live in a house again, and have some one to do the cooking, and wear pretty clothes. It will be such fun living where there are people and going about among

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them, going to parties and maybe having parties of our own."

He withdrew his hand from hers and pushed the hair back from his forehead. Though he said nothing she was conscious of a drop in his mood. She bent forward to peer into his face and queried with bright, observing eyes:

"You don't seem to like the thought of it."

"Oh, it's not me," he answered. "I was just wondering at the queer way women talk. A few minutes ago you said you'd be content anywhere with me. Now you say you think it would be such fun living in a city and going to parties."

"With you, too," she laughed, pressing against his shoulder. "I don't want to go to the parties alone."

"Well, I guess if you ever go it'll have to be alone," he said roughly.

She understood now that she had said something that annoyed him, and not knowing how she had come to do it, felt aggrieved and sought to justify herself:

"But we can't live here always. If we make money we'll want to go back some day where there are people, and comforts and things going on. We'll want friends, everybody has friends. You don't mean for us always to stay far away from everything in these wild, uncivilized places?"

"Why not?" he said, not looking at her, noting her rueful tone and resenting it.

"But we're not that kind of people. You're not

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a real mountain man. You're not like Zavi or the men at Fort Laramie. You're Napoleon Duchesney just as I'm Susan Gillespie. Your people in St. Louis and New Orleans were ladies and gentlemen. It was just a wild freak that made you run off into the mountains. You don't want to go on living that way. That part of your life's over. The rest will be with me."

"And you'll want the cities and the parties?"

"I'll want to live the way Mrs. Duchesney should live, and you'll want to, too." He did not answer, and she gave his arm a little shake and said, "Won't you?"

"I'm more Low Courant than I am Napoleon Duchesney," was his answer.

"Well, maybe so, but whichever you are, you've got a wife now and *that* makes a great difference."

She tried to infuse some of her old coquetry into the words, but the eyes, looking sideways at him, were troubled, for she did not yet see where she had erred.

"I guess it does," he said low, more as if speaking to himself than her.

This time she said nothing, feeling dashed and repulsed. They continued to sit close together on the rock, the man lost in morose reverie, the girl afraid to move or touch him lest he should show further annoyance.

The voice of Daddy John calling them to supper came to both with relief. They walked to the camp side by side, Low with head drooped, the girl at his

## The Emigrant Trail

elbow stealing furtive looks at him. As they approached the fire she slid her hand inside his arm and, glancing down, he saw the timid questioning of her face and was immediately contrite. He laid his hand on hers and smiled, and she caught her breath in a deep sigh and felt happiness come rushing back. Whatever it was she had said that displeased him she would be careful not to say it again, for she had already learned that the lion in love is still the lion.

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## CHAPTER II

THEIR claim was rich and they buckled down to work, the old man constructing a rocker after a model of his own, and Courant digging in the pits. Everything was with them, rivals were few, the ground uncrowded, the season dry. It was the American River before the Forty-niners swarmed along its edges, and there was gold in its sands, sunk in a sediment below its muddy deposit, caked in cracks through the rocks round which its currents had swept for undisturbed ages.

They worked feverishly, the threat of the winter rains urging them on. The girl helped, leaving her kettle settled firm on a bed of embers while the water heated for dish washing, to join them on the shore, heaped with their earth piles. She kept the rocker in motion while the old man dipped up the water in a tin ladle and sent it running over the sifting bed of sand and pebbles. The heavier labor of digging was Courant's. Before September was over the shore was honeycombed with his excavations, driven down to the rock bed. The diminishing stream shrunk with each day and he stood in it knee high, the sun beating on his head, his clothes pasted to his skin by perspiration, and the thud of

## The Emigrant Trail

his pick falling with regular stroke on the monotonous rattle of the rocker.

Sometimes she was tired and they ordered her to leave them and rest in the shade of the camp. She loitered about under the spread of the pine boughs, cleaning and tidying up, and patching the ragged remnants of their clothes. Often, as she sat propped against the trunk, her sewing fell to her lap and she looked out with shining, spell-bound eyes. The men were shapes of dark importance against the glancing veil of water, the soaked sands and the low brushwood yellowing in the autumn's soft, transforming breath. Far away the film of whitened summits dreamed against the blue. In the midwash of air, aloft and dreaming, too, the hawk's winged form poised, its shadow moving below it across the sea of tree tops.

She would sit thus, motionless and idle, as the long afternoon wore away, and deep-colored veils of twilight gathered in the cañon. She told the men the continuous sounds of their toil made her drowsy. But her stillness was the outward sign of an inner concentration. If delight in rest had replaced her old bodily energy, her mind had gained a new activity. She wondered a little at it, not yet at the heart of her own mystery. Her thoughts reached forward into the future, busied themselves with details of the next twelve months, dwelt anxiously on questions of finance. The nest-building instinct was astir in her and she pondered on the house they were to build, how they must arrange

## The Promised Land

something for a table, and maybe fashion arm-chairs of barrels and red flannel. Finally, in a last voluptuous flight of ecstasy, she saw herself riding into Sacramento with a sack of dust and abandoning herself to an orgie of bartering.

One afternoon three men, two Mexicans and an Australian sailor from a ship in San Francisco cove, stopped at the camp for food. The Australian was a loquacious fellow, with faculties sharpened by glimpses of life in many ports. He told them of the two emigrant convoys he had just seen arrive in Sacramento, worn and wasted by the last forced marches over the mountains. Susan, who had been busy over her cooking, according him scant attention, at his description of the trains, suddenly lifted intent eyes and leaned toward him:

"Did you see a man among them, a young man, tall and thin, with black hair and beard?"

"All the men were tall and thin, or any ways thin," said the sailor, laughing. "How tall was he?"

"Six feet," she replied, her face devoid of any answering smile, "with high shoulders and walking with a stoop. He had a fine, handsome face, and long black hair to his shoulders and gray eyes."

"Have you lost your sweetheart?" said the man, who did not know the relations of the party.

"No," she said gravely, "my friend."

Courant explained:

"She's my wife. The man she's speaking of was a member of our company that we lost on the desert."

## The Emigrant Trail

We thought Indians had got him and hoped he'd get away and join with a later westbound train. His name was David."

The sailor shook his head.

"Ain't seen no one answering to that name, nor to that description. There wasn't a handsome-featured one in the lot, nor a David. But if you're expecting him along, why don't you take her in and let her look 'em over? They told me at the Fort the trains was mostly all in or ought to be. Any time now the snow on the summit will be too deep for 'em. If they get caught up there they can't be got out, so they're coming over hot foot and are dumped down round Hock Farm. Not much to see, but if you're looking for a friend it's worth trying."

That night Courant was again wakeful. Susan's face, as she had questioned the sailor, floated before him on the darkness. With it came the thought of the dead man. In the silence David called upon him from the sepulcher beneath the rock, sent a message through the night which said that, though he was hidden from mortal vision, the memory of him was still alive, imbued with an unquenchable vitality. His unwinking eyes, with the rock crumbs sifting on them, looked at those of his triumphant enemy and spoke through their dusted films. In the moment of death they had said nothing to him, now they shone—not angrily accusing as they had been in life—but stern with a vindictive purpose.

Courant began to have a fearful understanding

## The Promised Land

of their meaning. Though dead to the rest of the world, David would maintain an intense and secret life in his murderer's conscience. He had never fought such a subtle and implacable foe, and he lay thinking of how he could create conditions that would give him escape, push the phantom from him, make him forget, and be as he had been when no one had disputed his sovereignty over himself. He tried to think that time would mitigate this haunting discomfort. His sense of guilt, his fear of his wife, would die when the novelty of once again being one with the crowd had worn away. It was not possible that he, defiant of man and God, could languish under this dread of a midnight visitation or a discovery that never would be made. It was the re-entering into the communal life that had upset his poise—or was it the influence of the woman, the softly pervasive, enervating influence? He came up against this thought with a dizzying impact and felt himself droop and sicken as one who is faced with a task for which his strength is inadequate.

He turned stealthily and lay on his back, his face beaded with sweat. The girl beside him waked and sat up casting a side glance at him. By the starlight, slanting in through the raised tent door, she saw his opened eyes and, leaning toward him, a black shape against the faintly blue triangle, said:

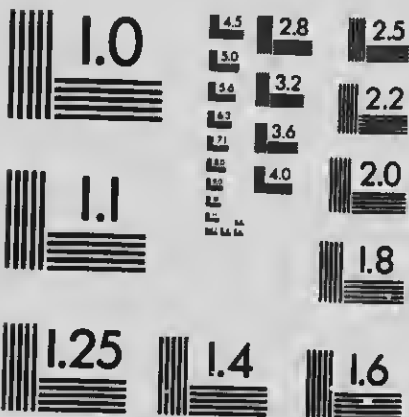
"Low, are you awake?"

He answered without moving, glad to hear her speak, to know that sleep had left her and her voice might conjure away his black imaginings.



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"Why aren't you sleeping?" she asked. "You must be half dead after such work as you did today."

"I was thinking—" then hastily, for he was afraid that she might sense his mood and ply him with sympathetic queries: "Sometimes people are too tired to sleep. I am, and so I was lying here just thinking of nothing."

His fears were unnecessary. She was as healthily oblivious of his disturbance as he was morbidly conscious of it. She sat still, her hands clasped round her knees, about which the blanket draped blackly.

"I was thinking, too," she said.

"Of what?"

"Of what that man was saying of David."

There was a silence. He lay motionless, his trouble coming back upon him. He wished that he might dare to impose upon her a silence on that one subject. David, given a place in her mind, would sit at every feast, walk beside them, lie between them in their marriage bed."

"Why do you think of him?" he asked.

"Because—" her tone showed surprise. "It's natural, isn't it? Don't you? I'm sure you do. I do often, much oftener than you think. I'm always hoping that he'll come."

"You never loved him," he said, in a voice from which all spring was gone.

"No, but he was my friend, and I would like to keep him so for always. I think of his kindness, his

## The Promised Land

gentleness, all the good part of him before the train broke him down. And, I think, too, how cruel I was to him."

The darkness hid her face, but her voice told that she, too, had her little load of guilt where David was concerned.

The man moved uneasily.

"That's foolishness. You only told the truth. If it was cruel, that's not your affair."

"He loved me. A woman doesn't forget that."

"That's over and done with. He's probably here somewhere, come through with a train that's scattered. And, anyway, you can't do any good by thinking about him."

This time the false reassurances came with the pang that the dead man was rousing in tardy retribution.

"I should like to know it," she said wistfully, "to feel sure. It's the only thing that mars our happiness. If I knew he was safe and well somewhere there'd be nothing in the world for me but perfect joy."

Her egotism of satisfied body and spirit jarred upon him. The passion she had evoked had found no peace in its fulfillment. She had got what he had hoped for. All that he had anticipated was destroyed by the unexpected intrusion of a part of himself that had lain dead till she had quickened it, and quickening it she had killed his joy. In a flash of divination he saw that, if she persisted in her worry over David, she would rouse in him an antagonism

## The Emigrant Trail

that would eventually drive him from her. He spoke with irritation:

"Put him out of your mind. Don't worry about him. You can't do any good, and it spoils our love."

After a pause, she said with a hesitating attempt at cajolery:

"Let me and Daddy John drive into the valley and try and get news of him. We need supplies and we'll be gone only two or three days. We can inquire at the Fort and maybe go on to Sacramento, and if he's been there we'll hear of it. If we could only hear, just hear, he was safe, it would be such a relief. It would take away this dreary feeling of anxiety, and guilt too, Low. For I feel guilty when I think of how we left him."

"Where was the guilt? You've no right to say that. You understood we had to go. I could take no risks with you and the old man."

"Yes," she said, slowly, tempering her agreement with a self-soothing reluctance, "but even so, it seemed terrible. I often tell myself we couldn't have done anything else, but——"

Her voice dropped to silence and she sat staring out at the quiet night, her head blurred with the filaments of loosened hair.

He did not speak, gripped by his internal torment, aggravated now by torment from without. He wondered, if he told her the truth, would she understand and help him to peace. But he knew that such knowledge would set her in a new attitude toward him, an attitude of secret judgment, of distracted

## The Promised Land

pity, of an agonized partisanship built on loyalty and the despairing passion of the disillusioned. He could never tell her, for he could never support the loss of her devoted belief, which was now the food of his life.

"Can I go?" she said, turning to look at him, smiling confidently as one who knows the formal demand unnecessary.

"If you want," he answered.

"Then we'll start to-morrow," she said, and, leaning down, kissed him.

He was unresponsive to the touch of her lips, lay inert as she nestled down into soft-breathing, child-like sleep. He watched the tent opening pale into a glimmering triangle wondering what their life would be with the specter of David standing in the path, an angel with a flaming sword barring the way to Paradise.

Two days later she and Daddy John, sitting on the front seat of the wagon, saw the low drab outlines of the Fort rising from the plain. Under their tree was a new encampment, one tent with the hood of a wagon behind it, and oxen grazing in the sun. As they drew near they could see the crouched forms of two children, the light filtering through the leafage on the silky flax of their heads. They were occupied over a game, evidently a serious business, its floor of operations the smooth ground worn bare about the camp fire. One of them lay flat with a careful hand patting the dust into mounds, the other squatted near by watching, a slant of white

## The Emigrant Trail

hair falling across a rounded cheek. They did not heed the creak of the wagon wheels, but as a woman's voice called from the tent, raised their heads listening, but not answering, evidently deeming silence the best safeguard against interruption.

Susan laid a clutching hand on Daddy John's arm. "It's the children," she cried in a choked voice. "Stop, stop!" and before he could rein the mules to order she was out and running toward them, calling their names.

They made a clamor of welcome, Bob running to her and making delighted leaps up at her face, the little girl standing aloof for the first bashful moment, then sidling nearer with mouth upheld for kisses. Bella heard them and came to the tent door, gave a great cry, and ran to them. There were tears on her cheeks as she clasped Susan, held her off and clutched her again, with panted ejaculations of "Deary me!" and "Oh, Lord, Missy, is it you?"

It was like a meeting on the other side of the grave. They babbled their news, both talking at once, not stopping to finish sentences, or wait for the answer to questions of the marches they had not shared. Over the clamor they looked at each other with faces that smiled and quivered, the tie between them strengthened by the separation when each had longed for the other, closer in understanding by the younger's added experience, both now women.

Glen was at the Fort and Daddy John rolled off to meet him there. The novelty of the moment over, the children returned sedately to their play, and the

## The Promised Land

women sat together under the canopy of the tree. Bella's adventures had been few and tame, Susan's was the great story. She was not discursive about her marriage. She was still shy on the subject and sensitively aware of the disappointment that Bella was too artlessly amazed to conceal. She passed over it quickly, pretending that she did not hear Bella's astonished:

"But why did you get married at Humboldt? Why didn't you wait till you got here?"

It was the loss of David that she made the point of her narrative, anxiously impressing on her listener their need of going on. She stole quick looks at Bella, watchful for the first shade of disapprobation, with all Low's arguments ready to sweep it aside. But Bella, with maternal instincts in place of a comprehensive humanity, agreed that Low had done right. Nature, in the beginning, combined with the needs of the trail, had given her a viewpoint where expediency counted for more than altruism. She with two children and a helpless man would have gone on and left anyone to his fate. She did not say this, but Susan, with intelligence sharpened by a jealous passion, felt that there was no need to defend her husband's action. As for the rest of the world—deep in her heart she had already decided it should never know.

"You couldn't have done anything else," said Bella. "I've learned that when you're doing that sort of thing, you can't have the same feelings you can back in the States, with everything handy and

## The Emigrant Trail

comfortable. You can be fair, but you got to fight for your own. They got to come first."

She had neither seen nor heard anything of David. No rumor of a man held captive by the Indians had reached their train. She tried not to let Susan see that she believed the worst. But her melancholy headshake and murmured "Poor David—and him such a kind, whole-hearted man" was as an obituary on the dead.

"Well," she said in pensive comment when Susan had got to the end of her history, "you can't get through a journey like that without some one coming to grief. It's not in human nature. But your father—that grand man! And then the young feller that would have made you such a good husband—" Susan moved warningly—"Not but what I'm sure you've got as good a one as it is. And we've got to take what we can get in this world," she added, spoiling it all by the philosophical acceptance of what she evidently regarded as a makeshift adjusting to Nature's needs.

When the men came back Glen had heard all about the gold in the river and was athirst to get there. Work at his trade could wait, and, anyway, he had been in Sacramento and found, while his services were in demand on every side, the materials where-with he was to help raise a weatherproof city were not to be had. Men were content to live in tents and cloth shacks until the day of lumber and saw-mills dawned, and why wait for this millennium when the river called from its golden sands?

## The Promised Land

No one had news of David. Daddy John had questioned the captains of two recently arrived convoys, but learned nothing. The men thought it likely he was dead. They agreed as to the possibility of the Indian abduction and his future reappearance. Such things had happened. But it was too late now to do anything. No search party could be sent out at this season when at any day the mountain trails might be neck high in snow. There was nothing to do but wait till the spring.

Susan listened with lowered brows. It was heavy news. She did not know how she had hoped till she heard that all hope must lie in abeyance for at least six months. It was a long time to be patient. She was selfishly desirous to have her anxieties at rest, for, as she had told her husband, they were the only cloud on her happiness, and she wanted that happiness complete. It was not necessary for her peace to see David again. To know he was safe somewhere would have satisfied her.

The fifth day after leaving the camp they sighted the pitted shores of their own diggings. Sitting in the McMurdos' wagon they had speculated gayly on Low's surprise. Susan, on the seat beside Glen, had been joyously full of the anticipation of it, wondered what he would say, and then fell to imagining it with closed lips and dancing eyes. When the road reached the last concealing buttress she climbed down and mounted beside Daddy John, whose wagon was some distance in advance.

"It's going to be a surprise for Low," she said

## The Emigrant Trail

in the voice of a mischievous child. "You mustn't say anything. Let me tell him."

The old man, squinting sideways at her, gave his wry smile. It was good to see his Missy this way again, in bloom like a refreshed flower.

"Look," she cried, as her husband's figure came into view kneeling by the rocker. "Here he is, and he doesn't see us. Stop!"

Courant heard their wheels and, turning, started to his feet and came forward, the light in his face leaping to hers. She sprang down and ran toward him, her arms out. Daddy John, slashing the way-side bushes with his whip, looked reflectively at the bending twigs while the embrace lasted. The Mc-Murdos' curiosity was not restrained by any such inconvenient delicacy. They peeped from under the wagon hood, grinning appreciatively, Bella the while maintaining a silent fight with the children, who struggled for an exit. None of them could hear what the girl said, but they saw Courant suddenly look with a changed face, its light extinguished, at the second wagon.

"He don't seem so terrible glad to see us," said Glen. "I guess he wanted to keep the place for himself."

Bella noted the look and snorted.

"He's a cross-grained thing," she said; "I don't see what got into her to marry him when she could have had David."

"She can't have him when he ain't round to be had," her husband answered. "Low's better than

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a man that's either a prisoner with the Indians or dead somewhere. David was a good boy, but I don't seem to see he'd be much use to her now."

Bella sniffed again, and let the squirming children go to get what good they could out of the unpromising moment of the surprise.

What Low had said to Susan was an angry, "Why did you bring them?"

She fell back from him not so crestfallen at his words as at his dark frown of disapproval.

"Why, I wanted them," she faltered, bewildered by his obvious displeasure at what she thought would be welcome news, "and I thought you would."

"I'd rather you hadn't. Aren't we enough by ourselves?"

"Yes, of course. But they're our friends. We traveled with them for days and weeks, and it's made them like relations. I was so glad to see them I cried when I saw Bella. Oh, do try and seem more as if you liked it. They're here and I've brought them."

He slouched forward to greet them. She was relieved to see that he made an effort to banish his annoyance and put some warmth of welcome into his voice. But the subtlety with which he could conceal his emotions when it behooved him had deserted him, and Bella and Glen saw the husband did not stand toward them as the wife did.

It was Susan who infused into the meeting a fevered and fictitious friendliness, chattering over the

## The Emigrant Trail

pauses that threatened to fall upon it, leaving them a reunited company only in name. She presently swept Bella to the camp, continuing her nervous prattle as she showed her the tent and the spring behind it, and told of the log house they were to raise before the rains came. Bella was placated. After all, it was a lovely spot, good for the children, and if Glen could do as well on a lower bend of the river as they had done here, it looked as if they had at last found the Promised Land.

After supper they sat by Daddy John's fire, which shot an eddying column of sparks into the plumed darkness of the pine. It was like old times only—with a glance outward toward the water and the star-strewn sky—so much more—what was the word? Not quiet; they could never forget the desert silence. "Homelike," Susan suggested, and they decided that was the right word.

"You feel as if you could stay here and not want to move on," Bella opined.

Glen thought perhaps you felt that way because you knew you'd come to the end and couldn't move much farther.

But the others argued him down. They all agreed there was something in the sun maybe, or the mellow warmth of the air, or the richness of wooded slope and plain, that made them feel they had found a place where they could stay, not for a few days' rest, but forever. Susan had hit upon the word "homelike," the spot on earth that seemed to you the one best fitted for a home.

## The Promised Land

The talk swung back to days on the trail and finally brought up on David. They rehearsed the tragic story, conned over the details that had begun to form into narrative sequence as in the time-worn lay of a minstrel. Bella and Glen asked all the old questions that had once been asked by Susan and Daddy John, and heard the same answers, leaning to catch them while the firelight played on the strained attention of their faces. With the night pressing close around them, and the melancholy, sea-like song sweeping low from the forest, a chill crept upon them, and their lost comrade became invested with the unreality of a spirit. Dead in that bleak and God-forgotten land, or captive in some Indian stronghold, he loomed a tragic phantom remote from them and their homely interests like a historical figure round which legend has begun to accumulate.

The awed silence that had fallen was broken by Courant rising and walking away toward the diggings. This brought their somber pondering to an end. Bella and Glen picked up the sleeping children and went to their tent, and Susan, peering beyond the light, saw her man sitting on a stone, dark against the broken silver of the stream. She stole down to him and laid her hand on his shoulder. He started as if her touch scared him, then saw who it was and turned away with a gruff murmur. The sound was not encouraging, but the wife, already so completely part of him that his moods were communicated to her through the hidden subways of

## The Emigrant Trail

instinct, understood that he was in some unconfessed trouble.

"What's the matter, Low?" she asked, bending to see his face.

He turned it toward her, met the penetrating inquiry of her look, and realized his dependence on her, feeling his weakness but not caring just then that he should be weak.

"Nothing," he answered. "Why do they harp so on David?"

"Don't you like them to?" she asked in some surprise.

He took a splinter from the stone and threw it into the water, a small silvery disturbance marking its fall.

"There's nothing more to be said. It's all useless talk. We can do no more than we've done."

"Shall I tell them you don't like the subject, not to speak of it again?"

He glanced at her with sudden suspicion:

"No, no, of course not. They've a right to say anything they please. But it's a waste of time, there's nothing but guessing now. What's the use of guessing and wondering all through the winter. Are they going to keep on that way till the spring?"

"I'll tell them not to," she said as a simple solution of the difficulty. "I'll tell them it worries you."

"Don't," he said sharply. "Do you hear? Don't. Do you want to act like a fool and make me angry with you?"

He got up and moved away, leaving her staring

## The Promised Land

blankly at his back. He had been rough to her often, but never before spoken with this note of peremptory, peevish displeasure. She felt an obscure sense of trouble, a premonition of disaster. She went to him and, standing close, put her hand inside his arm.

"Low," she pleaded, "what's wrong with you? You were angry that they came. Now you're angry at what they say. I don't understand. Tell me the reason of it. If there's something that I don't know let me hear it, and I'll try and straighten things out."

For a tempted moment he longed to tell her, to gain ease by letting her share his burden. The hand upon his arm was a symbol of her hold upon him that no action of his could ever loose. If he could admit her within the circle of his isolation he would have enough. He would lose the baleful consciousness of forever walking apart, separated from his kind, a spiritual Ishmaelite. She had strength enough. For the moment he felt that she was the stronger of the two, able to bear more than he, able to fortify him and give him courage for the future. He had a right to claim such a dole of her love, and once the knowledge hers, they two would stand, banished from the rest of the world, knit together by the bond of their mutual knowledge.

The temptation clutched him and his breast contracted in the rising struggle. His pain clamored for relief, his weakness for support. The lion man, broken and tamed by the first pure passion of his

## The Emigrant Trail

life, would have cast the weight of his sin upon the girl he had thought to bear through life like a pampered mistress.

With the words on his lips he looked at her. She met the look with a smile that she tried to make brave, but that was only a surface grimace, her spirit's disturbance plain beneath it. There was pathos in its courage and its failure. He averted his eyes, shook his arm free of her hand, and, moving toward the water, said:

"Go back to the tent and go to bed."

"What are you going to do?" she called after him, her voice sounding plaintive. Its wistful note gave him strength:

"Walk for a while. I'm not tired. I'll be back in an hour," and he walked away, down the edge of the current, past the pits and into the darkness.

She watched him, not understanding, vaguely alarmed, then turned and went back to the tent.

### CHAPTER III

THE stretch of the river where the McMurdos had settled was richer than Courant's location. Had Glen been as mighty a man with the pick, even in the short season left to him, he might have accumulated a goodly store. But he was a slack worker. His training as a carpenter made him useful, finding expression in an improvement on Daddy John's rocker, so they overlooked his inclination to lie off in the sun with his ragged hat pulled over his eyes. In Courant's camp Bella was regarded as the best man of the two. To her multiform duties she added that of assistant in the diggings, squatting beside her husband in the mud, keeping the rocker going, and when Glen was worked out, not above taking a hand at the shovel. Her camp showed a comfortable neatness, and the children's nakedness was covered with garments fashioned by the firelight from old flour sacks.

There was no crisp coming of autumn. A yellowing of the leafage along the river's edge was all that denoted the season's change. Nature seemed loth to lay a desecrating hand on the region's tranquil beauty. They had been told at the Fort that they might look for the first rains in November.

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When October was upon them they left the pits and set to work felling trees for two log huts.

Susan saw her home rising on the knoll, a square of logs, log roofed, with a door of woven saplings over which canvas was nailed. They built a chimney of stones rounded by the water's action, and for a hearth found a slab of granite which they sunk in the earth before the fireplace. The bunk was a frame of young pines with canvas stretched across, and cushioned with spruce boughs and buffalo robes. She watched as they nailed up shelves of small, split trunks and sawed the larger ones into sections for seats. The bottom of the wagon came out and, poised on four log supports, made the table.

Her housewife's instincts rose jubilant as the shell took form, and she sang to herself as she stitched her flour sacks together for towels. No princess decked her palace with a blither spirit. All the little treasures that had not been jettisoned in the last stern march across the desert came from their hiding places for the adornment of the first home of her married life. The square of mirror stood on the shelf near the door where the light could fall on it, and the French gilt clock that had been her mother's ticked beside it. The men laughed as she set out on the table the silver mug of her baby days and a two-handled tankard bearing on its side a worn coat of arms, a heritage from the adventurous Poutrincourt, a drop of whose blood had given boldness and courage to hers.

It was her home—very different from the home

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she had dreamed of—but so was her life different from the life she and her father had planned together in the dead days of the trail. She delighted in it, gloated over it. Long before the day of installation she moved in her primitive furnishings, disposed the few pans with an eye to their effect as other brides arrange their silver and crystal, hung her flour-sack towels on the pegs with as careful a hand as though they had been tapestries, and folded her clothes neat and seemly in her father's chest. Then came a night when the air was sharp, and they kindled the first fire in the wide chimney mouth. It leaped exultant, revealing the mud-filled cracks, playing on the pans, and licking the bosses of the old tankard. The hearthstone shone red with its light, and they sat drawn back on the seats of pine looking into its roaring depths—housed, sheltered, cozily content. When Glen and Bella retired to their tent a new romance seemed to have budded in the girl's heart. It was her bridal night—beneath a roof, beside a hearth, with a door to close against the world, and shut her away with her lover.

In these days she had many secret conferrings with Bella. They kept their heads together and whispered, and Bella crooned and fussed over her and pushed the men into the background in a masterful, aggressive manner. Susan knew now what had waked the nest-building instinct. The knowledge came with a thrilling, frightened joy. She sat apart adjusting herself to the new outlook, sometimes fearful, then uplifted in a rapt, still ela-

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tion. All the charm she had once held over the hearts of men was gone. Glen told Bella she was getting stupid, even Daddy John wondered at her dull, self-centered air. She would not have cared what they had said or thought of her. Her interest in men as creatures to snare and beguile was gone with her lost maidenhood. All that she had of charm and beauty she hoarded, stored up and jealously guarded, for her husband and her child.

"It'll be best for you to go down to the town," Bella had said to her, reveling discreetly in her position as high priestess of these mysteries, "there'll be doctors in Sacramento, *some* kind of doctors."

"I'll stay here," Susan answered. "You're here and my husband and Daddy John. I'd die if I was sent off among strangers. I can't live except with the people I'm fond of. I'm not afraid."

And the older woman decided that maybe she was right. She could see enough to know that this girl of a higher stock and culture, plucked from a home of sheltered ease to be cast down in the rude life of the pioneer, was only a woman like all the rest, having no existence outside her own small world.

So the bright, monotonous days filed by, always sunny, always warm, till it seemed as if they were to go on thus forever, glide into a winter which was still spring. An excursion to Sacramento, a big day's clean up, were their excitements. They taught little Bob to help at the rocker, and the women sat by the cabin door sewing, long periods of silence broken by moments of desultory talk. Susan had

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grown much quieter. She would sit with idle hands watching the shifting lights and the remoter hills turning from the afternoon's blue to the rich purple of twilight. Bella said she was lazy, and urged industry and the need of speed in the preparation of the new wardrobe. She laughed indolently and said, time enough later on. She had grown indifferent about her looks—her hair hanging elfish round her ears, her blouse unfastened at the throat, the new boots Low had brought her from Sacramento unworn in the cabin corner, her feet clothed in the ragged moccasins he had taught her to make.

In the evening she sat on a blanket on the cabin floor, blinking sleepily at the flames. Internally she brimmed with a level content. Life was coming to the flood with her, her being gathering itself for its ultimate expression. All the curiosity and interest she had once turned out to the multiple forms and claims of the world were now concentrated on the two lives between which hers stood. She was the primitive woman, a mechanism of elemental instincts, moving up an incline of progressive passions. The love of her father had filled her youth, and that had given way to the love of her mate, which in time would dim before the love of her child. Outside these phases of a governing prepossession—filial, conjugal, maternal—she knew nothing, felt nothing, and could see nothing.

Low, at first, had brooded over her with an almost ferocious tenderness. Had she demanded a removal to the town he would have given way. He would

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have acceded to anything she asked, but she asked nothing. As the time passed her demands of him, even to his help in small matters of the household, grew less. A slight, inscrutable change had come over her: she was less responsive, often held him with an eye whose blankness told of inner imaginings, when he spoke made no answer, concentrated in her reverie. When he watched her withdrawn in these dreams, or in a sudden attack of industry, fashioning small garments from her hoarded store of best clothes, he felt an alienation in her, and he realized with a start of alarmed divination that the child would take a part of what had been his, steal from him something of that blind devotion in the eternal possession of which he had thought to find solace.

It was a shock that roused him to a scared scrutiny of the future. He put questions to her for the purpose of drawing out her ideas, and her answers showed that all her thoughts and plans were gathering round the welfare of her baby. Her desire for its good was to end her unresisting subservience to him. She was thinking already of better things. Ambitions were awakened that would carry her out of the solitudes, where he felt himself at rest, back to the world where she would struggle to make a place for the child she had never wanted for herself.

"We'll take him to San Francisco soon"—it was always "him" in her speculations—"We can't keep him here."

## The Promised Land

"Why not?" he asked. "Look at Bella's children. Could anything be healthier and happier?"

"Bella's children are different. Bella's different. She doesn't know anything better, she doesn't care. To have them well fed and healthy is enough for her. *We're* not like that. *Our* child's going to have everything."

"You're content enough here by yourself and you're a different sort to Bella."

"For myself!" she gave a shrug. "I don't care any more than Bella does. But for my child—my son—I want everything. Want him a gentleman like his ancestors, French and American"—she gave his arm a propitiating squeeze for she knew he disliked this kind of talk—"want him to be educated like my father, and know everything, and have a profession."

"You're looking far ahead."

"Years and years ahead," and then with deprecating eyes and irrepressible laughter, "Now don't say I'm foolish, but sometimes I think of him getting married and the kind of girl I'll choose for him—not stupid like me, but one who's good and beautiful and knows all about literature and geography and science. The finest girl in the world, and I'll find her for him."

He didn't laugh, instead he looked sulkily thoughtful:

"And where will we get the money to do all this?"

"We'll make it. We have a good deal now."

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Daddy John told me the other day he thought we had nearly ten thousand dollars in dust beside what my father left. That will be plenty to begin on, and you can go into business down on the coast. They told Daddy John at the Fort there would be hundreds and thousands of people coming in next spring. They'll build towns, make Sacramento and San Francisco big places with lots going on. We can settle in whichever seems the most thriving and get back into the kind of life where we belong."

It was her old song, the swan song of his hopes.

He felt a loneliness more bitter than he had ever before conceived of. In the jarring tumult of a growing city he saw himself marked in his own eyes, aloof in the street and the market place, a stranger by his own fireside. In his fear he swore that he would thwart her, keep her in the wild places, crush her maternal ambitions and force her to share his chosen life, the life of the outcast. He knew that it would mean conflict, the subduing of a woman nerved by a mother's passion. And as he worked in the ditches he thought about it, arranging the process by which he would gradually break her to his will, beat down her aspirations till she was reduced to the abject docility of a squaw. Then he would hold her forever under his hand and eye, broken as a dog to his word, content to wander with him on those lonely paths where he would tread out the measure of his days.

Toward the end of November the rains came. First in hesitant showers, then in steadier down-

## The Promised Land

pourings, finally, as December advanced, in torrential fury. Veils of water descended upon them, swept round their knoll till it stood marooned amid yellow eddies. The river rose boisterous, swirled into the pits, ate its way across the honey-combed reach of mud and fingered along the bottom of their hillock. They had never seen such rain. The pines bowed and wailed under its assault, and the slopes were musical with the voices of liberated streams. Moss and mud had to be pressed into the cabin's cracks, and when they sat by the fire in the evening their voices fell before the angry lashings on the roof and the groaning of the tormented forest.

Daddy John and Courant tried to work but gave it up, and the younger man, harassed by the secession of the toil that kept his body wearied and gave him sleep, went abroad on the hills, roaming free in the dripping darkness. Bella saw cause for surprise that he should absent himself willingly from their company. She grumbled about it to Glen, and noted Susan's acquiescence with the amaze of the woman who holds absolute sway over her man. One night Courant came back, drenched and staggering, on his shoulders a small bear that he had shot on the heights above. The fresh bear meat placated Bella, but she shook her head over the mountain man's morose caprices, and in the bedtime hour made dismal prophecies as to the outcome of her friend's strange marriage.

The bear hunt had evil consequences that she did not foresee. It left Courant, the iron man, stricken

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by an ailment marked by shiverings, when he sat crouched over the fire, and fevered burnings when their combined entreaties could not keep him from the open door and the cool, wet air. When the clouds broke and the landscape emerged from its mourning, dappled with transparent tints, every twig and leaf washed clean, his malady grew worse and he lay on the bed of spruce boughs tossing in a sickness none of them understood.

They were uneasy, came in and out with disturbed looks and murmured inquiries. He refused to answer them, but on one splendid morning, blaring life like a trumpet call, he told them he was better and was going back to work. He got down to the river bank, fumbled over his spade, and then Daddy John had to help him back to the cabin. With gray face and filmed eyes he lay on the bunk while they stood round him, and the children came peeping fearfully through the doorway. They were thoroughly frightened, Bella standing by with her chin caught in her hand and her eyes fastened on him, and Susan on the ground beside him, trying to say heartening phrases with lips that were stiff. The men did not know what to do. They pushed the children from the door roughly, as if it were their desire to hurt and abuse them. In some obscure way it seemed to relieve their feelings.

The rains came back more heavily than ever. For three days the heavens descended in a downpour that made the river a roaring torrent and isled the two log houses on their hillocks. The walls of the

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cabin trickled with water. The buffets of the wind ripped the canvas covering from the door, and Susan and Daddy John had to take a buffalo robe from the bed and nail it over the rent. They kept the place warm with the fire, but the earth floor was damp to their feet, and the tinkle of drops falling from the roof into the standing pans came clear through the outside tumult.

The night when the storm was at its fiercest the girl begged the old man to stay with her. Courant had fallen into a state of lethargy from which it was hard to rouse him. Her anxiety gave place to anguish, and Daddy John was ready for the worst when she shook him into wakefulness, her voice at his ear:

"You must go somewhere and get a doctor. I'm afraid."

He blinked at her without answering, wondering where he could find a doctor and not wanting to speak till he had a hope to offer. She read his thoughts and cried as she snatched his hat and coat from a peg:

"There must be one somewhere. Go to the Fort, and if there's none there go to Sacramento. I'd go with you but I'm afraid to leave him."

Daddy John went. She stood in the doorway and saw him lead the horse from the brush shed and, with his head low against the downpour, vault into the saddle. The moaning of the disturbed trees mingled with the triumphant roar of the river. There was a shouted good-by, and she heard the clat-

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ter of the hoofs for a moment sharp and distinct, then swallowed in the storm's high clamor.

In three days he was back with a ship's doctor, an Englishman, who described himself as just arrived from Australia. Daddy John had searched the valley, and finally run his quarry to earth at the Porter Ranch, one of a motley crew waiting to swarm inland to the rivers. The man, a ruddy animal with some rudimentary knowledge of his profession, pronounced the ailment "mountain fever." He looked over the doctor's medicine chest with an air of wisdom and at Susan with subdued gallantry.

"Better get the wife down to Sacramento," he said to Daddy John. "The man's not going to last and you can't keep her up here."

"Is he going to die?" said the old man.

The doctor pursed his lips.

"He oughtn't to. He's a Hercules. But the strongest of 'em go this way with the work and exposure. Think they can do anything and don't last as well sometimes as the weak ones."

"Work and exposure oughtn't to hurt him. He's bred upon it. Why should he cave in and the others of us keep up?"

"Can't say. But he's all burned out—hollow. There's no rebound. He's half gone now. Doesn't seem to have the spirit that you'd expect in such a body."

"Would it do any good to get him out of here, down to the valley or the coast?"

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"It might—change of air sometimes knocks out these fevers. You could try the coast or Hock Farm. But if you want my opinion I don't think there's much use."

Then on the first fine day the doctor rode away with some of their dust in his saddlebags, spying on the foaming river for good spots to locate when the rains should cease and he, with the rest of the world, could try his luck.

His visit had done no good, had given no heart to the anguished woman or roused no flicker of life in the failing man. Through the weakness of his wasting faculties Courant realized the approach of death and welcomed it. In his forest roamings, before his illness struck him, he had thought of it as the one way out. Then it had come to him vaguely terrible as a specter in dreams. Now bereft of the sustaining power of his strength the burden of the days to come had grown insupportable. To live without telling her, to live beside her and remain a partial stranger, to live divorcing her from all she would desire, had been the only course he saw, and in it he recognized nothing but misery. Death was the solution for both, and he relinquished himself to it with less grief at parting from her than relief at the withdrawal from an existence that would destroy their mutual dream. What remained to him of his mighty forces went to keep his lips shut on the secret she must never know. Even as his brain grew clouded, and his senses feeble, he retained the resolution to leave her her belief in him. This would

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be his legacy. His last gift of love would be the memory of an undimmed happiness.

But Susan, unknowing, fought on. The doctor had not got back to the Porter Ranch before she began arranging to move Low to Sacramento and from there to the Coast. He would get better care, they would find more competent doctors, the change of air would strengthen him. She had it out with Bella, refusing to listen to the older woman's objections, pushing aside all references to her own health. Bella was distracted. "For," as she said afterwards to Glen, "what's the sense of having her go? She can't do anything for him, and it's like as not the three of them'll die instead of one."

There was no reasoning with Susan. The old willfulness was strengthened to a blind determination. She plodded back through the rain to Daddy John and laid the matter before him. As of old he did not dispute with her, only stipulated that he be permitted to go on ahead, make arrangements, and then come back for her. He, too, felt there was no hope, but unlike the others he felt the best hope for his Missy was in letting her do all she could for her husband.

In the evening, sitting by the fire, they talked it over—the stage down the river, the stop at the Fort, then on to Sacramento, and the long journey to the seaport settlement of San Francisco. The sick man seemed asleep, and their voices unconsciously rose, suddenly dropping to silence as he stirred and spoke:

"Are you talking of moving me? Don't. I've had twelve years of it. Let me rest now."

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Susan went to him and sat at his feet.

"But we must get you well," she said, trying to smile. "They'll want you in the pits. You must be back there working with them by the spring."

He looked at her with a wide, cold gaze, and said:

"The spring. We're all waiting for the spring. Everything's going to happen then."

A silence fell. The wife sat with drooped head, unable to speak. Daddy John looked into the fire. To them both the Angel of Death seemed to have paused outside the door, and in the stillness they waited for his knock. Only Courant was indifferent, staring at the wall with eyes full of an unfathomable unconcern.

The next day Daddy John left. He was to find the accommodations, get together such comforts as could be had, and return for them. He took a sack of dust and the fleetest horse, and calculated to be back inside two days. As he clattered away he turned for a last look at her, standing in the sunshine, her hand over her eyes. Man or devil would not stop him, he thought, as he buckled to his task, and his seventy years sat as light as a boy's twenty, the one passion of his heart beating life through him.

Two days later, at sundown, he came back. She heard the ringing of hoofs along the trail and ran forward to meet him, catching the bridle as the horse, a white lather of sweat, came to a panting halt. She did not notice the lined exhaustion of the

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old man's face, had no care for anything but his news.

"I've got everything fixed," he cried, and then slid off holding to the saddle for he was stiff and spent. "The place is ready and I've found a doctor and got him nailed. It'll be all clean and shipshape for you. How's Low?"

An answer was unnecessary. He could see there were no good tidings.

"Weaker a little," she said. "But if it's fine we can start to-morrow."

He thought of the road he had traveled and felt they were in God's hands. Then he stretched a gnarled and tremulous claw and laid it on her shoulder.

"And there's other news, Missy. Great news. I'm thinking that it may help you."

There was no news that could help her but news of Low. She was so fixed in her preoccupation that her eye was void of interest, as his, bright and expectant, held it:

"I seen David."

He was rewarded. Her face flashed into excitement and she grabbed at him with a wild hand:

"David! Where?"

"In Sacramento. I seen him and talked to him."

"Oh, Daddy John, how wonderful! Was he well?"

"Well and hearty, same as he used to be. Plumped up considerable."

"How had he got there?"

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"A train behind us picked him up, found him lyin' by the spring where he'd crawled lookin' for us."

"Then, it wasn't Indians? Had he got lost?"

"That's what I says to him first-off—'Well, god darn yer, what happened to yer?' and before he answers me he says quick, 'How's Susan?' It ain't no use settin' on bad news that's bound to come out so I give it to him straight that you and Low was married at Humboldt. And he took it very quiet, whitened up a bit, and says no words for a spell, walkin' off a few steps. Then he turns back and says, 'Is she happy?'"

Memory broke through the shell of absorption and gave voice to a forgotten sense of guilt:

"Oh, poor David! He always thought of me first."

"I told him you was. That you and Low was almighty sot on each other and that Low was sick. And he was quiet for another spell, and I could see his thoughts was troublesome. So to get his mind off it I asked him how it all happened. He didn't answer for a bit, standin' thinkin' with his eyes lookin' out same as he used to look at the sunsets before he got broke down. And then he tells me it was a fall, that he clum up to the top of the rock and thinks he got a touch o' sun up there. For first thing he knew he was all dizzy and staggerin' round, goin' this side and that, till he got to the edge where the rock broke off and over he went. He come to himself lying under a ledge alongside some bushes, with a spring tricklin' over him. He

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guessed he rolled there and that's why we couldn't find him. He don't know how long it was, or how long it took him to crawl round to the camp—maybe a day, he thinks, for he was 'bout two thirds dead. But he got there and saw we was gone. The Indians hadn't come down on the place, and he seen the writing on the rock and found the cache. The food and the water kep' him alive, and after a bit a big train come along, the finest train he even seen—eighteen wagons and an old Ashley man for pilot. They was almighty good to him; the women nursed him like Christians, and he rid in the wagons and come back slow to his strength. The reason we didn't hear of him before was because they come by a southern route that took 'em weeks longer, moving slow for the cattle. They was fine people, he says, and he's thick with one of the men who's a lawyer, and him and David's goin' to the coast to set up a law business there."

The flicker of outside interest was dying. "Thank Heaven," she said on a rising breath, then cast a look at the cabin and added quickly:

"I'll go and tell Low. Maybe it'll cheer him up. He was always so worried about David. You tell Bella and then come to the cabin and see hew you think he is."

There was light in the cabin, a leaping radiance from the logs on the hearth, and a thin, pale twilight from the uncovered doorway. She paused there for a moment, making her step light and composing her features into serener lines. The gaunt

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form under the blanket was motionless. The face, sunk away to skin clinging on sharp-set bones, was turned in profile. He might have been sleeping but for the glint of light between the eyelids. She was accustomed to seeing him thus, to sitting beside the inanimate shape, her hand curled round his, her eyes on the face that took no note of her impassioned scrutiny. Would her tidings of David rouse him? She left herself no time to wonder, hungrily expectant.

"Low," she said, bending over him, "Daddy John's been to Sacramento and has brought back wonderful news."

He turned his head with an effort and looked at her. His glance was vacant as if he had only half heard, as if her words had caught the outer edges of his senses and penetrated no farther.

"He has seen David."

Into the dull eyes a slow light dawned, struggling through their apathy till they became the eyes of a live man, hanging on hers, charged with a staring intelligence. He made an attempt to move, lifted a wavering hand and groped for her shoulder.

"David!" he whispered.

The news had touched an inner nerve that thrilled to it. She crouched on the edge of the bunk, her heart beating thickly:

"David, alive and well."

The fumbling hand gripped on her shoulder. She felt the fingers pressing in stronger than she had dreamed they could be. It pulled her down

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toward him, the eyes fixed on hers, searching her face, glaring fearfully from blackened hollows, riveted in a desperate questioning.

"What happened to him?" came the husky whisper.

"He fell from the rock; thinks he had a sunstroke up there and then lost his balance and fell over and rolled under a ledge. And after a few days a train came by and found him."

"Is that what he said?"

Her answering voice began to tremble, for the animation of his look grew wilder and stranger. It was as if all the life in his body was burning in those hungry eyes. The hand on her shoulder clutched like a talon, the muscles informed with an unnatural force. Was it the end coming with a last influx of strength and fire? Her tears began to fall upon his face, and she saw it through them, ravaged and fearful, with new life struggling under the ghastliness of dissolution. There was an awfulness in this rekindling of the spirit where death had set its stamp that broke her fortitude, and she forgot the legend of her courage and cried in her agony:

"Oh, Low, don't die, don't die! I can't bear it. Stay with me!"

The hand left her shoulder and fumblingly touched her face, feeling blindly over its tear-washed surface.

"I'm not going to die," came the feeble whisper. "I can live now."

Half an hour later when Daddy John came in he

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found her sitting on the side of the bunk, a hunched, dim figure against the firelight. She held up a warning hand, and the old man tiptoed to her side and leaned over her to look. Courant was sleeping, his head thrown back, his chest rising in even breaths. Daddy John gazed for a moment, then bent till his cheek was almost against hers.

"Pick up your heart, Missy," he whispered.  
"He looks to me better."

## CHAPTER IV

FROM the day of the good news Courant rallied. At first they hardly dared to hope. Bella and Daddy John talked about it together and wondered if it were only a pause in the progress of his ailment. But Susan was confident, nursing her man with a high cheerfulness that defied their anxious faces.

She had none of their fear of believing. She saw their doubts and angrily scouted them. "Low will be all right soon," she said, in answer to their gloomily observing looks. In her heart she called them cowards, ready to join hands with death, not rise up and fight till the final breath. Her resolute hope seemed to fill the cabin with light and life. It transformed her haggardness, made her a beaming presence, with eyes bright under tangled locks of hair, and lips that hummed snatches of song. He was coming back to her like a child staggering to its mother's outheld hands. While they were yet unconvinced "when Low gets well" became a constant phrase on her tongue. She began to plan again, filled their ears with speculations of the time when she and her husband would move to the coast. They marveled at her, at the dauntlessness of her spirit, at the desperate courage that made her grip her happiness and wrench it back from the enemy.

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They marveled more when they saw she had been right—Susan who had been a child so short a time before, knowing more than they, wiser and stronger in the wisdom and strength of her love.

There was a great day when Low crept out to the door and sat on the bench in the sun with his wife beside him. To the prosperous passerby they would have seemed a sorry pair—a skeleton man with uncertain feet and powerless hands, a worn woman, ragged and unkempt. To them it was the halcyon hour, the highest point of their mutual adventure. The cabin was their palace, the soaked prospect a pleasance decked for their delight. And from this rude and ravaged outlook their minds reached forward in undefined and unrestricted visioning to all the world that lay before them, which they would soon advance on and together win.

Nature was with them in their growing gladness. The spring was coming. The river began to fall, and Courant's eyes dwelt longingly on the expanding line of mud that waited for his pick. April came with a procession of cloudless days, with the tinkling of streams shrinking under the triumphant sun, with the pines exhaling scented breaths, and a first, faint sprouting of new green. The great refreshed landscape unveiled itself, serenely brooding in a vast, internal energy of germination. The earth was coming to life as they were, gathering itself for the expression of its ultimate purpose. It was rising to the rite of rebirth and they rose with it,

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with faces uplifted to its kindling glory and hearts in which joy was touched by awe.

On a May evening, when the shadows were congregating in the cañon, Susan lay on the bunk with her son in the hollow of her arm. The children came in and peeped fearfully at the little hairless head, pulling down the coverings with careful fingers and eying the newcomer dubiously, not sure that they liked him. Bella looked over their shoulders radiating proud content. Then she shoed them out and went about her work of "redding up," pacing the earthen floor with the proud tread of victory. Courant was sitting outside on the log bench. She moved to the door and smiled down at him over the tin plate she was scouring.

"Come in and sit with her while I get the supper," she said. "Don't talk, just sit where she can see you."

He came and sat beside her, and she drew the blanket down from the tiny, crumpled face. They were silent, wondering at it, looking back over the time when it had cried in their blood, inexorably drawn them together, till out of the heat of their passion the spark of its being had been struck. Both saw in it their excuse and their pardon.

She recovered rapidly, all her being revived and reinforced, coming back glowingly to a maturer beauty. Glimpses of the Susan of old began to reappear. She wanted her looking-glass, and, sitting up in the bunk with the baby against her side, arranged her hair in the becoming knot and twisted

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the locks on her temples into artful tendrils. She would sew soon, and kept Bella busy digging into the trunks and bringing out what was left of her best things. They held weighty conferences over these, the foot of the bunk littered with wrinkled skirts and jackets that had fitted a slimmer and more elegant Susan. A trip to Sacramento was talked of, in which Daddy John was to shop for a lady and baby, and buy all manner of strange articles of which he knew nothing.

"Calico, that's a pretty color," he exclaimed testily. "How am I to know what's a pretty color? Now if it was a sack of flour or a spade—but I'll do my best, Missy," he added meekly, catching her eye in which the familiar imperiousness gleamed through softening laughter.

Soon the day came when she walked to the door and sat on the bench. The river was settling decorously into its bed, and in the sunlight the drenched shores shone under a tracery of pools and ripples as though a silvery gauze had been rudely torn back from them, catching and tearing here and there. The men were starting the spring work. The rocker was up, and the spades and picks stood propped against the rock upon which she and Low had sat on that first evening. He sat there now, watching the preparations soon to take part again. His lean hand fingered among the picks, found his own, and he walked to the untouched shore and struck a tentative blow. Then he dropped the pick, laughing, and came back to her.

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"I'll be at it in a week," he said, sitting down on the bench. "It'll be good to be in the pits again and feel my muscles once more."

"It'll be good to see you," she answered.

In a week he was back, in two weeks he was himself again—the mightiest of those mighty men who, sixty years ago, measured their strength along the American River. The diggings ran farther upstream and were richer than the old ones. The day's takings were large, sometimes so large that the men's elation beat like a fever in their blood. At night they figured on their wealth, and Susan listened startled to the sums that fell so readily from their lips. They were rich, rich enough to go to the coast and for Courant to start in business there.

It was he who wanted this. The old shrinking and fear of the city were gone. Now, with a wife and child, he turned his face that way. He was longing to enter the fight for them, to create and acquire for them, to set them as high as the labor of his hands and work of his brain could compass. New ambitions possessed him. As Susan planned for a home and its comforts, he did for his work in the market place in competition with those who had once been his silent accusers.

But there was also a strange humbleness in him. It did not weaken his confidence or clog his aspiration, but it took something from the hard arrogance that had recognized in his own will the only law. He had heard from Daddy John of that interview with David, and he knew the reason of David's lie.

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He knew, too, that David would stand to that lie forever. Of the two great passions that the woman had inspired the one she had relinquished was the finer. He had stolen her from David, and David had shown that for love of her he could forego vengeance. Once such an act would have been inexplicable to the mountain man. Now he understood, and in his humility he vowed to make the life she had chosen as perfect as the one that might have been. Through this last, and to him, supremest sacrifice, David ceased to be the puny weakling and became the hero, the thought of whom would make Courant "go softly all his days."

The summer marched upon them, with the men doing giant labor on the banks and the women under the pine at work beside their children. The peace of the valley was broken by the influx of the Forty-niners, who stormed its solitudes, and changed the broken trail to a crowded highway echoing with the noises of life. The river yielded up its treasure to their eager hands, fortunes were made, and friendships begun that were to make the history of the new state. These bronzed and bearded men, these strong-thewed women, were waking from her sleep the virgin California.

Sometimes in the crowded hours Susan dropped her work and, with her baby in her arms, walked along the teeming river trail or back into the shadows of the forest. All about her was the stir of a fecund earth, growth, expansion, promise. From beneath the pines she looked up and saw the as-

## The Emigrant Trail

piration of their proud up-springing. At her feet the ground was bright with flower faces completing themselves in the sunshine. Wherever her glance fell there was a busyness of development, a progression toward fulfillment, a combined, harmonious striving in which each separate particle had its purpose and its meaning. The shell of her old self-engrossment cracked, and the call of a wider life came to her. It pierced clear and arresting through the fairy flutings of "the horns of elfland" that were all she had heretofore heard.

The desire to live as an experiment in happiness, to extract from life all there was for her own enjoying, left her. Slowly she began to see it as a vast concerted enterprise in which she was called to play her part. The days when the world was made for her pleasure were over. The days had begun when she saw her obligation, not alone to the man and child who were part of her, but out and beyond these to the diminishing circles of existences that had never touched hers. Her love that had met so generous a response, full measure, pressed down and running over, must be paid out without the stipulation of recompense. Her vision widened, dimly descried horizons limitless as the prairies, saw faintly how this unasked giving would transform a gray and narrow world as the desert's sunsets had done.

So gradually the struggling soul came into being and possessed the fragile tissue that had once been a girl and was now a woman.

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They left the river on a morning in September, the sacks of dust making the trunk heavy. The old wagon was ready, the mess chest strapped to the back, Julia in her place. Bella and the children were to follow as soon as the rains began, so the parting was not sad. The valley steeped in crystal shadow, the hills dark against the flush of dawn, held Susan's glance for a lingering minute as she thought of the days in the tent under the pine. She looked at her husband and met his eyes in which she saw the same memory. Then the child, rosy with life, leaped in her arms, bending to snatch with dimpled hands at its playmates, chuckling baby sounds as they pressed close to give him their kisses.

Daddy John, mounting to his seat, cried:

"There's the sun coming up to wish us God-speed."

She turned and saw it rising huge and red over the hill's shoulder, and held up her son to see. The great ball caught his eyes and he stared in tranced delight. Then he leaped against the restraint of her arm, kicking on her breast with his heels, stretching a grasping hand toward the crimson ball, a bright and shining toy to play with.

Its light fell red on the three faces—the child's waiting for life to mold its unformed softness, the woman's stamped with the gravity of deep experience, the man's stern with concentrated purpose. They watched in silence till the baby gave a cry, a thin, sweet sound of wondering joy that called them back to it. Again they looked at one another, but

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this time their eyes held no memories. The thoughts of both reached forward to the coming years, and they saw themselves shaping from this offspring of their lawless passion what should be a man, a molder of the new Empire, a builder of the Promised Land.

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