MEG of MYSTERY MOUNTAIN

NORTH

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MEG OF MYSTERY MOUNTAIN

By GRACE MAY NORTH

Girl on Horse

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MEG OF MYSTERY MOUNTAIN.

CHAPTER I.
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL

Jane Abbott, tall, graceful and languidly beautiful, passed through the bevy of girls on the wharf below Highacres Seminary with scarcely a nod for any of them. Closely following her came three other girls, each carrying a satchel and wearing a tailored gown of the latest cut.

Although Esther Ballard and Barbara Morris called gaily to many of their friends, it was around Marion Starr that all of the girls crowded until her passage way to the small boat, even then getting up steam, was completely blocked.

Jane, when she had crossed the gang plank, turned to find only Esther and Barbara at her side. A slight sneer curled her lips as she watched the adulation which Merry was receiving. Then, with a shrug of her slender shoulders that was more eloquent than words, the proud girl seated herself in one of the reclining deck chairs and imperiously motioned her friends to do likewise.

“It’s so silly of Merry to make such a fuss over all those girls. She’ll miss the boat if she doesn’t hurry.”

Marion had evidently thought of the same thing, for she laughingly ran up the gang plank, her arms filled with candy boxes, boquets and magazines, gifts of her admiring friends. Depositing these on a chair, she leaned over the rail to call: “Good-bye, girls! Of course I’ll write to you, Sally, reams and reams; a sort of a round-robin letter to be sent to the whole crowd.

“Sure thing, Betty Ann. I’ll tell my handsome brother Bob that you don’t want him to ever forget you.” Then as there was a protest from the wharf, the girl laughingly added: “But you wished to be remembered to him. Isn’t that the same thing?”

Noticing a small girl who had put her handkerchief to her eyes, Merry remonstrated. “Tessie, don’t cry, child! This isn’t a funeral or a wedding. Of course you’ll see us again. We four intend to come back to Highacres to watch you graduate just as you watched us today. Work hard, Little One, and carry off the honors. I’ve been your big-sister coach all this year, and I want you to make the goal. I know you will! Goodbye!” Marion Starr could say no more for the small river steamer gave a warning whistle—the rope was drawn in, and, as the boat churned the water noisily in starting, the chorus of goodbyes from the throng of girls on the wharf could be heard but faintly.

Marion remained standing at the rail, waving her handkerchief, smiling and nodding until the small steamer rounded a jutting-out point of land, then she turned about and faced the three other girls, who had made themselves comfortable in the reclining steamer chairs.

“What a fuss you make over all those undergrads, Merry,” Jane Abbott remarked languidly. “A casual observer might suppose that each one of them was a very best friend, while we three, who are here present, have that honor. For myself, I much prefer to conserve my enthusiasm.”

Marion sat down in a vacant steamer chair, and merely smiled her reply, but the youngest among them, Esther Ballard, flashed a defense for her ideal among girls. “That’s the very reason why Merry was unanimously voted the most popular girl in Highacres during the entire four years that we have been at the seminary. Nothing was ever too much trouble, and no girl was too unimportant for Merry’s loving consideration.”

“Listen! Listen!” laughed good natured Barbara Morris. “All salute Saint Marion Starr.”

But Esther, flushed and eager, did not stop. “While you, Jane Abbott”—she could not keep the scorn out of her voice—“while you were only voted the most beautiful.”

“Only?” there was a rising inflection in Barbara’s voice, and she also lifted her eyebrows questioningly. “I think our queen is quite satisfied with her laurels.”

Jane merely shrugged her shoulders, then turning her dark, shapely head on the small cherry colored pillow with which she always traveled, she asked in her usual languid manner, “Marion, let’s forget the past and plan for the future.”

“You said you had a wonderful vacation trip to suggest, and that you would reveal it when we were on the boat. Well, this is the time and the place.”

“And the girls?” chimed in Barbara. “Do hurry and tell us, Merry. Your plans are always jolly.”

And so with a smile of pleasurable anticipation, Merry began to unfold her scheme.

“Aunt Belle is going to one of those adorable cottage hotels at Newport. She is just past-perfect as a chaperone and she said that she thought a party of four girls would be ideal. It will only cost each of us about $100 a month.”

“A mere mite,” Jane Abbott commented, “and the plan, as far as I’m concerned, is simply inspirational. I’ve always had a wild desire to live at one of those fashionable cottage-hotels, but not having a mother to take me, I have never been. I know my father will be glad to have me go, since your Aunt Belle is to be there, and I shall ask for $150 a month, so that we may have plenty of ice cream and not feel stinted.”

The usually indolent Jane was so interested in Merry’s plan that she was actually sitting erect, the small cherry-colored pillow in her lap.

“I’m not so sure that I can go,” Esther Ballard said ruefully. “My father is not a Wall Street magnate as is your father, Jane, and $100 a month may seem a good deal to him, following so closely the vast sum that he has had to spend on my four years’ tuition at Highacres.”

“Nonsense,” Jane flashed at their youngest. “You are the idol of your artist-father’s existence. He’d give you anything you needed to make you happy.”

Then, before Esther could voice her retort, the older girl had continued: “As for me, I shall need an additional $500 for clothes. Since we are going to so fashionable a place, we ought to have the smartest and latest summer styles from Paris. Let’s all make note of the wardrobe we’d like to take.”

Out came four small leather notebooks and with tiny pencils suspended above them, the girls thought for a moment.

Then Merry scribbled something as she remarked, “My first is a bathing suit.

Green, the color mermaids wear."

"Mine shall be cherry colored. It best suits my style of beauty," Jane said complacently.

"You surely do look peachy in it," Barbara remarked admirably. "It doesn't matter what I put on, my squint and my freckled pug nose spoil it all."

"Oh, you're not so bad!" Esther said generously. "I heard one of the cadets at our closing dance say that he thought your squint was adorable."

"Lead me to him!" Barbara jumped up as though about to start in search of her unknown admirer, but sank back again when she recalled that she was on a steamer which was chugging down the Hudson at its best speed.

"Do be serious, girls. See, I've made out a long list of things that I shall need." Jane held up her notebook for inspection. But Esther closed hers and replaced it in her natty alligator traveling bag. "I'll select my wardrobe after I have had my father's consent," she said. "You might as well stop planning now, Jane, as we are nearly to the Battery."

Esther was right and in another five moments all was confusion on the small steamer. When they had safely crossed the gang plank, Merry detained them long enough to say, "Girls, before we part, let's plan to meet at my home next Friday. Since you will all have to travel so far, suppose you come early and stay to lunch. Then we can make our final plans. How I do hope that we can all go."

"I know that I can," Jane replied confidently. "I always do as I wish, and nothing could induce me to spend another summer with my young brother and sister. They're so boisterous and bothersome. As for Dan, he's so eager to make high grades at college that he always is deep in a book."

"Why Jane Abbott," rebuked Esther. "I think your little sister is adorable. I'd give anything if I were not an only child." Jane merely shrugged. "Au revoir," she called over her shoulder. "I've got to catch the ferry."

CHAPTER II.
THE MOST SELFISH GIRL

The girls who had been inseparable friends during the four years at the fashionable Highacres Seminary parted at the Battery to go in as many different directions.

Marion Starr's home was far up on Riverside Drive, while Barbara Morris' millionaire father had an extensive estate on Long Island. Esther Ballard, the only daughter of devoted parents, resided in the house of her grandfather, Colonel Ballard, on Washington Square, while Jane Abbott's family of four lived in the same rambling, picturesque wooden house that Mr. Abbott's father had built for his bride long before his name had become so well known on Wall Street. Edgemere, a pretty little town among the Jersey hills, Mr. Abbott deemed a good place to bring up his younger girl and boy, and so, although Jane often pleaded that they move to a more fashionable suburb, in Edgemere they had remained. Nor would her father tear down the old home to replace it with one finer, for his beloved wife, who had died at the birth of little Julie, had planned it and had chosen all of the furnishings. "Some day you will have a home of your own, Jane," he had told his proud older daughter, "and then you may have it as fine as you wish."

But in all other things, Mr. Abbott humored her, for she was so like her mother in appearance. It was with sorrow that the father had to confess in his heart that there the resemblance ceased, for the mother, who had been equally beautiful, had been neither proud nor selfish. Little Julie, though not so beautiful, was far more like the mother in nature, and so, too, was Daniel, the nineteen-year-old lad upon whom the father placed so much reliance.

Regrettable as it may seem, Jane Abbott, as she stood on the deck of the ferry

that was to convey her to the Jersey shore, was actually dreading the two weeks that she would have to spend in her own home. Marion had suggested that they plan going to Newport by the middle of July and it was now the first.

It was late afternoon, and there were many working girls on the huge ferry, who were returning to their Jersey homes after a long hot day in the New York offices. As they crowded against her, Jane drew herself away from them haughtily, thankful, indeed, that her father was so wealthy that she would never have to earn her own way in the world, nor wear such unattractive ready-made dresses. Unconsciously her lips curled scornfully until she chanced to catch a glimpse of her own trim tailored figure in one of the panel mirrors; then she smiled complacently and seated herself somewhat apart from the working girls, who, from time to time, glanced at her, as she supposed, with admiration. But she was disabused of this satisfying thought when one of them spoke loud enough for her to hear. “See that stiff-necked snob! She thinks she’s made of different clay from the rest of us. I wish her pa’d lose his money, so she’d have to scrub for a living.”

This remark merely caused Jane to sneer slightly, but what she heard next filled her heart with terrified foreboding, for another girl had turned to look at her and replied:

“Well, if she’s who I think she is, her father’s already gone bankrupt, and she’s poor enough, all right.”

The working girls then moved to another part of the ferry and Jane was left alone. It was ridiculous, of course. Her father could not lose his vast fortune. Jane determined to think no more about it. The ferry had reached its destination, and the proud girl hurried away. Never before had she so longed to reach her home.

“Of course it is not true,” her panicky thought kept repeating. “But what could it mean? What could it mean?”

* * * * * * * *

Jane vowed to herself that she would not again think of what the spiteful working girl had said, for how could she, a mere nobody, have information concerning the affairs of a man of her father’s standing, which Jane, his own daughter, did not have?

But a disquieting thought reminded her that the working girl's face had been familiar, and then memory recalled that she had seen her in the very building on Wall Street where Mr. Abbott's offices were located.

Jane's troubled reverie was interrupted by a joyous exclamation, and her brother, who was three years her senior and a head taller, leaped from the crowd and held out both hands. His greeting was so enthusiastic, his expression so radiant, that the girl was convinced that all was well with their father, and so she said nothing of what she had heard.

It was not until they were seated on the train and had started for Edgemere that Jane noticed how pale and thin was her brother's face, and, when his eager flow of conversation was interrupted by a severe coughing spell, the girl exclaimed with real concern, "Why, Brother Dan, what a terrible cold you have! You ought to be in bed."

The boy's smile was reassuring. "Don't worry about that cough, sis," he said lightly. "Now the grind is over, it will let up, I'm thinking. But it surely has stuck closer than a postage stamp. Caught it weeks ago, but I've been so busy, well, doing things, that I haven't had time to coddle myself."

Suddenly the lad's expression became very serious, and turning, he placed a thin hand, that was far too white, lovingly on his sister's as he said: "Jane, dear, some changes have taken place in our home since you went back to Highacres last Christmas. For Dad's sake try to bear them bravely."

Then it was true, true, all that this dreadful working girl had said. For a moment the girl's whole being surged with self-pity, then she felt cold and hard. What right had their father to lose his fortune and bring disgrace and privation upon his family? In a voice that sounded most unfeeling, she asked, "And just what may those changes be?"

It was hard, so hard for Dan to tell the whole truth to a girl whom he knew, with sorrow, thought only of herself. He had believed that trouble might awaken the true Jane, whom he had always felt must be somewhere deep under all the adamant of selfishness, but as yet there was no evidence of it.

He removed his hand, as from something that hurt him, and folding his arms, he began: "Our father is in great trouble, Jane, and he needs our aid, but at present all we can do is to bear cheerfully the inconveniences that are not nearly as

severe as many others have to endure.”

But the girl was impatient. “For goodness sakes, Dan, don’t preach! Now is no time to moralize. If our father has done some idiotic speculating and has lost his money, tell me so squarely.”

A red spot burned in each pale cheek of the lad and a light of momentary indignation flashed in his eyes, but he replied calmly enough: “Remember, Jane, that you are speaking of our father, one of the noblest men who ever trod on this earth. You know as well as I do that Dad never did any wildcat speculating.”

“Well, then, stop beating around the bush and tell me just what has happened.”

CHAPTER III.
FACING HARD TRUTHS

“It is because our father is honest that today we are poor,” Dan Abbott began, “and I glory in that fact.”

His sister, sitting beside him in the train that was nearing Edgemere, curled her lips but did not reply. “The firm to which Dad belonged made illegal contracts in western oil fields. The other men will be many times richer than they were before, but, because our father scorned to be a party to such dishonesty, he has failed. Not a one of the men in whom he trusted made the slightest effort to help avert the catastrophe.”

“When did this all happen?” Jane’s voice was still hard, almost bitter, as though she felt hatred and scorn for her father, rather than loyalty and admiration.

“Last February,” was the brief reply.

“Then why was I not informed? Am I a mere infant to be kept in ignorance of facts like these? Father has treated me unfairly, letting me boast to my most intimate friends that I could have an elaborate Paris wardrobe for the summer. My position is certainly a most unpleasant one.”

At this the slow temper of the lad at her side flamed and though he spoke in a low voice that the other passengers might not hear, he said just what he thought. “Jane Abbott, you are the most selfish, heartless girl I have ever known. It is very hard to believe that you are an own daughter to that most wonderful woman whom we are permitted to claim as our mother. In an hour of trouble (and there were many of them in those long ago days) she was always brave and cheerful, comforting Dad and urging him above all to be true to an ideal. But I actually believe that you, Jane Abbott, would rather our Dad had entered into dishonest

negotiations as did the other members of his firm."

The lad glanced hopefully at his sister. Surely she would indignantly refute this accusation, but she did nothing of the sort. With a shrug of her slender shoulders, she sank back against the cherry colored cushion as she replied, "I have often heard that an honest man can not be a success in business, and I do feel that our father should have considered his family above all else."

Dan pressed his lips firmly together. He feared that if his torrent of angry thoughts were expressed it might form a barrier between himself and his sister that the future could not tear down, and so, after taking a deep breath that seemed almost a half sob, he again placed his hand tenderly on the cold white one that lay listlessly near him.

"Sis, dear," he implored, "try to be brave, won't you? I'll do all I can to make things easier for you, and so will Dad. He's pretty much stunned, just now, but, oh, little girl, you can't guess how he is dreading your homecoming. That's why I offered to meet you at the ferry station. I wanted to tell you and save Dad that agony of spirit. If you would only go in brightly and say, what our dear mother would have said, it will do more to help our father than anything else in this world."

Selfish as Jane was, she dearly loved the brother who had idolized her, and who in moments of great tenderness had always called her his little girl, remembering only that she was three years younger and in need of his protection.

Tears sprang to her eyes, but as the train was drawing in at the Edgemere station she only had time to say, "I'll try. But, oh, it is so hard, so hard."

Dan engaged a hack and after assisting his sister in, he sat beside her. Then, as they drove along the pleasant streets of the village that were shaded by wide spreading elms, the lad told her what changes had occurred in their home.

"Mrs. Beach, our housekeeper, and Nora, her assistant, have left, and our dear old grandmother has closed up her farm in Vermont and is staying with father. It has been his greatest comfort to have his mother with him. You always thought her ways so old-fashioned and farmerish, Jane, but for all that she is the sweetest kind of a little old lady and as brisk and capable as she was two years ago when we visited the farm."

There was a slight curl to Jane's lips, but she merely said: "I suppose I shall be expected to wash dishes now. We must be terribly poor if we couldn't even keep Nora."

"But we have one big blessing," Dan said brightly, "the home, which was mother's can not be taken from us, for it belongs to us children."

Jane was not listening. She was trying to figure out something in her own mind. "Dan." She turned toward him suddenly. "I can't see why Dad lost his money, just because he did not want to be a partner in what he considered a dishonest oil deal. Explain it to me a little more clearly."

"I didn't at first," her brother confessed, "fearing that it would not have your sympathy. Many poor people invested their entire savings in the oil deal, supposing that father's firm could be relied upon to be absolutely honest. It is their money, much of it, which is making the rich men richer. Our father, knowing that many had invested their all because they trusted his personal integrity, has turned over his entire fortune to make up their losses, as far as it will go." Dan was sorry he had to make this explanation, for he saw at once the hard expression returning to the eyes of his sister.

"If our father has greater consideration for the poor of New York than he has for his own children, you can not expect me to express much sympathy for him."

"Dear girl, wouldn't you rather have our father honest than rich?" The lad's clear grey eyes looked at her searchingly.

Jane put her hand to her forehead as though it ached. "Oh, Dan," she said, wearily, "you and father have different ideals from what I have, I guess. I never really gave any thought to these things. I like comfort and nice clothes and I hate, hate, hate drudgery and work of every kind. I suppose now I shall have to scrub for a living." Jane was recalling what the working girl on the ferry had said.

Dan's amused laughter rang out. "Oh, Jane, what nonsense. Do you suppose that while I have a strong right arm I would let my little pal work in any of those drudgery ways? No, indeed, so forget that fear, if it's haunting you." But the boy could say no more, for another violent coughing spell racked his frail body.

Instantly Jane was self-reproachful. "Oh, Dan, Dan," she said, "I know you

would give your very life to help me. I’m so selfish, so very selfish! I’m going to think of only one thing, and that is how I can help you to get well, for I can see now that you must have been ill.”

The boy took advantage of this momentary tender spell to turn and take the girl’s hands in his and say imploringly: “Dear, we’re almost home. If you really want to help me to get well, be loving and brave to Dad. Your unhappiness grieves me more than our loss, little girl, and I can’t get strong while I am so worried.”

There were again tears in the beautiful dark eyes of the girl, and impulsively she kissed the one person on earth whom she truly loved. “Brother, for your sake I’ll try to be brave,” she said with a half sob as the hack stopped in front of their home.

CHAPTER IV.
A SAD HOMECOMING

As Jane walked up the circling graveled path which led to the picturesque, rambling, low-built brown house that she called home her heart was filled with conflicting emotions. She bit her trembling lips and brushed away the tears that quivered on her eyelashes. She knew, oh, how well she knew, that they were prompted only by self-pity. She struggled to awaken the nobler self that her brother was so confident still slumbered in her soul, but she could not. She felt cold, hard, indignant every time she recalled that her father had sacrificed his children's comfort for a Quixotic ideal. "It is no use trying," she assured herself, noticing vaguely that they were passing the rose garden, which was a riot of fragrant, colorful bloom. How tenderly her father cared for that garden, for every bush in it had been planted by the loved one who was gone.

The tall lad carrying her satchels walked silently at Jane's side. He well knew the conflict that was raging in the heart of the girl he had always loved, in spite of her ever-increasing selfishness, with a tenderness akin to that which he had given his mother, but he said no word to try to help. This was a moment when Jane must stand alone.

They were ascending the wide front steps when the door of the house was flung open and a little girl of ten leaped out with a glad cry. "Oh, Janey, my wonderful big sister Janey." Two arms were held out, and in another moment, as the older girl well knew, she would be in one of those crushing embraces that the younger children called "bear hugs." She frowned slightly. "Don't, Julie!" she implored. "My suit has just been pressed. Won't you ever grow up, and greet people in a more dignified way?"

The glad expression on the freckled face of the little girl, who could not be

called really pretty, changed instantly. Her lips quivered and her eyes filled with tears. “Don’t be a silly,” Jane said rebukingly, as she stooped and kissed the child indifferently on the forehead.

A dear old lady, wearing a pretty lavender gingham and a white “afternoon apron,” appeared in the doorway all a-flutter of happy excitement. She had not seen Jane for two years, and she took the girl’s hands in her own that trembled.

“Dear, dear Jenny!” (How the graduate of fashionable Highacres had always hated the name her grandmother had given her.) “What a blessing ’tis that you have come home at last. It’ll mean more to your father to have you here than you can think.” The old lady evidently did not notice the scornful curling of the girl’s lips, or, if she did, she purposely pretended that she did not, and kept on with her speech. “You know, dearie, you’re the perfect image of that other Jane my Daniel loved so dearly, and she was just your age, Jenny, when they met. It’ll be like meeting her all over again to have you coming home now, when he’s in such trouble, you being so like her, and she was most tender and brave and unselfish.”

Even the grandmother noticed that her well-meant speech was not acceptable, for the girl’s impatience was ill concealed.

“Where is my father?” she said in a voice which gave Dan little hope that the nobler self in the girl had been awakened.

“He’s working in the garden, dearie; out beyond the apple orchard,” the old lady said tremulously. “He told me when you came to send you out. He wants to be alone with you just at first. And your little brother, Gerald; I s’pose you’re wondering where he is. Well, he’s got a place down in the village as errand boy for Peterson’s grocery. They give him his pay every night, and he fetches it right home to his Dad. Of course my Daniel puts the money in bank for Gerald’s schooling, but the boy don’t know that. He thinks he’s helping, and bless him, nobody knows how much he is helping. There’s ways to bring comfort that no money could buy.”

Dan knew that Jane believed their gentle old grandmother was preaching at her. He was almost sorry. He feared that it was antagonizing Jane; nor was he wrong.

“Well, I think the back orchard was a strange place for father to have me meet him,” she said, almost angrily, as she flung herself out of the house. Dan sighed. Then, stooping, he kissed the little old lady. “Don’t feel badly, grandmother,” he

said, adding hopefully: “The real Jane must waken soon.”

The proud, selfish girl, again rebellious, walked along the narrow path that led under the great, old, gnarled apple trees which the children had used for playhouses ever since they could climb. She felt like one stunned, or as though she were reading a tragic story and expected at every moment to be awakened to the joyful realization that it was not true.

Her father saw her coming and dropped the hoe that he had been plying between the long rows of beans. “How terribly he has changed,” Jane thought. He had indeed aged and there was on his sensitive face, which was more that of an idealist than a business man, the impress of sorrow, but also there was something else. Jane noticed it at once; an expression of firm, unwavering determination. She knew that appealing to his love for his daughter would be useless, great as that love was. A quotation she had learned in school flashed into her mind—“I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honor more.”

There was, indeed, infinite tenderness in the clear gray eyes that looked at her, and then, without a word, he held out his arms, and suddenly Jane felt as she had when she was a little child, and things had gone wrong.

“Father! Father!” she sobbed, and then she clung to him, while he held her in a yearning, strong embrace, saying, “It’s hard, my daughter, terribly hard for all of us, but it was the thing that I had to do. Dan, I am sure, has told you all that happened. But it won’t be for long, Janey. What I have done once, I can do again.” He led her to a rustic bench under one of the trees, and removing her hat, he stroked her dark, glossy hair. “Jane, dear,” he implored, when her sobs grew less, “try to be brave, just for a time. Promise me!” Then, as the girl did not speak, the man went on, “We have tried so hard, all of us together, to make it possible for you to finish at Highacres. Poor Dan made the biggest sacrifice. I feared that I would have to send for you to come home, perhaps only for this term, but Dan wrote, ‘Father, use my college money for Jane’s tuition. I’ll work my way through for the rest of this year.’ And that is what he did. Notwithstanding the fact that he had to study until long after midnight, he worked during the day, nor did he stop when he caught a severe cold. He did not let us know how ill he was, but struggled on and finished the year with high honors, but, oh, my daughter, you can see how worn he is. Dr. Sanders tells me that Dan must go to the Colorado mountains for the summer and I have been waiting, dear, to talk it over with you. You will want to go with Dan to take care

of him, won't you, Jane?"

Almost before the girl knew that she was going to say it, she heard her self-pitying voice expostulating, "Oh, Dad, how cruel fate is! Marion Starr wanted me to go with her to Newport. They're going to one of those adorable cottage-hotels, she and her Aunt Belle, and we three girls who have been Merry's best friends were to go with her. It would only cost me one hundred dollars a month. That isn't so very much, is it, Dad?"

Mr. Abbott sighed. "Jane," and there was infinite reproach in his tone, "am I to believe that you are willing that Dan should go alone to the mountains to try to find there the health he lost in his endeavor to help you?"

Again the girl sobbed. "Oh, Dad, how selfish I am! How terribly selfish! I love Dan, but the thing I want to do is to go to Newport. Of course I know I can't go, but, oh, *how* I do want to."

The girl feared that her father would rebuke her angrily for the frank revelation of her lack of gratitude, but, instead, he rose, saying kindly as he assisted her to arise, "Jane, dear, you *think* that is what you want to do but I don't believe it. Dan is to go West next Friday. My good friend Mr. Bethel, being president of a railroad, has sent me the passes. As you know, I still own a little cabin on Mystery Mountain which I purchased for almost nothing when I graduated from college and went West to seek my fortune. There is *no* mystery, and there was *no* wealth, but I have paid the taxes until last year and those Dan shall pay, as I do not want to lose the place. It was to that cabin, as you have often heard us tell, that your mother and I went for our honeymoon. You need not decide today, daughter. If you prefer to go with your friends, I will find a way to send you."

CHAPTER V.
JANE'S SMALL BROTHER

There were many conflicting emotions in the heart of the tall, beautiful girl as she walked slowly back to the house, her father at her side with one arm lovingly about her.

"Jane," he said tenderly, "I wish there were words in our English language that could adequately express the joy it is to me because you are so like your mother, and, strangely perhaps, Dan is as much like me as I was at his age as you are like that other Jane. She was tall and willowy, with the same bright, uplifting of her dark eyes when she was pleased."

Then the man sighed, and he said almost pleadingly, "You do realize, do you not, daughter, that I would do anything that was right to give you pleasure?"

Vaguely the girl replied, "Why, I suppose so, Dad. I don't quite understand ideals and ethics. I've never given much thought to them." Jane could say no more, for, vaulting over the low fence beyond the orchard, a vigorous boy of twelve appeared, and, if ten-year-old Julie had made a terrifying onrush, this boy's attack resembled that of a little wild Indian. "Whoopla!" he fairly shouted, "If here isn't old Jane! Bully, but that's great! Did you bring me anything?"

There was no fending off the boy's well meant embraces, and Jane emerged from them with decidedly ruffled feelings.

"I certainly don't like to have you call me old Jane," she scolded. "I think it is very lacking in respect. Father, I wish you would tell Gerald to call me Sister Jane."

Mr. Abbott reprimanded the crestfallen lad, then he told the girl that the boy had

not meant to be disrespectful. “You know, Jane, that children use certain phrases until they are worn ragged, and just now ‘old’ is applied to everything of which Gerald is especially fond. It is with him a term of endearment.” Then, with a smile of loving encouragement for the boy, their father added: “Why, that youngster even calls me ‘old Dad’ and I confess I rather like it.”

The boy did not again address his sister, but going to the other side of his father, he clung affectionately to his arm and hopped along on one foot and then on the other as though he had quite forgotten the rebuff, but he had not. They entered a side door and Jane went upstairs to her own pleasant room with its wide bow windows that opened out over the tops of the apple trees and toward the sloping green hills for which New Jersey is famous. Grandmother was in the kitchen preparing a supper such as Jane had liked two years before when she had visited the Vermont farm, and Julie was setting the table, when Gerald appeared. Straddling a chair he blurted out, “Say, isn’t Jane a spoil-joy? I’m awful sorry her school’s let out, and ’tisn’t only for vacation that she’ll be home. Dan says it’s forever ’n ever ’n ever. She’ll be trying to tell us where to head in. We’ll have about as much fun as—as—(the boy was trying hard to think of a suitable simile)—as—a——” Then as he was still floundering, Julie, holding a handful of silver knives and forks, whirled and said brightly, “as a rat in a dog kennel. You know last week how awful unhappy that rat was that puppy had in his kennel, till you held his collar and let the poor thing get away.” Then as the small girl continued on her way around the long table placing the silver by each plate, she said hopefully, “Don’t let’s mope about it yet. Jane always goes a-visitin’ her school friends every summer and like’s not she will this.”

“Humph! She must be heaps nicer other places than she is here, or folks wouldn’t want her.” Their mutual commiserating came to an abrupt end, for Grandma appeared from the kitchen with a covered dish, out of which a delicious aroma was escaping. Then in from the other door came Dad, one arm about Jane and the other about Dan. Grandma glanced anxiously at her big son. His expression was hard to read, but he seemed happier. How she hoped Jane had proved herself a worthy daughter of her mother.

It is well, perhaps, that we cannot read the thoughts of those nearest us, for all that evening Jane was wondering how she could make over her last summer’s wardrobe that it might appear new even in a fashionable cottage-hotel.

On Thursday, directly after breakfast, Jane went up to her room without having

offered to help with the morning work. She had never even made her own bed in all the eighteen years of her life and the thought did not suggest itself to her that she might be useful. Or, if it did, she assured herself that Julie was far more willing and much more capable as a helper for their grandmother than she, Jane, could possibly be. The truth was that bright-eyed, eager, light-footed little Julie was far more welcome than the older girl, bored, sulky, and selfish, would have been.

Dan left early for the city, where he wished to purchase a few things he would need while “roughing it” in the Colorado mountains. Gerald went with him as far as the cross-roads, then the older boy tramped on to the depot while the younger one, whistling gaily and even turning a handspring now and then, proceeded to his place of business, and was soon nearly hidden in an apron much too big for him, while he swept out the store.

Mr. Abbott had watched his older daughter closely during that morning meal. He had said little to her, but had conversed cheerily with Dan, telling him just what khaki garments he would need, and, at Gerald’s urging, he had retold exciting adventures that he had had in that old log cabin in the long ago days, when he had first purchased it. How the boy wished that he, also, could go to that wonderful Mystery Mountain, but not for one moment would he let Dad know of this yearning. He was needed at home to earn what he could by working at the Peterson grocery. His big brother was not well, so he, Gerald, must take his place as father’s helper. He was a little boy, only twelve, and it took courage to whistle and turn handsprings when he would far rather have crept away into some hidden fence corner and sobbed out his longing for travel and adventure.

All that sunny July morning Mr. Abbott worked in his garden back of the apple orchard.

Often as he hoed between the long rows of thrifty vegetables, the sorrowing man glanced up at the windows of the room in which he knew his beloved daughter sat. How he wished she would come out and talk with him, even if it were to tell him that she had decided that she wanted to go with her friends to Newport. He had promised to find a way to obtain the $300 she would need, if she wished to go for three months.

He sighed deeply, and, being hidden from the house by a gnarled old apple tree, he stopped his work and took from his pocket an often read letter from an old

friend who had offered to loan him any sum, large or small, at any time that it might be needed. “If Jane wants to go, I’ll wire for the money,” he decided. Never before had a morning dragged so slowly for the man who was used to the whirl, confusion and excitement of Wall Street.

And yet, though he hardly realized it, the warm, gentle breeze rustling among the leaves of the trees, the smell of the freshly turned earth in which he was working, the cheerful singing of the birds far and near—brought into his soul a sense of peace. At the end of one row he stood up, very straight as he had stood before it had all happened, and looking up into the radiant blue sky, he seemed to know, deep in the heart of him, that all would be well. It was with a brisker step than he had walked in many a day that he returned to the house, when little Julie appeared at the back door to ring the luncheon bell.

“Surely Jane has decided by now,” he told himself. “And equally surely she will want to go West with the brother who has sacrificed himself, his ease and his health that she might finish her course at Highacres.” So confident was he of his daughter’s real nobility of nature that he found himself planning what he would suggest that she take with her. She would ask him about that at lunch. There was not much time to prepare, but she would need little in that wild mountain country. At last he heard her slowly descending the stairs. His anxiety increased. What would Jane’s decision be?

CHAPTER VI.
JANE’S CHOICE

The father, with his hands clasped behind him, was pacing up and down the long dining room when his daughter entered. He saw at once that she had been crying, although she had endeavored to erase the traces of the tears which had been shed almost continuously through the morning.

In a listless voice she said at once, “Father, I have decided to go with Dan since you feel that it is my duty, but, oh, how I want to go to Newport with Merry and the rest: but of course it would cost $300 and there is no money.”

The father had started eagerly toward his daughter when she had entered, but, upon hearing the concluding part of her speech, he drew back, a hurt expression in his clear gray eyes. He folded his arms and a more alert observer than Jane would have noticed an almost hard tone in his voice. Never before had it been used for the daughter who was so like the mother in looks only. “The matter is decided. Jane,” he informed her. “The $300 that you require will be forthcoming. However, I wish you would plan to leave tomorrow, the same day that your brother goes West. I want to be alone, without worries, that I may decide how best to go about earning what I shall need to finish paying the debt that I still owe to the poor people who trusted me.”

“Oh, father, father!” Jane flung herself into her chair at the table and put her head down on her folded arms. “I didn’t know that you felt that you owe them more than your entire fortune.”

“It was not enough to cover their investments,” the man said, still coldly, for he believed the girl was crying because she would have to give up even more than she had supposed, and be kept in poverty for a longer period of time. She sat up,

however, when her father said, “Jane, dry your tears. Since you are to go to Newport, I see nothing for you to cry about, and I do not wish mother and Julie to know how I feel about this whole matter.”

Hastily Jane left the table to again remove the traces of tears, and when she returned, her grandmother and Julie were in their places. Her father had remained standing until she also was seated. Then, bowing his head, he said the simple grace of gratitude which had never been omitted at that table.

Jane marveled at the courage of her father, for he was actually smiling at the little old lady who sat at his side. “Mother mine,” he said, “if this isn’t the same kind of a meat pudding that you used to make for me as a special treat, long ago, when I had been good. Have I been good today?”

There were sudden tears in the fading blue eyes and a quiver in the corners of the sweet old mouth as the grandmother replied, “Yes, Dan, you have been very good. And all the while I was making it I was thinking how proud and pleased your father would be if he only knew, and maybe he does know, how good you’ve been. When you weren’t more than knee high to your Dad, he began to teach you that it was better to have folks know that your word could be depended on than to be praised for smartness, and that’s how ’tis, Danny, and I’m happy and proud.”

The dear little old lady wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron; then she smiled up brightly, and pretended to eat the meat pie, which was in danger of being neglected by all except Julie, who prattled, “We’ve set away two big pieces, one for brother Dan, when he comes home from the city, and one for Gerry. Umm, won’t they be glad when they see them? They’ll be hungry as anything! I like to be awful hungry when there’s something extra special to eat, don’t you, Janey?” Almost timorously this query was ventured. Julie did not like to have the big sister look so sad. The answer was not encouraging. “Oh, Julie, I don’t want to talk,” the other girl said fretfully.

“Nor eat, neither, it looks like,” the old lady had just said when the front door bell pealed. Julie leaped up, looking eagerly at her father. “Oh, Dad, may I go?” But, being nearest the door, he had risen. “I’ll answer it, Julie,” he replied. “It is probably some one to see me.” But Mr. Abbott was mistaken. A messenger boy stood on the porch. After the yellow envelope had been signed for, it was taken to Jane, to whom it was addressed.

Eagerly the girl tore it open, the others watching her with varied emotions, although Julie's was just eager curiosity. "Ohee," she squealed, "telegrams are such fun and so exciting. What's in it, Janey, do tell us!"

Mr. Abbott noted that a red spot was burning in each cheek of the daughter who had been so pale. She glanced up at him, her eyes shining. "Dad," she cried, "you won't have to give me $300. Listen to this. Oh, Merry is certainly wonderful!" Then she read:

"Dearest Jane: Aunt Belle has changed her plans. She has rented a cottage just beyond the hotel grounds and is going to take her own cook and I want you to come as our guest, because, darling girl, I owe you a visit, since you gave me such a wonderful time in the country with you last year, and, what is more, we are going Friday, so pack up your trunk today, and be at the Central Station tomorrow at 4:00. Lovingly, your intimate friend—Marion Starr.

"P. S.—Who, more than ever, is living up to her nickname, Merry.—M. S."

During the reading of the "night letter" Mr. Abbott had quickly made up his mind just what his attitude would be. "That's splendid, Jane, isn't it?" he said, and not even his watchful mother noted a trace of disappointment in his voice. "If I were you I would pack at once. You would better go over to the city in the morning and that will give you time to buy a new summer dress, for I am sure that you must need one."

Jane started to reply, but something in her throat seemed to make it hard for her to speak, and so she left the room hurriedly without having more than touched her plate. Julie followed, as she adored packing. When they were gone, the man sighed deeply. "Mother," he said, "I have decided to send Julie with Dan. She can cook the simple things he will need and some one must go with the boy. I would go myself, but I would be of little use. In a few days, as soon as I can pull myself together, I am going back to the city to start in some occupation far from Wall Street."

The old lady reached out a comforting hand and placed it on that of her son nearest her. "Dan," she said in a low voice, "Jane doesn't know a thing about your long illness, does she? Nobody's told her, has there?"

The man shook his head. “Jane has been so interested in her own problems, and in finding a way to do as she wished, that she has not even wondered why I am working about in the garden instead of going to the city daily, as I always have done. But don’t tell her, mother. She does not seem to care, and, moreover, I am now much stronger. My only real worry is Dan, and I do feel confident that if he can be well cared for, the mountain air will restore his health.”

Rising, he stooped to kiss his mother’s forehead, then left the room, going through the kitchen to the garden. As he worked he glanced often at the open windows of the room above the tree tops. He saw the two girls hurrying about, for Jane had gladly accepted Julie’s offer of service, and the trunk packing was evidently progressing merrily. This assurance was brought to him when he heard Jane singing a snatch of a school song.

It sounded like a requiem to the man in the garden below. He leaned on his hoe as he thought, self-rebukingly, “It is all my fault. I have spoiled Jane. My love has been misdirected. It is I who have made her selfish. I wanted to give her everything, for she had lost so much when she lost her mother. I have done as much for the other three children, but somehow they didn’t spoil.”

The comfort of that realization was so great that the father soon returned to his self-imposed task, and, an hour later, when Dan appeared, he told the boy Jane’s decision, saying: “Son of mine, it would be no comfort to you to have her companionship if her heart were elsewhere.” The shadow of keen disappointment in the lad’s eyes was quickly dispelled. Placing a hand on his father’s shoulder he said cheerfully, “It’s all right, Dad. Julie is a great little pal.”

But even yet the matter was not decided.

That Thursday night, after the younger members of the household were asleep, Mr. Abbott and his mother talked together in his den.

“Julie was the happiest child in this world when I told her she was to go with Dan.” The old lady smiled as she recalled the hoppings and squealings with which the small girl had expressed her joy. “Luckily I’d washed and ironed her summer clothes on Monday and Tuesday, and this being only Thursday, she hadn’t soiled any of them.”

Then her tone changed to one of tenderness. “Dan,” she said, “Julie and Jane aren’t much alike, are they? That little girl didn’t hop and squeal long before she

thought of something that sobered her. Then she told me, ‘I don’t like to go, Grandma, and leave Gerald at home. He’s been wishing and wishing and wishing he could go, but he wouldn’t tell Dad ’cause he wants to stay home and earn money to help.’”

To the little old lady’s surprise, her companion sprang up as he exclaimed: “Mother, I won’t be gone long. Wait up for me!” Seizing his hat from the hall “tree,” he left the house. “Well, now, that’s certainly a curious caper,” the old lady thought. “He couldn’t have been listening to a word I was saying. He must have thought of something he’d forgotten, probably it’s something for Jane. Well, there’s nothing for me to do but wait.” She glanced at the clock on the mantle. Even then it was late. She was usually asleep at ten. There had been time for many a little cat-nap before she heard her son returning. His expression assured the old lady that he was satisfied with the result of his errand.

“Why, Dan Abbott,” she exclaimed, “whatever started you off in that way? ’Twasn’t anything I said, was it?”

The man sank down in his chair again and took from his pocket a telegram. “That’s what I went after, mother,” he told her. “I wired Bethel for one more pass, as I had a small son who also wished to go West, and this is his answer:

“‘Glad indeed to accommodate you, Dan, and I’m sending one more, just for good measure. Happened to recall that you have four children. Let me do something else for you, old man, if I can.’”

The grandmother looked up with shining eyes as she commented: “Bert Bethel’s a true friend, if there ever was one. Won’t Gerry be wild with joy?

“But, goodness me, Danny, that means more packing to do. There’s room enough in Julie’s trunk for the things Gerald will need, and I do believe I’ll go right up and put them in while the boy’s asleep.” Then she paused and looked at her son inquiringly. “Will it be quite fair to Mr. Peterson to have Gerry leave his store without giving notice?”

“I’ve attended to that, mother,” the man replied. “While I was waiting for an answer from Bert, I walked over to the grocery and told Jock Peterson all that had happened, and he was as pleased as he could be. He wants Gerald to come over there first thing in the morning to get a present to take with him.

“He didn’t say what it would be. I don’t even suppose that he had decided when he spoke. I was indeed happy to have him praise Gerald as he did. He said that he would trust our boy with any amount of money. He has watched Gerald, as he always does every lad who works in the store. He said that nearly all of them had helped themselves to a piece of candy from the showcase when they had wished, but that Gerald had never once touched a thing that did not belong to him. Mr. Peterson was so pleased that he asked Gerald about it one day, saying: ‘Don’t you like candy, lad?’ And our boy replied: ‘Indeed I do, Mr. Peterson! I don’t buy it because I want to save all my money to help Dad.’

“Gerald hadn’t even thought of helping himself as he worked around the store.”

“Of course, Gerry wouldn’t,” the old lady replied emphatically, “for isn’t he your son, Daniel?”

“And your grandson, mother?” the man smilingly returned. “But we must get some sleep,” he added, as the chimes on the mantle clock told them that it was eleven. “Tomorrow is to be a busy day.”

It was also to be a day of surprises, although this, these two did not guess.

CHAPTER VII.
GERRY'S SURPRISE

Grandmother Abbott had indeed been right when she prophecied that Gerald's joy, upon hearing that he could accompany Dan and his sister Julie, would be unbounded. She told him before breakfast while they were waiting for the others to come down. They had planned telling him later, but when his father saw how hard the small boy was trying to be brave; how the tune he was endeavoring to whistle wavered and broke, he could stand it no longer, and, putting a hand on each of the boy's shoulders, he looked down at him as he asked: "Son, if you could have your dearest wish fulfilled, what would it be?"

The lad hesitated, then he said earnestly: "There's two things to wish for, Dad, and they're both awful big. I want everything to be all right for you, but, oh, how I do want brother Dan to get well."

Tears sprang to the eyes of the little old lady, and placing a hand affectionately on the boy's head she asked: "Isn't there something else, dearie, something you'd be wishing just for yourself?"

It was quite evident to the two who were watching that a struggle was going on in the boy's heart. He had assured himself, time and again, that his dad must not know how he wished that he could go with Dan. He even felt guilty, because he wanted to go, believing that his dad needed his help at home, and so he said nothing. His father, surmising that this might be the case, asked, with one of his rare smiles: "If you knew, son, that I thought it best for you to go with Julie, to help her take care of Dan, would you be pleased?"

Such a light as there was in the freckled face, but, even then, the boy did not let himself rejoice. "Dad," he said, "don't you need me here?"

“No, son, your grandmother has decided to stay all summer. She has found a nice family to take care of her farm. Indeed I shall feel better, knowing that you are with Julie, if Dan should be really ill.”

For a moment the good news seemed to stun the little fellow. But when the full realization of what it meant surged over him, he leaped into his father’s arms and hugged him hard, then turning, he bolted for the stairway, and went up two steps at a time.

“Hurray!” he fairly shouted. “Dan, Jane, Julie, I’m going to Mystery Mountain!”

This unexpected news was received joyfully by Julie and Dan, but Jane, who was putting the last touches to her traveling costume, merely gave a shrug, which was reflected back to her in the long mirror. “Well, thanks be, I’m not going,” she confided to that reflection. “I’d be worn to rags by the end of the summer if I had to listen to such shrieking. I’m thankful Merry’s Aunt Belle has no children. They may be all very well for people who like them, but I think they are superlative nuisances.”

The entire family had gathered in the dining room when Jane descended, and, after the grace had been said, the two youngest members began to chatter their excitement like little magpies. Dan, who sat next to Jane, smiled at her lovingly. “I suppose you are going to have a wonderful time, little girl,” he said. “I have heard that Newport is a merry whirl for society people in the summer time, with dances, tallyho rides, and picnic suppers.”

Jane’s eyes glowed, and she voiced her agreement. “I’ve heard so, too, and I’ve always been just wild to have a wee taste of that gay life, and now I can hardly believe that I am to be right in the midst of it for three glorious months.” Then, as she saw a sudden wearied expression in her brother’s face, she added: “You’re very tired, Dan, aren’t you? If only you were rested, I should try to plan some way to have you go with me. I’m wild to have you meet Merry. I do believe she is just the kind of a girl whom you would like. You never have cared for any girl yet, have you? I mean not particularly well?”

There was a tender light in the gray eyes that were so like their father’s. Resting a hand on Jane’s arm, he said in a low voice, “I care right now very particularly for a girl, and she is my dear sister-pal.”

Somehow the expression in her brother’s eyes made Jane unhappy. She did wish

he would not look at her—was it wistfully, yearningly or what? Rising, their father said, “The taxi is outside, children. Are you all ready?”

There was much confusion for the next few moments. The expressman had come for the trunks, and there were many last things that the father wished to say to the three who were going to his cabin on Mystery Mountain.

“Dan, my boy,” Mr. Abbott held the hand of his eldest in a firm clasp and looked deep into his eyes, “let your first thought be how best you can regain your strength. If you need me, wire and I will come at once.” Then putting his hand in his pocket, he drew out an envelope. “The passes are in here. Put them away carefully.” Then he turned to Jane. “Goodbye, daughter. You will be nearer. Come home when you want to. May heaven protect you all.”

The two younger children gave “bear hugs,” over and over again, to their dad and grandmother, and when at last all were seated in the taxi, they waved to the two who stood on the porch until they had turned a corner.

Dan smiled at Jane as he said: “This is indeed an exodus. That little old home of ours never lost so many of us all at once.”

“Gee, I bet ye the apple orchard’ll wonder where me and Julie are,” the boy began, but Jane interrupted fretfully. “Oh, I do wish you would be more careful of the way you speak, Gerald. You know as well as any of us that you should say where Julie and I are.”

The boy’s exuberance for a moment was dampened, but not for long. He soon burst out with, “Say, Dan, you know that story Dad tells about a brown bear that came right up to the cabin door once. Do you suppose there’s bears in those mountains now?”

“I’m sure of it, Gerry. Dozens of them, but they won’t hurt us, unless we get them cornered.”

“Well, you can bet I’m not going to corner any of them,” Gerry confided. “But I’d like to have a little cub, wouldn’t you, Julie, to fetch up for a pet?”

The little girl was doubtful. “Maybe, when it grew up, it would forget it was a pet bear, and maybe you’d get it cornered, and then what would you do?”

Dan laughed. “The bear would do the doing,” he said. He glanced at Jane, who sat looking out of the small window at her side. He did not believe that she really saw the objects without. How he wished he knew what the girl, who had been his pal all through their childhood, was thinking. As he watched her, there was again in his eyes that yearning, wistful expression, but Jane did not know it as she did not turn.

The little station at Edgemere was soon reached, the trunks checked for the big city beyond the river, and, after a short ride on the train and ferry, they found themselves in the whirling, seething mass of humanity with which the Grand Central Station seemed always to be filled.

The train for the West was to leave at 10, and after it was gone, Jane planned going uptown to buy a summer dress. Dad had told her to charge it to him. His credit was still good. As they stood waiting for the gates to open, Dan took from his pocket the envelope containing the passes. For the first time he glanced them over, then exclaimed: “Why, how curious! There are four passes! I thought there were but three. Oh, well, they are only slips of paper, and do not represent money.” He replaced them and smiled at Jane. The children raced to a stand to buy a bag of popcorn and Dan seized that opportunity to take his sister’s hand, and say most seriously: “Dear girl, if I never come back, try to be to our Dad all that I have so wanted to be.”

There was a startled expression in the girl’s dark eyes. “Dan, what do you mean?” Her voice sounded frightened, terrorized. “If you never come back? Brother, why shouldn’t you come back!” She clung to his arm. “Tell me, what do you mean?” But he could not reply for a time, because of a sudden attack of coughing. Then he said: “I don’t know, little girl. I’m afraid I’m worse off than Dad knows. I——”

“All aboard!” The gates were swung open. Frantically, Jane cried: “Dan, quick, have my trunk checked on that other pass. I’m going with you.”

* * * * * * * *

Mr. Abbott smiled through tears as he handed his mother the telegram he received that afternoon. “I felt sure our Jane had a soul,” he said. “Her mother’s daughter couldn’t be entirely without one.”

“And now that it’s awakened maybe it’ll start to blossoming,” the old lady

replied.

CHAPTER VIII.
ALL ABOARD

There had been such a whirl at the last moment that it was not until they were on the train and had located their seats on the Pullman, that the children realized what had happened. Luckily Jane was too much occupied readjusting her own attitude of mind, and trying to think hastily what she should do before the train was really on its way, to notice the disappointment which was plainly depicted on the faces of Julie and Gerald. They gazed at each other almost in dismay when they heard that their big sister was to accompany them, but the joy in their brother's face and manner was all that was needed to reconcile the younger boy.

In the confusion caused by passengers entering the car with porters carrying their luggage, Gerald managed to draw Julie aside and whisper to her: "Don't let on we didn't want Jane, not on your life! Dan wanted her, and this journey's got just one object, Dad says, and that's to help Dan get well."

But Julie was too terribly disappointed to pretend that she was not. "I know all that," she half sobbed and turned toward the window across the aisle, "but I was so happy when I s'posed I was to cook for Dan, and when you and I were to be the ones to take care of him. But now Jane will get all the honor and everything, and we'll have to be bossed around worse than if we were at home, for Dad's there to take our part."

Gerald's clear hazel eyes gazed at his sister rebukingly. "Julie," he said, with an earnestness far beyond his years, "the train hasn't started yet and if you'n I are going to think of ourselves we'd better go back home. Shall we, Julie?"

The little girl shook her head vigorously. "No, no. I don't want to go home." She clung to the back of a seat as though she feared she were going to be taken

forcibly from the train.

Gerald leaned over to whisper to her, but he first gave her a little kiss on the ear, then he said: “Julie, you’n I will have oodles of fun up there in the mountains. If Jane isn’t too snappish, I’ll be glad she’s along, because, of course, she’ll be able to take care of Dan better than we could.” Then suddenly he laughed gleefully.

“I’ve got it!” he confided to the girl, who had looked around curiously. She could not imagine how Gerald could laugh when such a tragic thing had happened. “You’re dippy about pretending, Julie. You once said you could pretend anything you wanted to, and make it seem real. Well, here’s your chance. Every time Jane is snappy, pretend she has said something pleasant. That’ll be a hard one, but for Dan’s sake, I’m willing to give it a try.”

Julie’s mania had always been “pretending,” and she had often wished that Gerald would play it with her, but he was a matter-of-fact sort of a lad, and his reply had been that real things were fun enough for him. The little girl’s face brightened. At last her brother was willing to play her favorite game.

“That will be a hard one,” she agreed. Then, as she was lunged against the boy, she also laughed. “Oh, goodie!” she whispered. “Now the train is really started —nobody can send us back home. Honest, I was skeered Jane might want to. She thinks we’re so terribly in the way.”

Happy as Dan was, because the sister he so loved was to accompany him to the West, he did not forget the two who had been willing to go with him and care for him in the beginning, and, as soon as the train was well under way, he called to the children. “Come here, Julie. I’ve saved the window side of my seat for you, and I’m sure Jane will let Gerald sit by the window on her seat. Now, isn’t this jolly?”

The children wedged into the places toward which he was beckoning them. Julie glanced almost fearfully up at the older girl she had accidentally jostled in passing, but Jane was gazing out of the window deep in dreams. Dan noticed his sister-pal’s expression. How he hoped she was not regretting her hasty decision.

His fears were soon dispelled, for Jane turned toward him with a tender light in her beautiful dark eyes. “Brother,” she said, “I have just been wondering how I can communicate with Marion Starr. She expects to meet me at the Central Station at four. It is now nearly noon. I should have left some message for her.”

“We must send a telegram to her home when we reach Albany, or sooner, if we make a stop. I’ll ask the conductor. Suppose you write out what you wish to say.” And so Jane took from her valise the very same little leather covered notebook in which, less than a week before, she had written a list of the things she would need for a wardrobe to be worn at the fashionable summer resort at Newport.

Of this Jane did not even think as she wrote, after a thoughtful moment, the ten words that were needed to tell her best friend that she was on her way West with her brother Dan, who was ill and who needed her.

The conductor took the message and said that he expected to have an opportunity to send a telegram in a very short time. The train soon stopped at a village, where it was evidently flagged, and the young people saw the station master running from the depot waving a yellow envelope. The conductor received it, at the same time giving him the paper on which Jane’s message was written. “Please send this at once.” The sound of his voice came to them through Gerald’s window. Then the train started again and had acquired its former speed when the kindly conductor entered their car. He was reading the telegram he had just received. Stopping at their seats, he asked: “Are you Daniel Abbott, accompanied by Jane, Julie and Gerald?”

“We are,” the tall lad replied in his friendly manner. “Have you a message from our father?”

The conductor shook his head. “No, not that. This telegram is from the president of the railroad telling us that four young people named Abbott are his guests, and he wishes them to receive every courtesy, and now, as it is noon, if you will come with me, I will escort you to the diner.”

“Oh, but I’m glad,” Julie, who treated everyone with frank friendliness, smiled brightly up into the face of the man whom she just knew must be a father, he had such kind, understanding eyes. “I’m awful hungry; aren’t you, Gerry?” she whispered, a moment later, as they filed down the aisle in procession, the conductor first, Jane next, with Dan at the end as rear guard. Julie tittered and Jane turned to frown at her. Gerry poked his young sister with the reminder, “Pretend she smiled.”

But frowns could not squelch Julie’s exuberance when they were seated about a

table in the dining car, which was rapidly filling with their fellow travelers.

“Ohee, isn’t this the jolliest? I’m going to pretend I’m a princess and——” But the small girl paused and listened. The head waiter was addressing Jane. “As guests of Mr. Bethel’s,” he told them, “you may select whatever you wish from the menu. Kindly write out your orders.” He handed them each an order slip and a pencil and then went on to another table. Julie gave a little bounce of joy. The “*real*” was so wonderful, she would not have to pretend. She and Gerald bowed their heads over a typed menu; and then they began to scribble. Dan, glancing across at them, smiled good naturedly. “What are you doing, kiddies, copying the entire menu?” he asked. But Jane remarked rebukingly, “Julie Abbott, do you wish people to think that you have been starved at home? Tear those up at once. Here are two others. If you can’t make them out properly, I’ll do it for you.”

Dan saw a rebellious expression in Julie’s eyes, so he suggested, “Let them try once more, Jane. They can’t learn any younger. Just order a few things at first, Gerry, and then, if you are still hungry, you can have more.”

Such a jolly time as the children had! When the train turned sharply at a curve and the dishes slid about, Julie laughed outright. She purposely did not look at Jane. She could pretend her big sister was smiling easier, if she didn’t see the frown. But their fun was just beginning.

CHAPTER IX.
TELEGRAMS

Although the children were greatly interested in all they saw, nothing of an unusual nature had occurred, when, early one morning they reached Chicago.

The kindly conductor directed them to the other train that would bear them to their destination, assuring them that on it, also, they would be guests of Mr. Bethel.

The four young people were standing on the outer edge of the hurrying throng, gazing about them with interest (as several hours would elapse before the departure of the west-bound train), when Jane was sure that she heard their name being called through a megaphone.

“It’s that man in uniform over by the gates. He’s calling ‘Telegram for Jane Abbott!’” Gerald told her. “May I go get it, Dan? May I?”

The older boy nodded and the younger pushed through the crowd, the others following more slowly. Very quickly Gerald returned, waving two yellow envelopes. One was a night letter from Marion Starr. Tearing it open, Jane read:

“Dearest friend: As soon as I received your message I telephoned your father, knowing that he could explain much more than you could in ten words. What you are doing makes me love you more than I did before, if that is possible. My one wish is that I, too, might go West. I like mountains far better than I do fashionable summer resorts. Will write. Your

MERRY.”

The other telegram contained a short message, but Jane looked up with tears in her eyes as she said: “It is from father and just for me.”

Dan smiled down at her and asked no questions. The few words were: “Thank you, daughter, for your self-sacrifice. Now I know that Dan will get well.”

But their father did not know how serious Dan believed his condition to be.

“And he shall not,” the girl decided, “not until I have good news to send.”

As soon as they were seated in the train that was to take them the rest of the journey, Jane said anxiously: “Dan, dear, aren’t you trying too hard to keep up? You look so very weak and weary. Let’s have the porter make up the lower berth, even though it is still daytime. You need a long rest.”

Dan shook his head, though he pressed her arm tenderly, but a coughing spell racked his body when he tried to speak. The conductor on the Rock Island was more practical than their former friend, but not more kindly. He motioned Jane to one side.

“Miss Abbott,” he said, “there is a drawing-room vacant. Bride and groom were to have had it, but the order has been canceled. Since you are friends of Mr. Bethel, I’m going to put you all in there. It will be more comfortable, and you can turn in any time you wish.”

Jane’s gratitude was sincerely expressed. It would give Dan just the opportunity he needed to rest, and the lad, nothing loath, permitted Jane to have her way. How elated the children were when they found that they were to travel in a room quite by themselves. That evening they went to the diner alone, but Gerald was not as pleased as was his sister.

“I should think you’d be tickled pink,” Julie said, inelegantly, “to be able to order anything you choose and not have Jane peering at what you write.”

The boy replied dismally: “I can’t be much pleased about anything. Don’t you know, Jane’s staying with Dan ’cause she thinks he’s too weak to come out here? I heard her ask the porter to have their dinners brought in there. Julie, you and I’ll have to keep quieter if we want to help Dan get well. He’s sicker than he was when we started. I can see that easy.”

The small girl was at once remorseful.

“I’m so glad you told me,” she said with tears in her dark violet eyes. “I’ve just been thinking what a lot of fun we’re having. I’ve been worse selfish than Jane was.”

Seeing that her lips were quivering, Gerald said consolingly: “No, you haven’t, either. Anyhow, I think Dan’s just tired out. He’ll be lots better in the morning. You see if he isn’t.”

But when Dan awakened in the morning he was no better.

During the afternoon, that their brother might try to sleep, the conductor suggested that Julie and Gerald go out on the observation platform.

“Is it quite safe for them out there alone?” Dan inquired.

“They will not be alone,” was the reply. “I’ll put them in the care of Mr. Packard, with whom I am acquainted, as he frequently travels over this line.”

Julie had been very eager to ride on the observation platform, but Jane had not wished to go outside because of the dust and cinders which she was sure she would encounter, but now that the small girl was actually going, she could hardly keep from skipping down the aisle as she followed the conductor with Gerald as rear guard.

There was only one occupant of the observation platform, and to Gerald’s delight, he wore the wide brimmed Stetson hat which the boy had often seen on the screen.

“I’ll bet yo’ he’s a cattle-man. I bet yo’ he is!” Gerry gleefully confided to his small sister while their guide said a few words to the Westerner. Then, turning, the conductor beckoned to them.

The stranger arose and held out a strong brown hand to assist the little girl to a chair at his side.

“How do you do, Julie and Gerald?” he said, including them both in his friendly smile. Julie bobbed a little curtsy, but Gerald’s attempt at manners was rudely interrupted by the necessity of seizing his cap.

“We have to watch out for our hats,” the stranger cautioned, “for now and then we are visited by a miniature whirlwind.”

Gerald was almost bursting with eagerness. “Oh, I say, Mr. Packard,” he blurted out, “aren’t you a reg’lar—er—I mean a reg’lar——” The boy grew red and embarrassed, and so Julie went to his aid with, “Mr. Packard, Gerry thinks maybe you’re a cow-man rancher like we’ve seen in the moving pictures.”

The bronzed face of the middle-aged man wrinkled in a good-natured smile. “I am the owner of a cattle-ranch fifteen miles from Redfords,” he told them.

This information so delighted the boy that Julie was afraid he would bounce right over the rail.

“Gee-golly! That’s where we’re going—Redfords is! Our daddy owns a cabin way up high on Mystery Mountain.”

The man looked puzzled. “Mystery Mountain,” he repeated thoughtfully. “I don’t seem to recall having heard of it.”

Then practical little Julie put in: “Oh, Mr. Packard, that isn’t its really-truly name. Our daddy called it that ’cause there’s a lost mine on it and Dad said it was a mystery where it went to.”

The man’s face brightened.

“O-ho! Then you must mean Redfords’ Peak. That mine was found and lost again before I bought the Green Hills Ranch. Quite a long while ago that was.”

Gerry nodded agreement. “Yep. Dan, our big brother is most twenty-one and he hadn’t been born yet.” Then the boy’s face saddened as he confided: “Dan’s sick. He’s got a dreadful cough. That’s why we’re going to Dad’s cabin in the Rockies.”

“Our doctor said the al-te-tood would make him well,” Julie explained, stopping after each syllable of the long word and saying it very thoughtfully.

Gerald looked up eagerly. “Do you think it will, Mr. Packard? Do you think Dan will get well?”

The older man’s reply was reassuring: “Of course he will. Our Rocky Mountain air is a tonic that gives new life to everyone. Are you three traveling alone?”

Julie and Gerald solemnly shook their heads, and the small girl, in childish fashion, put a finger on her lips as though to keep from saying something which she knew she ought not. It was Gerald who replied: “Our big sister Jane is with us.” The boy said no more, but Mr. Packard was convinced that, devoted as the youngsters were to Dan, Jane, for some reason, was not very popular with them.

Then, as he did not wish to pry into their family affairs, the genial rancher pointed out and described to fascinated listeners the many things of interest which they were passing.

The afternoon sped quickly and even when the dinner hour approached the children were loath to leave their new friend.

“Me and Julie have to eat alone,” the small boy began, but, feeling a nudge, he looked around to see his sister’s shocked little mouth forming a rebuking O! and so, with a shake of his head, he began again: “I mean Julie and I eat alone, and gee-golly, don’t I wish we could sit at your table, Mr. Packard. Don’t I though!”

“The pleasure would be mine,” the man, who was much amused with the children, replied. Then, after naming an hour to meet in the diner, the youngsters darted away and Mr. Packard laughed merrily.

It was quite evident that some one of their elders had often rebuked them for putting “me” at the beginning of a sentence, he decided as he also arose and went within.

Meanwhile Julie and Gerald had quietly opened the door of the drawing-room, and, finding Dan alone, they told him with great gusto about their new friend. “Mr. Packard says he’s a really-truly neighbor of ours,” Gerry said. “How can he be a neighbor if he lives fifteen miles away?”

“I don’t know, Gerald, but I suppose that he does,” Dan replied. “I would like to meet your new friend. I’ll try to be up tomorrow.”

CHAPTER X.
A CATTLE-MAN FRIEND

The next day Dan seemed to be much better as the crisp morning air that swept into their drawing-room was very invigorating. By noon he declared that he was quite strong enough to go to the diner for lunch, and, while there, the excited children pointed out to him their friend Mr. Packard.

That kindly man bowed and smiled, noting as he did so that the older girl in their party drew herself up haughtily. The observer, who was an interested student of character, did not find it hard, having seen Jane, to understand the lack of enthusiasm which the children had shown when speaking of her.

Not wishing to thrust his acquaintance upon the girl, who so evidently did not desire it, the man passed their table on his way from the diner without pausing.

It is true that Julie had made a slight move as though to call to him, but this Mr. Packard had not seen, as a cold, rebuking glance from Jane's dark eyes had caused the small girl to sit back in her chair, inwardly rebellious.

Dan, noting this, said: "I like your friend's appearance. I think I shall go with you for a while to the observation platform. I cannot breathe too much of this wonderful air."

Jane reluctantly consented to accompany them there. "Gee-golly, how I hope Mr. Packard is there," Gerald whispered as he led the way.

The Westerner rose when the young people appeared and Jane quickly realized that he was not as uncouth as she had supposed all ranchers were.

Dan was made as comfortable as possible and he at once said: "Mr. Packard,

Gerald tells me that you are our neighbor. That is indeed good news."

"You have only one nearer neighbor," the man replied, "and that is the family of a trapper named Heger. They have a cabin high on your mountain."

Then, turning toward Jane, he said: "Their daughter, whom they call Meg, is just about your age, I judge. She is considered the most beautiful girl in the Redfords district. Indeed, for that matter, she is the most beautiful girl whom I have ever seen, and I have traveled a good deal. How pleased Meg will be to have you all for near neighbors."

Jane's thoughts were indignant, and her lips curled scornfully, but as Mr. Packard's attention had been drawn to Gerald, he did not know that his remarks had been received almost wrathfully.

"Ranchers must have strange ideas of beauty!" she was assuring herself. "How this crude man could say that a trapper's daughter is the most beautiful girl he has ever met when he was looking directly at *me*, is simply incomprehensible. Mr. Packard is evidently a man without taste or knowledge of social distinctions."

Jane soon excused herself, and going to their drawing-room, she attempted to read, but her hurt vanity kept recurring to her and she most heartily wished she was back East, where her type of beauty was properly appreciated. It was not strange, perhaps, that Jane thought herself without a peer, for had she not been voted the most beautiful girl at Highacres Seminary, and many of the others had been the attractive daughters of New York's most exclusive families.

Dan returned to their drawing-room an hour later, apparently much stronger, and filled with a new enthusiasm. "It's going to be great, these three months in the West. I'm so glad that we have made the acquaintance of this most interesting neighbor. He is a well educated man, Jane." Then glancing at his sister anxiously, "You didn't like him, did you? I wish you had for my sake and the children's."

Jane shrugged her slender shoulders. "Oh, don't mind about me. I can endure him, I suppose."

Dan sighed and stretched out to rest until the dinner hour arrived.

Julie and Gerald joined them, jubilantly declaring that they were to reach their destination the next morning before sun-up.

“Then we must all retire early,” Dan said. This plan was carried out, but for hours Jane sobbed softly into her pillow. It was almost more than she could bear. She had started this journey just on an impulse, and she *did* want to help Dan, who had broken down trying to work his way through college that there might be money enough to keep her at Highacres. It was their father who had been inconsiderate of them. If he had let the poor people lose the money they had invested rather than give up all he had himself, she, Jane, could have remained at the fashionable seminary and Dan would have been well and strong.

Indeed everything would have been far better.

But the small voice in the girl’s soul which now and then succeeded in making itself heard caused Jane to acknowledge: “Of course Dad is so conscientious, he would never have been happy if he believed that his money really belonged to the poor people who had trusted him.”

It was midnight before Jane fell asleep, and it seemed almost no time at all before she heard a tapping on her door. She sat up and looked out of the window. Although the sky was lightening, the stars were still shining with a wonderful brilliancy in the bit of sky that she could see. Then a voice, which she recognized as that of Mr. Packard, spoke.

“Time to get up, young friends. We’ll be at Redfords in half an hour.”

Gerald leaped to his feet when he heard the summons. Then, when he grasped the fact that they were nearly at their destination, he gave a whoop of joy.

“Hurry up, Julie,” he shook his still sleeping young sister. “We are ’most to Mystery Mountain, and, Oh, boy, what jolly fun we’re going to have.”

Half an hour later, Mr. Packard and the young Abbotts stood on a platform watching the departing train. Then they turned to gaze about them. It surely was a desolate scene. The low log depot was the only building in sight, and, closing in about them on every side were silent, dark, fir-clad mountains that looked bold and stern in the chill gray light of early dawn. Jane shuddered. How tragically far away from civilization, from the gay life she so enjoyed—all this seemed.

The station master, a native grown too old for more active duty, shuffled toward them, chewing tobacco in a manner that made his long gray beard move sideways. His near-sighted eyes peered through his brass-rimmed spectacles, but, when he recognized one of the new arrivals, he grinned broadly. In a high, cracked voice he exclaimed: “Wall, if ’tain’t Silas Packard home again from the East. Glad to git back to God’s country, ain’t you now, Si? Brought a parcel of young folks along this trip? Wall, I don’t wonder at it. Your big place is sort o’ lonesome wi’ no wimmin folks into it. What? You don’ mean to tell me these here are Dan Abbott’s kids! Wall, wall. How-de-do? Did I know yer pa? Did I know Danny Abbott? I reckon I was the furst man in these here parts that did know him. He come to my camp, nigh to the top of Redfords’ Peak, the week he landed here from college.” The old man took off his bearskin cap and scratched his head. “Nigh onto twenty-five year, I make it. Yep, that’s jest what ’twas. That’s the year we struck the payin’ streak over t’other side of the mountain, and folks flocked in here thicker’n buzzards arter a dead sheep. Yep, that’s the year the Crazy Creek Camp sprung up, and that’s how yer pa come to buy where he did.”

Then, encouraged by the interest exhibited by at least three of the young people, the old man continued:

“The payin’ streak, where the camp was built, headed straight that way, and I sez to him, sez I—‘Dan Abbott,’ sez I, ‘If I was you I’d use the money I’d fetched to get aholt of that 160 acres afore it’s nabbed by these rich folks that’s tryin’ to grab all the mines,’ sez I. ‘That’s what I’d do.’ And so Dan tuk it, but as luck would have it, that vein petered out to nothin’ an’ I allays felt mighty mean, havin’ Dan stuck that way wi’ so much land an’ no gold on it, but he sez to me, ‘Gabby,’ that’s my name; ‘Gabby,’ sez he, ‘don’ go to feelin’ bad about it, not one mite. That place is jest what I’ve allays wanted. When a fellow’s tired out, there’s nothin’ so soothin’,’ sez he, ‘as a retreat,’ that’s what he called it, ‘a retreat in the mountains.’ But he didn’t need 160 acres to retreat on, so he let go all but ten. He’d built a log cabin on it that had some style, not jest a shack like the rest of us miners run up, then Dan went away for a spell—but by and by he come back.” The old man’s leathery face wrinkled into a broad smile. “An’ he didn’t come back alone! I reckon you young Abbotts know who ’twas he fetched back with him. It was the purtiest gal ’ceptin’ one that I ever laid eyes on. You’re the splittin’ image of the bride Danny brought.” The small blue eyes that were almost hidden under shaggy gray brows turned toward Jane. “Yep, you look powerful like your ma.”

But Jane had heard only one thing, which was that even this garrulous old man knew one other person whom he considered more beautiful. How she wanted to ask the question, but there was no time, for “Gabby” never hesitated except to change the location of his tobacco quid or to do some long distance expectorating.

Turning to Mr. Packard, he began again: “Meg Heger’s took to comin’ down to Redfords school ag’in. She’s packin’ a gun now. That ol’ sneakin’ Ute is still trailin’ her. I can’t figger out what he wants wi’ her. The slinkin’ coyote! She ain’t got nothin’ but beauty, and Indians ain’t so powerful set on that. Thar sure sartin is a mystery somewhere.”

The old man stopped talking to peer through near-sighted eyes at the canon road.

“I reckon here’s the stage coach,” he told them, “late, like it allays is. If ’tain’t the ho’ses as falls asleep on the way, then it’s Sourface his self. Si, do yo’ mind the time when the stage was a-goin’ down the Toboggan Grade——”

It was quite evident that Gabby was launched on another long yarn, but Mr. Packard laughingly interrupted, placing a kindly hand on the old man’s shoulder.

“Tell us about that at another time, Gab,” he said. “We’re eager to get to the town and have some breakfast.”

He picked up Jane’s satchel and Dan’s also, and led the way to the edge of the platform, where an old-fashioned stage was waiting. Four white horses stood with drooping heads and on the high seat another old man was huddled in a heap as though he felt the need of seizing a few moments’ rest before making the return trip to Redfords.

“They have just come up the steep Toboggan Grade,” Mr. Packard said by way of explanation. “That’s why the horses look tired.”

Then in his cheerful way he shouted: “Hello, there, Wallace. How goes it?”

The man on the seat sat up and looked down at the passengers with an expression so surly on his leathery countenance that it was not hard for the young people to know why he had been given his nickname, but he said nothing, nor was there in his eyes a light of recognition. With a grunt, which might have been intended as a greeting, he motioned them to get into the lower part of the

stage, which they did.

Then he jerked at the reins and the horses came to life and started back the way they had so recently come. Gabby had followed them to the edge of the platform, and as far as the Abbotts could make out, he was still telling them the story which Mr. Packard had interrupted.

“How cold it is!” Julie shivered as she spoke and cuddled close to Dan. He smiled down at her and then said:

“Mr. Packard, this is wonderful air, so crisp and invigorating. I feel better already. Honestly, I’ll confess now, the last two days on the train I feared you would have to carry me off when we got here, but now”—the lad paused and took a long breath of the mountain air—“I feel as though I had been given a new lease on life.”

The older man laid a bronzed hand on the boy’s sleeve.

“Dan,” he said, “you have. When you leave here in three months you’ll be as well as I am, and that’s saying a good deal.”

Then the lad surprised Jane by exclaiming: “Perhaps I won’t want to leave. There’s a fascination to me about all this.”

He waved his free arm out toward the mountains. “And your native characters, Mr. Packard, interest me exceedingly. You see,” Dan smilingly confessed, “my ambition is to become a writer. I would like to put ‘Gabby’ into a story.”

Mr. Packard’s eyes brightened. “Do it, Dan! Do it!” he said with real enthusiasm. “Personally I can’t write a line, not easily, but I have real admiration for men who can, and I am a great reader. Come over soon and see my library.”

Then he cautioned: “I told you to write, but don’t begin yet. Not until you are stronger. Stay outdoors for a time, boy. Climb to the rim rock, take notes, and then later, when you are strong, you will find them of value.”

While they had been talking, the stage had started down a steep, narrow canon. The mountain walls on both sides were almost perpendicular, and for a time nothing else was to be seen. It was more than a mile in length, and they could soon see the valley opening below them.

“Redfords proper,” Mr. Packard smilingly told them as he nodded in that direction. “It is not much of a metropolis.”

The young Abbotts looked curiously ahead, wondering what the town would be like.

CHAPTER XI.
REDFORDS

“Is that all there is to the town of Redfords?” Jane gasped when the stage, leaving Toboggan Grade, reached a small circular valley which was apparently surrounded on all sides by towering timber-covered mountains. A stream of clear, sparkling water rushed and swirled on its way through the narrow, barren, rock-strewn lowland. The rocks, the very dust of the road, were of a reddish cast.

“That road yonder climbs your mountain in a zig-zag fashion, and then circles around it to the old abandoned mining camp.” Then to Gerald, he said: “Youngster, if you’re pining for mystery, that’s where you ought to find one. That deserted mining camp always looks to me as though it must have a secret, perhaps more than one, that it could tell and will not.”

“Ohee!” squealed Julie. “How interesting! Gerry and I are wild to find a mystery to unravel. Why do you think that old mining camp has secrets, Mr. Packard?”

Smiling at the little girl’s eagerness, the rancher replied: “Because it looks so deserted and haunted.” Then to Dan, “You heard what Gabby said at the depot. Well, he did not exaggerate. A rich vein of gold was found on the other side of your mountain, and a throng of men came swarming in from everywhere, and just overnight, or so it seemed, buildings of every description were erected. They did not take time to make them of permanent logs, though there are a few of that description. For several months they worked untiringly, digging, blasting, searching everywhere, but the vein which had promised so much ended abruptly.

“Of course, when the horde of men found that there was no gold, they departed as they had come. For a time after that a wandering tribe of Ute Indians lived there, but the hunting was poor, and as they, too, moved on farther into the

Rockies, where there are many fertile valleys. Only one old Indian, of whom Gabby spoke, has remained. They call him Slinking Coyote. Why he stayed behind when his tribe went in search of better hunting grounds surely is a mystery."

Julie gave another little bounce of joy. "Oh, goodie!" she cried. "Gerry, there's two mysteries and maybe we'll find the answers to both of them."

"I would rather find something to eat," Jane said rather peevishly. "I never was obliged to wait so long for my breakfast in all my life. It's one whole hour since we left the train." She glanced at her wrist watch as she spoke.

Mr. Packard looked at her meditatively. The other three Abbotts were as amiable as any young people he had ever met, but Jane was surely the most fretful and discontented. Although he knew nothing of all that had happened, he could easily see that she, at least, was in the West quite against her will.

"Well, my dear young lady," he said as he reached for her bag, "you won't have long to wait, for even now we are in the town, approaching the inn."

"What?" Jane's eyes were wide and unbelieving. "Is this wretched log cabin place the only hotel?" She peered out of the stage window and saw two cowboys lounging on the porch, and each was chewing a toothpick. They were picturesquely dressed in fringed buckskin trousers, soft shirts, carelessly knotted bandannas and wide Stetson hats. Their ponies were tied in front, as were several other lean, restless horses.

Mr. Packard nodded. "Yes, this is the inn and the general store and the postoffice. Across the road is another building just like it and that has a room in front which is used as a church on Sunday and a school on weekdays, while in back there is a billiard room. There are no saloons now," this was addressed to Dan, "which is certainly a good thing for Redfords."

"Billiard room, church and a school house all in one building," Jane repeated in scornful amazement. "But where are the houses? Where do the townspeople live?"

Mr. Packard smiled at her. "There aren't any," he said. "The ranchers, cowboys, mountaineers and summer tourists are the patrons of the inn and billiard rooms. But here we are!" The stage had stopped in front of the rambling log building

and reluctantly Jane followed the others.

Mr. Packard held the screen door open for the young people to pass, then, taking Jane's arm, he piloted her through the front part of the building, which was occupied by the postoffice and store, to the room in the rear, where were half a dozen bare tables. Each had in the center a vinegar cruet, a sugar bowl, salt and pepper shakers. At least they were clean, but the dishes were so coarse that had not Jane been ravenously hungry, she told herself, she simply could not have eaten. Mr. Packard led the way to the largest table, at which there were six places, and as soon as they were seated a comely woman entered through a swinging green baize door.

"Howdy, Mr. Packard?" she said in response to the rancher's cordial greeting. "Jean Sawyer, your foreman, was in last night an' left your hoss for yo'. He said as how he was expectin' yo' in some time today. You've fetched along some visitors, I take it." The woman looked at the older girl with unconcealed admiration. The blood rushed to Jane's face. Was this innkeeper's wife going to tell her that she had never seen but one other girl who was more beautiful? But Mrs. Bently made no personal comment.

When Mr. Packard explained that his companions were the young Abbotts, and that they were to spend the summer in a cabin on Redford Mountain, her only remark was: "Is it the cabin that's been standin' empty so long, the one that's a short piece down from where Meg Heger lives?"

"Yes, that's it, Mrs. Bently." Then the man implored: "Please bring us some of your good ham and eggs and coffee and——"

"There's plenty of waffle dough left, if the young people likes 'em." The woman smiled at Julie, who beamed back at her.

"Oh, boy!" Gerald chimed in. "Me for the waffles!"

The cooking was excellent and even the fastidious Jane thoroughly enjoyed the breakfast.

When they emerged from the inn, Dan said, regretfully: "The sun is high up. We've missed our first sunrise."

"We were on the Toboggan Grade when the sun rose," Mr. Packard told them.

He then shook hands with Jane and Dan as he said heartily:

“Here is where we part company. That is my horse over yonder. A beauty, isn’t he? Silver, I call him. By the way, Dan, I want you to meet Jean Sawyer. He is just about your age, and a fine fellow, if I am a judge of character. I would trust him with anything I have. In fact, I do. I send him all the way to the city often, to get money from the bank to pay off the men. I know he isn’t dishonest, and yet, for some reason, he ran away from his home. You know, we have a code out here by which each man is permitted to keep his own counsel.

“We ask no one from whence he came or why. We take people for what they seem to be, with no knowledge of their past.”

Then, breaking off abruptly, the older man repeated: “I would, indeed, like you to meet Jean and tell me what you think of him. Come over to our place soon, or, better still, since that is a rough trip until you get hardened to the saddle, I’ll send him over to call on you next Sunday.”

Dan’s face brightened. “Great, Mr. Packard; do that! A chap whom you so much admire must be worth knowing. Have him take dinner with us. Goodbye, and thank you for being our much-needed guide.”

When their neighbor and friend had swung into his saddle and had ridden away, Jane said fretfully: “I don’t see why you asked that Jean Sawyer, who may be an outlaw, for all we know, to come over to our place for dinner.” Then, when she saw the expression of troubled disappointment in her brother’s face, again the small voice within rebuked her, and she implored: “Oh, Dan, don’t mind me! I know I am horridly selfish, but I am so tired, and these people are all so queer. What are we to do next?”

The older lad knew what an effort Jane was making, and he held her arm affectionately close as he replied: “Mr. Packard said that the stage would call for us at 8:30. We will have half an hour to purchase our supplies. Grandmother made out a list of things we would need. Julie has that. Jane, here is my wallet. I wish you would take charge of our funds. You won’t be climbing around as I will. It will be safer with you.”

Together the girls went into the store and purchased the supplies they would need. Then they rejoined the boys, who had waited outside. Gerry wanted to look in the school house.

The Abbotts found the door of the rambling log cabin across from the inn standing open, and they peered in curiously. The room was long and well lighted by large windows, but it was quite like any other country school. There were eight rows of benches, one back of the other, with a shelf-like desk in front of each. These had many an initial carved in them. The teacher's table and chair faced the others, with a blackboard hanging on the wall at the back. Near the door was a pail and a dipper. Dan smiled. "It doesn't look as though genius could be awakened here, does it?" he was saying, when a pleasant voice back of them caused them to turn.

"You're wrong there, my friend." The young people saw before them a withered-up little old man with the whitest of hair reaching to his shoulders. Noting their unconcealed astonishment, he continued, by way of introduction, "I am Preacher Bellows on Sunday and Teacher Bellows on weekdays. Now, as I was saying, having overheard your remark, this little schoolroom and the teacher who presides over it are proud to tell you that your statement is not correct. It may not look as though genius could be awakened here," he smiled most kindly. "I'll agree that it does not, but that is just what has happened. Meg Heger, one of my mountain girls, has written some beautiful things. Her last composition, 'Sunrise From the Rim-Rock,' is truly poetical."

Jane turned away impatiently. Was she never to be through with hearing about Meg Heger? "Brother," the manner in which she interrupted the conversation was almost rude, "isn't that the stage returning? I am so tired, I do want to get up to our cabin." She started to cross the street. Dan quickly joined her. He did not rebuke her for not having said goodbye to the teacher.

"He's a nice man, isn't he, Dan?" Gerald skipped along by his brother's side as he spoke. "He loves mountain people, doesn't he?"

Dan smiled down at the eager questioner. "Why, of course, he must, if he practices what I suppose he preaches; the brotherhood of man."

"Well, I certainly don't want to claim people like the ones we have met in Redfords as any kin of mine," Jane snapped as they all crossed to the stage that awaited them. Again the four white horses drooped their heads and the driver slouched on his high seat, as though at every opportunity they took short naps. But the horses came to life when the driver snapped his long whip and with much jolting they forded the stream.

“Oh, my; I’m ’cited as anything!” Julie squealed. “Wish something, Gerald, ’cause this is the first time we’ve ever been up our very own mountain road.”

“There’s just one thing to wish for,” the small boy said with the seriousness which now and then made him seem older than his years, “and that’s that Dan will get well. What do you wish, Jane?”

“Why, the same thing, of course,” the girl replied languidly.

Gerald continued his questioning. “What do you wish, Dan?”

The boy thought for a moment and then he exclaimed, “I have a wonderful thing to wish. Wouldn’t it be great if we could find the lost gold vein on our very own ten acres? Then Dad could pay the rest that he owes and be free from all worry?”

“Me, too,” Julie cried jubilantly. “Now, we’ve all wished and here we go up the mountain.”

The road was narrow. In some places it was barely wide enough for the stage to pass, and, as Jane looked back and down, she shuddered many times.

At last, when nothing happened and the old stage did stick to the road, Jane consented to look around at the majestic scenery, about which the others were exclaiming. Beyond the gorge-like valley in which was Redfords, one mountain range towered above another, while many peaks were crowned with snow, dazzling in the light of the sun that was now high above them.

The air was becoming warmer, but it was so wonderfully clear that even things in the far distance stood out with remarkable detail.

At a curve, Gerald pointed to the road where it circled above them. “Gee-whiliker! Look-it!” he cried excitedly. “How that boy can ride.” The others, turning, saw a pony which seemed to be running at breakneck speed, but as the stage appeared around the bend, the small horse was halted so suddenly that it reared. When it settled back on all fours, the watchers saw that, instead of a boy, the rider was a girl, slender of build, wiry, alert. She drew to one side close to the mountain, to permit the stage to pass. She wore a divided skirt of the coarsest material, a scarlet blouse but no hat. Her glossy black wind-blown hair fluttered loosely about her slim shoulders. Her dusky eyes looked curiously out at them from between long curling lashes. Dan thought he had never before seen such

wonderful eyes, but it only took a moment for the stage to pass.

They all turned to look down the road. The pony was again leaping ahead as sure-footed, evidently, as a mountain goat, the girl leaning low in the saddle. Jane's lips were curled scornfully. "Well, if that is their mountain beauty, I think they have queer taste! She looked to me very much like an Indian, didn't she to you, Dan?"

The boy replied frankly: "I should say she might be Spanish or French, but I do indeed think she is wonderfully beautiful. I never saw such eyes. They seem to have slumbering soul-fires just waiting to be kindled. I should like to hear her talk."

Jane shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I certainly should not. I have heard enough of this mountain dialect, if that's what you call it, to last me the rest of my life. I simply will not make the acquaintance of that—Oh, it doesn't matter what she is —" she hurried on to add when she saw that Dan was about to speak. "I don't want to know her, and do please remember that, all of you!"

"Gee, sis," Gerald blurted out, "you don't like the West much, do you? I s'pose you wish you had stayed at home or gone to that hifalutin watering place."

Jane bit her lips to keep from retorting angrily. Julie was still watching the small horse that now and then reappeared as the zigzagging mountain road far below them came in sight.

"That girl's going to school, I guess. Though I should think it would be vacation time, now it's summer," she remarked.

"I rather believe that winter is vacation time for mountain schools. It's mighty cold here for a good many months and the roads are probably so deep in snow that they are not passable."

Dan had just said this when Gerald, who had been kneeling on the seat, watching intently ahead, whirled toward them with a cry of joy. "There's our log cabin on that ledge up there! I bet you 'tis! Gee-whiliker, we're stopping. Hurray! It's ours."

CHAPTER XII.
THE ABBOTT CABIN

It was quite evident that the picturesque log cabin which nestled against the side of the mountain on a wide, overhanging ledge was indeed their own. The road curved about twenty feet below it, and crude steps had been hewn out of the rocks. The small boy tumbled out of the stage almost before it came to a standstill.

“Oh, Julie, look-it, will you! We’ve got a real stairway leading right up to our front door. I’ll beat you to the cabin.”

Julie, equally excited, scurried up after her brother and reached the top almost as soon as he did. Then they turned and shouted joyfully to the two below them: “Jane! Dan! Look at us! We’re top of the world.”

“Oh, boy!” Gerald capered about, unable to stand still. “I’m glad I came. I bet you, Julie, we’ll have a million adventures, maybe more.” But Dan was calling and so they scampered back down the rocky flight of stairs.

The older lad laughed at their enthusiasm. “I know just how you feel,” he told them. “If I weren’t afraid of shocking your sedate sister here, I believe I would—well—I don’t know just what I would do.”

“Stand on your head,” Gerald prompted. “Do it, Dan. I’ll dare you.”

But the older boy was needed just then to tell the surly driver where the trunks were to be put. “Let me help you, Mr. Wallace.” Dan made an attempt to take one end of a trunk, but the husky man, with the unchangeable countenance, merely grunted his dissent, and swinging a trunk up on his broad shoulders, he began the ascent of the steep stone stairs quite as though it were not a herculean

task.

Dan followed. “Just leave them on the porch until we get our bearings,” he directed. “We can move them in after we have unpacked.” Then, from the loose change that he had in his pocket, he paid the man. A few moments later the stage rumbled on its way up the road, which circled the mountain and then descended to a hamlet in the valley on the other side.

As soon as the four young Abbotts were alone, Dan, slipping an arm about Jane, exclaimed: “Think of it, sister! Isn’t it almost beyond comprehension that we have such magnificence right in our front door-yard.” He took a long breath. The pine trees, though not large, were spicily fragrant. Then, whirling toward her, he caught both of her hands, and there were actually tears in his eyes as he said, “Jane, I’m going to live! I know that I am!”

Selfish as the girl was, she could not but respond to her brother’s enthusiasm. The younger children had raced away on a tour of discovery. Their excited voices were heard exclaiming about something they had discovered beyond the cabin. Clear and high Gerry’s voice rang out: “Dan, Jane, come quick! We’ve found Roaring Creek, and it isn’t making a terrible lot of noise at all.”

But the older boy had noted the extreme weariness on his sister’s face. He well knew that she had sacrificed herself to come to a country which did not appeal to her; where she had to meet people whom she considered far beneath her, and she had done it all to help him get well. Instantly the boy decided that he would make Jane’s comfort his first care, that her stay with him might be as pleasant as possible, and so he called back: “After a time, Gerald. Come on; I’m going to unlock the door. Don’t you want to see what’s on the inside of our cabin?”

“Oh, boy, don’t I, though!” Gerry, closely followed by Julie, raced back to the wide front porch, which was made of logs. Dan took from his satchel a very large key and holding it up, he called merrily, “The key to health and happiness.”

“You left out something,” Gerry prompted. “It’s health, wealth and happiness. Maybe we’ll find that lost mine, who knows?”

Dan merely laughed at that. “Now,” he said, as he put the key in the lock, “what do you suppose we’ll find on the other side of this door?”

What they saw delighted the hearts of three of the young people. A large log

cabin room with a long window on either side of the door. At the back was a crude fireplace made of rocks. There was no window on that side of the room, as a wall of the mountain came so close to the cabin that there would have been no view.

The rafters were logs with the bark still on, and the furniture had been made of saplings. There were leather cushions in the chairs, but the thing that made Gerald caper about, mad with joy, was a bearskin on one of the walls.

“Oh, look-it, will you, Dan? What kind of a bear is it? Do you think it is a grizzly, and do you s’pose it’s that one Dad said came right down here to our ledge? Do you, Dan?”

The older boy looked at the rather small bearskin and shook his head.

“No, it isn’t a grizzly,” he said. “I think it is the skin of a black bear. But here is another on the floor in front of the fireplace. That’s Dad’s bear, I remember now. This old fellow was the grizzly who was unfortunate enough to come down here to try to help himself to Dad’s supplies.”

Jane had dropped wearily into a big chair that really was comfortable with its leather-covered cushions, and Dan, noting how tired she was, exclaimed:

“Jane, I’ll unlock the packing trunk and get out some of the bedding, and if you wish, you may lie down for a while. Dad said there were two good beds here and several cots.”

Gerald and Julie had darted through a door at one side and, reappearing, they beckoned to their big brother.

“We’ve found one of ’em,” the younger lad announced. “It’s in a dandee room! I bet you Jane will choose it for hers.”

Then Julie chimed in with: “Jane, please come and see it.”

The older girl, who was feeling terribly sorry for herself, rose languidly and went with the small sister. The boys followed.

“Why, what a nice room this is!” Dan, truly pleased, remarked. Then anxiously, and in his voice there was a note that was almost imploring, he asked: “Jane,

dear, don’t you think you can be comfortable in here?”

The girl’s heart was touched by the tone more than the words, and she turned away that she might not show how near, how very near, she had been to crying out her unhappiness. It was hardship to her to be in a log cabin where there were none of the luxuries and conveniences to which she had been used. She smiled at her brother, but he saw her lips tremble. He was tempted to tell her to go back to civilization, since it was all going to be so hard for her, but something prompted him to wait one week. Inwardly he resolved: “If Jane is not happy here by one week from today, I am going to insist that she return to Newport and to the friend Merry for whom she cares so much.”

But Jane, too, had been making a resolve, and so when she spoke her voice sounded more cheerful.

“It is a nice room,” she said. “That wide window has a wonderful view of the mountains and the valley.” It was hard to keep from adding, “If anyone cares for such a view, which I do not.”

But instead she looked up at the rafters. “What are those great bundles that are hanging up there?” she inquired.

Dan laughed. “Why, those bundles, Dad said, contain the mattress and bedding which he and mother stored away. They are wrapped in canvas and so he expected that we would find them in good condition.”

“But how are we to get them?” Julie wanted to know.

Gerald’s quick eyes found the answer to that.

“Look-it!” he cried, pointing. “There’s a ladder nailed right against the back wall. I’ll skin up that in two jiffs. Give me your knife, Dan. I’ll cut the ropes.”

The boy was soon sliding along a rafter. “Out of the way down below there!” he shouted the warning. “Here they come!”

There was a soft thud, followed by another as the two great bundles fell to the floor. An excellent mattress was in one of them and clean warm blankets in the other.

“Now, I’ll get the sheets from the packing trunk and a pillow case, and in less than no time at all we’ll have a fine bed in our lady’s chamber.”

Dan led Jane to another large comfortable though rustic chair as he said:

“The rest of us are going to pretend that you are a princess today and we are going to wait upon you. By tomorrow, when you have had a long sleep, perhaps you will want to be a mountain girl.”

Again there was the yearning note in his voice. How he hoped that Jane would want to stay, but a week would tell.

Jane was quite willing to pretend that she was a princess and be waited upon, and so half an hour later, when the bed in her room was made, she consented to lie down and try to make up the many hours of sleep that she had lost on the train. Hardly had her head touched the pillow before she was sound asleep. Two of her windows, that swung inward, were wide open and a soft mountain breeze wafted to her the scent of the pines. Even though she was not conscious of it, the peace of the mountains was quieting her restless soul. She had supposed that, as soon as she were alone, she would sob out her unhappiness, but her weariness had been too great, and not a tear had been shed.

Julie reported that Jane had gone right to sleep and Dan’s face brightened. Surely his sister-pal would feel better when she awakened and how could she help loving it all, so high up on their wonderful mountain.

The younger children had gone on another trip of exploration, and soon burst back into the big living-room with the information that on the other side of the cabin there were two smaller bedrooms and a real kitchen.

Dan held up a warning hand and framed the word “quiet” with his lips, and so the excited children took his hands and dragged him from the deep easy chair where he had sought to rest for a moment and showed him what lay behind the two doors on the other side of the cabin. “Aren’t these little bedrooms the cunningest?” Julie whispered. “See the front one has a bed in it like Jane’s and the other has the cot. But there are three of us, so what shall we do?” Julie’s brown eyes were suddenly serious and inquiring.

“That’s easy!” Dan told her. “Dad said there were several cots. See, there they are, hanging up on the rafters. I shall take one of those and put it out on the wide

front porch. That’s where I want to sleep. I don’t want to be shut in by walls. And Julie may have this pretty front room with the bed and Gerald the other. Now, let’s get them made up, just as quietly as we can. Then we will unpack the supplies that you got from the store, Julie, and prepare a noon meal.”

The cots were untied from the rafters and one was placed on the porch in the position chosen by Dan, then the bedding was put on all of them and it was 11 o’clock and the sun was riding hot and high above the mountain when Julie, suddenly becoming demure, announced that she wanted Dan to go to sleep also, and that she and Gerald would get the lunch.

The older boy did not require much urging and when he saw the eager light in the eyes of the little girl, who had in the beginning supposed that she alone was to be the one to take care of him, he decided to do as she wished. Julie had had six months’ training with her grandmother, who believed that a girl could not begin too young to learn how to cook, and she had often boasted that she had a very apt pupil.

He soon heard the children whispering and laughing happily at the back of the cabin, then a door was closed softly and the lad heard only the soughing in the pine trees close to the porch and the humming of the winged insects far and near. Then he, too, fell into a much needed slumber.

CHAPTER XIII.
TWO LITTLE COOKS

The kitchen of the log cabin had one window and a door which opened out into what Gerry called the “back-yard part of their ledge.” It was only about fifty feet to the very edge, and Gerry crept on hands and knees to look over, that he might see where their “back-yard went.” He lifted a face filled with awe and beckoned his sister to advance with caution. Lying flat, the two children gazed over the rim of the ledge, straight down a wall of rock, far below which the road could be seen curving. “Ohee!” Julie drew back with a shudder. “What if our cabin should slide right off this shelf that it’s built on?”

“It can’t, if it wants to,” the boy told her confidently. “We’re safe here as anything. That’s two ways a bear can’t come,” he continued; “but on the other side, where the creek is, and in front, where the stone steps are, I suppose the bear came in one of those two ways.”

The small girl looked frightened. “Oh, Gerry,” she said, “what if a bear should come again? What would we do?”

“Why, Dan would shoot it, just the way Dad did,” the boy replied with great assurance. His big brother was his hero, and that he could not perform any feat required was not to be thought of for one moment.

“But Dan hasn’t a gun, has he?” Julie was not yet convinced.

“Indeed he has, silly. Do you s’pose Dad would let us come into this wild country without guns? Dan has two in his trunk. One’s a big fellow! Dad let me hold it once, and, Oh, boy, I’m telling you it’s a heavy one. I most had to drop it, and I’ve got bully muscle. Look at what muscle I’ve got!”

Gerry crooked his bare arm, but his sister turned away impatiently, saying: “Oh, I don’t want to! You make me feel what muscle you’ve got most every day.”

Julie returned to the kitchen, but Gerry followed, and, if he were offended by her lack of interest in his brawniness, he did not show it. He was far too interested in the subject under discussion. “That big gun I was telling you about is the very one Dad used when he shot the grizzly, and if it shot one bear, then of course it can shoot another bear.”

The little girl was convinced. That seemed clear reasoning, but she interrupted when the boy began again, by saying: “Gerald Abbott, do stop telling bear stories, and help me clean up this kitchen. Jane won’t be any more use than nothing and we might as well do things and pretend she isn’t here, the way I wish she wasn’t.”

“I sort of wish she hadn’t come, myself,” Gerry confessed. “Now, let’s see. Here’s a cupboard all nailed up. I guess I can pull out the nails, but first I’d better make a fire in this old stove. I’ll have to fetch in some wood.”

“No, you won’t! Not just at first. There’s a box full behind the stove. Big, knotty pieces; pine, I suppose; but maybe we do need some kindling. Then bring me some water from the creek and I’ll wash up everything. Dad said we’d find some dishes in the cupboard, if they hadn’t been stolen.”

“Gee, I hope they haven’t!” The boy, who was as handy about a home as was his small sister, soon had a fire in the stove, and then, having found a pail, he went to the creek, stealing around past the front porch and under his sister’s window as quietly as he possibly could. Although dry twigs creaked and snapped, the two sleepers did not waken.

Such fun as those youngsters had putting the kitchen in order. In the cupboard they found all of the dishes which their father had mentioned. Although the china was coarse, the green fern pattern was attractive. Gerald, standing on a chair, handed it out, piece by piece, to the small girl, who put them in hot, sudsy water and then dried them till they shone. Gerald, meantime, was washing the shelves. Then they replaced the dishes and stood back to admire their handiwork.

“Oh, aren’t we having fun?” Julie chuckled. “Now, we’re all ready to get the lunch.”

It was one o’clock when Julie went to waken Jane, and Gerald, at the same time, went out on the porch where Dan had been sleeping, but the older boy was sitting up on the edge of his cot drinking in the beauty of the scene which, to him, was an ever-changing marvel. He sprang up, wonderfully refreshed, and going to the packing trunk, he procured a towel.

“Hello, Jane,” he called brightly to the tall girl, who appeared in the open door. Then he gave a long whistle. “Sister,” he exclaimed, love and admiration ringing in his voice, “I hope that Jean Sawyer, who is coming to dine with us day after tomorrow, has a heart of adamant. I pity him if he hasn’t! I honestly never saw anyone so beautiful as you are, with the flush of slumber on your cheeks and your eyes so bright.”

Jane came out smiling. This was the sort of adulation she desired and required, but her brother felt a twinge of guilt, for, even as he had been talking, he had seen in memory a slender, alert little creature with eyes, star-like in their dusky radiance, gazing out at him from under dark, curling lashes.

But they were so unlike, these two, he told himself. The one proud, imperious, ultra-civilized; the other, a wild thing, untamed, or so she had appeared to him in that one moment’s glance, a native of the mountains.

“Where are you going with that towel?” Jane asked him.

The lad laughingly dived again into the packing trunk and brought out another. “Let’s go to the creek to wash,” he suggested. “I haven’t even seen it yet, and I’m ever so eager to feel that cold mountain water dash into my face.” Then in a low tone he whispered close to his sister’s ear, “The children have a surprise for us, Jane, and so let’s be very much surprised and not disappoint them.”

Jane shrugged. To her, children and their ways had to be endured, but she took no interest in what they did or did not do. However, she accompanied her brother around the house.

She glanced at him with a sense of satisfaction, which was, as usual, prompted by selfishness. If Dan seemed so much better in one day, he might be so well by the end of a fortnight that she would not need to remain with him. If she were sure that all was to be well with him, she would return to Merry. The lad, not dreaming what her thoughts were, caught her hand boyishly. “Oh, Jane,” he cried as he pointed ahead, “can you believe it, Sister-pal, that is our very own

mountain stream! Isn’t it a beauty?”

The sunlight, falling between the pines, lighted the narrow, rushing, whirling little mountain brook, which sparkled and seemed to sing for the very joy of being. Standing on its edge, Dan looked up the mountain along the course the brook had come. “See,” he cried jubilantly, “wherever the sunlight filters through, it gleams as though it were laughing. Dad said that it springs out just below the rim rock. Oh, I do hope by next week I will be able to climb up that high.”

Jane’s glance followed her brother’s up the rough, rocky mountain side and she shook her head. “I’ll never attempt it,” she decided, but Dan whirled, laughing defiance. “I’m going to prophesy that you’ll climb the rim rock before a fortnight is over.”

Then kneeling, he splashed the clear, cold water in his face and reached for the towel that Jane held. Then he implored her to do the same. With great reluctance she complied, and so cool and restful did she find it, that she actually smiled, almost with pleasure.

But Dan had the misfortune to say the wrong thing just then. “I suppose this brook, or one like it, is all the mirror that the mountain girl, Meg Heger, has ever had,” he began, when he sensed a chill in his sister’s reply.

“I certainly do not know, nor do I care.” Then she added, as an afterthought, “And I shall never find out.”

CHAPTER XIV.
FRETFUL JANE

Luckily Dan had succeeded in changing his sister's thought before they returned to the cabin, and he vowed inwardly that he would never again mention Meg Heger, since Jane had taken such a strange dislike to her. How one could dislike a girl one had barely seen was beyond his comprehension, but girls were hard to understand, all except Julie. She was just a wholesome, helpful little maid with a pug-nose that was always freckled.

"Now for the surprise!" Dan said as they neared the cabin.

"Well, I certainly hope it is something to eat," Jane began, with little interest, but when the two children threw open the front door and she saw the table in the living-room close to the wide window with four places set, she delighted the little workers by announcing that it was the best sight she had beheld that day. Then, when Jane and Dan were seated, Julie and Gerry skipped to the kitchen and returned with as tempting a lunch as even Jane could have wished for. There was creamed tuna on toast and jam and a heaping plate of lettuce sandwiches and two of the Rockyford melons for which Colorado is famous. Then there was for each a glass of creamy milk.

"Great!" Dan exclaimed. "I didn't know we were going to be able to get milk."

Julie nodded eagerly. "It comes from the Packard ranch, fresh to the inn every day, and Mrs. Bently said she would send us two quarts every time the stage comes up our road, which usually is three times a week. We can keep it cool as anything in the creek. Mrs. Bently told us how."

"After lunch can we get out the guns, Dan?" Gerald asked when he had hungrily gulped down a sandwich.

“Why, I guess so,” the older boy laughed good naturedly. “You aren’t expecting a bear to find out this soon, are you, that we have some supplies that he might wish to devour?”

Julie looked anxiously toward the open door of the cabin. “Don’t you think maybe we’d better keep that door closed when we’re eating?” she asked anxiously. “You know Dad said he and mother were sitting right here where we are, maybe, one morning at breakfast, when mother looked up and there was an old grizzly standing in the open door. He had been around to the kitchen and had eaten up all the supplies he could find and he was hunting for more.”

Gerald chimed in with: “It was lucky Dad kept his big gun always standing in the corner. I suppose it was right there, near you, Dan, so he could just grab it and shoot.”

The children were watching the door as though they expected at any minute that another grizzly might appear. Dan laughed at them. “We might as well have stayed at home if we are going to stay in the cabin and keep the door closed,” he told them. “I’m going to suggest that we put the table on that nice porch just outside of the kitchen. That will make an ideal outdoor dining-room, with a big pine tree back of it to shelter us from the sun. It will be handy to the kitchen, and, what is more, a bear simply could not scale up that wall beyond the ledge.” Then, very seriously, the older brother addressed the younger two. “Julie, I don’t want you or Gerald to go close to that cliff. It’s too dangerous.”

Honest Gerald blurted in with, “We did go once, Dan. We squirmed out on our tummies till we could look ’way down, and I tell you it made us dizzy. We won’t ever want to do it again.”

After lunch the children announced that they would do up the dishes if Dan would give them a lesson in shooting the big gun when they were through. “Well,” the older boy smilingly conceded, “I’ll try to teach you to handle the smaller gun; yes, both of you,” he assured Julie, who was making an effort to attract his attention by motions behind Jane’s back. “You really ought to both know how to use it. You might need to know how some time to protect yourselves.”

“What shall you do, Jane, while we are learning to shoot?” Julie inquired when the kitchen had again been tidied and the children were ready for their very first

lesson with the small gun.

“Maybe Jane’ll want to learn too,” Gerald suggested, but the older girl declared that she simply could not and would not touch one of the dreadful things.

“Won’t you come with us and watch the fun?” Dan lingered, when the two active youngsters had bounded out of the cabin. But the girl shook her head. “It wouldn’t be fun to me,” she said fretfully. “I’d much rather be left all alone. I want to write a long letter to Merry. She will be eager to hear from me, just as I am from her.” There was a self-pitying tone in the girl’s voice and a slight quiver to her lips. She turned hastily into her room and closed the door. She did not want Dan to see the tears. The lad went out on the wide front porch and stood for a moment with folded arms, his gray eyes gazing across the sun-shimmered valley, but he was not conscious of the grandeur of the scene. He was regretting, deeply regretting that he had permitted his sister to come to a country so distasteful to her. He well knew that she had shut herself in her room to sob out her grief and disappointment and then perhaps to write it all to this friend of whom she so often spoke and whom she seemed to love so dearly.

Once Dan turned toward the door as though to return to the cabin. His impulse was to go to Jane and tell her not to unpack. The stage would be passing there again on the following day, and, if she wished she could go back to the East. In fact, the lad almost believed that if Jane went, it might hasten his recovery. Her evident unhappiness was causing him to worry, and that was most detrimental. With a deep sigh of resignation, he did turn toward the open door, bent on carrying out his resolve, but a cry of alarm from Julie sent him running around the cabin and up toward the brook.

He met the children, white-faced, big-eyed, hurrying toward him, Gerald carrying the small gun.

“What is it, Gerry? What have you seen to frighten you?” He looked about as he spoke, but saw nothing but the jagged mountain side, the rushing, whirling brook and the peaceful old pines.

But it was quite evident by the expressions of the two children that they at least thought they had seen something of a dangerous nature. Gerald pointed toward a clump of low-growing pines on the other side of the brook as he said in a tense, half-whispered voice: “Whatever ’twas, Dan, it’s hiding in there.” Then he

explained: “Julie and I were crossing the water on those big stones when, snap, something went. I whirled to look. Honest, I expected to see a grizzly, but there wasn’t anything at all in sight. Julie and I stood just as still as we could; we didn’t even make a sound! Then we saw those bushy trees moving, though there wasn’t a bit of wind, so we know whatever ’tis, it’s in there.”

While the small boy had been talking, Dan had been loading the gun. “You’d better let me go alone,” he said to the children, but their disappointed expressions caused him to add: “At least let me go ahead, and if I think best for you to come, I’ll beckon.”

Dan crossed the brook on the big stones and went toward the clump of small stubby pines. Then he stood still, watching the dense low trees intently. His heart beat rapidly, not from fear, for he almost hoped that it might be a grizzly, and yet, would it not be unwise to shoot at it with a small gun? It might infuriate a huge beast, and so endanger all of their lives. But, although he waited, watching and listening for many minutes, no sound was heard. He began to believe that the children had imagined the stealthy noise they thought they had heard, for, after all, they had not really seen anything, and so he beckoned them to join him. They leaped across the brook and were quickly at his side.

“Wasn’t it a bear, or a wildcat, or anything?” Gerald asked eagerly. Dan shook his head, as he replied with a laugh: “Don’t be too disappointed, youngsters, even if you don’t see everything on the first day. This time it was just a false alarm.”

But Dan was mistaken, for, from a safe hiding place, the old Indian, Slinking Coyote, was watching their every move.

“Why don’t we shoot into that pine brush anyway?” Julie suggested. “We might scare out whatever is hiding there.” But Dan didn’t wish to do this. He felt that it would be safer to have the larger gun with him before he started beating up hidden wild creatures of any kind.

“Come along, youngsters, let’s get back on the home-side of our brook and set up a target,” the older boy suggested as he crossed the brook, followed by the children.

In their door-yard Dan paused and looked about meditatively. “I want to set up a target near enough to be within call, and yet far enough away to keep from

disturbing Jane too much with our racket."

"Oh, I know!" Gerald cried. "Over there, just above where the road bends! That'll be a dandee place. Won't it, Dan?"

The older boy smiled his agreement. "I do believe it will do as well as any place." They went toward the spot indicated and Dan continued: "Suppose we choose a cone on that lowest pine branch. If a bullet hits it, the cone will surely fall. Now, Gerald, just to be polite, shall we let Julie try first?"

The boy nodded, his eyes shining with eagerness. "Sure! How many tries do we each get? Three?"

"Any number you wish is all right with me." Then Dan placed the small gun in the position that Julie was to hold it, showed her how to look along the barrel, and how to take aim.

"Hold it steady! One, two, three, go!" But no report was heard.

"What's the matter, chick-a-biddie?" Dan was surprised to see how white the small girl's face had become, and to note that her arm was shaking so that she could hardly hold the gun. "I'm scared," she confessed. "I don't know why, but I am, Dan." She dropped the gun and ran to his arms. Then she smiled up through her tears. "I guess I'm afraid to hear the noise."

"Pooh, pooh! That's just like a girl," said Gerry almost scornfully. "Anyhow, you don't need to learn to shoot. Dan or I'll always be around to protect you'n Jane. Can I have a try now, Dan? Can I?"

The older lad turned to the small girl. "Suppose we let Gerald practice today, and later, when you feel that you would like to try again, you may do so?"

This plan seemed quite satisfactory to Julie, who seated herself upon a rock which overhung the curving mountain road, and was about twenty feet above it. Gerald, instead of dreading the noise that the small gun would make, was eager to hear it, and after repeated trials, he managed to dislodge the brown cone. "Hurray! I did it! Bully for me! I'm a marksman now! Isn't that what I am, Dan? Now I'll pick out another one, and I bet you I'll hit it first shot."

Julie, having wearied of the constant report of the small gun, had wandered away

in search of wild flowers. The boys saw her running toward them, beckoning excitedly. “Dan,” she said in a low voice, “Come on over here and look down at the road. The queerest man seems to be hiding. I was so far up above him, he didn’t see me. He’s hiding back of some rocks watching the road. Who do you suppose he is?”

Dan looked troubled. He thought at once that it might be the old Ute Indian who had not gone with his tribe when they went in search of better hunting grounds, nor was he wrong. Very quietly, the three went to the rim of their ledge. About twenty feet below they beheld a most uncouth creature crouching behind a big boulder. Evidently he was intently watching the road as it wound up from Redfords. His cap was of black fur with a bushy tail hanging down at the back. They could not see his face as they were above him. Julie clung fearfully to her brother. “Oh, Dan,” she whispered. “What do you suppose he’s watching for?”

Before Dan could decide what he ought to do, a pounding of horse’s feet was heard just below the bend, and a wiry brown pony leaped into view. The old Indian sprang from his hiding place so suddenly that the small horse reared, but the rider, her dark face flushed, her wonderful eyes flashing angrily, cried: “What did I tell you last time you stopped me? Didn’t I say I’d shoot? You know I pack a gun, and I *never* miss. I can’t give you any more money. I’m saving all I can to go away to school. I’ve told you that before, and if you *are* my father, as you’re always telling me that you are, you’d ought to be glad if I’m going to have a chance.”

The old Indian whined something, which Dan could not hear. Impatiently the girl took from her pocket a coin and tossed it to him. “I don’t believe you’re hungry. You don’t need to be, with squirrels as thick as they are. You’ll spend all I give you on fire-water, if you can get it.”

Already the old Indian, evidently satisfied with what he had received, had started shambling down the road in the direction of the town, but the girl turned in the saddle to call after him: “Mind you, that’s the last time I’ll give you money. I don’t believe that you are my father, and neither does Mammy Heger.”

She might have been talking to the wind for all the attention the old Indian paid. His pace had increased as the descent became steeper.

Dan felt guilty because he had overheard a conversation not meant for his ears,

and he drew the children away toward the cabin, and so heard, rather than saw, the girl's rapid flight up the road.

The chivalry of the ages stirred in his heart. "It's a wicked shame that she hasn't a brother to protect her," he thought. "A young girl ought not to be tormented by such a coward. Slinking Coyote, that's what he is. Blackmailing, it would be called in civilized countries." Dan's indignation increased as he recalled how wonderfully beautiful the girl had looked when her dark eyes had flashed in anger. "I'd be far more inclined to think her a daughter of noble birth."

His thoughts were interrupted by Julie, who, believing that they were a safe distance from the road, asked anxiously, "Who was the awful looking man, Dan? Will he hurt us?"

The same question had presented itself to Dan, but he made himself say lightly, "Oh, no! That old Indian isn't at all interested in us. He evidently is just a beggar. He was asking the mountain girl for money and she gave it to him." Then, as an afterthought, he cautioned, "Don't mention having seen him to Jane, will you, children?"

Willingly they agreed. They were indeed pleased to share a secret with their big brother.

Julie chattered on, "Dan, I'd like to go up and see that nice girl. Do you think she'd let me ride on her pony? May Gerald and I go up there tomorrow?"

Dan forced himself to smile. He did not want either of his companions to know that he was troubled. "Yes, we'll go up there tomorrow. I would like to meet the trapper who is, I believe, the father of that little horsewoman." But even as he spoke Dan recalled that the slinking Indian had insisted that he was her father, and that the girl did not believe it.

When he reached the cabin, Jane was still shut in her room. The children declared that they were hungry as wolves and that they would get the evening meal, and so the older lad seated himself on the edge of the front porch to think over all that he had seen and heard, and decide what it would be best for him to do. Perhaps, after all, he had been unwise to bring either of the girls to a place so wild. Perhaps he ought to send them both home. He and Gerald could protect themselves if there were to be trouble of any kind. He decided that the very next day, as soon as the mountain girl had gone to the Redfords school, he would

climb up the road to the cabin, which he believed was just about a mile above them. Then he could discover from the trapper if any real danger might lurk on the mountain for the two Eastern girls.

CHAPTER XV.
MEG HEGER

To the surprise of the young people, almost as soon as the sun had set, night descended upon them. Dan had helped the children clean the lamps and lanterns. Their grandmother, at their father's prompting, had remembered to put kerosene on their list and also candles.

Jane chose one of the latter to light her to bed. She simply detested kerosene lamps, she declared when Dan had asked if she didn't want to sit up with them a little while and read some of the books their father and mother had left in the cabin. "No, thank you!" had been the emphatic refusal. "The nights here are bitterly cold. In bed at least I can keep warm."

"Gee-whiliker," Gerald said when the girl to whom everything seemed distasteful had retired. "Ain't she a wet blanket?"

Before Dan could rebuke him for criticizing his elders, Julie burst in with, "Why, Gerry Abbott, didn't you promise Dad you wouldn't ever say ain't, and there you said it."

The boy squirmed uncomfortably. "It's an awful long time since I said it before," he tried to excuse himself. "I bet you I won't do it again. You see if I do."

Dan was looking at the empty hearth. "We should have cut some wood and had a roaring fire tonight. Let's do it tomorrow and make it more cheerful for Jane, if ——" He paused as though he had said more than he had intended, but his alert companions would not let a sentence go unfinished.

"If what, Dan?" Julie asked curiously.

The boy was not yet ready to tell, even these two, that he might think it best to start Jane and Julie on their homeward way the next day. He knew that the older girl would be overjoyed, but the younger would be so disappointed that it seemed almost a cruel thing to contemplate. “I’ll tell you tomorrow noon,” he compromised, when he saw both pairs of eyes watching him as though awaiting his answer.

In a very short time the children were nodding sleepily and Dan was glad when Julie took a candle and Gerry a lantern and bade him good-night.

“We’re going to get up to see the sunrise,” Julie said.

“If you wake up,” Dan laughingly told them. Then, putting out the remaining lights, he, too, retired to his cot on the porch. He placed his loaded gun in the corner, back of him, where it could not be reached by anyone else without awakening him.

For long hours he lay with wide eyes watching the sky, which seemed to be a canopy close above him, brilliant with stars. A slight wind kept the mosquitos away and, as it rustled through the pine boughs that were so near, a sense of peace stole into his heart—his fears were banished and he seemed to know that all was well.

It was long after sunrise when he wakened and no one else was astir in the cabin. Very quietly he arose and dressed. Then he went to the kitchen, and a fragrance of coffee was what finally awakened the two children. They bounded from bed, ashamed of their laziness, and when they joined their big brother he had a good breakfast spread on the table in their out-of-door dining-room.

“Julie, will you see if Jane is awake?” the older lad asked, and the small girl cautiously opened the door into her sister’s room. Then she entered and went to the bedside. “You’ve got one of your dreadful headaches, haven’t you, Janey?” The younger girl was all compassion. She knew well how Jane suffered when these infrequent headaches came. What she did not know was that they always followed a spell of anger or of worry. “I’ll draw the curtains over this window so the sun can’t come in and I’ll fetch you your breakfast.”

Julie liked nothing better than to be mothering someone, but Jane showed no sign of appreciation. Her only comment was, “Have the coffee hot.”

Dan was sorry to hear that Jane had neuralgia, and, from past experience, he knew that she would be unable to travel that afternoon, and so she would be obliged to wait until the following Tuesday, when the stage would again pass that way. He felt elated at the thought, but first he must find out if it were safe for the girls to remain. Directly after breakfast he drew Gerald aside and asked him if he would stay at the cabin while he (Dan) went up the mountain road to interview the trapper. Although the small boy would much rather have accompanied Dan, he always wanted to do his share, and so he consented to remain.

Dan waited until he was sure that Meg Heger had passed on her way to the Redfords school before he began the ascent of the mountain road. He could not have explained to himself why he did not want to meet the girl. It might have been a feeling that he had lacked in chivalry on the day before, when he had listened to the conversation in which she had probably revealed a secret which she would not wish strangers to share. He sauntered along by the brook, his gun over his shoulder, stopping every few feet to examine some rock or growth or just to gaze out over the valley, seeing new pictures at each changed position.

It was a glorious morning, but with the invigorating chill yet in the air. He breathed deeply and walked with shoulders thrown back. Birds sang to him, squirrels in the pine boughs over his head, or scurrying among the dry soft carpet of needles, chattered at him; some were curious, many were scolding, but he laughingly told them that he was a comrade. He stopped on a level with one protesting bushy-tailed fellow to say, “Mr. Bright-Eyes, I wouldn’t harm you, not for anything! This gun is merely to be used on something that would harm me, if it got the chance first. I don’t believe in taking life from a little wild creature that enjoys living just as much as I do.” Then, as he continued his walk, he thought, “I must tell Gerry not to kill any harmless creature unless we need it for food.”

Coming to a sudden sharp descent of about fifteen feet, he saw that the brook became a waterfall and just below it was a large pool which would make an excellent swimming hole. The water was as clear as crystal and was held in a smooth, red rock basin. After standing for some time, watching the joyous waterfall on which broken sunlight flashed, the lad glanced at his watch. It was after nine and so he could safely take to the road without fear of encountering the mountain girl. She was surely, by now, reciting to that kindly old man, Teacher Bellows. After another downward scramble, the road was reached. The ascent was gradual and Dan’s thoughts wandered on without his conscious

direction. He wondered how that mountain girl had happened to have a thirst for knowledge. That, in itself, proved to him that the old Ute was not her father, but, if he were not, why did he pretend that he was? What could be his reason? To obtain what money he could by making her think it her duty to help care for him. Dan had just decided this to be the most plausible explanation of the whole thing, when he was greatly startled by hearing the sudden report of a gun from the high rocks at his right. He looked up and beheld the girl about whom he had been thinking, every muscle tense, a smoking gun still against her shoulder. It was pointed at the bushes directly at his left. “Don’t you move!” she shouted the warning. “Maybe I didn’t kill it.”

Dan whirled toward the rocks and low-growing bushes at his left and what he saw reassured him. A mountain lion lay there, evidently dead, its position showing that it had been just about to spring upon him. He turned to thank the girl, but she had disappeared. She, too, had evidently been convinced that the animal was dead. On examining it closer, the boy saw that the bullet had entered the creature’s head at a most vulnerable spot, and being thus assured that it was not playing possum, he went on his way.

Already Meg Heger had won a right to his chivalry. She had saved his life. How he wished that in turn he might do something to save her from her tormentor.

CHAPTER XVI.
THE TRAPPER'S CABIN

Dan felt a glow of pleasure as he neared the log cabin which nestled against the mountain, sheltered by rock walls on the side from which the worst storms always came.

Eagerly he looked ahead, hoping that he would see the girl. He wanted to thank her for having saved his life, but no one was in sight.

It was a pleasant, home-like place, with chickens clucking cheerfully in a large, wired-in yard. Goats climbed among the rocks at the back, and a washing fluttered on a line at one side, while, to the boy's delight, masses of wild flowers, showing evidence of loving care, carpeted the earth-filled stretches between boulders, and some of them that trailed along the ground hung over the cliff in vivid bloom. It was Meg's garden, he knew, without being told.

He rapped on the closed front door, but a voice from outside called to him. "Whoever 'tis, come around here. I'm washin'."

Dan did as he was told and saw a thin, angular woman, who stood up very straight and looked at him out of keen blue eyes, as she wiped her sudsy hands on her gingham apron. Then she brushed back her graying locks.

Her smile was a friendly one. "You're Dan Abbott's son, ain't you?" she began at once. "Hank Wallace, him as drives the stage, stopped in for dinner to our place yesterday and he told us all about having fetched you up. Pa and I knew your pa, and your ma, too, years back, afore any of you children was living, and long afore I had Meg." The woman nodded toward the wooded mountain beyond. "Meg's out studyin' some fandangled thing she calls bot'ny." Then she waved a bony hand toward the glowing gardens. "Them's what she calls her

specimens. Queer things they get to larnin' in schools nowadays. I didn't have much iddication. None at all is more like the real of it. But pa, he went summers for a spell, and learned readin', writin' and 'rithmetic. All a person needs to know in these mountains; but Meg, now, she's been goin' ever since she could talk, seems like. Notion Pa Heger took. He got talked into doin' it by Preacher Bellows." Then, before saying more, the woman cautiously scanned the woods and the road. Feeling sure that there was no one near enough to hear her, she confided: "You see, we ain't dead sure who Meg is. She was about three when one of the Ute squaw women fetched her, all done up in one of them bright-colored blankets they make. It was a terrible stormy night. There'd been a cloudburst, and the thunder made this old mountain shake for true. Pa Heger said he heard someone at the door, and I said 'twas the wind. He said he knew better, and he went to see. There stood a Ute squaw, and she grunted something and held out the blanket bundle. Pa took it, bein' as he heard a cry inside of it. That squaw didn't stop. She shuffled away and Pa shut the door quick to keep the storm out.

"'Well, Ma,' he says, turning to me, 'what d' s'pose we've got here?'

"'Some Indian papoose,' I reckoned 'twas.

"'Well, if 'tis,' said he, 'I can't throw it out into this awful storm. We'll have to keep it till it clears, an' then I'll pack it back to the Utes.'

"They was over at the Crazy Creek camp then, but when that storm let up, and Pa did go over, there wa'n't a hide or hair left of that Ute tribe. They'd gone to better huntin' grounds, the way they allays do, and we've never seen 'em since. None of 'em 'cept ol' Slinkin' Coyote. It's queer the way he sticks to it that he's Meg's pa, but my man won't listen to it. Gets mad as anythin' if I as much as say maybe it's true. He'll rave, Pa will, an' say: 'Look at our Meg! Does she look like a young 'un of that skulkin' old wildcat?' Pa says, an' I have to agree she don't. But he pesters her, askin' for money. That is, he used to afore Pa Heger set the law on him. Pa has a paper from the sheriff, givin' him the right to arrest that ol' Ute if he ever sets eyes on him.

"But I declare to it! Here comes Pa Heger himself. He'll be glad to meet you, bein' as he knew your pa so well."

The lad turned eagerly. He was always glad to meet someone who had known his

father in the long ago years, when he had come West, just after leaving college, hoping to win a fortune.

Then, as the boy waited for the man to come up, he wondered why Meg did not return. Didn't she care to make his acquaintance?

"Pa Heger," as he liked to be called, was a pleasant-faced man whose deeply wrinkled, leathery countenance showed at once that he had weathered wind and storm through many a long year in the mountains.

As Ma Heger had done, he seemed to know intuitively who the visitor was. But before he could speak, his talkative spouse began:

"Pa, ain't this boy the splittin' image of Danny Abbott, him as used to come over to set by our fire and hear you spin them trappin' yarns o' yourn? That was afore he went away an' got married. 'Arter that he wa'n't alone when he come climbin' up the mountain, but along of him was the sweetest purtiest little creature I'd ever sot my eyes on. The two of 'em were a fine lookin' pair."

Dan shook hands with the silent man, who showed his pleasure more with his smiling eyes than with words. He was quite willing to let his wife do most of the talking. The lad was pleased with the praise given his father and mother, when they were young, and he at once told Mrs. Heger that his sister Jane, who was with him, very closely resembled that bride of long ago.

"Wall, now," the good woman exclaimed, "how I'd like to see the gal. She'n my Meg ought to get on fine, if she's anyhow as friendly as her ma was. Mis' Abbott used to come right out to my kitchen. She'd been goin' to some fandangly cookin' school, the while she was gettin' ready to be married, and she larned me a lot of things to make kitchen work easier. I'm doin' some of 'em yet, and thinkin' of her often."

Dan did not comment on the possibility of his proud sister becoming an intimate friend of the mountain girl, but, for himself, he found that he very much wanted to know more about their adopted daughter.

"Mr. Heger," he turned to the man, who stood shyly twirling his fur cap, "your daughter has just saved my life."

His listeners both looked very much surprised.

“Why, how come that?” Mrs. Heger inquired. “You didn’t say as how you’d seen Meg, all the time I was talkin’ about her.”

Dan might have replied that he had not had an opportunity to say much of anything. But to an interested audience he related the recent occurrence.

“Pshaw, that’s queer now!” Pa Heger scratched his gray head back of one ear, which Dan was to learn was a habit with him when he was puzzled.

“You say the mountain lion was crouched to spring at you? Then it must o’ been that she had some young near. They’re cowards when it comes to humans, them lions are. They kill sheep an’ calves an’ deer, an’ all the little wild critters, but they don’t often attack a man. They’ll trail ’em for hours, curious, sort of, I reckon, keepin’ out of sight. Makes you feel mighty uncomfortable to know one of them big critters is prowlin’ arter you, whatever his intentions may be. But that ’un, now, you was mentionin’, I’ll walk back wi’ you, when you go, an’ take a look at it. Thar’s a bounty paid for ’em by the ranchers. An’ if young air near by, there’ll be no time better for puttin’ an end to ’em.”

Ma Heger glanced often toward the wooded mountain beyond Meg’s “Bot’ny Gardens.” Then to her husband she said: “I reckon Meg knows thar’s company, an’ that’s why she’s stayin’ so long. She said to me, ‘Ma, I ain’t agoin’ to school today,’ says she. ‘I reckon I’ll get some more specimens.’“

At that the man looked up quickly, evident alarm in his clear blue eyes.

“Did she say anything about havin’ seen that skulkin’ Ute? Has he been pesterin’ her? The day arter she’s given him money, she don’ dare go to school, fearin’ he’ll be rarin’ drunk wi’ fire-water an’ waylay her. If ever I come up wi’ that coyote, I’ll—I’ll——”

The wife tried to quiet the increasing anger of her spouse.

“Pa Heger,” she said, “you’re alarmin’ yerself needless. That Ute knows the sheriff gave you power to jail him, an’ he’s mos’ likely gone to whar his tribe is.”

Dan stood silently, wondering what he ought to say. He knew that Meg had given the old Indian money, and he realized that was why she had been at home to save his life.

“I shall be glad to have you walk back with me, Mr. Heger,” he said.

Dan wanted to be alone with the mountaineer. When they had started down the mountain road, the man at Dan’s side was silent, a frown gathering on his leathery forehead. Suddenly he blurted out: “This here business has got to stop. That slinkin’ ol’ Ute’s got to prove that my Meg is his gal. In the courts, he’s got to prove it, or I’ll have him strung up. Jail’s too good for him. Pesterin’ a little gal to get her to give up her savin’s that she’s been puttin’ by this five year past, meanin’ to go to school in the big city and larn to be a teacher. That’s what Meg’s figgerin’ on, and that skulkin’ Ute drainin’ it away from her little by little. I made her pack a gun, an’ tol’ her to shoot him on sight, but I reckon she ain’t got the heart to take a life, though I’d sooner trap him than I would a—well, a coyote that he’s named arter.”

Dan could be quiet no longer. “Mr. Heger,” he said, “it was about that very Indian that I came up here to talk to you this morning. I saw him in hiding near our cabin. Yesterday afternoon he frightened the children, although he did not come out into the open; then about two hours later we saw him hiding behind boulders on the road below us. He waylaid your daughter, just as you fear. Also she gave him money.” While the boy had been talking, the man’s great knotted hands had closed and unclosed and cords swelled out on his reddening face. “I knew it,” he cried. “Dan Abbott, I want you to help me catch that Ute. Meg won’t. She ain’t sure but what he is her pa, an’ it’s agin nature to ask her to harm him. I won’t let on that you tol’ me, but, Dan, we’ve got to trap him. You needn’t be afraid of him. He won’t harm you or your family. He’s too cowardly for that. What’s more, he’s paralyzed in one arm; it’s all shriveled up so he can’t hold a gun.”

Dan felt greatly relieved upon hearing this, and wishing to change the conversation to something pleasanter, he inquired how soon Meg expected to be able to go away to school. But the subject evidently was not pleasant to the old man. “Next fall’s the time, an’ me and ma can’t bring ourselves to think on it. Snowed in all winter without Meg’s ’bout as pleasin’ as bein’ shet in a tomb.” The anger had all died out of the leathery, wrinkled face and in the blue eyes there shone that wonderful love-light that is the most beautiful thing the world holds. “Queer, now, ain’t it, how a slip of a baby girl could fill up two lives the way Meg did our’n from the start. An’ she cares for us jest as much as we for her, I reckon. ’Pears like she does.” The old man’s voice had become tender as he spoke.

“I’m sure of it,” Dan said heartily. Then, after a pause, Pa Heger continued slowly: “That gal of our’n has the queerest notions. One’s the way she takes to flowers.” Then, looking up inquiringly, “Did Ma tell you how she earned the money she’s savin’ for her iddication?” Dan shook his head, and so the old man continued: “Teacher Bellows ’twas got her started on it. He’s what folks call a naturalist, an’ when he used to stay up to our cabin for weeks at a time an’ he’d take Meg wi’ him specimen huntin’. Seems like thar’s museum places all over this here country that wants specimens of flowers growin’ high up in the Rockies. So Teacher Bellows and Meg would hunt for days, startin’ early every mornin’ and late back in the arternoon, till they had a set of specimens. They’d press ’em till they was dry as paper, then mount ’em, as they call it, an’ send ’em off to a museum, and along come a check. Arter Teacher Bellows went back to his school, Meg kept right on doin’ it by herself, him helpin’ now an’ then, an’ she’s saved nigh enough for the two years’ schoolin’ she’ll need to be a low grade schoolmarm. She’s got another queer notion, Meg has. I wonder if Ma tol’ you about that?” The old man looked up inquiringly, and Dan, finding himself very much interested in the notions of this girl whom he did not know, said that he would very much like to hear about it.

The old man removed his fur cap and scratched his gray head again. His voice grew even more tender. “You know what it says in that good book Preacher Bellows is allays readin’ out of, how a little child shall lead. Wall, that’s sartin what Meg’s done for me and Ma Heger. When she was about six year old, or maybe, now, she was seven, it was curious how friendly even the skeeriest little wild critters was toward her. She could feed ’em out of her hand, arter a little coaxin’, an’ how she loved ’em! You see, they was all the playmates she’s ever had. Then ’twas she started her horspital for hurt critters, an’ she’s kept it goin’ ever sence. Got one now, but, plague it, I can’t remember what kind of patients she’s got into it. She won’t keep nothin’ captive arter they’re well enough to fight for themselves out in the forest. Wall, as I was sayin’ back a piece, Meg was about seven as I recollect, when she sort of sudden like seemed to realize how ’twas I made my livin’, trappin’ wild animals and sellin’ their skins at the tradin’ post.

“But even then, she didn’t fully sense what it meant, seemed like, till the day we couldn’t find her nowhar. She’d never gone far into the mountains afore that, but when she didn’t come home at noonday, Ma asked me to go an’ hunt for her. It was late arternoon afore I come upon her, an’ I’ll never forget that sight as long as I’m livin’.

“My habit was to set them powerful steel traps to catch mountain lions and the fur animals I wanted for pelts. Then, every few days, I’d go the round and shoot the critters that had been caught in ’em. Wall, as I was goin’ toward whar one of them big traps was. I heard sech a pitiful cryin’. Good God, but I was wild wi’ fear, an’ I ran like wolves was arter me. I’d a notion our baby gal was catched in it. An’ thar she was, sure enough, but not hurt. Instead she was down on the ground wi’ her arms around a little black bear cub that had been catched hours before and was all torn and bleedin’.

“The fight was gone out o’ him, but he wa’n’t dead yet. It was our little Meg who was doin’ the cryin’. Clingin’ to the little fellow, not heedin’ the blood, her sobbin’ was pitiful to hear. I picked her up, an’ I ain’t ’shamed to be tellin’ you that I was cryin’ myself along about that time.

“‘Take him out, Pa,’ my little gal was beggin’. ‘Maybe he’ll get well, Pa.’

“So I opened the great steel jaws of that trap and took out the little cub bear. He was too small to be worth anything for a pelt, an’ we fetched him home, but he died soon arter, and Meg, she had me bury him. But she couldn’t get over what she had seen. She had a ragin’ fever for days. I sot up every night holdin’ her little quiverin’ body close in my arms, an’ prayin’ God if he’d let my little gal live, I’d never set another of them cruel steel traps to catch any of His critters as long as I’d breath in my body.

“Wall, boy, sort of a miracle took place. That little gal of mine had fallen asleep while I sat holdin’ her, but jest as I made that promise, silent to God, she lifted up her little hand and put it soft like on my face, an’ says, still asleep, seemed like—‘I love you, Pa Heger.’ An’ when she woke up next mornin’, the fever was gone, and she was well as ever.

“I kept my promise,” he went on grimly. “I went all over the mountain an’ I took them steel traps, one by one, unsprung ’em and dropped ’em down into that crack some earthquake had split into Bald Peak. It’s bottomless, seems like, an’ what goes into that crack never does no more harm. Now, when I kill a critter that needs killin’, I shoot an’ they never know what hits ’em. Meg is a sure-shot, too, though she’d never pack a gun if ’twant that I make her.”

They had reached the spot where the mountain lion still lay, and the old man stooped to examine it. “I reckon that was a sure shot, all right.” Then he

shouldered the limp creature. “Thar’s fifty dollars bounty, so I might as well have it. I’ll hunt for the cubs tomorrer. So long. Hit the trail up our way often.”

As Dan walked slowly down the mountain road toward his home cabin, he found that he was more interested in this unknown Meg than he had ever before been in any girl.

Jane’s headache was better when Dan returned, but her disposition was worse, and poor Julie was about ready to cry. She had been spoken to so sharply when she had really tried to help. Gerald was angry and indignant. He had at first urged his small sister and comrade to pretend that Jane was being pleasant, but, after a time, even he had decided that such a feat was too much for anyone to accomplish. Then he had intentionally slammed a door and had declared that he hoped it would make “ol’ Jane’s” head worse.

It was well that Dan returned just when he did. He entered the cabin living-room calling cheerily, “Good, Jane, I’m glad to see you are up.” Then he looked from one to the other. Julie, tearful, rebellious, stood near the kitchen door, and Gerald, with clenched fists, had evidently been saying something of a defiant nature. “Why, what’s the matter? What has gone wrong?”

Dan was indeed dismayed at the picture before him. Jane, who had seated herself in the one comfortable chair in the room, said peevishly: “Everything is the matter. Dan, you can see for yourself what a mistake I made in coming to this terrible place, and trying to live with these two children who have had no training whatever. They are defiant and rebellious.”

Even as Jane spoke, a memoried picture presented itself of Julie’s sweet solicitude for her earlier that morning, but she would not heed, so she hurried on: “I have been lying in there with this frightful headache thinking it all out, and I have decided that either the children must go back or I will.” A hard look, unusual in Dan’s face, appeared there and his voice sounded cold. “Very well, Jane, I will help you pack. The stage passes soon. If we hurry, we may be ready.” The children could hardly keep from shouting for joy. Something which Julie was cooking, boiled over and so she darted to the kitchen, followed by Gerald, who stood upon his head in the middle of the floor. But they had rejoiced too soon, for Gerry, who a moment later went to the brook for water, returned with the disheartening news that the stage was passing down their part of the road. Julie plumped down on the floor and her mouth quivered, but before she could

cry, Gerald caught her hands, pulled her up and said comfortingly: “Never mind, Jule. The stage will be going past again on Monday. Me and you’ll stay on the watch and tell Mister Sourface to stop for Jane when he goes back to Redfords on Tuesday. That is not so awful long. Oh, boy, then won’t we have the time of our lives?”

Julie agreed that they would indeed and decided to be very patient during the remaining two days. So she went back to her cooking and, with Gerald’s help, soon had the lunch spread.

Jane ate but little, and again shut herself up in her room for all that afternoon. Dan was almost as glad as were the children that she was to go back to the East, but Jane, strangely enough, was deeply hurt because her brother, who had been her playmate when they were little, and her pal in later years, had actually chosen the younger children in preference to herself. That proved how much he really cared for *her* and, as for his health, he seemed to be recovering remarkably. He had coughed a while the evening before, and for a shorter time that morning.

Then he had evidently been on a long hike. Of all that had happened Dan had said nothing, knowing that Jane would not wish to hear about the mountain girl, toward whom she felt so unkindly.

That afternoon Dan gave the children another lesson at shooting cones from an old pine, far enough from the cabin to keep from disturbing Jane. Julie grew braver as she watched Gerald’s success, and at last she too tried, and when, after many failures, she sent a brown cone spinning, she leaped about wild with joy.

“Now we are both sharpshooters,” Gerald cried generously. Then, glancing over at the cabin, he added: “There’s Jane sitting out on the porch. She does look sort of sick, doesn’t she?”

Dan’s heart was touched when he saw the forlorn attitude of the sister he so loved. “You youngsters amuse yourselves for a while,” he suggested, “I want to have a quiet talk with Jane.” Dan neglected to tell the children not to wander away.

CHAPTER XVII.
QUEER KITTENS

Left alone, Julie and Gerald scrambled to the road and looked both up and down. “Which way will we go?” Julie inquired.

“We’ve been down—or, I mean, we’ve been up the down road.” Then the boy laughed. “Aw, gee! You know what I mean. We came up the road yesterday in the stage; so now, let’s go on further up.”

Julie hopped about, clapping her hands gleefully. “Ohee, I know what! Let’s see if we can find that cabin the innkeeper lady said was about a mile up the mountain road from our place. Wouldn’t that be fun? And maybe that nice girl will be at home from school, and, if she is, I just know she’ll let me ride her pony.”

Gerald, nothing loath, fell into step by his sister’s side, the gun over his shoulder. After the fashion of small brothers, he could not resist teasing. “I bet you couldn’t stay on that pony, however hard you tried. It’s a wild Western broncho sort, like those we saw at Madison Square Garden that time Dad took us to Buffalo Bill’s big circus.” Then, in a manner which seemed to imply that he did not wish to boast, he added: “I sort of think I could ride it easy. Boys get the knack, seems like, without half trying.”

They had rounded the bend and were nearing the very spot where the mountain girl had shot the lion, when Julie clutched her brother’s arm and drew him back, whispering excitedly: “Gerry! Hark! What’s that noise I hear?”

The boy listened and then crept cautiously toward the bushes. He also heard queer little crying sounds that were almost plaintive. “Huh!” he said boldly. “’Tisn’t anything that would hurt us. Sounds to me like kittens crying for their

mother.”

A joyful shout from the girl, closely following him, turned into “Gerry! That’s just what they are! Great big kittens! See how comically they sprawl? They haven’t learned to walk yet. Their little legs aren’t strong enough to stand on. See, I can pick one right up. He doesn’t seem to mind a bit.” The small girl suited the action to the word, and it was well for her that the mother lion had been killed, or Julie would soon have been badly torn, despite the fact that her brother still carried his small gun.

The boy had lifted the other weak creature, which had not been alive many days, and, with much curious questioning as to what kind of “pussy cats” they might be, they continued their walk and soon reached the cabin.

Meg Heger, who had remained long in the forest that day, having sought a rare lichen high on the mountain, was just descending from the trail that led into her “botany gardens” when she saw the two children entering the front yard of her home cabin. Unbuckling the basket which she carried much as an Indian squaw carries a pappoose, the girl leaped down the rocks and exclaimed: “Oh, children, where did you find those darling little mountain lion babies?”

Luckily she took the one Julie was holding in her own arms as she spoke, for if she had not, that particular “baby” would have had a hard fall, for when the small girl from the East heard that she was actually holding a mountain lion, she uttered a little frightened scream and let go her hold. But Gerald, being a boy, realized that even a future fierce wild animal was harmless when its legs were too weak for it to stand on, and so he continued to hold his pet, even venturing to admire it.

“It’s a little beauty, ain’t—I mean, isn’t it?” He glanced quickly at Julie, but the slip had evidently not been observed, for she was intently watching the mountain girl, who was caressing the little creature she held as though she loved it, as she did everything that lived in all the wilderness.

But as Meg Heger held that helpless, hungry baby her heart was sad, for well she knew that it was unprotected and perhaps starving because she had shot and killed its mother. Of course she had to kill the lion to save the life of the lad who had gone too close to the place where the mother had her young; but, nevertheless, she felt that, in a way, her act had made her responsible for these

helpless little wild creatures, since they had been brought to her.

Brightly she turned to the children. “Don’t you want to come with me to the hospital?” she invited. “We’ll give them some supper.”

She did not ask who the children were, nor from whence they had come. Perhaps she remembered having seen them the day before on the stage; or Sourface Wallace may have told her.

Julie and Gerald followed, wondering what the “hospital” might be.

Back of the cabin, on a rocky ledge, the children saw a queer assortment of wooden boxes, small cages and little runways. “This is the hospital.” Meg flashed a merry smile at them over her shoulder. “There aren’t many patients just now. Most of them have been cured. Here’s one little darling, and I’m afraid he never will be well. Some prowling creature caught him and had succeeded in breaking a wing when it heard me coming. Why it dropped its prey when it ran, I don’t know, but I brought the little fellow home and Pap helped me set its wing. It’s ever so much better, but even yet can’t fly, but it can scuttle along the ground just ever so fast.”

Gerald was much interested.

“What kind of a bird is it, Miss Heger?” he began, very politely, when the girl’s musical laughter rippled out. “Don’t call me that!” she pleaded. “It makes me feel as old as the thousand-year pine Teacher Bellows told our class about. It’s a little quail bird, dearie. You’ll see ever so many of them in flocks. There are sixty different kinds of cousins in their family. The Bob Whites with their reddish brown plumage have a black and white speckled jacket. They live in the grass rather than in trees and are good friends of the farmer because they devour so many of the insects that destroy grain and fruits. This one is a mountain quail; it is one of the largest cousins. The one that lives in the South is called a partridge.”

Gerald listened politely to the life history of the pretty bird, but his attention had been seized and held by what Meg had said about the very ancient pine. “Was there ever a tree that lived a thousand years?” he asked with eager interest. The girl nodded. “Indeed, there are many that have lived much longer, but this pine was blown over, and Teacher Bellows was allowed to cut it up to read its life history. He found that it had been in two forest fires, and about five hundred

years ago an Indian battle had been fought near it, for there were arrow heads imbedded in the rings that indicated that year of its life."

Then Meg concluded with her bright smile: "Some day, when Teacher Bellows is up here, I'll have him tell you the names and probable ages of all our neighbor trees! It's a fascinating study."

Julie was not much interested in the length of a tree's life and so she began eagerly: "Miss—I mean—do you want us to call you Meg?" she interrupted herself to inquire.

The older girl nodded. Every move she made seemed to express bubbling-over enthusiasm and interest. "Haven't you any more patients?"

Gerry was peering into empty boxes in which there were soft, leaf-like beds.

"Only just Mickey Mouse. He's a little cripple! His left foot was cut off in a trap, but he gets around nicely on one stump. That's his hole over there. I put grain and bits of cheese in front of it. Keep ever so still and I'll put a kernel of corn right by his door. Then perhaps you'll see his bright eyes." And that is just what happened. As soon as the corn kernel rolled in front of the hole, out darted a sharp brown nose with twitching whiskers and two beady black eyes appeared just long enough for their owner to drag his supper into the safe darkness of his particular box.

Meg laughed happily. "He's the cunningest, Mickey is! I sometimes take him with me in my pocket. He likes to ride there, or so it seems. At any rate he is just as good as he can be. Often he goes to sleep, but at other times, he stands right up and looks out of the pocket, just as though he were enjoying the scenery."

At that moment a sharp, almost impatient cry from the small creature she held recalled to the head doctor of the hospital the fact that she had started out to feed the baby lions. She brought milk from a cave-like room, only the front wall of which was wood, the rest being in the mountain. "That's our cooler," she told Gerald, whom she could easily observe was interested in all the strange things he saw. Dipping one corner of her handkerchief into the milk, she put it in the mouth of her tiny lion and the children were delighted to see how readily and joyfully the creature seemed to feast upon it. Having gathered courage, Julie wished to feed the other baby lion and then Meg suggested that they be put in a soft lined box on the rocks near, since they were used to being high up. The baby

lions, being no longer hungry, cuddled down and went to sleep. Gerald's conscience was troubling him. "We'll have to be going," he said. "Nobody knows where we are." Then he hesitated. He knew that it would be polite to ask the mountain girl to call upon them, but he was afraid that Jane would not treat her kindly, so, in his embarrassment, he caught Julie by the hand and fairly dragged her away as he called, "Goodbye, Meg, I'm coming up often." When they were on the down-road, the boy cautioned Julie to say nothing whatever of their adventure to their sister, but just to Dan.

CHAPTER XVIII.
A YOUNG OVERSEER

Sunday dawned gloriously, and Dan declared that he felt better than he had supposed that he ever would again. Jane, too, though she did not voice it, was conscious of feeling more invigorated than she had been in the East, and yet, of course, she was very glad that she was going back again on the following Tuesday. She would go directly to Newport to visit Merry Starr, as had been their original plan. Her conscience would not trouble her, since it was Dan's wish that she be the one to leave.

The two children, on the evening before, had failed to confide that they had visited the cabin up the mountain road. They were wild to tell Dan, but they wished to get him off by himself before they did so. They dragged him out into the kitchen after the Sunday morning work was done and asked him if he would go with them for a hike up along the brook to a natural bridge that they could see from their door-yard.

The older lad hesitated. "I'll ask Jane if she would like to go," he began, but the immediate disappointment expressed by the two freckled faces made him turn back to add, "Or, rather, I'll ask Jane if she minds our going, just for a little while." This suggestion was far more pleasing to the children.

They all entered the living-room where Jane sat reading. "My goodness, don't go far," she said petulantly. "Don't you remember that the terrible overseer from the Packard ranch is coming to take dinner with you today? I intend to shut myself in my room and stay there until he is gone."

"Hm!" Dan snapped his fingers as he ejaculated. "Queer I'd forget that visit, since I have been looking forward to it so eagerly." Then he queried: "Why do

you say that he is terrible, Jane? A foreman on a vast cattle ranch is not necessarily an uncouth specimen of humanity."

The girl flung herself impatiently in the chair as she emphatically replied: "Of course he'll be terrible! A big, rawboned creature who will speak with a dreadful dialect, or whatever you call it; and he will be so embarrassed at meeting people from the city, that he will stutter more than likely."

Dan laughed at the description. "Maybe you are right, sister of mine, but we'll be home to prepare the meal for our guest, long before the hour he is to arrive. Goodbye! Fire off the gun if you are frightened at anything."

The girl merely shrugged her shoulders, and when they were gone she decided, since it really was very lovely out-of-doors, to take her book to the porch, and so she dragged thither the comfortable chair with the leather pillows. She was soon reading the story, which interested her so greatly that she did not notice the passing of time until she heard a step near by. Jane supposed that her family was returning, and did not glance up until she heard a pleasant, well-modulated voice saying:

"Pardon me if I intrude, but is this the cabin occupied by the Abbott family?"

Looking up in astonishment, Jane saw before her a handsome youth whose wide Stetson hat was held in one hand. He wore a tan-colored shirt of soft flannel, and his corduroys, of the same shade, were tucked into high, laced boots. Even before she spoke, Jane was conscious that the youth with the clean-shaven face, strong square chin, pleasant mouth, blue eyes with clear, direct gaze was not in the least embarrassed by her presence. He was indeed the kind of a lad she had always met in the homes of her best friends, the kind that Dan was. But that of which she was most conscious was the fact that he was very good looking, and that in his eyes there was an expression of sincere admiration for her.

Graciously Jane rose and held out a slim white hand. "We are the Abbotts," she began; then, laughingly confessed that, unfortunately, she was the only one at home, as the others had gone on a hike—she really had not inquired where.

The lad did not seem to consider it unfortunate. "Please be seated again, Miss Abbott, and I'll occupy the door-step, if you don't mind. I'd heaps rather meet strangers one by one. It's easier to get acquainted."

Then, as he thought of something, he exclaimed: “I hope I have not come over much earlier than I was expected. I hiked all the way. I thought it might be easier to come cross-lots, so to speak, than to ride horseback to Redfords and then up your mountain road.”

“Was it?” Jane asked, wishing to appear interested.

“It was great! I adore mountain climbing, don’t you, Miss Abbott?”

Then, not waiting for her reply, he continued with boyish enthusiasm: “I tell you, it means a lot to me to have you Abbotts here. I love the West, but I’ve missed my friends. We’ll have great times! How long are you going to stay?”

Jane hesitated. She should have replied that she was leaving on Tuesday, but now she was not sure that she wished to go.

For a merry half hour these two chattered. The lad seemed to be quite willing to talk of everything but his home, and Jane was too well bred to ask questions. Jean told of his college life, and when she asked if he regretted that his days of study were over, he laughingly declared that they never would be. “Mr. Packard is a great student,” he looked up brightly to say, “and our long winter evenings, that some chaps might call dull, are the most interesting I have ever spent. We take one subject after another and go into it thoroughly. We’re most interested in experimental inventions and we have rigged up all sorts of labor saving contrivances over on the ranch.” Recalling something which for the moment had been forgotten, Jean exclaimed: “Mr. Packard wished me to invite you all to visit us as soon as you are quite settled here.”

Then with that unconscious admiration in his eyes, he concluded: “For myself I most eagerly second the invitation.” Jane’s vanity was indeed gratified. She laughed a happy musical laugh which sounded natural, although it had really been cultivated. “I am greatly flattered that you should be so anxious to entertain the Abbotts,” she told him, “since I am the only one of us whom you have met.”

“True!” he confessed, merrily, “but you know we scientists can visualize an entire family from one specimen. How could the other three be undesirable when one is so lovely? Maybe it’s because I am a blonde that I admire the olive type of beauty.”

Just why she said it Jane could not have told, unless the memory of what that

awful Gabby at the station had said still rankled. Be that as it may, almost without her conscious direction she heard herself saying: “I suppose, then, that you must be a great admirer of Meg Heger?” There was a note in the girl’s voice which made the lad look up a bit puzzled. What he said in reply was both pleasing and displeasing to his companion. With a ring of sincerity he assured his listener that there were few girls finer than Meg Heger.

“I do not know her personally very well,” he told Jane. “She seems to shun the acquaintance of all young people. I sometimes think that she may believe her friendship would not be desired since she is supposed to be the daughter of that old Ute Indian, but this is not true. We in the West ask not the parentage but the sincerity of our friends. It’s through her foster-father that I know the girl, really. I often go with him to the timber line and above it, when I am not needed on the ranch. It’s a beautiful thing to hear him tell how Meg has enriched their lives.”

Then, as his direct gaze was again lifted to the olive-tinted face of the girl near him, he said frankly: “Many of the cowboys and others of our neighbors rave about Meg’s beauty. But I do not admire the Spanish or French type as much as I do our very own American girl.”

Jean did not say in words which American girl he thought wonderfully lovely to look upon, but his eyes were eloquent.

Jane could have sat there basking in the lad’s evident admiration for hours, but the position of the sun, high above them, suggested to her that something must be amiss. “I wonder why Dan and the children do not return,” she said, rising to look up the brook trail. Jean leaped to his feet and together they went around the cabin and scanned the mountain-side and the lad yodeled, but there was no response.

“Of course, nothing could have happened to them all,” Jane assured him. “They have gone farther than they planned, I suppose.” Then, turning with a helpless little laugh, she said in her most winning way (and Jane could be quite irresistible when she wished), “I have a terrible confession to make. You will have to starve if they do not return, for I have never learned to cook.”

“Great! I’m glad you haven’t, because that will give me an opportunity of shining in an art at which I excel.” The lad seemed brimming over with enthusiasm. Jane smiled up at him. He stood a head taller than she, with wide,

square shoulders that looked so strong and capable of carrying whatever burden might be placed upon them.

“How did you happen to learn how to cook?” the girl inquired, and then wondered at the sudden change of expression in his handsome face. The joyful enthusiasm of the moment before was gone and in its place was an expression both tender and sad. “The last year of my little mother’s life we two went alone to our cabin on the Maine coast. Mums wanted to take our Chinaman, but I begged her to let me have her all alone by myself, and so under her direction I learned to cook. Miss Abbott,” the boy turned toward her, seeming to feel sure of her understanding sympathy, “that was the happiest summer of my life, but it had the saddest ending, for, try as I might to keep her, my little mother faded away and left us.” Then abruptly he exclaimed, as though he dared not trust himself to keep on: “Won’t you lead me to the kitchen, and when the wanderers return we will have a feast ready for them.”

CHAPTER XIX.
A NEW COOK

Such a pleasant half hour was spent by these two who seemed content just to be together, Jane, with a twinge of regret, realized that the youth was idealizing her. He constantly attributed to her qualities that she well knew that she did not possess. He told her that he could understand why she had not learned to cook simply because for years she had been away at a fashionable seminary. “But now is your golden opportunity, and I am indeed lucky to be your first teacher.” That he was pleased was quite evident. “I am sure you agree with me, Miss Abbott, that cooking is as essential in a young woman’s education as painting or singing.” Then he laughed boyishly. “I’m afraid, when I am hungry that I would far rather have a beautiful girl cook for me than sing to me. Now, what is the menu to be?”

Jane looked about the kitchen helplessly. She did not wish to confess to Jean Sawyer that she had not before been in there except to pass through it to their outdoor dining-room.

“Julie and Dan were planning the meal. I really don’t know.” The situation was relieved by Jean’s asking: “May I prepare anything I can find?”

“Oh, yes, do please! It really doesn’t matter which of our supplies are used first.” The girl was glad to have the problem thus easily solved. After a few moments of ransacking, the lad looked up from a box as he asked: “Miss Jane, will you pare the potatoes?”

She shrank away before she realized what she was doing. “Oh, wouldn’t they stain my hands terribly?” Then, with her most winning smile, she held them both out to him. “You see, they haven’t a stain on them yet, and I did hope they never

would have." The boy made a move as though to take the hands in his. But he stooped quickly over the box of potatoes and said earnestly: "Right you are, Miss Abbott. They are far too lovely to mar."

Perhaps because of associated ideas it was that he recalled a poem that went somewhat in this way: "Beautiful hands are those that do work that is useful, kind and true." What he said was: "Suppose you set the table. I'll make the fire and have a pot of goulash in no time. That is my favorite camp menu, perhaps because it is the simplest."

Everything was in readiness when merry voices were heard without, and Julie, evidently believing they were unheard, said in a stage whisper: "Don't tell Jane that we've been up to see Meg Heger's hospital, will you, Dan? She'd be mad as anything." The older lad was opening the kitchen door at that moment, and the two, who had been keeping so still in the kitchen that the surprise might be complete, could not but hear. Vaguely Jean Sawyer wondered why Jane would be "mad" because the rest of her family had been to call upon a neighbor. Glancing at her proud, beautiful face, he saw a scornful curl to the mouth which he had thought so lovely, and it was not pleasant to behold. But a moment later he had forgotten it, in the excitement that followed his discovery. Dan advanced with glowing eyes and outstretched hand. "Jean Sawyer! How glad we are to have you with us. These are the youngsters, Julie and Gerald." The little girl made a pretty curtsy and Gerry thrust out a chubby, freckled hand, smiling his widest as he looked admiringly at the cowboy's costume. "Gee!" he confided, "I'd like awful well to have one of those rigs. Dan, don't you s'pose they make 'em small enough for boys?"

But it was Jean who answered. "They do, indeed, and what is more, there is one over at the Packard ranch more typical than mine, which I am pretty sure will fit you. A grandson of Mr. Packard's was with us last summer, but he isn't coming this year and he'd be glad to have you wear it." Then, smiling at the older girl, he said to Dan: "Your sister, Miss Jane, has agreed to bring you all over to our place to spend next Sunday. That is a week from today." Julie, upon hearing this, was about to blurt out her disappointment by saying, "How can she, if she's going back East on Tuesday?" But a cold glance from her sister's eyes made the small girl turn away with quivering lips. After all Jane was going to stay and their summer would be spoiled. Jean Sawyer had also witnessed this by-play and he felt a sense of great disappointment.

It was quite evident that Jane Abbott's beauty was only skin deep.

When Jean Sawyer took his departure that afternoon, Dan accompanied him part way "cross-lots," as the former lad had called it.

They crossed the brook and after climbing many a jagged boulder, began the descent on the side of the mountain nearest the wide valley in which was located the fertile Packard ranch.

These two lads, so near of an age, found that they were most congenial. When Dan confessed that his dearest desire was to become a writer of purpose fiction, Jean heartily applauded. "Great! I'd give anything if I had the ability to do something fine for this old world of ours, but, just at present, I believe I will continue being Mr. Packard's foreman. Really, Dan, reading and studying with that man is as good as having a post-graduate course at college."

Then apropos of nothing (or so it seemed), Jean said: "What a beautiful girl your sister is. What a pity that she has not had the love and direction of a mother. I had such a wonderful mother myself, Dan, I well know what girls and boys have missed when they lost their mothers while they were very young."

Dan grew serious at once. Then he confessed:

"Jean, I feel as though I had known you for a long time, and so I am going to tell you my greatest problem. My sister Jane is beautiful, and before she went away to that fashionable Highacres Seminary she was as sweet and lovable a girl as any you could find, but for some reason she learned there much that was not in the curriculum. Pride of family, snobbishness, and because of our father's position, many of her companions were so differential to her that she has come to expect it from everyone. How I wish I knew how to save Jane from herself."

It was just as Jean had feared. He surprised himself by saying: "If she would chum with Meg Heger a while, I believe it would help her to overcome those artificially acquired qualities, for Meg is sincerely natural. But your sister would have to make the advances. Meg never will. She keeps apart by herself, and will probably continue doing so until it is proven that she is not that Ute Indian's daughter. I know that you have met Meg, for I overheard your little sister saying that you had been there this morning."

"Yes, we were. The children pleaded so hard that I go and see their baby lions."

Then he told the story of the death of the mother lion to an interested listener. “I wondered why Meg Heger disappeared directly after having saved my life. Nor would she come to her home while she know that I was there. It is too bad that she shuts herself away from people who would gladly be her friends.”

Jean nodded. “That is just what she does. Last year, as I was telling Gerald, Mr. Packard’s daughter, Mrs. Delbert, and her young son were with us. When Mrs. Delbert heard the story of Meg’s devotion to her foster-parents and how she is trying to become a teacher that she might make life easier and pleasanter for them, she at once wished to make Meg’s acquaintance. We hiked up to the Heger cabin one Saturday morning, and although Meg willingly showed Mrs. Delbert her botany gardens, and her hurt animal hospital, she was so reserved and shut away from us, that we realized at once that she did not wish our friendship. Mrs. Delbert invited Meg to spend a day with her at the ranch, but the girl never came, nor have I seen her since.”

The other lad understood.

“With me she is also distant and reserved,” he said, “but when she talks to Julie and Gerald she is very different.”

Then, returning to a remark made earlier, he concluded: “My sister Jane would be greatly helped if she could see how much more naturalness is admired than cultivated poses, but she will never learn from Meg Heger, whom she considers greatly beneath her.” Then, stopping, he held out his hand. “Jean,” he said seriously, “I hope I have not given you a wrong opinion of my beautiful sister. I honestly believe that the girl she used to be still lives beneath all this artificial veneer that she has acquired at the fashionable seminary and my most earnest wish is to find a way by which that other girl, who was my dearly loved sister-pal, can be returned to me. I would not have spoken of this were it not that I am as greatly troubled for Jane’s sake as my own.”

“I am glad you told me, Dan. I, too, have faith in her. Goodbye till next Sunday.”

Dan walked slowly back to the cabin, pleased, indeed, with his new friend.

Dan found his sister Jane alone with her book on the front porch of their cabin. She looked up with a smile of welcome. “I was agreeably surprised in our guest,” she began at once, “and so, before you tease me for having described him as raw-boned and illiterate, I will make the confession that I never met a better

looking or nicer mannered youth."

"Tut! Tut!" her brother, sinking to the doorstep where earlier in the day Jean had sat, merrily shook a finger at his sister, "That is extreme praise, and I may take offense, since I consider myself good looking and nice mannered."

The girl laughed happily. Her brother reflected that, not in many a day, had he seen her brow unclouded with frown or fretfulness.

Suddenly he said: "Jane, have you changed your mind about going East next Tuesday?" He looked up inquiringly, eagerly.

The girl flushed, then said with an effort at indifference: "I thought perhaps it is hardly fair to decide that I do not like the mountain life, after having been here for such a few days. Shall you mind if I postpone my departure until a week from Tuesday?" The lad caught the hand that hung near him and pressed it with sudden warmth to his cheek. "Jane," he said, "I'm desperately lonesome for the comrade that my sister used to be. Won't you give up all thought of going away and try once again to be that other girl?"

Jane looked puzzled, then she drew her hand away, saying coldly: "You are evidently not satisfied with me. I suppose that you also admire a girl who prefers to pare potatoes and stain her hands, than you do one who keeps herself attractive."

Dan was astonished at the outburst, but wisely made no comment, though his thoughts were busy. Evidently Jean Sawyer had told his sister that he admired a girl who could be useful as well as ornamental. What would the result be, he wondered. But on the following day Jane permitted the other three to do all of the work of the cabin while she idled hours away at letter writing to her many girl friends in the East; finished her book, and started a bit of lace making which had been the popular pastime at the seminary.

At nine o'clock on Monday the stage drew up in front of their stone stairway and the discordant sound from a horn seemed to be calling them, and so Gerald hopped down to receive from Mr. "Sourface" Wallace a packet of newspapers and letters. "Oh, thanks a lot, Mr. Wallace!" the boy shouted, knowing that the stage driver was deaf, and then up the stairway he scrambled to distribute the mail. There was a letter for each of the Abbotts from their father and a tiny note inclosed from grandmother with good advice for each, not excluding Jane,

whose lips took their favorite scornful curve when it was read.

But a glance at her other two letters sent her to her own room, where she could read them undisturbed. One was from Merry Starr and, instead of containing enthusiastic descriptions of the gay life at Newport, which it was her good fortune to be living, the epistle was crammed full of longing to see the wonderful West.

“Tastes are surely different!” Jane thought as she opened the second epistle, which was from Esther Ballard. In it she read a news item which pleased her exceedingly. “Jane, old dear”—was the very informal beginning.

“Put on your remembering cap and you will recall that you told me, if ever I could find another string of those semi-precious cardinal gems that you so greatly admired, to buy them at once, notify you and you would send me the money. Well, the deed is done. I have found the necklace, and, honestly, Jane, it holds all of the glory of the sunset and sunrise melted into one. They will set off your dark beauty to perfection. But I’ll have to confess that I haven’t a penny. Always broke, as you know, and so, if you want them, you’ll have to mail me twenty-five perfectly good dollars by return post.

“Yours in great haste,

E. B.”

Jane sat looking thoughtfully out of the window. In about two weeks she would have a birthday, and on that occasion her aunt, after whom she was named, always sent her the amount needed for the gems, but in a postscript Esther had said that she had asked to have the chain held one week, feeling sure that by that time Jane would have sent the money.

Taking from her purse two bills, she put them in an envelope addressed to Esther, added a hurried little letter, stamped it and was just wondering how she would get it to the post when she saw Meg Heger coming down the road on her pony. Although she herself would not ask a favor of the mountain girl, she called Julie and requested that she hail Meg and ask her to mail the letter. Not until it was done did Jane face her conscience. Had she any right to use the tax money for a necklace? She shrugged her shoulders. What would two weeks more or less matter?

CHAPTER XX.
MEG AS SCHOOL-MISTRESS

Upon arriving in Redfords, Meg Heger had at once given the letter which had been marked “Important! Rush!” to the innkeeper, who was about to start for the station to meet the eastbound train. He promised the girl to attend to putting the letter on the train himself, and thus assured that she had served her neighbors to the best of her ability, Meg went across the road to the school, only to find that her good friend, Teacher Bellows, was not to be there that day as he had been sent for by a dying mountaineer in his capacity as preacher, and had left word that he wished Meg to hear the younger children recite, and dismiss them at two, which was an hour earlier than usual.

Nothing pleased the girl more than to have an opportunity to practice the art of instruction, since that was to be her chosen life work, and a very happy morning she had with the dozen and one pupils, queer little specimens of childhood, although, indeed, several of them were beyond that, being long, lanky boys and girls in their teens. They, one and all, loved Meg devotedly and considered it a rare treat to have her in charge of the class. This happened quite often, as, in his double capacity as preacher as well as teacher, the kindly old man had various calls upon his time; some of them taking him so far into the mountains that he was obliged to be gone for days at a time.

Meg had a charming way, quite her own, of teaching, with story and word pictures. Even the master had to concede that she was more fitted by nature than he was to instruct the child mind. At two o’clock, when the young teacher dismissed her class, they flocked about her as she crossed the road to the inn.

The tallest among her pupils, a rancher’s daughter, who was indeed as old as Meg, put an arm lovingly about her as she said, “When yer through with yer

schoolin', don't I hope yo'll come back to Redfords an' be our teacher."

The mountain girl laughed. "Why, Ann Skittle!" she teased. "You will be married, with a home of your own, by the time that I am ready to teach. You are seventeen, now, aren't you?"

Ann's sunburned face flushed suddenly and her unexpected embarrassment caused Meg to believe that she had guessed more accurately than she had supposed. "Yeah, I'm seventeen. But I'll be eighteen before snowfall, an' then Hank Griggs an' me's goin' to be married. He's pa's hired man. A new one from Arizony."

"Then why should you care whether or not I teach the Redford school?" Meg turned at the lowest step of the inn porch to inquire. Her dark eyes seemed always to hold a kindly interest in whatever they looked upon, were it a hurt little animal or, as at that moment, a girl who had not been endowed with much natural intelligence.

Ann Skittle, again visibly embarrassed, stood looking down, twisting one corner of her apron as she said in a low voice: "Me an' Hank is like to have kiddies an' I'd be wishin' you could teach 'em."

Suddenly Meg leaned over and impulsively kissed the flushed face of her surprised companion. "Of course you'll have little ones, dear," she said, and in her voice there was a note of tenderness. "No greater happiness can come to any girl than just that; to be a mother and to have a mother." She turned away to hide the tears that, mist-like, always rose to her own eyes when she thought of the mother whom she never knew. Ann, calling goodbye, walked away toward the corral back of the school where her pony had been for hours awaiting her.

When Meg entered the front room of the inn, her smile was as bright as ever. Mrs. Bently often said that it didn't matter how gloomy the day might be, when Meg appeared with "that lighten' up" smile of hers, somehow it seemed as though the sun had burst through, and even if things had been going wrong, they began to go right then and there. "Mrs. Bently," the girl said, "Pa Heger told me not to come home today without the County Weekly News. It's days overdue."

The comely woman's face brightened.

"Wall, I've found that newspaper at last," she announced. "That man of mine

didn’t have on his specks when he was sortin’ the mail, I reckon. Anyhow he stuck that paper o’ yer pa’s ’way over into Mr. Peters’ box. ’Twas fetched clear out to his ranch and fetched back agin.”

“Thanks.” Meg said brightly, as she took the paper. “It won’t matter any. I don’t suppose there’s any startling news in it.”

Half way up the mountain road Meg drew rein and listened. There was not a breath of wind stirring. The sun beat down relentlessly and heat shimmered from the red-gold dust of the road ahead. The only sounds were the humming, buzzing and wing-whirring of the multitudinous insects all about her. Then again she heard the sound which had first attracted her attention. A pitiful little gasping cry. Leaping from her pony, she commanded: “Pal, stand still for a moment. One of our little brothers is calling for help.”

Although the faint cry had instantly ceased, Meg remembered the direction from which it had come and climbed agilely down the rocks to find that one, having been dislodged, had caught a Douglas squirrel’s tail and had held it captive so long that the creature was nearly starved.

“You poor little mite,” Meg said with tender sympathy as she stooped, and, after removing the heavy stone, lifted the small creature in her hands. She held it, unresisting, for a moment against her cheek, then put it into one of her saddle bags. Peering in, she said assuringly, “Don’t be frightened. I’m going to take you to the hospital, but as soon as you are stronger, you shall have your freedom.” The bead-like eyes that looked up out of the dark depths of the bag seemed to be more appreciative than fearful. There was a quality in Meg’s voice when she spoke to the sad and wounded that soothed and comforted even though the words were not understood. “I’ll take the newspaper out,” she thought; “then his bed will be more comfortable.” And, as she did so, she chanced to see a name which attracted her attention. It was a name which had come, within the last three days, to mean much of possible comradeship to her. It was “Daniel Abbott.” Opening the paper, the girl expected merely to read an article telling of the arrival of the Abbott family at their cabin on Redfords Peak, but, to her dismay, the story that newspaper contained was of an entirely different nature. It was a list of the properties in the county that were tax delinquents. Meg learned from the short paragraph that the ten acres and “cabin thereon” belonging to one Daniel Abbott, having been for three weeks advertised as delinquent, was to be sold for taxes on August the tenth at five o’clock unless the aforesaid taxes,

amounting to the sum of twenty-five dollars, should be paid before that hour.

The girl stared at the printed page, unable at first to comprehend its meaning. Then she glanced at the sun. It was at least two-thirty. But what could it mean? Surely the young man with whom she was talking but yesterday, when the children had brought him to see the baby lions, surely he had known of this and had paid the taxes. Refolding the paper, Meg started leisurely up the mountain road, but something seemed to be urging her to at least tell Dan Abbott what she had seen. Perhaps he had not paid the back taxes, and, if not, she might be instrumental in saving his cabin home for him, and yet, even as she thought of it, she was assailed with doubt. It would be impossible to reach Scarsburg, the county seat, before five unless one rode at top speed, and the Abbotts had neither car nor horse.

Meg had reached the stairway hewn in the rocks, leading to the cabin, which, for so many minutes had been uppermost in her thoughts, and she drew rein, yodeling to a tall, graceful girl whom she saw standing by a pine gazing out over the valley. Jane Abbott turned and looked down, amazed that the mountain girl should have the effrontery to yodel to *her*. “Just because she mailed a letter for me does not entitle her to *my* friendship as an equal!” Abruptly Jane turned her back and walked away toward the cabin. Meg’s face flushed and her inclination was to ride on to her own home, but she recalled the clinging of little Julie’s arms and the sweet, yearning expression in the small girl’s face when she had said, “Meg, I like you. I wish you were my sister instead of Jane. You’d love me, wouldn’t you?”

Leaping from her pony, she bade him wait for her, and, taking the paper, the girl sprang, nimble as a mountain goat, up the rocky steps. Jane had seated herself in the comfortable chair on the porch, and was reading when she heard hurrying footsteps. She looked up, an angry color suffusing her cheeks. This halfbreed was evidently going to force her acquaintance upon her. Well, she would soon regret it. But the proud, scornful words were never spoken.

CHAPTER XXI.
MEG AS BENEFACTRESS

Dan and the children had gone on a hike, and Jane, being quite alone, rose and confronted the mountain girl with a cold stare that would have caused Meg at another time to have whirled about and departed, but for the sake of the other three she was willing to be treated unkindly.

“Miss Abbott,” she said, holding out the newspaper, and pretending not to notice the unfriendly expression, “there is news in here which may be of great importance to you. May I show it to your brother?”

Suddenly Jane found herself trembling from some unnamed fear. Instantly she had thought of the taxes. Perhaps, without really being conscious of it, she had read the word somewhere on that outheld paper.

She sank back into her chair, saying, almost breathlessly, “Dan isn’t here. What is it, Miss Heger? Is something wrong?”

The mountain girl pointed to the paragraph and was amazed at the effect the reading of it had upon the proud girl. There was an expression of terror in the dark eyes that were lifted.

“Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?” she implored helplessly. “Our father gave us the money. He told us the taxes must be paid, but I thought another two weeks would do as well as now. Dan did not know the need of haste.”

Meg, seeing that the girl, unused to deciding matters of importance, was more helpless than even Julie would have been, felt a sudden compassion for her and so she said: “If you can get the money to the county seat before five o’clock you will not lose your property.”

A dull flush suffused the dark face. “I—I haven’t the money! I—I borrowed it for something I wanted. It was in that letter that Julie gave you this morning to mail.”

Then looking up eagerly, hopefully, “Miss Heger, perhaps you forgot to post it. Oh, how I hope that you did!”

But the mountain girl shook her head. “I sent it by Mr. Bently to the eastbound train, which was due about noon. He said that he himself would put it in the mail car.”

“Then there is nothing that I can do!” The proud girl burst into sudden tears. “Father has lost everything but our home in the East, and now, now I have been the cause of his losing the cabin he so loved.” Lifting a tear-stained face to the girl who was watching her, troubled and thoughtful, she implored: “Oh, isn’t there something I can do? If I tell them I will pay it in two weeks, when my birthday money comes, won’t that do as well as now?”

Meg shook her head. “No,” she said. “This is final. They notified your father some time ago.”

Jane nodded hopelessly. “Oh, if only brother were here! But the worry would start him to coughing.”

Again the girl, who scorned tears in others, began to sob helplessly. How vain and foolish she had been to want that necklace, hoping that it would make her appear more beautiful in the eyes of Jean Sawyer.

Meg stood for one moment deep in thought. Then she said: “Miss Abbott, find your papers. Have them ready for me when I return. I’ll try to save your place.”

With that she turned and ran back to her pony, leaped upon it and galloped out of sight up around the bend.

“What does she mean?” Jane sat, almost as one stunned, for a moment, then as the command of the mountain girl recalled itself to her, she arose and went indoors to locate the papers their father had given Dan.

These being fastened with a rubber band into a neat packet, she held closely while she ran out to the brook calling Dan’s name frantically, but there was no

response. Soon she heard the musical yodeling which had so filled her heart with wrath a short half hour before. Now it was to her a sound sweeter than any she had ever heard. It brought a faint hope that her father's cabin might yet be saved. Down the stone steps she went, holding out the papers. Then and for the first time she thought of something: "But the money—I haven't any to give you."

Meg's answer was: "I am loaning you twenty-five dollars from my savings, but don't hope too much. It will be very hard for me to make Scarsburg by five o'clock, but for Julie's sake I'll do my best."

"For Julie's sake!" The words drifted back to Jane as she stood watching the pony hurtling itself down the mountain road until the cloud of dust hid it from view. She, Jane, had never done anything for Julie's sake, and why, pray, should this mountain girl loan her own money to strangers who might never repay her, and risk her life and that of her pony, as it was evident she was doing?

Jane looked out into the heat-shimmering valley. Many times the mountain road reappeared to her as it zigzagged down to Redfords. Again and again a rushing cloud of dust assured her that Meg was still racing with time.

Returning to the porch, Jane sank down in the deep chair, keenly conscious of her own uselessness.

"Oh, what a vain, worthless creature I am! I don't see why Dan cares for me so much; why he risked his health that I might finish my course in that seminary where everyone, everything, conspired to make me more proud and helpless."

Then before her arose a mental picture. Meg, clear-eyed, eager to be of service in an hour of need, and more than that, capable of being, and she, Jane, had snubbed her, but for Julie's sake the mountain girl had persevered in her desire to be neighborly.

Unable to sit still, Jane went again to the brook to call, but the children, with Dan, had climbed higher than usual and had found so much to interest them that they had failed to note the passage of time.

As there was no answer to her calling, Jane went back to the house, and, because she had to do something (she had entirely lost interest in her book), she wandered out into the kitchen. She saw on the table a pan of potatoes with the paring knife near.

Hardly knowing what she was about, Jane took the pan to the porch, and, seating herself on the step, she began most awkwardly to pare. She had heard her grandmother say that the peeling should be as thin as possible as the goodness was next to the skin. It took a very long time for Jane to pare the half dozen potatoes and she had almost resolved not to tell Dan about the taxes until she knew the worst or the best, when she heard him hallooing from the brook. Placing the pan on the step, she ran to meet him. One glance at her white, startled face assured him more than words could have done that something of an unusual nature had occurred during their absence. Catching her in his arms, he felt her body tremble. He led her back to the porch before he asked, “Jane, tell me. What has happened? Has that Slinking Coyote frightened you?”

Julie and Gerald, wide-eyed and wondering, crowded near. “Dan,” Jane clung to him as she had not since the long ago childhood, when she had so often been frightened and had turned to him for protection, “please send the children away. I want to tell you alone.”

Gerald needed no second bidding. “Come on, Julie,” he called. “Let’s go and practice on our pine tree rifle range.” He was carrying the small gun, and so away they raced. Although they were almost overcome with natural curiosity, they neither of them desired to stay where they were not wanted.

When they were gone, Jane leaned against her brother and told the story between sobs that were almost hysterical. “Oh, brother, brother! If only this cabin is saved for Dad, I will never, never again be so vain and selfish. Oh, Dan, tell me, say that you think Meg will reach the county seat before five.”

The lad found that his heart was filled with conflicting emotions. The scorn his sister’s pride and selfishness would have aroused in him at another time was crowded out by pity for her. She had suffered enough without his rebuke. Then there was the dread that the cabin might not be saved, for well he knew the sorrow its loss would bring to his father, but, above all, there was something in his heart he had never felt before, a warm glow of admiration for a girl who was not his sister. What he said was, “Jane, dear, quiet yourself. We can do nothing but wait.”

And a long, long wait they were destined to have. The hands of the clock moved slowly to four, then five and then six. Jane’s poor efforts at paring the potatoes received much comment from the children alone in the kitchen.

“Gee,” Gerald confided to his small sister, “something must have happened if it upset Jane so she didn’t know what she was doing. She surely didn’t, or she wouldn’t have tried to pare potatoes and stain those lily hands of hers.”

Try as the small boy might, he could not keep the scorn out of his voice. But Julie was more forgiving. “Gerry, don’t be too hard on Jane. She acts awfully worried about something. I don’t believe she saw a bear or anything that scared her. I think it’s something in her heart that’s troubling her. I think she’s sorry about something she’s done.”

“Well, she sure ought to be.” The boy was less sympathetic. “She’s been dirt mean to us ever since she’s been home from that hifalutin’ seminary, and what’s more, she’s none too good to Dan. I’d hate her, that’s what, if she wasn’t my sister, and if she didn’t look just like our mother. But even for all of that, I’m going to let myself hate her hard if she isn’t better to you, Jule. The way she lets you do the work, and she setting around reading novels to keep her hands white so’s folks will admire them! Aren’t you the same family as she is, and shouldn’t your hands be kept just as white? Tell me that now!”

The boy, who was holding the bread knife, whirled with such an indignant expression on his freckled face that Julie laughed merrily, which broke the spell.

“Oh, Gerry, you do look so funny! If I had time, I’d find some riggins to make you into a pirate. It could be done easy, ’cause your face looks just like their pictures and that knife would do for a dagger.”

Meanwhile, on the front porch, the two who had long watched and waited, were getting momentarily more anxious, and often Dan walked to the top of the steep stairway, down which he gazed at the zig-zagging mountain road. At last he saw a pony climbing, oh, so slowly, as though it could hardly take another step; and at its side there walked a girl. Dan leaped back to the porch and snatched up his hat. “Jane,” he said, “you and the children have your supper. I’m going up to the Heger cabin and get one of their horses. Meg’s pony is worn out, and I’m not going to have that brave girl walk all the way up the mountain, just to serve us.”

Jane did not try to detain him, and the lad fairly leaped up the road to the Heger cabin. He found the trapper, who had just returned from a ride over the other side of the mountain. “Take this hoss,” he said, when he had heard the story which fairly tumbled from Dan’s mouth. “Ol’ Bag-o’-Bones ain’t a bit tired, and he’s

the best hoss I have on the place."

Then the man held out a strong hand as he said: "Dan, boy, I hope my gal made it! She would if anyone could."

Dan silently returned the clasp, then he mounted the horse, that was not at all what its name might suggest, but lean and wiry, as were all of the mustangs of the West, with hard muscles and a loping step that carried it down the road, sure-footed and with great rapidity. Jane heard the halloo when he passed, but she did not stir. She felt that she never could move again until she had learned the news that Meg would have for them.

And Meg, far down the mountain, looked up and saw Bag-o'-Bones, her foster-father's favorite horse, descending with speed, and, believing it to be ridden by Mr. Heger, she wondered why, at that hour, he was in such haste. But at a lower turn of the road, she saw that the figure on the horse was that of the lad from the East, who as yet did not know how to ride as they did in the West.

Then she knew why he was coming, and for the first time in her lonely, isolated life, there was a sudden warmth in her heart. She had a real friend, she knew that instinctively, and his name was Dan Abbott.

CHAPTER XXII.
MEG'S CONFIDENCE

As soon as Dan was near enough to see Meg's face, he knew that all was well. Leaping from the back of the dusty gray horse, he went forward with both hands outheld. "Miss Heger," he cried, and his voice was tense with emotion, "how can I, how are we ever going to thank you for what you have done for us today?"

The girl's radiant smile flashed up at him. "Be my friend," she said simply, and, as the lad stood there looking deep into those wonderful dark eyes, he seemed to feel that no greater privilege could be accorded him than to be permitted to be the friend of this courageous, rarely beautiful mountain girl.

But she did not give him the opportunity to voice his feeling, for at once she said in a matter-of-fact tone: "Wasn't I lucky to reach the county court-house at five minutes to five? Pal and I have been congratulating each other all the way home."

"Poor Pal!" Dan stroked the drooping head of the faithful little animal which had raced down the rough mountain road as he had never raced before. Then, quite irrelevantly, the youth asked: "Would you mind if I call you Margaret? It fits you better than Meg." Instantly Dan was sorry he had made the request, for he saw the sudden clouding of the girl's brow. The joyousness of the moment before was gone and when she spoke there was a note of sorrow in her voice. "Mr. Abbott," she began with sweet seriousness, "I forgot when I said that your friendship would be the reward I would ask, yours and Julie's and Gerald's—I forgot who I am, or rather that I do not know who my parents were. My real name is not Meg. Mammy Heger called me that after a little sister of hers who had died when a baby. Mammy loved that other Meg and so it meant a great deal to her to call me by that name." Then, sighing wistfully: "I wish I knew my real

name," she concluded.

Dan took her hand in a firm, friendly clasp as he said earnestly: "Meg Heger, I don't care what your name is, I don't care who your parents were. I care only to be your friend, your very best. Of course I would not wish to call you Margaret since it would be displeasing to you."

The girl withdrew her hand, replying: "Call me Meg. I'm used to that and hearing it won't make me think. Oh, I've thought about it all so long and so much!"

Then as they started walking side by side, leading their horses, the girl confided: "Next month, when I am eighteen, Teacher Bellows, Pa Heger and I are going to start on a long, hard trip. We're going to find, if we can, the tribe that was living in the deserted mining town on Crazy Creek the year that I was brought to the Heger cabin." How her dark face brightened, and Dan realized that he had never dreamed that anyone could be so beautiful. "If we find them, then I shall know," she concluded. For a few moments they walked on in silence. "If they tell me I am the daughter of——" The girl hesitated as though dreading to utter the name of Slinking Coyote, then began again, "If I am a member of their tribe, I shall live near them and help them. I shall be a teacher to their children. It will be my duty. But if, as Pa Heger and Teacher Bellows think, my parents were of a foreign race, my future will be different."

Dan, knowing how deeply humiliating the conversation must be for the girl and wishing to change the subject, exclaimed: "How stupid of me! I brought Bag-o'-Bones down for you to ride. You must be very tired after your wild race to Scarsburg."

The girl smiled gratefully. "I believe I am very, very tired," she confessed, "which happens but seldom. I had thought that I was tireless."

They soon reached the road in front of the Abbotts' cabin and Meg bade Dan take from the pony's saddle bags the papers and receipts. Although he pleaded to be permitted to accompany her to her home, she shook her head. "You haven't had your supper and it is very late." Then impulsively she reached down her brown hand as she said with an almost tremulous smile: "Good-night, my friend."

It was early dusk when Jane, still sitting on the porch of their cabin intently

listening, heard voices and the clattering of slow-moving horses along the mountain road below the bend. She leaped to her feet, her breath came with nervous quickness, she pressed her hand to her heart. Oh, what if Meg had been too late. Before she could decide what she ought to do, she heard Dan's voice calling to the mountain girl, who was evidently not stopping. Jane ran to the top of the stone stairway. How ungrateful it must have seemed for her not to have been there to thank Meg for the effort she had made, whether or not it was successful. But Dan was leaping up the steps, two at a time, his face radiant.

Jane thought that all of his joyousness was caused by the message he was shouting to her: "Sister, that wonderful girl reached there on time! Our cabin is saved for us! How can we ever thank her?"

Jane, who had never been so upset by anything before in her protected life, clung to her brother almost hysterically. "Oh, Dan, Dan, I am so thankful! Do you think Meg Heger will ever forgive me? I was so rude to her when she first came."

The lad was serious at once. "I do not know that she will," he replied as he recalled that the mountain girl had said the reward she requested was the friendship of all the Abbotts except Jane.

It was hard not to rebuke his sister for her foolish pride, but she was trembling as she clung to him, and so he encircled her with his arm as he said hopefully: "Meg is too fine a girl to hold a grudge when she finds out that your heart has changed."

Jane said nothing, but she suddenly wondered if, in reality, her heart had changed. Now that the taxes were paid and the hours of anxiety were over, she was not sure that she cared to begin an intimate friendship with a "halfbreed," merely to show her gratitude, but even as she was conscious of this shrinking, the voice of her soul told her that she was despicable.

The children, who had been on the kitchen porch, hearing Dan's voice, rushed out, but Jane delayed him long enough to whisper: "They know nothing of what has happened. Please do not tell them."

Gerald was the first to reach them, and he cried, rebukingly: "Dan, why did you go horseback riding without taking me. I saw you go by an hour ago. I'm just wild to learn to ride that Bag-o'-Bones. Do you think Mr. Heger will let me?"

Dan realized that the younger members of their family thought he had merely been for a horseback ride, and so he made no further explanation, replying gayly: “Indeed I do! But I think you would better take your first lesson on the level. Wait until we go down to the Packard ranch. You remember that good friend of ours told us that he had forty horses and many of them were broken to the saddle.”

Julie clapped her hands as she hopped up and down gleefully. “Me, too!” she cried ungrammatically. “Mr. Packard said he had a little spotted horse, just the right size for me. When are we going down there, Dan?”

The older lad glanced at his sister. “Did you say that we are to go next Sunday?” The girl nodded, but the boy looked perplexed. “But how?” he queried. “If we went to Redfords by the stage, how are we to get to the Packard ranch? And we couldn’t possibly return on the same day.”

Jane thought for a moment, then she looked up brightly. “I recall now. Jean Sawyer said that we would hear from Mr. Packard during the week.” Then she smilingly confessed: “I was so pleased to find the foreman different—I mean—one of our own class—that——”

Gerald, noting the blushes, pointed a chubby finger at his sister as he sing-songed: “Jane likes Jean Sawyer extra-special.”

It was Julie, knowing that her sister did not like to be teased, who came to the rescue by saying emphatically: “So do I like Jean Sawyer extra-special; and I know what girl you like best, Gerald Abbott. It’s Meg Heger; so now.”

The small boy grinned his agreement. “Bet you I do,” he confessed.

Dan said nothing, but by the warm glow in his heart at the mention of the mountain girl’s name, he knew that he also liked Meg Heger extra-special.

CHAPTER XXIII.
JANE HUMILIATED

The next morning Jane arose early with the determination to walk up the mountain road and meet Meg Heger on her way to the Redfords school. And so, directly after breakfast, she started away alone. She asked Dan to detain the children in the kitchen that they might not see her go and perhaps wish to accompany her.

The older lad, recalling the incident of the mountain lion, wondered if he ought to permit her to go alone, but the trapper had assured him that the occurrence had been a most unusual one, that the lions, and other wild creatures usually remained far from the haunts of man, and that in the ten years that Meg had ridden up and down that mountain road to the Redfords school, she had never encountered a dangerous animal of any kind.

The sun, even at that early hour, was so warm Jane was glad that most of the mile she was to climb was in the shadow. She found herself scanning the roadside with great interest, stopping to watch a scaly lizard that was lying on a rock gazing at her intently with small back eyes, believing himself to be unseen because his coat was the color of his surroundings. He had not stirred, even when she started away.

It was a still morning and out of many a cool green covert a bird-song pealed. Again and again Jane paused to listen to some clear rising cadence. She wondered why she had never before heard the singing of birds. Of course, she must have heard them many, many times. They had often awakened her in her home, and at Highacres, but she had felt disturbed rather than pleased. She never before had listened to a single song, like the one which some hidden bird was singing. It would be interesting to know what kind of a bird it was. She would

ask Meg Heger. Surely the mountain girl would know. Jane Abbott had not been in so susceptible a mood, at least not since her long ago childhood, and it was with a sense of eager anticipation that she at last drew to one side of the road to await the coming of the small horse and rider that she could hear approaching.

Meg Heger was indeed surprised to see the sister of Dan Abbott in the road so evidently awaiting her, but she experienced no pleasure from the meeting. She well knew that the city girl, who had snubbed her on the day before, would again do so, if it were not that she considered it her duty to express gratitude for what Meg had done.

She drew rein, merely because Jane Abbott had stepped forward and had held up her hand. The expression in the dusky eyes of the mountain girl was at that moment as proud and cold as had been the expression in the eyes of Jane on the day previous. Before the girl in the road could speak, Meg said: “Miss Abbott, I know that you have come to thank me for having ridden to Scarsburg, but let me assure you at once that I did not do it for your sake. I did it for Julie and Gerald, chiefly, because they are my friends. You owe me nothing. Good morning!”

The pony, feeling the urging of his mistress’ heel, started away so suddenly that Jane found herself standing in a whirl of dust. Her face grew crimson as her anger rose. She, Jane Abbott, had actually been snubbed by a halfbreed. It had been only natural that she, a city girl of family and culture, should have snubbed Meg Heger. But she had supposed that the mountain girl would be pleased, indeed, when she condescended to be friendly. As she walked slowly back toward their cabin, she did not hear the song of the birds, nor see the beauty that lay all about her. She was wrathfully deciding that she would pack at once and leave a place where it was possible for her to be snubbed by a halfbreed Indian.

Then that persistent voice, deep within her, asked: “Didn’t you deserve it, Jane? Would you admire a girl who would fall upon your neck after you had been rude to her?”

And Jane had to acknowledge that the soul-voice was right.

But, though Jane had seemed to have a change of heart toward Meg Heger, she still felt most irritable toward Julie. Nothing that small girl could do pleased her. She had at once retired to her room, wishing to be alone. True, she had decided to try to win the friendship of the mountain girl, but after the first few hours she

found herself questioning if she really wanted it. Of course she did not. She wanted only friends of her own kind. She flung herself down on her bed and in her heart was a growing anger at herself and at everyone. Dan had gone for the daily climb which he believed would aid the recovery of his strength, as indeed everything seemed to be doing in a most miraculous manner. Julie and Gerald were cleaning house and were dragging the heavy pieces of furniture about in the living-room with shouts and laughter. Jane sprang up and threw open her door.

“I do wish you children would try to keep quiet,” she blazed at them. Gerald faced her defiantly. “Come and do the cleaning yourself if you want it done different. There’s no reason why we should do it at all, only Julie said, being as it hadn’t been done right since we came, we’d ought to get at it.”

“You’re just hateful, both of you! I wish you would clear out of my sight and never come back!” With this angry remark, Jane closed her door with a bang.

With a dark glance in that direction, Gerald caught Julie by the hand. “Come on, sis,” he said. “You’n I’ll clear out and we’ll stay away till that Jane Abbott goes back East, that’s what we’ll do.” The boy snatched up his small gun and put the cartridges in his pocket. He took his cap and handed Julie her hat and then led her out of the door.

“Why, Gerald Abbott, where are we going?” the small girl held back, feeling sure that they ought not to leave their cabin home in this manner.

“First off we’re going to find Dan and tell him just what happened. Then, second off, I don’t ’zactly know what we will do, but I just won’t stay here and have that horrid old Jane saying mean things to you all the time and us waiting on her and doing the work she ought to be doing. That’s what.”

The boy led his small sister along so rapidly that she tripped and would have fallen had he not turned and caught her. “Gee, I guess we’ll have to go slower,” he confessed as they started to climb the steep rocks that formed the outer edge of the mountain brook which tumbled in a series of little waterfalls, now and then tossing a mist of spray over them.

Julie began to glow with the pleasurable sense of adventure, supposing, of course, that Gerald knew where Dan had gone. At last she inquired.

“I sort o’ think we’ll find him up at the rim-rock,” Gerald said stoutly. “I’m pretty sure we will. He told me that’s where he goes for his constitootional. That means a hike to make him get strong, constitootional does.”

The girl’s freckled face was aglow. “Oh, goodie!” she cried. “I’d love to climb ’way up there.” Then she asked, a little anxiously: “Aren’t you skeered we might meet a wildcat or a lion or a bear?”

Her small brother’s courage was reassuring. “I hope we will. That’s what! I’m a sharpshooter, I am, and the wildcat that meets us will wish he hadn’t.” Julie clung to his hand with a secure feeling that she was well protected. “Oh, look-it, will you?”

Gerry pointed ahead and above. “There’s a tree that has fallen right across our brook. That’s a nice bridge and if we can get up there we can go across on it.”

“Is the rim-rock on the other side of our brook?” Julie inquired. Now Gerald had never climbed that high on their mountain before, and so he had no real knowledge of the exact location of the rock about which Dan had told them, but since it was on the very top, the small boy knew that if they kept on climbing, in time they would surely reach it.

The fallen tree was lying across the brook at a very steep ascent and it was with great difficulty that Gerald boosted his sister to the narrow ledge on which it rested. “Don’t be scared,” he said. “I’ll get you across all right and then we’ll begin calling for Dan.”

CHAPTER XXIV.
JULIE AND GERALD LOST

It was nearly noon when Dan returned to the cabin. He gave a long whistle of astonishment when he saw the disordered living-room and heard no one about. Jane at once appeared in her doorway. Her face still showed evidence of her anger. “Dan,” she said coldly, “my trunks are all packed. Please put out a flag or whatever you should do to stop the stage. It passes about one, does it not, on the way to Redfords?”

The lad went to the girl with outstretched hands. “Jane, dear, what has happened? Have you and the children had more trouble? Is it so hard for you to love them and be patient with their playfulness? You know it is nothing more.” The girl’s lips curled scornfully. “Love them?” she repeated coldly. “I feel far more as if I hated them. I don’t believe love is possible to me. I even hate myself! Dan, there’s something all wrong with me, and I’m going back East to Merry, who is about the only person living who can understand me.”

There was an expression of tender rebuke in the gray eyes that were gazing at her. “You are wrong,” the lad said seriously. “Father and I love you dearly, not only because we know that you are different from what you seem to be, but for Mother’s sake.” Then, turning and glancing again at the confusion, the lad said, “Tell me just what happened.”

Jane did so, adding petulantly: “My head was beginning to ache. I had had an unpleasant encounter with your Meg Heger.” Dan felt a sudden leaping of his heart. How strange, he thought, that for the first time in his life the name of a girl should so affect him. He had heard of love at first sight, but he had never believed in it. With an effort he again listened to Jane’s indignant outpouring of words. “Don’t say I deserved just such treatment,” she protested. “No one knows

it better than I do. I acknowledge that I am despicable and I hate myself. Honestly, Dan, I do, but I don't know how to change. I don't seem to really want to be different."

"That's just it, Jane." The boy had grown very serious. "Just as soon as you desire to be different you will at once begin to change. We are the sculptors of our own characters. We can set before ourselves a model of what we would like to be and carve accordingly." Then, as the clock was striking twelve, the lad suddenly inquired, "Jane, when did all this trouble with the children occur? I left at nine. You think it was about an hour after that?"

The girl nodded, then, glancing out of the wide front door, she exclaimed: "I wonder why they don't come back. I supposed, of course, that they had gone to find you. Gerald knew where you were going, didn't he?"

Dan shook his head. "He could not have known, for I did not myself. Yesterday and the day before I climbed up to the rim-rock and planned doing it every morning as a strength restorative measure, but today, after we had been wondering how we were to get to the Packard ranch, I thought I would cross the mountain to the other side and look down into the valley, and see if I could, how much nearer was the trail which Jean Sawyer took on Sunday. But I found that it would be much too rough and hard for you, and so we will wait until we receive directions from Mr. Packard. If you will prepare the lunch, I will go out and put up a white flag. Surely Mr. Wallace will know that I wish to speak to him. Then I will call the children to come home. They may be close, but since you told them that you wished you would never see them again, they are probably hiding, hoping that you are to go on the afternoon stage."

Jane was indeed miserable. Her flaring anger had often caused her to say things that afterwards she deeply repented. "Perhaps if I would go with you and call they would know that I did not mean all that I said," she ventured. But Dan was insistent that she, at least, prepare a lunch for herself.

"You must not start for the East without having a good hearty noon meal," he told her. As he spoke he was fastening an old pillow case to a pole. Leaving the house, he placed it at the top of the stairway.

Then going to the brook, he began a series of halloos, but a hollow, distant echo was all that responded.

Dan, after a fruitless effort to call to the children, returned to the cabin, his face an ashen white. “Jane,” he said, and his voice was almost harsh, “you will have to attend to stopping the stage if it comes soon. Mr. Wallace can carry your baggage down without my assistance. I am going to hunt for those poor little youngsters who felt that they were turned out of their home. Goodbye.”

Jane, with a low cry of agony, leaped forward with arms outstretched, but Dan had not given her another look, and by the time she reached the brook he was out of sight. The girl sank down on a boulder and sobbed bitterly.

“If they’re lost I shall never forgive myself. Oh, how selfish, how unkind I have been, thinking only of Jane Abbott and her comfort. I can’t go away now, and not know what has become of Julie and Gerald.”

Then another thought caused her to rise and go slowly to the cabin. “They want me to go, all of them, even Dan. Perhaps it would be the best thing for me to do, and when they come back they will be glad to find that I have gone.”

Almost unconsciously Jane began to put the living-room in order. She smoothed rugs and dragged the heavy furniture into the places it had formerly occupied. Then she went to the kitchen to prepare lunch. If Julie and Gerald had been climbing the mountains all the morning they would be starved, as she well knew. Again Jane Abbott pared potatoes and after studying upon the subject for some moments she made a fire in the stove and put on a kettle of water. In the midst of these preparations she was startled by the shrill blast of the horn carried by the stage driver. Oh, she could not go just then. She was nowhere near ready. Jane snatched up a letter that she had that morning written to Merry and hurried down the stone steps. The surly driver took it with a grunt which seemed to express displeasure, although, as Jane knew, taking the mail to town was one of his duties.

When the big creaking stage had rocked around the corner, Jane suddenly felt as though a great load had been lifted from her heart. She had not really wanted to go at all. She wanted to be sure that all was well with the children, and more than that, she did so want to see Jean Sawyer again. But her pleasure was short lived, for, with a sense of oppression, she again recalled that they would all be disappointed to find her there, even Dan.

As the water in the tea kettle had not yet started to boil, Jane went to her room to

change her dress to one more suitable for the work she had undertaken. Upon opening her trunk she saw, lying on top, a miniature picture delicately colored in a dainty frame of silver filigree. The girl lifted it and looked long into the truly beautiful face. Then with a half-sob she said aloud, “My mother!”

Instantly she recalled what Dan had said: “We are each of us sculptors of our own characters. We can choose a model and carve ourselves like it.” The girl sank on her knees, the picture held close to her cheek.

“Oh, mother, mother!” she sobbed, “I choose you for my model. Help me; I am sure you can help me to be more like you.”

A strange sense of strength came to her as she arose. She had been struggling without a definite goal. She had known, the small voice within had often told her, that she was despicable, but she had not found a way to change, but surely Dan’s suggestion would help her. She clearly remembered her mother, gentle, courageous and always loving.

With infinite tenderness Jane again addressed the miniature:

“Oh, mother, if you had only lived, you would have helped me carve a character more lovely, but alone I have made of it an ugly thing, but now, dearest one, I’ll begin all over.”

But even as the girl spoke she feared that it might be too late to ask Julie and Gerald to forgive her and try to love her.

CHAPTER XXV.
JANE’S RESOLVE

The lunch was prepared, the potatoes had cooked quite to pieces, but still the children did not return. Jane was becoming terrorized. She was startled when there came a sharp rapping at the front door. Running into the living-room, her hand pressed to her heart, she saw standing there a tall, uncouth-looking mountaineer. She believed, and rightly, that it was the trapper who lived near them.

He began at once: “Dan Abbott came to our place nigh an hour ago sayin’ the young ’uns was lost. Meg and me wasn’t to home, but my woman said she’d tell whichever of us come fust and we’d help hunt. Ben’t they back yet?”

Jane shook her head. “Oh, Mr. Heger,” she cried, “what do you suppose has happened to them? Do you suppose they have been harmed?”

It was unusual for the kind face of the man to look hard, but at that moment it did so. His voice was stern. “Dan Abbott said ’twas you as let them young ’uns go to hunt for him, not knowin’ whar he was. Wall, Miss, I’ll tell ye this: If ’tis they ever come back alive, yo’d better keep them young ’uns a little closer to home. Thar’s no harm if they stay on the road. Nothin’s likely to happen thar, but ’way off in the wilderness places, wall, thar’s no tellin’ what may have happened. I’ll bid you good day.”

Here was still another of her fellow men who scorned her. Of course, Dan had not told him the whole truth, that she had said she hoped she never again would see the children. Oh, why had she said it? She knew, even in her anger, that she had not meant it.

She sank down on the porch and buried her face in her hands. Would this torture

never end? The odor of something burning reached her and, leaping to her feet, she ran to the kitchen and pushed back the kettle of potatoes that had started to scorch. There was no one to eat the lunch she had spread on the table and at two o'clock she began to mechanically put things back in their places, when she heard a step on the porch. Running into the living-room, hardly able to breath in her great anxiety, she saw her brother stagger in and fall as one spent from a long race on the cot-bed they were using as a day lounge. For a moment he lay white and still, his eyes closed. Jane knelt at his side and held his limp hand. "Brother. Brother Dan," she sobbed, "you are worn out. Oh, won't you stay here and let me be the one to hunt? I would give my life to save the children. Dan, brother, open your eyes and tell me that you forgive me and believe me." A tightening of the clasp of the limp hand was the only answer she received. Jane, rising, brought water, cold from the brook, and when she returned the lad was sitting up, his elbows on his knees, his face bent on the palms of his hands.

He looked at her as she handed him the goblet of water and when he saw the lines of suffering in her face, his heart, that had been like adamant, softened.

"Sister," he took her hand as he spoke, "I well know we none of us mean what we say in anger, and yet the results are often just as disastrous. I have sent word to the Packard ranch for them to be on the lookout for our little ones. Luckily, high on the mountain, I came upon the cabin of a forest ranger where there was a telephone to Redfords and Mrs. Bently said she would relay the message to Mr. Packard." Then he rose, coughing in the same racking way that he had on the train. "Now I am rested, I must start out again."

Jane clung to him, trying to detain him. "Oh, brother, please eat something. I had lunch all ready. Even yet it is warm." The lad smiled at her wanly, but shook his head. "I couldn't swallow food, and there are springs wherever I go."

Then turning back in the doorway and noting that Jane had flung herself despairingly on the lounge, he said kindly: "Jane, dear, we often are taught much-needed lessons through great suffering. You and I will each have learned one of these if our little ones are found." Then, holding to a staff for support, he again started away.

For another two long hours Jane sat in the porch chair as one stunned. She had lost hope. She was sure Julie and Gerald, of their own free will, would not stay away so long. They must have been attacked by wild animals or kidnapped by

that Ute Indian.

When the clock struck four, Jane leaped to her feet. She could no longer stand the inactivity. She simply must do something. Going to her room, she again unpacked her trunk and took from it a riding habit of dark blue tweed. She donned the neat fitting trousers that laced to the ankles, her high riding boots, the long skirted coat and a small visored cap. None of her costumes was more becoming, but not once did Jane glance in the mirror. She had but one desire and that was to help find the children. She was about to write a note to tell Dan that she also had gone in search of Julie and Gerald when she again heard a step on the porch, a light, quick footfall which she had not heard before. In the open doorway stood Meg Heger. Without a word of greeting she said: “The children, have they been found?”

“No, no!” Jane cried. “Dan was here two hours ago, and, oh, Miss Heger, he is all worn out. I am as troubled about him, or nearly, as I am about Julie and Gerald. He told me to stay here for the children might return, but it is so long now. They left at nine this morning. I am sure they will not come back alone and I, also, must go in search of them.”

The mountain girl’s dusky eyes had been closely watching the speaker and she seemed to sense that the proud girl was in no way considering herself. “Jane Abbott,” she said seriously, “it would be foolhardy for you, an Easterner, unused to our wilderness ways, to start out alone. You would better heed your brother’s wishes and remain here.”

But the girl to whom she spoke was beyond the power to reason. “No! No!” she cried. “Oh, Meg Heger, if you are going, I beg of you let me go with you.”

The mountain girl thought for a moment, then she said: “I will leave word for whoever may return.” Taking from her pocket the notebook and pencil she always carried, she tore out a page and wrote upon it:

“Jane Abbott and Meg Heger are going to the Crazy Creek Camp in search of the children. The hour is now 4:30. If we think best, we will remain there all night.”

The Eastern girl shuddered when she read the note, but made no comment. “Let us tack it on the door after we have closed it,” she suggested.

This was done, and taking the stout staff Dan had cut for her, Jane followed her companion, whom she was glad to see carried a gun.

Silently they climbed the natural stairway of rocks that ascended by the brook until they reached the pine which, having fallen across the stream, formed a bridge. Meg uttered an exclamation and turning back she said: “We are on the right trail, Jane Abbott. There is a torn bit of your sister’s red gingham dress on the tree. She evidently feared to walk across and so she jumped over.”

Jane’s eyes glowed with hope. “How happy I would be if we were the ones to find them, although, of course, the important thing is that they shall be found.”

Meg often broke through dense undergrowth, holding open a place for Jane to pass, then again she took the lead, beating ahead with her staff to startle serpent or wild creature that might be in hiding.

Jane, though greatly frightened, followed quietly, but now and then, when back of Meg, she pressed her hand to her heart to still its too rapid beating. They came to a wall of almost perpendicular rocks which the mountain girl said would save them many minutes if they could scale. How Meg climbed them alone and unaided was indeed a mystery to the watcher below. The toe of her boot fitted into a crevice so small that it did not seem possible that it could be used as a stair, but with little apparent effort the ascent was made, and then, kneeling on the top, Meg leaned far down and pulled Jane to a place at her side.

At last they came to what appeared to be a grove of poles so straight and tall were the pines. They were on a wide, slowly ascending mountainside. The ground was soft with the drying needles and it was easier to walk. Jane commented on the grove-like aspect of the place, and Meg at once told her that they were called lodge-pole trees because Indians had used them as the main poles in their wigwams. “It is the Tamarack Pine,” the mountain girl said, and then, as the ground was level for a considerable distance, she walked more rapidly, and neither spoke for some time. Jane was wretchedly unhappy and she well knew that she never again would be happy unless the children were found.

“Redfords Peak is one of the lowest in the range,” Meg turned to say when they had left the pole-pine grove and were climbing over rugged bare rocks which in the distance had looked to Jane unscaleable, but Meg, in each instance, found a way. At last they stood on a large flat rock which formed a small plateau. “This

is the left shoulder of the peak," Meg paused to say, "and it is here that we begin the descent to Crazy Creek mine. See, far down there beyond the foothills is the Packard ranch. The buildings are large, but they do not appear so from here." Jane, sitting on a rock to rest, at Meg's suggestion, looked about her, eager to find some trace of the lost children. From time to time they had both shouted, but there had been no answer save the startled cry of birds, or the scolding of squirrels, who greatly objected to intruders.

Suddenly the Eastern girl uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Why, there is the stage road not very far below us. Wouldn't it have been easier for us to follow that?"

Meg nodded. "Much easier, but I had been told that the children started away along the brook, so if they were to be found we would have to hunt in the way they had gone."

"Of course, and we did find that torn bit of Julie's dress."

Meg looked at her companion eagerly. "Are you rested enough now to start down? It is an easy descent to the road and we will follow it directly into the camp." As she spoke she glanced anxiously at the sun. "It is dropping rapidly to the horizon," Jane, having followed the glance of the other, commented.

Silently they began the descent. Jane found it much easier than she had supposed and before long they were on the stage road which zigzagged downward. They had not gone far when Jane said: "What a queer color the sunlight is becoming." She turned to look toward the west and uttered an exclamation. "Meg!" she cried, unconsciously using the mountain girl's Christian name, "the sun looks like a ball of orange fire and the mountain range is being hidden by a yellow haze. What can it mean?"

"It means that a summer storm is brewing. Let us make haste. We will soon be under the shelter of the pines and just below them is the Crazy Creek camp. We will keep dry in one of the old cabins. These sudden storms, though often cloudbursts, are of short duration."

There was a weird light under the great old pines, but in the spaces between they saw that clouds were rapidly gathering close above them. Then a vivid flash of lightning almost blinded them. Instantly it was followed by a crash of thunder which seemed to make the very mountain rock. Big drops of rain could be heard

pelting among the trees, though few of them could be felt because of the densely interwoven branches. Meg drew her companion close to one of the great old trunks.

“It isn’t safe under trees, is it?” Jane’s face was white with fear. Her companion’s matter-of-fact voice calmed her. “As safe as it is anywhere,” she commented. “It won’t last five minutes and we won’t be much wet.”

The flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder were incessant and the road out of which they had scrambled became for a moment a raging torrent. “I’ve been struck,” Jane cried out. “I know I have! I feel the electricity pulling at my hair.”

Again the calm voice: “You are all right. That is because we are so near the cloud. The air is charged with electricity.”

The storm was gone as quickly as it had come, but there was a roaring, rushing noise near. “That’s the Crazy Creek. It floods for a few moments after every cloudburst. Quick now, let’s make for the shelter of a cabin. The camp is just below here.” Meg fairly dragged Jane out from under the pines. The light was brighter and the Eastern girl saw beneath her a scene of desolation, but before she could clearly define it, Meg had dragged her into an old log cabin. There was a joyous cry from within. It was Gerald shouting, “Meg, you’ve come. I knew you would.”

CHAPTER XXVI.
A RECONCILIATION

The small boy, ignoring Jane, sprang toward the mountain girl and dragged her into the cabin. On the floor lay Julie, her cheeks wet with tears, her eyes dulled with suffering.

With a glad cry Jane leaped into the darkened room and was about to take the small girl in her arms, but Julie turned away and held her hands out toward Meg, when to their surprise Jane sank down in a worn-out heap on the floor and began to sob bitterly.

“Oh, mother, mother!” she cried, as though addressing someone she knew must be present, “help me to take your place with Julie and Gerald. Tell them to forgive me.”

Meg feared that Jane’s long day of anguish had temporarily unbalanced her mind, but Julie, hearing that cry, reached out a comforting hand.

“Jane,” she said weakly, “don’t feel so badly. I guess we were awfully trying, me and Gerald.”

Passionately Jane caught the child in her arms and held her close. She kissed her forehead and her tumbled hair. Then she reached out a hand to the boy, who had drawn near amazed to see his usually cold, hard sister so affected.

“Give me another chance, Gerald!” she cried, tears streaming unheeded down her cheeks. “Don’t hate me yet. I’m going to begin all over. I’m going to try to be like mother.”

A cry of pain from the small girl then caught her attention.

“Julie, what is it, dear? Are you hurt? What has happened?”

Gerald spoke up: “That’s why we came in here. We were headin’ down the mountain for the Packard ranch when Julie fell. I guess her ankle is hurt.”

Meg at once was on her knees unbuttoning the high shoe. The ankle was swollen, but there were no bones broken.

“It is a bad sprain,” she said.

Then, swinging the knapsack which she always carried when on a mountain hike from her back, she took out her emergency kit. She washed the angry looking place with soothing liniment and then wound tightly about it strips of clean white cloth.

“Now,” she said, “we will have some refreshments.”

This amazed her listeners and greatly pleased at least one of them.

“Gee-golly!” Gerald cried. “I hadn’t thought of it before, but I guess I’m starving to death more’n likely.”

Meg smiled as she produced a box of raisins. “This may not seem much of a menu, but it is all one needs for several days to sustain life.”

The small boy took a generous handful and gobbled it with speed. Then the mountain girl brought out a canteen.

“Bring us some water from the creek,” she told him. Jane held out a detaining hand.

“Oh, Meg,” she implored, “don’t send Gerry to that raging torrent. Don’t you remember how we heard it roaring?”

“But you don’t hear it now,” was the reply. “The water from the cloudburst has long since gone to the valley to be absorbed, much of it, in the coarse gravel. You’ll find Crazy Creek just as it always is.”

“That’s where Julie sprained her ankle,” Gerald said. “We were trying to reach it to get a drink.”

He soon returned with the canteen full of ice-cold water. His eyes were wide.

“Say, girls,” he began, “we can’t make it home tonight, can we? The sun’s going down west of our peak right this minute.”

“We didn’t expect to,” Meg replied. “Gerald, you come with me and we will bring in pine branches or kinnikinick, if we can find any, for our beds.”

From her knapsack Meg took a folding knife as she talked.

“Kinnikinick?” the boy gayly repeated. Everything that had happened now appeared to him in the light of a jolly adventure except, of course, Julie’s ankle, and she no longer seemed to be in pain. “What sort of a thing is that?”

Meg had led the way out of the cabin.

“Here’s some!” she shouted, and the boy raced over to find the girl whom he so admired bending over a dense evergreen vine.

“It’s prettier in winter,” she told him, “for then it has red berries among the bright green leaves. It makes a wonderful bed. It is so soft and springy.”

After half an hour of effort branches of pine and some of the kinnikinick were laid on the floor, Julie was made comfortable, but Jane would not lie down. She sat with her back against the wall holding the small girl’s head on her lap. Dan had been right. One could carve oneself after a model. Never, never again would she lose sight, she assured herself, of her chosen goal, which was to do in all things as her dear mother would have done.

As soon as the sun sank it began to grow dark. Meg had at once barred the door, and also she had examined the floor and walls to be sure that there was no yawning knothole large enough to admit a snake.

The children slept from sheer exhaustion, but Jane and Meg stayed awake through the seemingly endless hours, while night prowlers howled many times close to their cabin.

At the first gray streak of dawn, Julie stirred uneasily and began to cry softly. Meg begged Jane to change positions with her, and, completely worn out, Jane did lie down on the pine boughs which had been so placed that they were

springy and comfortable. Almost at once she fell asleep.

Meg removed the bandages that were hot from the little girl's hurt ankle and again applied the cooling liniment. Other fresh strips of cloth were used and then, with the small head pillowed on Meg's lap, Julie again fell asleep. Gerald had not wakened through the night, not even when a curious wolf had sniffed at their doorsill and had then lifted his head to wail out his displeasure.

The sun was high above the peak when Jane leaped up, startled, from her restless slumber. "What was that? I thought I heard a gun shot."

"You did." Nothing seemed to stir Meg from her undisturbed calm. "Someone is coming. Julie, will you sit up against the wall, dear, and I will open the door."

Gerald, half awake, but sensing some excitement, leaped out of the cabin, his small gun held in readiness. "Do you 'spect it's the Utes?" he asked, almost hoping that the answer would be in the affirmative. But Meg laughed. "No," she said. "It is probably someone searching for you." Then she fired in answer. From not far above them came two gun shots in rapid succession.

"Oh, boy!" Gerald leaped to a position where he could see the road as it wound under the pines. "There are two horsemen. Gee! One of 'em is Dan."

"And the other is Jean Sawyer!" his companion told him.

Julie had wanted to see what was going on, so hopping on one foot, she appeared in the doorway, supported by Jane. The two lads uttered whoops of joy when they saw the group awaiting them. Dan at once caught Gerald in his arms and then glanced tenderly toward the two in the doorway. Little did Jane guess that in that moment, white and worn as she was, she had never looked so beautiful to her brother. And as for Jean Sawyer, he saw in the face which had charmed him, a softer expression, and he knew that some great transformation had taken place in the soul of the girl. Leaping forward, he said with deep solicitude: "Oh, Miss Jane, how you have suffered!"

Dan lifted Julie most carefully to the back of his horse as he said: "Meg, can you ride in front of this little miss and I will walk at your side?" Then he smiled, and Jane, glancing at him anxiously, rejoiced to note he was not ill as she had feared he would be, though he did look very tired. The lad continued: "You see, Jean and I expected to find you all here. Intuitive knowledge, if you wish to call it

that, and so we planned what we would do. Jane is to ride on Silver, which Mr. Packard loaned us, and Jean will lead the way."

"But where are we going?" his older sister inquired.

"Down to the ranch," Jean replied. "I had strict orders to bring you back with me, all of you, for that visit that you were to have paid at the weekend."

Meg was about to demur, but the lad hastened to say: "I told your father that I would telephone the forest ranger as soon as you all were located. He is waiting there for a message, and I cannot until I get you to the ranch."

Still Meg thought she ought to climb back to her own home, but Jane implored: "Oh, don't leave me! I do *so* want you to go with us." That settled it and though the girl from the East little dreamed it, there was a warm glow of joy in the heart of the mountain girl who had so wanted a friend of her own age.

Jane shuddered as they rode down the old trail of the deserted mining camp. Shacks in all degrees of ruin stood about, machinery was rusting where it had been left. The beauty of the mountain had been marred by dark tunnels, outside of which stood heaps of orange and blue-gray refuse. Even in the more substantial log huts, made of aspen poles, windows were broken and doors hung on one hinge. "The desolation of the place will haunt my dreams forever," the girl from the East said.

"And all this," Jean made a wide sweep with his arm, "because the paying vein they had been so frantically following was lost. It might have been found, Mr. Packard told me, but another rich strike was made on Eagle Head Mountain and the inhabitants of this camp, to a man, deserted it and flocked to that new mine, and from there they probably followed other lures, ending, I suppose, as poor, or poorer, than when they began."

Dan was interested. "Then the lost vein may still be here, who knows?" he commented with a backward glance at the deserted camp they had left. And yet, was it deserted? As soon as the young people were gone a stealthy figure appeared, slinking out of one of the huts. It was the old Ute Indian and since he carried a pick and shovel, it was quite evident that he had started out to dig. Was it the lost vein or some other treasure that he sought?

CHAPTER XXVII.
THE GREEN HILLS RANCH

Shielded from the fury of the storms by gently sloping foothills, the rambling Packard ranch house presented a very inviting appearance to the young people as the two big horses carefully picked their way down the last steep trail.

“O, how beautiful!” was Jane’s involuntary exclamation when the level road, having been reached, she felt freer to look about and admire the scene.

“I had no idea that a mere ranch could be so attractive.” A great change was evident in the Eastern girl, and Jean Sawyer had been quick to notice it. Not once that morning had she seemed to be posing that she might appear more charming to him. She was just sweetly, sincerely natural. The reason, perhaps, was that Jane had suffered so much since his last visit that she had changed her estimate of real values. She was so happy, so at peace deep in her heart. She had learned that her mother’s little ones were dearer to her than all else, and so the impression she might make had dwindled in importance. If Jean had thought her beautiful on the day of their first meeting, he thought her more lovely now, although her face showed evidence of a great weariness and the hours of anxiety through which she had passed. He smiled up at her as he walked at her side, one hand resting on the horse’s bridle. “Mr. Packard and I have tried out many schemes to make our home more beautiful,” he told her. “That little artificial lake surrounded by cottonwood trees and willows we made quite by ourselves. A mountain stream flows into it. Indeed, there are many springs in these foothills and that is why they have such a soft, velvety-green appearance when the desert and mountains are so dry.” They were passing through a vegetable garden where a beaming Chinaman, hoe in hand, nodded to them.

Then came the flower gardens and Meg’s enthusiasm, though expressed in her

usual quiet way, was very evident. “How you do love flowers,” Dan said, smiling up at her.

“Indeed I do!” Meg replied. “They seem like live things to me, and so I was not surprised to read recently that a scientist, with some very delicate instrument, has learned that many plants are sentient, though not acutely so. Since then I have never torn a plant ruthlessly. That scientist advised cutting flowers rather than breaking them.”

It was indeed Meg’s much-loved subject and her eyes glowed as she gazed at the banks of scarlet salvia, at the masses of golden glow, and many-hued asters.

“Someone else must love flowers,” she commented, turning to look back at Jean. He nodded. “It is my best friend, Mr. Packard. You two ought to be great cronies. I sometimes tell him that I think it is the color effect, rather than the individual flower, that he so greatly admires, but here he comes now.”

They were riding up to the circling drive which passed under a vine-covered portico. Mr. Packard leaped down the steps with an agility which seemed to dispute the years his graying hair attributed to him.

“Welcome!” he cried, with a wide sweep of his sombrero. “This is indeed a pleasant surprise, although I can hardly call it that as I have been watching for just such a cavalcade to come riding down my foothills ever since the dawn broke.” He held out his strong arms to lift little Julie, whose face, still tear-stained and white with pain, appealed to him. He held her close as he listened sympathetically while Gerald told what had happened to the poor little foot. Then, after giving a word of greeting to each of the guests, he bade them follow him indoors to the breakfast that had long been awaiting them.

The girls found that a wing, containing two rooms and a bath, and overlooking the little lake, had been prepared for their comfort. Gerald, with the two older boys, sought quarters elsewhere in the rambling ranch house, which had room for the accommodation of many guests.

“When you girls have prinked enough,” Mr. Packard said merrily, “follow the scent of the coffee and you will find the rest of us.” When the door had closed and the three girls were alone, Jane held out a hand to Meg, saying: “Will you forgive me for everything, and let me try to be a real friend?” An expression of gladness in the mountain girl’s dusky eyes was her most eloquent reply.

Directly after breakfast in the dining-room, which seemed to be all windows and where they were served by a silently moving Chinaman, the girls were told that they were to go to their wing and rest until noon.

This was in no way a displeasing suggestion and in a very short while Julie and Jane in one room and Meg in the other were deep in slumber. Gerald was also advised to rest, but he declared that he would rather stay awake and see what was going to happen. Dan laughed as he said that Gerald seemed always to believe that an adventure might begin at any moment.

“What boy does not?” Mr. Packard smiled understandingly down at the stocky little fellow whose clear blue eyes and freckled face beamed good nature. Then, quite as though he could read the small boy’s thought, the man exclaimed: “Gerald, you ought to wear my grandson’s cowboy outfit. He’d be glad to loan it to you.” That this suggestion met with the youngster’s entire approval was quite evident by the wild dance which he executed then and there.

Jean led the little fellow away and before long Gerald reappeared, clothed in a costume of the most approved style, a fringed buckskin suit, a red bandana handkerchief loosely knotted about his neck, while in one hand he held a wide felt hat on which to his great joy a dried rattlesnake skin served as band. His own small gun was never out of his possession.

“Great!” Dan said with brotherly pride. “I wish our dad and dear old grandmother might see you now, Gerry. You do indeed look ready to start on an adventure.”

“Where’ll we go to look for it?” The small boy gazed eagerly, hopefully up at their genial host.

“Well, sonny, what kind of an adventure would you prefer?” the amused man asked as though he were willing, at least, to attempt to provide whatever adventure his small guest might desire.

“I’d like an Indian raid best, or a hold-up.” The boy was thinking of the most exciting things he could recall in his set of Wild-West books, but Mr. Packard shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint you, sonny, but the Utes are a friendly tribe: peaceable, anyway, and they are no longer our near neighbors. They have moved their camp deeper into the mountains. And, as for hold-ups, since we are neither on a stage or a train we cannot provide that, but if you boys are not too weary I

am going to suggest that you ride with me to the old stage road. I've been losing some calves lately and Jean believes that they might have been driven into an abandoned corral over in the foothills at night, and later were spirited away." He hesitated. "It's a hard ride, though. Perhaps you boys would rather not undertake it until tomorrow."

But they were glad to go, and Gerald would not agree to being left behind. He was given a small horse that was gentle and used to boys, as the grandson had claimed it as his own, and so they rode away, having left word for the girls that they would return as soon as possible.

In the mid-morning they reached the old abandoned stage road. "No one uses it now, that is, for legitimate purposes, as it is very dangerous. There are washouts and cutways that make it almost impassable for stage or for auto travel." Then, pointing to the place where the road circled a high hill, Mr. Packard concluded: "Jean, can you see where yesterday's cloudburst washed out the road? It has started a new canon that will have to be bridged, for now and then a tenderfoot autoist does get started on that old road, thinking that it leads to Redfords. Time and again we have put up signs on the main highway, but they are hurled down in the storms, I suppose."

Dan had been intently tracing the old road until it was lost from sight. Suddenly he urged his horse forward to Mr. Packard's side. "May I take the field glasses? I feel sure that I see a dark object moving along that old road and coming this way. You look first, though. Your eyes are better trained to these distances than mine." Mr. Packard gazed long, then he turned to Jean. "Boy," he said, "it looks like an auto moving slowly this way. If it ever starts on that down grade toward the washout there is going to be a tragedy."

Jean was eagerly alert. "What shall we do, Mr. Packard? How can it be averted?"

The automobile had disappeared as the road circled behind a hill, but the watchers well knew that if it did not meet with disaster it would soon reappear above the washout and then be unable to stop because of the steep descent.

"Follow me!" Mr. Packard gave the brief order, and, urging his horse to its utmost speed, he led the way at what seemed to Gerald a breakneck pace. The small boy clung to his wiry little pony, which kept close behind the racing mustangs. It was evident to the boys that Mr. Packard was hoping to round the

foot of the hill in time to shout a warning to the autoists before they began the descent which would prove fatal. It seemed a very long distance to Dan and he could not see how they possibly could make it. He kept his eyes constantly on the crest of the hill road, dreading the moment when the car would appear, there to plunge down to certain destruction. Mr. Packard rounded the foot of the hill first, whirled in his saddle, beckoned the boys to make haste, then disappeared, leaving his horse standing riderless. “What can *that* mean?” Dan asked, but Jean merely shook his head. In another moment they would know. When they, also, had rounded the hill, they saw that “ill fortune,” as autoists usually consider a blow-out, had befriended the travelers. The car had been stopped just as it had begun the ascent of the hill, on the other side of which sure death had awaited them.

Mr. Packard was seen breaking a trail through the underbrush. From time to time he hallooed, and the boys saw that at last he had been heard.

“It will be needless for us to make the climb,” Jean said, “since Mr. Packard will warn them,” and so the three boys awaited the man’s return.

“Who were they?” Jean inquired. Mr. Packard, removing his Stetson to wipe his brow, shook his head. “I do not know. Some family from the East trying to cross the Rockies. They could have done it easily enough if they had not taken the wrong road. The woman in the party is so utterly exhausted that I invited them to come to our place to rest. I showed them the road from the foot of the hill back of them. It certainly isn’t in good condition, but, being on the level, it at least will not be dangerous. The woman fainted when she heard how near death lurked ahead of them, but they’ll be all right now. We’ll inspect that old foothill corral some other day, Jean. These strangers have need of our friendly services.” Mr. Packard turned his horse’s head toward the ranch as he spoke and they all galloped back at a moderate speed.

“That was sort of an adventure, wasn’t it?” Gerald inquired hopefully.

Mr. Packard laughed heartily. “I certainly think it could be so classified,” he agreed. “I shudder to think what it would have been, however, if that tire had not halted them. We could not have reached them in time.”

Although it was not quite noon, the girls were up and dressed when the equestrians returned and were greatly interested in all that had happened. Gerald

waxed eloquent as he told Julie the details, and that little girl, who hungered for adventure quite as much as her brother, hoped that if anything exciting happened again, she might be in the thick of it.

Mr. Packard retired to the kitchen to advise Sing Long, the cook, that four other guests were to arrive for lunch. Although that Chinaman's reply was merely "Ally lite" the American interpretation of his pleased smile would be, "the more the merrier." Guests were his joy that he might display the art at which he excelled.

An hour later a big, luxurious closed car limped into the ranch door-yard. Mr. Packard went out to greet the strangers in the same hospitable manner that he had greeted his friends. The girls on the wide porch saw a fine looking man with a Van Dyke beard assisting a simply though richly gowned woman from the car, then the front door was flung open! There was a joyful cry from a girl who leaped out and fairly raced up the front steps with arms out-held. "O Jane, Jane! How wonderful to find you here! We were looking for your cabin and that's how we came to lose our way."

"Marion Starr, of all things! I thought that you were in Newport!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.
OLD FRIENDS

Jean, Dan and Gerald had gone at once to the corral with the four horses they had ridden and were still there (for Jean had much to show his guests) when the car arrived, and so the excitement was quite over when they at last sauntered around one corner of the porch.

There were four in the party of autoists, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Starr, Marion, and Bob, her young brother.

Jane at once took Merry to her room, while Julie accepted Meg's invitation to wander about the gardens and make the acquaintance of the flowers. Mr. Packard had just returned from showing Mr. and Mrs. Starr to the guest room when the boys appeared. Bob Starr had lingered to look over the car, which was the pride of his heart, and so it was that he first met Jean, Dan and Gerald. Jean proved himself an expert mechanic, as was also Mr. Packard, and they promised the lad that directly after lunch they would assist him in putting his car in the best of shape.

Meanwhile Jane and Merry were telling each other all that had happened since last they had met.

"I simply can't understand it in the least," Jane declared for the tenth time. "To think that you deliberately gave up the opportunity to spend a whole summer in Newport to undergo the hardships of a cross-country motor trip."

Merry dropped down in a deep easy chair and laughed happily. "Oh, I've loved it! Every hour of the trip has been fascinating. Of course I'm mighty glad Mr. Packard saved our lives, but even that was exciting."

“But wasn’t your Aunt Belle terribly disappointed?”

“Why, no; not at all. There are steens of us in the Starr family. She just invited some other girl cousins. Aunt Belle is never so happy as when she is surrounded with gay young girls. Then, moreover, Esther Ballard couldn’t go. Her artist father had planned a tramping trip through Switzerland as a surprise for her and Barbara Morris decided to accompany them; so you and I would have been quite alone at Newport. But do tell me who is the girl to whom you introduced me when I first arrived? She is beautiful, isn’t she?”

Jane surely had changed in the past week, for her reply was sincere and even enthusiastic. “Merry, that girl is more than beautiful. She is wonderful! I want you to know her better. She has saved me from myself.” Then she laughingly arose, holding out both hands to assist her friend to her feet. “If you are rested, dear, come out on the porch. I want you to meet the nicest, well, almost the nicest boy I have ever known.”

Merry glanced up roguishly. “Are congratulations in order?”

Jane flushed prettily, though she protested: “You know they are not, Marion Starr! Romance is as far from my thoughts today as it ever was, but next to Dan, I do like Jean best.”

“Well, I certainly am curious to meet this paragon of a youth.” Merry gave her friend’s waist a little affectionate hug, then said: “I have a pretty nice brother of my own. He ought to be ready by now to be presented to my best friend.” Together they went toward the front door. “I know Bob must be nice,” Jane agreed, “since he is your twin.”

The girls appeared on the porch just as the boys had completed an inspection of the machine and so Jane’s “paragon,” with a smudge of grease on one cheek and smeared hands, laughingly begged Merry to pardon his inability to remove his hat. Before Marion could reply, her brother led her aside and talked rapidly and in a low voice, then returning he said in his pleasing manner: “Miss Abbott, you will pardon any seeming lack of courtesy on my part when I tell you there was something very important which I wished to say to my sister, and there is no time like the present, you know.”

Merry laughingly interrupted: “And now that you have made that long speech to Jane, it would be sort of an anti-climax, would it not, for me to formally

introduce you? However, Jane, this is my wayward young brother Bob, whom I am endeavoring to bring up the way that he should go." Jane held out a slim white hand, but, although she said just the right thing, her thoughts were busy. Something had happened that she did not understand.

Mrs. Starr rested that afternoon in one of the comfortable reclining chairs on the wide front porch. Mr. Starr was most interested in all that Mr. Packard had to show him, while the young people went for a horseback ride in merry cavalcade. Bob Starr was eager to see the washout, and decide for himself what chance of escape they might have had. Julie was overjoyed that this time she also might accompany the riders. A small spotted pony was chosen for her, as it was a most reliable little creature—sure-footed and gentle.

For a while Jane and Merry rode side by side, then Bob and Jean Sawyer, who for some time had ridden far back of the others, galloped up and rode alongside of the two girls, Bob next to Jane and Jean close to Merry.

There was a pang in the dark girl's heart. She had noticed several times at lunch that Jean had glanced across at Marion Starr and had smiled at her when their eyes met. But the trail soon became too rough to permit four to ride abreast, and so Jean called: "Miss Starr, suppose you and I ride ahead and set the pace."

Marion smiled at her friend. "That will give you and Bob a chance to become better acquainted," she said, then urged her horse to a gallop, and away they went, Jean and Merry, laughing happily, and yet when they had quite outdistanced the rest, Jane noted that they rode more slowly and close together, as though in serious converse.

"They surely are becoming acquainted very rapidly," the girl thought miserably. She had not realized until now how very much Jean Sawyer's admiration had meant to her. Suddenly she felt so alone and looked back to find the brother who had always cared so much for her, but he also was completely engrossed in another girl, for Meg had dismounted to examine some growth by the trail, and Dan, standing at her side, was listening, as he gazed into her dusky eyes, with great evident interest. Jane sighed.

"I deserve it all," she thought. "I have not been lovable, and so why should I expect to be loved?"

"Jean Sawyer seems to be a mighty fine chap," her companion was saying. "Is

he overseer of this cattle ranch?”

“Yes, I understand that is the position he fills,” Jane said, feeling suddenly very weary, and wishing that she could ride back to the ranch house. A fortnight before she would have done so, but now a thought for the happiness of others came to prevent such a selfish decision, for, of course, if Jane turned back, some of the others would also, for the lads were too chivalrous to permit her to ride alone. Bob, glancing at her, decided that she was not interested in his companionship, but for Merry’s sake he made one more effort at friendly conversation.

“I do not suppose, though, that so fine a chap and one so capable will remain forever in the position of an employee,” he ventured. “Do you know where he hails from?”

“No, I do not,” Jane replied. Then wishing to change the subject, she pointed toward a hill over which one lone vulture was swinging in wide circles. “There is the washout!” Merry and Jean were galloping back toward them.

The girl rode up to Jane as she said with a shudder: “Oh, I don’t want to go any closer! When I saw that wicked looking vulture and heard why he is circling there I could picture all too plainly what *would* have happened if we had been killed and——”

It was seldom that Merry was so overcome. “Jane, do you mind riding back with me?” she pleaded. “I want to go to my mother.”

And so the two girls turned back toward the ranch house. They assured the others that they did not mind going alone. Jane noticed that Merry said nothing of the conversation that she had had with Jean Sawyer; in fact, she did not mention his name and neither did Jane. When they reached the ranch house Merry ran up the steps, and kneeling, she held her mother close. That sweet-faced woman smoothed the sunny hair of the girl she so loved, marveling at the unusual emotion, but when her daughter told her how much more vividly she could picture their escape, after she had seen the washout, and the vulture, the older woman understood. Jane, watching her friend, felt that something more than a view of the road where there might have been a tragedy was affecting her dearest friend, nor was she wrong.

Mr. Packard prevailed upon Mrs. and Mr. Starr to remain as his guests for at

least another day, that the mother of Merry and Bob might become thoroughly rested before the return journey to the East, which was to be made by train, the automobile to be shipped back.

“O, Mrs. Starr, how I do wish you would permit Merry and Bob to visit us in our cabin on Redfords Peak,” Jane said when this decision had been reached. “Couldn’t they stay until we return East next month?”

Mrs. Starr looked inquiringly at her husband, but it was Merry who replied. “Not quite that long, dear,” she said, slipping an arm about her friend. “I very much want to be in New York on September the first.”

Just why she glanced quickly up at Jean Sawyer, a pretty flush tinting her cheeks, Jane could not understand. There was an actual pain in her heart, and she caught her breath quickly before she could reply in a voice that sounded natural: “Well, then, at least you and Bob can remain with us for two weeks and that will be better than not at all.”

The selfish side of Jane’s nature was saying to her: “Why urge Merry to remain, when, if she were to go, you could have Jean Sawyer’s companionship all to yourself?” But Jane had indeed changed, for she put the thought away from her as unworthy, and gave her friend a little affectionate hug when Mrs. Starr said that the plan was quite agreeable to her.

“Good! That’s great!” Dan declared warmly. Then he excused himself, for he saw Meg Heger returning with Julie from a “botany expedition” in the foothills.

The mountain girl smiled up at him in her frank way when he ran down the garden path toward them. “Have you news to tell us?” she inquired. “You’re looking wonderfully well these days, Daniel Abbott. I do not believe that your lungs were affected, after all.”

“Indeed, they were not!” The boy whirled to walk at Meg’s side, and as she smiled up at him in her good comradeship way, he was almost impelled to add, “But my heart is.” Instead, he laughed boyishly, and took the basket of specimens that the girl carried. Peeping under the cover, he exclaimed: “Why, if you haven’t taken them up, root and all.”

Meg nodded joyfully. “Wasn’t it nice of Mr. Packard to tell me that I might transplant them to my own botany gardens. Aren’t they the most exquisite star-

like flowers and the most delicate pinks and blues?" Then, when the cover had been replaced, Meg lifted long-lashed, dusky eyes that were more serious. "Dan, do you suppose Jane would mind if I went home this afternoon? Think of it, in another fortnight I will be going to Scarsburg to take the entrance examinations for the normal, and kind old Teacher Bellows is giving me some special review work which I cannot afford to miss."

"If you return, I will also," the lad said; then, when he saw that his companion was about to protest, he hurriedly added: "Not because you need my protection, but because I *wish* to be with you."

Meg gave no outward sign of having understood the deep underlying meaning of the words that she had heard, but the warmth in her heart assured her that she was glad, glad that Dan wanted to accompany her.

Gerald came bounding toward them, dressed still in his fringed cowboy suit. "Say, kids," he shouted inelegantly, then looked rather sheepishly at Julie, as though he expected one of her grandmotherly rebukes, but hearing none, he blurted on: "We're going to have a corn and potato roast for supper tonight. Won't that be high jinks, though? Mr. Packard has a barbecue pit on the other side of the little lake. Oh. boy!" he continued, rubbing the spot where the feast would eventually be. "You bet you I'll be there with bells!" Then, catching Julie by the hand, he raced with her to the corral, where they liked to look over the log fence at the horses and colts in the enclosure.

Dan smiled down at his companion. "Let us wait until morning and start at sunrise, shall we?" he suggested. "If we go this afternoon, our host might think that we do not appreciate his plans for our entertainment."

Meg agreed willingly, little dreaming that so slight an incident was to make a vital change in her hitherto uneventful life.

CHAPTER XXIX.
THE BARBEQUE

Julie and Gerald were hilariously excited as the hour of the roast approached. Mr. Packard had selected them as his aides, had made them a committee on arrangement. They took wood to the pit and then went with the ever-beaming Chinese gardener to the field where the corn grew, and they carried back between them a heavily laden basket. Then the long table near the lake that was sheltered by cottonwood trees was set with the plate and dishes found on every cattle ranch in reserve for round-ups and similar occasions when many are to be fed.

In the center Julie placed a huge bouquet of scarlet salvia and golden glow to make the table “extra-pretty,” and she put Meg’s name nearest the flowers, but, with the innocence of childhood, she put Dan’s name at the place directly opposite. When the guests were finally summoned, Julie’s big brother protested that he didn’t want to sit directly behind that huge bouquet because he couldn’t “see anything.” Julie looked perplexed. “Why, yes, you can so! You can see the foothills, and just lots of things.”

Then Gerald blurted out, “Silly, he can’t see Meg Heger, can he, when you’ve put her right across from the bouquet?”

How they all laughed, even Meg, and Mrs. Starr, glancing at the mountain girl, marveled at her beauty, and thought it quite natural that any lad would rather look at her than at a scarlet and gold bouquet.

Mr. Packard settled the matter by removing the huge centerpiece to a side table. “There, that’s heaps better!” Jean said as he smiled across at Marion. “Now I also have a better view of the foothills,” he added mischievously.

It was hard, cruelly hard for Jane, even though Bob Starr, who was seated next to her, tried his utmost to be entertaining. Bob was indeed puzzled. He was not at all conceited, but, up to the present, he had found even very attractive girls seeking, rather than spurning, his companionship.

“Icebergs aren’t in my line,” he decided, and turned toward little Julie, who was on his other side, and whose fresh enthusiasm was interesting, even to a lad several years her senior.

Merry noticed that her best friend did not eat with the same zest that was very apparent in the appetites of all the others, and, after a time, she suggested to Bob that he change seats with her. The table had just been cleared and Gerald had darted away with the Chinaman to bring on the generous slices of watermelon, and so the change was made very easily. Merry slipped a hand under the table and held Jane’s in a close, loving clasp. “Dear,” she said very softly, “you aren’t feeling well, are you? Shall we go back to the ranch house? I do not mind missing the watermelon.”

“No, thank you, Marion,” Jane’s voice, try as she might to make it sound natural, had in it a note of reserve that was almost cold. For the first time in the years that they had been so intimate, Jane had used the formal Marion. The friends who loved her always called her Merry. Something was wrong, radically wrong. Merry ate her slice of melon, wondering what it could possibly be, and finally decided that if Jane’s manner remained unchanged throughout the evening, she would accompany her mother to the East on the following day.

“There is going to be a wonderful moon tonight,” Mr. Packard said, “Why don’t you young people climb the foothill trail and watch it rise?”

“That’s a good suggestion!” Jean Sawyer at once offered to lead the expedition. Then, as everyone had arisen, he went to the two girls, who were seated together, and said with a smile which included them both, “Shall we three go ahead?”

But Jane replied, “You and Merry may go. I have one of my sick headaches. I shall go to bed at once.” Jean Sawyer looked at the girl almost sadly. Then he said quietly, “I am sorry, Jane. May I walk back to the house with you?”

“I thank you, no!” The girl’s haughty manner was in evidence. Then going to Mr. Packard, she asked to be excused and walked quickly around the little lake. Merry watched her thoughtfully, then turning to her companion, she said, “Jean,

I think I understand. May I tell her our secret now—tonight?”

The boy assented eagerly. “I shall be glad to have Jane know,” he said. Then Merry also excused herself and followed her friend.

CHAPTER XXX.
JEAN SAWYER'S SECRET

Jane, going to the deserted ranch house, threw herself down on her bed and sobbed heart-brokenly. She did not hear the tap on the door, nor was she conscious that Merry had entered until she heard her voice: "Jane, dear, have I done anything to hurt you, to make you unhappy?" The tenderness in the tone of her best friend was unmistakable. All at once Jane felt ashamed of herself. Holding out a fevered hand, she said: "Indeed not, dear girl. It isn't your fault at all. Any boy would like you better than me. You are so sweet and unselfish and lovable." Merry's eyes widened, for she was indeed perplexed, "Jane, I don't understand," she said. "What boy likes me better than he does you?" Then, slowly a light dawned. Taking both hot hands in her own, she cried, her blue eyes glowing, "Oh, Jane, dearest Jane, *did* you think that Jean Sawyer cared for me? Did you think for one moment that I, knowing how much you liked him, would even want him to care for me? Indeed not, Janey! But now that I think about it, I realize that you might misunderstand. Dear, it's a long story. Let's go out on the veranda in the moonlight. There is no one around. They all went up the foothill trail and will be gone for an hour."

Jane permitted herself to be led to a vine-sheltered corner of the veranda, where they sat close together in a hammock swing. Merry piled the soft cushions behind her friend, whose flushed face assured her that the head was really aching. Jane sighed as she sank back among them, but it was a sigh of relief. How wrong it had been to doubt for one moment the loyalty of this, her very best friend. But Merry was beginning the story. "Dear," she said, placing a cool hand on the hot one near her, "when you first introduced me to Jean Sawyer, did you notice that my brother Bob drew me away to whisper something to me before I could acknowledge the introduction?"

Jane nodded, both curious and interested. “Why did Bob do that? I wondered at the time.” Merry continued: “I was just about to exclaim, ‘Why, Jean Sawyer Willoughby, so this is where you disappeared to when you left home last February!’ but I did not, for Bob gave me no time. What he whispered was, ‘Don’t let on you know Jean. He wants his identity kept in the dark. He is using his mother’s maiden name. Get the cue?’

“Of course I got it, but as soon as I could I asked Jean to go for a canter with me that I might tell him how heart-broken his family was because he had disappeared as he did.” Jane was no longer reclining among the cushions. She sat up, listening intently.

“You and Bob know Jean’s family?”

“Yes, indeed, both his father and older brother Ken. We met them every summer on the coast of Maine, where our parents had cottages next to each other.”

“Jean told me of that cottage where he went that summer, alone with his mother,” Jane said. “I mean the summer she died.”

“Poor boy! He never was happy in his home life after that,” Merry replied. “Ken, his brother, is a commissioned officer on one of the war boats. He had little shore leave and that left Jean and his father quite alone in their big house in New York. They never had been congenial in their interests, but the final break came when the father entered into some oil deal which Jean considered dishonorable. He told his father exactly how he felt about it. He said that he refused to inherit money that was taken from the poor who had invested their savings in the wildcat scheme, believing the firm to be honest. Of course his father was angry, and Jean, refusing to take one penny of what he called ‘tainted’ money, left home to make his own way in the world.

“The father did not seem to care at first, for he had always loved Ken more than he did Jean, but when Ken came home on a leave he took Jean’s part, and also denounced his father’s dishonorable business methods.”

Jane was sitting very erect and her breath came hard. At last she interrupted. “Merry,” she said in a voice she could hardly recognize as her own, “Jean’s father, Mr. Willoughby, was my father’s partner.” Then she burst into unexpected tears. “Jean was nobler than I! Oh, Merry, I never can be his friend again. I am not worthy of him. I want you to be his best friend. You are so good. I am sure

that in his heart of hearts he must love you." Merry leaned over and kissed her friend tenderly. "I hope Jean does love me," she said simply. "He is to be my brother, for I am engaged to Ken Willoughby. His three years in the navy are nearly over. Ken is coming home for good on September first."

Jane's heart was filled with conflicting emotions. She was indeed happy when she heard the wonderful secret which Merry assured her she would have told her at once but Ken had wanted her to wait until he had given her the ring which he had bought for her in Paris. "But I just had to tell you, dear girl, when I realized that my friendship with Jean might lead you to believe that we cared for each other." Then, slipping an arm affectionately about her companion, Merry continued: "And now there is just one thing for which I am going to wish until it comes true, and that is that you and Jean may care for each other in the way Ken and I care. Then, Jane, I will be your sister. Think what that would mean, for we would share all of the joy that the future holds."

But Jane, tears brimming her eyes, said sadly: "That can never be! If Jean knew the truth; if he knew that I wanted father to cheat those poor people who had trusted him, he would scorn me, even as I now scorn myself. I never knew father's partners except by name. We lived so very far apart and Dad always wanted to just rest when he reached our village home, and so, even when I was with him, which was seldom, we had no social life." Then, turning with a startled expression, Jane inquired, "Oh, do you suppose that Jean knows? Do you suppose he recognized our name as being the same as his father's partner?"

Merry replied thoughtfully: "There are a good many Abbotts in the world, dear, and just at first Jean did not suspect that your father was the one who had withdrawn from the firm, and who, by so doing, had incurred the hatred and wrath of Mr. Willoughby, but, when I happened to mention why your father had lost everything, as Dan had told him, Jean's face brightened. 'I am glad,' he said, 'that the father of Jane had the courage to do the honorable thing.' I noticed at the time that he said 'the father of Jane' and not of Dan. That means, dear, that you are often in his thoughts."

But Jane had again burst into tears, and rising, she hurried to her own room and begged Merry, who had followed her with tender solicitude, to leave her alone. "I never, never can be Jean's friend again, but don't tell him how dishonorable I have been, Merry. Promise me that you will not tell him."

“Of course I will not tell, but, oh, Jane, you are over-imaginative tonight. I am sure that you never wished your father to rob the poor that you might have luxury. But there, please don’t answer me, dear. You are all worn out and your poor head is throbbing cruelly. Let me help you undress. Tomorrow morning when you awake you will see everything in a different light.”

But Merry was wrong. Because of Jane, the young people did not start at sunrise as they had planned, but delayed until after Mr. and Mrs. Starr had been driven away to the Redfords station. Mr. Packard accompanied them. Bob was pleased indeed that he and his sister were to remain in the Rockies for another fortnight, and Merry was glad to be with Jane, who, more than ever, seemed to need her friendship.

When the young people were gathered at the corral, preparing to start, Jean glanced across at Jane and noting how pale and weary she looked, he strode over to her, saying: “Aren’t you afraid the ride will be too hard for you? Suppose we let the others start now, if Meg feels that she must get home. You and I could follow them more leisurely, starting later, when you are rested.”

There was a sad expression in the dark eyes that were lifted to his, but the girl’s reply was: “Thank you, Jean, I would rather go now, with the others.” Merry felt Jane’s clasp tighten about her hand, and well knew that she was suffering cruelly, and that it was a mental, not a physical torture.

Jean assisted both of the girls to mount and then the string of horses started toward the mountain trail, for Bob was eager to visit the old deserted Crazy Creek mine. Jean Sawyer glanced often at the pale, beautiful face of the girl who seemed purposely to avoid him.

CHAPTER XXXI.
AN UNCANNY EXPERIENCE

At the foot of the trail that led up the mountain, Dan, who had been in the lead with Meg, called: “Jean, we’re waiting for you to go ahead, since you have so often ridden this trail.”

The boy, who had been silently riding at Jane’s side whenever it had been possible, turned to ask: “Will you ride on ahead with me?”

The girl tried to smile at him, but her lips quivered. “No, thank you, Jean. I think I will stay with Merry.”

A boyish voice called, “Ask me and hear what I’ll say.” It was Bob, and before Jean could express a desire for his companionship, the black horse which the younger lad rode was scrambling up the rocky trail following the leader. Julie and Gerald, on their agile ponies, were next; Meg and Dan followed, while Jane and Merry rode more slowly, each putting her entire trust in the horse on which she was mounted. “We do not need to try to guide them,” Merry had said. “Jean told me that the horses climb best without direction. Just pull up on the rein if it should happen to stumble.”

Bob’s enthusiasm over all he saw was given such constant expression that Jane’s silence was not so noticeable. Dan, now and then, glanced back anxiously. He also had noted Jean’s apparent devotion to Merry on the two days previous, and he wondered if it had saddened Jane, and yet she had never said that she really cared for Jean.

When they reached a wide rock plateau their guide whirled in his saddle to ask if any of the riders were tired and wished to rest for a while, but they all preferred to keep on. A few moments later they were passing through the deserted mining

camp. There was not a breath of wind stirring and the only sounds they heard were the humming of insects and now and then a bird song.

The cabins, many of them falling into ruins, looked as though they might be haunted with ghosts of the men who had given their lives trying to find gold. “Say, boy!” Bob drew rein to look about him. “This places gives one the shivers, all right! At any minute I expect to hear a ghost groan or——”

“Hark! What was that?” Merry interrupted. “I *did* hear a groan! I am positive that I did.” They all listened and there was no mistaking the fact that a groaning noise was coming from a cabin that stood near a deep pit beside which was a pile of red and yellow ore.

“What do you suppose it is, since we know there is no such thing as a ghost?” Dan turned toward Meg to inquire. Surely the mountain girl would know.

But it was Jean who replied: “Don’t you believe that some wounded animal may have dragged itself into the cabin to die? They always *do* try to hide away when they are hurt, don’t they, Meg?”

The girl nodded, her sweet face serious as she said: “I will ride over and see what it is. A moan like that always means that some creature needs help.”

“You must not go alone,” Dan told her. “I will ride over there with you.”

Meg turned to the others. “Please wait here,” she said. “If it is a hurt animal, so many of us would frighten it.”

In silence the group waited, watching the two who rode toward the yawning pit. When they were near the place, Meg dismounted and Dan did likewise. Together they approached the door of the isolated cabin. Dan swung his gun from his shoulder and held it in readiness if harm were to threaten them. Meg glanced at the door, then turning, motioned the lad to put up his gun. Wondering what the girl had seen, the boy hastened to her side.

Meg entered the old cabin and Dan, standing at the door, saw on the rotting floor the twisted form of the old Ute Indian.

His wrinkled, leathery face showed how cruelly he was suffering, but when he saw Meg, who at once knelt at his side, his expression changed to one of

eagerness, almost of gladness. He tried to reach out his shriveled arm, but groaned instead.

Dan stepped inside and looked down pityingly. Meg, glancing up with tears in her wonderful eyes, said, “Poor old Ute. He has had another stroke, and this one is his last.” They both knew that the old Indian was making a great effort to speak, and the lad bent to whisper, “Perhaps he is trying to tell you something.”

“Oh, if he only would! If he only could.” Meg was rubbing the poor limp hand that was crusted with dirt in her own. Then, close to his ear, she asked clearly: “Could you tell me about my father?”

Again there was a lightening of the eyes that were beginning to dim. “Fadder he die—hid box——. Dig, dig, no find box. *You* find box, then you know——” The old Ute could say no more, for another contortion had seized him and it was the last.

Meg was trembling so that Dan had to assist her to rise. The others, having been eager to know what had happened, had approached the cabin and dismounted. Jane saw that, for the first time in their acquaintance, the mountain girl was nearly overcome with emotion, and going to her, she slipped an arm about her, saying sincerely, “Meg, dear, what is it? Can we help you?” But almost at once Meg regained at least outward composure. “It is the old Ute Indian who has died,” she told them. “How thankful I am that we came this way, for he has told me about my father. Perhaps I shall know more, but that much is enough.”

Turning back, she looked thoughtfully at the cabin, then said, “Dan, will you help me bar the door that no wild creature can get in? The windows were long ago boarded up. The old Ute shall have it for his tomb.”

When this was done, a solemn group of young people rode away. Meg said little, and Dan, riding at her side, understood her thoughtfulness. When the Abbott cabin was reached, Meg said goodbye to the friends who were to remain there, but Dan insisted upon accompanying her to her home.

When they were quite alone the lad rode close to her, and placed a hand on hers as he said, “Meg, dear, how much, how very much this means to you.”

Such a wonderful light there was in the dusky eyes that were lifted to his. “O, Dan, *now* I can feel that I have a right to accept your friendship; yours and

Jane's." But with sincere feeling the lad replied: "It is for your sake only that I am glad. Your parentage mattered not at all to me, nor, of late, has it to Jane." Then, although Dan had not planned on speaking so soon, he heard himself saying: "Meg, you are all to me that my most idealistic dreams could picture for the girl I would wish to marry. Do you think that some day you might care for me if I regain my health and am able to make a home for you?"

There was infinite tenderness in the dark eyes, but the girl shook her head. "Your companionship means very much to me, Dan, but I must teach. I want to care for the two old people who took me in out of the storm and who have given me all that I have had."

"You shall, dearest girl. That is, *we* shall, if you will let me help you."

Then before Meg could refuse, Dan implored, "Don't answer me yet. I can wait if you will *try* to love me." They had reached the cabin and saw Ma Heger, wiping sudsy hands on her apron, hurrying out to greet them. Dan detained the girl. "Promise me that you will try to care," he pleaded. "I won't have to try," she said, then turned to greet the angular woman who had been the only mother she had ever known.

CHAPTER XXXII.
HUNTING FOR THE BOX

Jean Sawyer, troubled indeed, because Jane Abbott continued to avoid him, changed his plan and decided not to remain at the cabin until late afternoon; and so, bidding them goodbye, he went down the road toward Redfords, leading the string of horses. The other young people climbed the stone stairway.

“Oh, Jane, what a perfectly adorable place,” Merry exclaimed when the door had been unlocked and the young people had entered the long rustic living-room. “I like it so much better than those elaborately furnished cottages at Newport. They are too much like our own homes, but this cabin savors of camping out. It’s a wonderful spot for a real vacation.”

“It surely is different,” Jane agreed as she led her friend into the comfortable front bedroom which they were to share. Then she confessed: “I do like it much more than I had supposed that I would when I first came. Honestly, Merry, I feel differently inside. When I believed that those poor little children had been driven out of their home by my temper, and might never be found, something inside of me snapped; something that had been holding me tense, I can’t explain it, and I felt as though I had been set free from—well, free from myself. Self, that is it,” she continued bitterly, “planning for oneself, living for oneself, living for one’s selfish pleasure and comfort, slowly but surely deadens sympathy and love and understanding.” Then taking from the table near the wide window a delicate miniature, Jane handed it to her companion. “That is my mother’s portrait.”

“How beautiful she must have been.” Merry glanced from the sweet pictured face to that of the girl at her side. “You are so alike. It is only the expression that is different. I am sure that anyone in sorrow would have gone to your mother for comfort.”

Jane nodded. “I am not like that—yet; but Dan thinks that if we choose a model and keep it ever in thought, we will grow to be like that person or ideal, and I have chosen my mother.”

Silently Merry kissed her friend and then replaced the miniature on the table. Jane had indeed changed that she could talk, even with her best friend, of these things of the soul.

A moment later there came a jolly rapping on their closed door, and Bob called: “Come and see where I am going to hang out, or hang up rather.”

Merry and Jane went out on the front porch with the lad, who was brimming with enthusiasm. “Oh, aren’t you afraid a bear will devour you in the night?” his sister inquired, when she saw a hammock hung between two pines.

“Hope one will,” Bob replied jubilantly. “What a yarn that would be to tell when I get back to college.”

Practical Julie was wide-eyed. “Why, Bob Starr,” she exclaimed, “how could you tell about it after you were all eaten up?”

“Which reminds me,” Bob said irrelevantly, “of a story about the South Sea Islanders. A missionary was teaching them that they must take great care of their bodies, as they were to rise on the last day, and one native asked what would become of his poor brother who had been eaten by a tiger.”

“Bob, dear,” Merry rebuked, “you ought not to joke about such things. It does not matter what we believe ourselves, or how outlandish we consider the beliefs of others, we ought to treat them with respect.”

“Yes’m,” Bob pretended to be quite contrite. “I’m willing to change the subject if the next subject is something to eat.”

“I’ll get the lunch.” Julie, leaning on the staff Dan had cut for her, limped toward the kitchen, but her sister caught her and put her on the porch cot and piled pillows under her head. “Indeed not, little lady.” Jane kissed her affectionately. “It’s your turn now to pretend you are a princess and I will be your maid of waiting.”

Impulsively Julie threw her arms about her sister’s neck and clung to her as she

whispered: “Oh, Janey, I love you so!” And Jane, when she arose, felt in her heart a greater happiness than had ever been there when she had received the adulation of the admiring girls at Highacres.

“And I will be your aide!” Merry, who had gone to the top of the stone stairway to look down at the road, skipped back to say, and, then, arm in arm, these two friends went, and from their merry laughter it was quite evident that Jane’s efforts as head cook were being mirthfully regarded by both of them. However, when the others were called to the back porch, where the table was set, they found as appetizing a lunch as could be desired. But underneath all her apparent pleasure Jane was sorrowing. She never again could be Jean Sawyer’s friend. He would not want her friendship if he knew how she had felt about her father’s sacrifice, but he must never, never know.

Jane glanced often at Dan during the lunch. Never had she seen him look so wonderfully happy. He had expressed his regret that Jean had departed before his return and exclaimed: “But the horse I rode also belongs to Mr. Packard. I wonder why he did not wait for it.”

“Mr. Packard told him to leave one horse with us,” his sister explained, “and more if we wished, but I thought one would be all you would want to care for.” Dan was pleased.

He said: “We have made good friends since we came here. It is hard to realize that it is not yet a fortnight ago.” Julie chimed in with: “Yep, haven’t we?” Then, beginning with one small thumb to count, “First there’s Meg Heger. Next to Janey, she’s the nicest girl I guess there is.” Merry pretended to be quite offended. “Little one, you surely are honest. You ought always to say present company excepted.”

“Oh, I do like you, Merry, awful much. You can be third. Will that be all right?” The golden haired girl laughed gaily: “Of course, I was only teasing, dear. Now who comes next?”

“Jean Sawyer and Mr. Packard and then the little spotted pony, and then my mountain lion baby.” The small girl put down her hand as she concluded. “I guess that’s all the new friends I’ve made here in the mountains.”

Bob suddenly thought of something. “Say, Dan, there is a sort of mystery about that trapper’s daughter, isn’t there? I understand that at first the old Ute Indian

pretended he was her father in order to get the girl to give him money, and that this morning when he was dying he confessed that he was not."

Dan nodded. Then turning to Jane, he said: "I am sure that Meg would not wish it kept a secret from any of us and so I will tell you what the old Indian said. His speech was almost incoherent, but we understood him to say that Meg's father had died long ago. He must have told the squaw in Slinking Coyote's hearing that he had hidden a box which he wished given to his little girl when she was older, but he must have died before he could tell where he had placed the box."

"How I wish it could be found," Jane said earnestly, "for without doubt it would contain identification papers. Although it is a great joy to Meg to know that she is not that old Ute's daughter, she will have to seek out the squaw who took her to the Heger cabin before she can know who her father really was."

"And even then I doubt if she would discover much," Dan remarked. "My theory is that Meg's father was a miner who had brought the three-year-old little girl to Crazy Creek Camp and had remained there for a time, even after the exodus. In fact, he must have stayed until the Indian tribe took possession of the otherwise deserted camp. Perhaps just after they came he was seized with a fatal illness and left his little one with the kindly old squaw, probably telling her to give the child to a white family, since that is what she did."

"I believe you are right," Jane agreed. "It all sounds very reasonable to me. But why do you suppose Meg's father remained at the camp after everyone else had left? Do you think he had some clue to the whereabouts of the lost vein?"

"That we cannot tell," Dan said. "He may have remained to hunt for it." Then, rising, he smiled around at the group. "What shall we do this afternoon, or do you want to just rest?"

"Nary for me!" was energetic Bob's reply. "I want to hunt for Meg Heger's hidden box. Who will go with me and where shall we begin the search?"

Bob's enthusiasm was contagious. "I believe that I now understand the real reason why the Ute Indian hung around the Crazy Creek Camp," Dan told them. "He knew that the miner had hidden a box, an iron one, of course it must be, and he has been searching for it, probably believing it to contain whatever money Meg's father had."

“Of course,” Bob agreed. “That’s as clear as daylight. We have clues enough, but the thing is to try to reason out *where* would be a likely place for the miner to have hidden it.”

Gerald, not wishing to be left out of so interesting a discussion, wisely contributed, “Maybe under the floor-boards in the cabin where he lived, or some place like that.”

Dan smiled down into the chubby freckled face of his small brother as he replied: “One naturally might suppose so, but I do believe, Gerry, that the old Ute suspected the same thing and has been ransacking those cabins all these years. I would be more inclined to look in some of the dug-outs or tunnels where, if he were a miner, Meg’s father may have been searching for the lost vein.”

While the boys talked Jane and Merry had been washing and wiping the lunch dishes. When they joined the excited group on the front porch, Bob stood up, saying, “Shall we start now?”

Jane also arose, but, happening to glance down at Julie, she saw tears brimming the small girl’s eyes and that her lips were quivering. Instantly the older girl sat on the cot beside her, and, putting her arms about her little sister, she said compassionately: “Is your ankle hurting again, dearie? Since you cannot go, I will stay here with you and read to you. Don’t feel badly, Julie. Your foot will soon be well; long before they find the box, I am sure of that.”

The small girl leaned happily against her sister and looked up at her with adoration in her dark violet eyes. Then Merry announced: “This is a boys’ adventure anyway. We girls will sit on the porch and have the best kind of a time all together.”

And so the boys departed, armed with stout staffs and guns and calling that they would surely be back by supper time.

But when at last they did return, they had discovered nothing, and Bob was eager to start at dawn the next day and search everywhere around the Crazy Creek Camp.

Merry shuddered. “Goodness, don’t!” she ejaculated. “It was ghostly enough before, but now that we know that old Ute is entombed in one of those cabins,

you couldn’t get me within a mile of the place.”

Bob retorted: “Well, we hadn’t invited you girls, had we? So you need not refuse with such gusto! We’re going to take the horse, so that Dan can ride most of the way.” But that lad interrupted: “You mean that we will take turns riding. Although I have been in the Rockies so short a time my cold is entirely cured, and, as my lungs had not really been affected, I am soon to be as husky as you, Bob.”

“Of course you are, old man,” Bob put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, “but soon isn’t now. I won’t go unless you will ride, when I think it is the best for you to do so.”

“All righto! Anything to be agreeable.” Dan sank down on the porch step as though he were rather tired after the climb they had just completed.

Bob then turned to the girls. “You maidens fair need not awaken. We’ll be as quiet as—as——” Dan smilingly offered: “How would Santa Claus do? He steals around very softly, or so tradition has it.” Bob laughed. “I was going to say as a thief in the night, but I don’t like to use a simile which suggests an unpleasant picture, and it’s the wrong time of the year for Santa Claus.”

“A mouse is awful quiet,” Julie put in.

“Or a cat. They have cushions on their feet,” Gerald added.

“We’ll be as quiet as all of them,” Bob said, “and tomorrow, young ladies, we are going to bring home the box.”

When the boys returned from Crazy Creek Camp they were weary and disappointed, but not discouraged, or so Bob assured the girls. It was quite evident that they were much excited, however, but what had caused it they would not reveal. When Merry asked if their search had taken them close to the tomb of the old Ute Indian, Bob had looked over at Dan and had asked, “Shall we tell?”

The older boy nodded. “Why, yes, we might as well. Sooner or later they are likely to find it out.”

The young people were seated about the hearth in the living-room of the cabin

resting and visiting before they retired for the night. Gerald's eyes glowed with excitement. "Julie won't sleep a wink if she knows about it. She'll be skeered as anything, Julie will."

The small girl nestled closer to Jane and looked up at her inquiringly. "What does Gerry mean, Janey?" she asked. "Are they trying to tease us?"

But Dan replied seriously, "No, it is the truth that something has occurred since we were last at the Crazy Creek Camp, and the discovery of it did startle us. Although we planned to give the tomb-cabin a wide berth, we at once went to a position where we could look at it. You girls can imagine our surprise, and I'll confess it, horror, when we saw the front door standing wide open."

"Oh-oo, how dreadful!" Jane shuddered. "What did it mean? Had someone opened the door out of curiosity, do you suppose, and what a shock it must have been when they found that dead Indian on the floor."

Dan and Bob exchanged curious glances. Then the latter spoke up: "It is just possible that the old Ute was not really dead and that he revived and left the cabin."

"But how could he?" Merry looked thoughtfully into the fire. "As I remember, the door was barred on the outside."

"True!" her brother replied, "but we also found a loose board on the floor, which had been lifted, leaving a hole large enough for the Ute to have crawled through. After that he may have opened the door to procure his pick-ax and shovel, as both were gone."

Julie glanced fearfully at the dark windows of the room, and Gerald said, almost gloatingly: "There, I told you so! Julie is skeered. She thinks the old Ute may be prowling around our cabin this very minute."

"Mr. Heger ought to be told about this," Dan had started to say, when Gerry grabbed his arm. "What's that noise?" he whispered. "Someone is outside. I hear 'em coming."

Dan and Bob were on their feet at once. There was indeed the sound of footsteps outside the cabin, then there came a rap on the door. Julie implored: "O Dan, don't! don't open it! Get your gun first!"

The older boy hesitated for a moment, but in that brief time his own fears were set at rest, for a familiar voice called, “Daniel Abbott, may I speak with ye?”

The boy’s tenseness relaxed and he threw open the door with a welcoming smile. “Mr. Heger, we’re mighty glad to see you! Come in, won’t you?”

The mountaineer glanced at the group about the fire, but shook his head. “No, I thank ye. I jest came down to ask if a big brown mare I found whinnyin’ around my corral is the one Mr. Packard loaned ye? I would have asked Meg hed she been to home, but she went, sudden-like, to Scarsburg, along of some school-work, and she’ll put up at the inn there for several days.”

Dan thanked the mountaineer for the trouble he had taken, adding, “There really is no place here to keep the horse. I suppose that is why it wandered up to you. As soon as Jean Sawyer comes again, I will send it back.”

The mountaineer assured the boy: “No need to do that, Danny, if you’d like to keep it. I’ll jest let it into my corral along of Bag-o’-Bones. They seem to be actin’ friendly enough.” The man was about to leave, when Dan said, “Mr. Heger, we boys have been over to Crazy Creek Camp today and we are rather puzzled about something.”

He then told what they had seen, ending with, “We’re afraid that old Ute came to life, and that he will continue to blackmail Meg.”

The mountaineer shook his head, saying: “No, Danny, Slinkin’ Coyote’ll never more be seen in these parts, lest be it’s his ghost. Arter Meg tol’ me what had happened, I went down to put the sheriff wise. He reckoned ’twouldn’t do, no-how, to leave the body unburied, and that the county’d have to tend to it.”

The girls uttered sighs of relief. Jane rose, when the mountaineer had departed, saying, “Well, now, I guess we can all sleep without fear of a visit from Slinking Coyote.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.
JANE’S BIRTHDAY

For the next two days the boys searched high and low, far and near, without finding the box. On the morning of the third, which was Saturday, Jane announced at breakfast that, as it was her birthday, she wished to go down to the inn and get the mail. The stage would not come up that way until the following Monday. Instantly there was an uproar. Julie, whose foot was nearly well again, hopped around the table and threw her arms about her big sister’s neck without fear of being rebuked because the fresh muslin collar might be crushed. The older girl slipped an arm lovingly about the child, who stood with her cheek pressed against the soft dark hair.

Dan reached a hand across the table. “Jane, so it is! This is the wonderful day on which you are eighteen. I congratulate you!”

Gerry, with a whoop, had pounced upon her, even as Julie had done, without fear of rebuke. The older girl had been so consistently loving during the past few days that, childlike, they had accepted the change as being natural and permanent. Dan smiled happily at the group and in his eyes there was a tenderness that his sister rejoiced to see. But the lad who had been her chum since little childhood also knew that Jane’s heart held a sorrow which she was not sharing with him. That it had something to do with Jean Sawyer he surmised, but believed that it was because Jane still thought Mr. Packard’s overseer liked Merry especially well.

“Let’s have a party!” Gerald shouted as he capered about the room unable, it would seem, to otherwise express his enthusiasm. “That would be sport!” Dan agreed. Julie slipped from Jane’s encircling arm. Clapping her hands, she sang out: “Goodie! We’re going to have a party and maybe there’ll be ice-cream.”

“There probably isn’t any to be had nearer than Scarsburg,” Dan remarked. Then he grew thoughtful, wondering how long the girl he loved would be detained at the county seat, “along of school-work.”

As though voicing his thought, Gerald ceased his antics to say earnestly: “It won’t be a party unless Meg is at it.”

“And Jean Sawyer, too!” Julie put in. “Let’s ask Meg and Jean to our party. You want them, don’t you, Janey?”

The other girl smiled as she arose to clear the breakfast table; then turned away, but not quickly enough to hide the sudden tears from Dan. The boy’s heart was sad. He also believed that Jean Sawyer especially liked Merry, and, if this were true, there was nothing for Jane to do but to try *not* to care.

Bob suggested that he and Dan go up to the Heger place to get the horse. “Then the girls can take turns walking and riding,” he ended. Merry seemed to be very eager to go to the village, far down in the valley. “I, also, am expecting some mail,” was all that she would tell the others.

“I’m glad it’s such a shiny day,” Julie chirped. “Birthdays ought to be all gold and blue, hadn’t they ought to be, Janey?”

“What a tangled up sentence that is, dearie!” The older girl tried to hide her own sorrow that she need not depress the others who were all in a holiday mood. “But I *do* believe that birthdays *ought* to be sunny, for they are a chance to start life all over.” Merry looked up brightly. “I love beginnings!” she said, as she rolled her sleeves preparing to wash the dishes. “Whatever the mistakes or faults of the past have been, I feel that on New Years and birthdays, and even on Mondays, I can clean off the slate, so to speak, and start all over.” When the two girls were alone in the kitchen, Merry slipped an arm about her companion as she said, “Dear Jane, I wish you would act more friendly toward poor Jean Willoughby. I know that your seeming to avoid him the other day, hurt him deeply.” But Jane shook her head and in her eyes there was an expression of suffering. “I can’t! Oh, I can’t!” she said miserably. “Some day he might find out how I had acted about father’s renouncing his fortune, and then he would scorn me! I couldn’t endure it, Merry. Oh, indeed, I couldn’t! I’m going back East with you next week, and then I shall never see Jean Sawyer.”

An hour later the young people started down the mountain road, Julie riding on

the horse as the other two girls, dressed in their natty hiking costumes, declared that they would rather walk. They had decided to have lunch at the inn, for Mrs. Bently was an excellent cook.

Jane covered her aching heart so well that Dan believed after all he had been mistaken in thinking that she was sorrowing for Jean. Her loving devotion to her best friend plainly proved to him that she was not at all jealous of Merry. Deciding that he must have been wrong, he entered wholeheartedly into the joyousness of the occasion and a jolly procession it was that wended its way down the circling road toward the hamlet of Redfords. At every turn Dan glanced down to see if, by any chance, Meg Heger might be returning to her home cabin. Her foster-father had not known how long she would have to stay at the Normal, where Teacher Bellows had sent her for a time of intensive preparatory work, but the lad hoped and believed that, even if Meg would have to return to Scarsburg on the following Monday, she would visit her home over the week-end. Nor was he wrong, for, at the bend, just above the village, Gerald, who had been racing ahead, turned to shout through hands held trumpet-wise: “Say kids, Meg Heger’s coming. Gee-golly! Now she can come to the party!”

Luckily no one glanced at Dan, for his sudden brightening expression would have revealed the secret he wished to share with none but Meg. In another few moments the girl, riding slowly up the mountain road on her spotted pony, heard a chorus of shouts, and glancing up, saw the young people on the bend above waving caps and kerchiefs. What a warmth there was in the heart of the girl who, through all the years, had been without a companion of her own age. And when at last they met, Jane was the first to hurry forward with outstretched hands. “We’ve missed our nearest neighbor and we’re so glad you came home today,” she said in her friendliest manner.

The beautiful girl looked from one to another of the group and seeing in each face a joyful expression, she asked: “What is it? Some special occasion?” Gerald shouted, “Yo’ bet it is! It’s ol’ Jane’s birthday!” Instantly he remembered the time in the orchard at home when he had called his sister “Ol’ Jane” and how scathingly he had been rebuked, and he looked quickly, anxiously at the girl, but she was laughingly saying, “You’re right, Gerald! Eighteen *is* old! I feel as ancient as the hills.” Then taking Meg’s free hand, for Julie was clinging to the other, Jane said, “Won’t you turn about and take lunch with us at the inn? It’s the first of the birthday celebrations.” But the mountain girl shook her head, smiling happily into her friend’s eyes as she replied: “Ma Heger is expecting me this

noon and will have the things baked up that I like best. I couldn't disappoint her nor dear old Pap, either."

"But you'll come later. We'll be home by two o'clock and then the real celebration is to begin," Jane begged, while Gerald said informingly, "We're going to do stunts. I mean something extra-different. We don't know what yet, but it'll be something awful jolly."

Meg beamed down at the eager freckled face. "I wouldn't miss it for worlds. Of course I will be there." Dan, who had been standing silently at her side said: "I will come up to your cabin for you. Then you will know when we are back and ready to begin the frolic, whatever it is to be."

"Is Jean Sawyer coming?" Meg glanced at Jane to inquire. The mountain girl noted the sudden clouding of her new friend's eyes and although the reply was lightly given in the negative, Meg knew that something was wrong. She had been so sure that Jane and Jean liked each other especially well.

Glancing at the sun, which was nearing the zenith, she exclaimed: "I must go now; my pony has had a long walk today and I do not want him to climb too rapidly." Then with a direct glance out of her dusky, long-lashed eyes at Dan, she said: "I'll be ready and waiting for you when you come."

Mrs. Bently was indeed pleased when she heard that she was to have so many hungry guests for lunch and asked if she might have one hour for preparation.

The young people were disappointed when they learned that the mail had not arrived, but they had not long to wait before the stage drew up in front of the inn. Mr. Bently went out to get the leather bag which both Jane and Merry hoped might contain something of especial interest to them.

They all crowded around the tiny window in the corner which served as postoffice and waited eagerly while the innkeeper sorted out the papers, letters and packages.

"Wall, now," he beamed at them over his spectacles, "if here ain't that parcel ol' Granny Peters been waitin' fer so long. Yarn's in it," he informed his amused listeners. "Red, black and yellar. Granny sends to the city for a fresh batch every summer and knits things for Christmas presents. I've had one o' Granny Peters' mufflers every year for longer than I kin recollect." He reached again into the

bag. “An’ here’s magazines enough to start a shop. Them’s for the Packard ranch. They must have a powerful lot o’ time for settin’ around readin’, them two must.” Merry was watching eagerly, for, on the very next package she was sure that she saw her name. The postmaster looked at it closely. Then he held it far off to get a different angle, evidently hoping for enlightenment. Finally he shook his head and tossed it to one side. “Reckon thar’s been a mistake as to that parcel,” he said. “Thar ain’t no Miss Marion Starr in these here parts.”

“I’m Marion Starr,” that maiden informed him, laughingly holding out her hand. But before the postmaster would give up the parcel he presented the girl with a paper to sign. “Reckon thar’s suthin’ powerful valuable in that thar box,” he said, “bein’ as it’s sent registered.”

Then he leaned on his elbows as though planning to wait until Merry had opened her package before he finished distributing the mail, but to his quite evident disappointment, the girl slipped it into her sweater coat pocket. “I know what’s in it,” she said brightly. Jane, noting the radiant happiness in her friend’s face, believed that she also knew, but her attention was attracted again to the small window near which she stood, for the postmaster was touching her arm with a long letter. “Miss Jane Abbott,” he said, adding, “Wall, golly be, you’re sort o’ popular, I reckon. Here are three letters an’ thar’s another that come in yesterday.”

“It’s Jane’s birthday,” Julie piped up informingly. A month before the older girl would have rebuked the younger for having been so familiar with one of a class far beneath her. As it was, she accepted smilingly the well meant remark. “Wall, do tell! How old be yo’, Miss Jane? Not a day over sixteen, jedgin’ by yer looks.”

As soon as the two girls could slip away from the others, Jane led Merry into the deserted parlor of the inn, where hair-cloth chairs and sofa, a marble-topped table, and bright-colored prints on the wall were revealed in the subdued light from windows hung with heavy draperies.

When they were alone, Merry whirled and caught Jane’s hands as she asked glowingly: “Can you guess what’s in the box? I told mother to forward it.”

For answer Jane stooped and kissed the flushed cheek of her friend. “Of course, I can guess,” she replied. “It’s the ring Jean’s brother was to send you from Paris.”

Merry soon had the small box unwrapped and a dew-drop clear diamond was revealed in a setting of quaint design. “Oh, Merry, how wonderfully beautiful it is!” Jane said with sincere admiration. Her shining-eyed friend slipped it on the finger for which it was intended, then, smiling up at her companion, she prophesied, “Some day another ring, as lovely as this one, will make you my sister.”

There was a wistful expression in the dark eyes, but Jane’s quiet reply was, “You are wrong, Merry. Even if Jean thinks he cares for me, he would not, if he knew, and what is more, I have no reason to believe that he even likes me better than he does his other girl friends.”

Merry, knowing that time alone could tell whether or not she was a prophet, changed the subject by asking: “From whom are your letters, dear? How selfish I have been, opening my box first when it is *your* birthday.” Jane glanced at the top envelope, then tore it open with breathless eagerness.

Merry surmised, and correctly, that the letter was from Jean Sawyer. It was the one Mr. Bently had taken from a pigeon-hole where it had been since the day before. It did not take long for Jane to read it, and when she looked up there was an expression of happiness shining through the tears that had come. Then suddenly and most unexpectedly, the girl sank down in the stiff chair by the marble-topped table and bending her head on her arms, she sobbed bitterly. Merry went to her and putting an arm about her, she implored: “Don’t, don’t cry, dearie. It will make your eyes red and the others will wonder. Tell me what is in the letter and let us try to think what it is best to do. Is it from Jean?”

Jane lifted her head and wiped her eyes. Then she held the letter out for her friend to read. There were few words in it, but they told how sincerely unhappy the lad was because Jane seemed not to wish for his friendship. Jean had written: “All I can think of is that in some way I have hurt you, and that I do so want to be forgiven. At least, be frank and tell me just why you do not wish my friendship.”

“Why don’t you tell him, dearie? If it would be hard to talk it over with him, write a little letter now and leave it until someone comes for the Packard ranch mail. Will you do that if I get the materials?”

Jane nodded miserably. “Yes, I would rather write it. Then I will go back with

you next week and I shall never again see Jean Sawyer."

Merry procured from Mr. Bently the paper and envelope, while Bob willingly loaned his fountain pen. A glance at the big, loud-ticking clock on the wall showed that there was still twenty minutes before Mrs. Bently would be ready for them.

Merry thoughtfully left Jane alone, nor did she ask what her friend had written when, at last, she joined the others, who were seated in the cane-bottomed chairs on the front veranda of the inn.

The letter Jane had given to Mr. Bently, asking him to place it with the rest of the mail for the Packard ranch.

The boys sprang up when Jane appeared, and Bob, being nearest, offered his chair with a flourish. Merry glanced anxiously at her friend, but the beautiful face betrayed nothing. "Thank you," Jane replied with a smile at Bob, who had perched upon the rail near. Then, to Dan, she said: "Brother, I have such a nice letter from Dad and one from grandmother, but best of all is the check in Aunt Jane's letter, because now I can repay the debt that I owe our dear, wonderful Meg."

Before she could say more, Mrs. Bently appeared in the doorway, her face rosy, her spotless blue apron wound about her hands. "The birthday lunch is ready to be dished up," she announced. Instantly Bob was on his feet, making a deep bow before Jane and holding out his arm as he inquired, "May I have the great pleasure of escorting the guest of honor?"

Gerald, taking the cue, bowed before Merry and Julie, laughing up at Dan, said ungrammatically but happily: "Me'n you are all that's left." The tall boy caught the little girl by one hand as he joyfully replied: "Mrs. Tom Thumb and The Living Skeleton will end the procession."

Jane, smiling over her shoulder, said rebukingly, "Don't call yourself that, brother. You're not nearly as thin as you were." When the dining-room was reached, the young people were surprised and pleased. "Say, boy!" was Bob's comment "Mrs. Bently, you've decked it out in grand style."

The table to which they had been led was indeed resplendent with the best of everything that the good woman possessed. On a real damask table-cloth was

glass that sparkled, while a pink rose pattern wound about plates and cups. “They’re my wedding presents,” the comely woman told them as she beamed her pleasure. “I never use them except for extra occasions like Christmas and ____”

“Birthdays,” Gerald put in. Then, after the boys had moved the chairs out for the girls and all were seated, they glanced about the room. Two cowboys were at a table in a corner, and Jane recognized that one of them was from the Packard ranch. “He’ll take back their mail,” she thought, “and so this very day Jean Sawyer will know all. He will never, never want to see me after he reads what I have written.”

The menu for that birthday lunch was indeed an excellent one, but the children, who sat next to each other, were eagerly anticipating the dessert. “What do you ’spect it will be?” Gerald inquired softly, and Julie whispered back: “I know what I wish it was. It begins with I. C.”

“You might as well wish for something else,” Dan, who had overheard, replied, but when Mrs. Bently appeared, on her tray there were six dishes heaped high with chocolate ice cream.

“Why, Mrs. Bently, are you a miracle worker?” Jane, pleased for the children’s sake, inquired. Laughingly the woman confessed that the ice-cream had been the reason she had asked for one hour in which to prepare. “So many folks motorin’ past want ice-cream,” she told them, “and so Pa Bently fetched a new contraption from Denver last time he was up there, an’ it’ll freeze ice-cream in one hour easy.” Then she disappeared to soon return with a mountain of a chocolate layer cake. “You’ll have to get along without candles, Miss Jane,” the good woman said, “an’ the frostin’ ain’t very hard yet, but I reckon it’ll pass.”

The girl, who had felt scornful of these “natives,” as she had called them only a short month before, was deeply touched and she exclaimed with real feeling: “Mrs. Bently, I do indeed appreciate all the trouble that you have taken. I have never had a nicer party.”

A moment later Jane saw the two cowboys leave the dining-room. Almost unconsciously she pressed her hand against her heart to still its rapid beating as her panicky thought was questioning: “Do you really want to send that letter to Jean Sawyer? There is yet time to get it. Do you want him to know just how

dishonorable you were about the money?" She half rose, then sank down again, for through the swinging door she had seen Mr. Bently handing the Packard mail pouch to the cowboy. It was too late. Then, chancing to meet Merry's troubled glance, Jane smiled as she said with an effort at gaiety: "Gerald, if all of your wishes are to be fulfilled as magically as this one has been, you are to be a lucky boy."

"There's two things we've wished for lately that don't happen, aren't there, Danny?" The small boy looked up at his big brother, who smiled down, as be replied, "I suppose you mean that we have not found Meg Heger's box. What is the other unmaterialized wish, Gerry?"

The boy's wide eyes expressed astonishment. "Why, Dan Abbott, I do believe you've forgotten that we wished we might find the lost gold mine."

The older boy laughingly confessed that was true. Dan had found a gold mine that he valued much more than the one to which Gerald referred. It was Mrs. Bently who said, "It wasn't a lost mine, exactly, dearie. The vein they'd been workin' petered out, although there are folks who reckon that vein branched off somewhars, but the miners went away hot-foot when the Bald Mountain Strike was made." Then she concluded: "There's not much use huntin' for that lost vein, how-some-ever. Time and again there's been wanderin' miners diggin' around in them parts, but they allays give up and go away."

Then, as the young people rose, they each expressed some characteristic praise for the meal and indeed Mrs. Bently was almost as pleased about it as her guests had been. The bill, they found, was surprisingly small. Then, after bidding the two queer characters goodbye, the six merrymakers started up the trail with Julie again on the horse. The other girls took turns riding with her and so, at about two, they reached the Abbott cabin. Dan climbed to the back of the mare. Calling that he would soon return, he rode up the mountain toward Meg's home. How very many things had happened in the few weeks they had been in the mountains, he thought. If only Jane could be happy, Dan assured himself, he would be supremely so. But poor Jane found, as the moments passed, that she regretted more and more having sent the letter, but she would not confide this to Merry, whose suggestion it had been. Meanwhile the letter had reached its destination and had been read by Jean Sawyer.

CHAPTER XXXIV.
SECRETS

Merry glanced anxiously at Jane when they were alone, Bob having gone with the children for a hike along the brook.

“Dear,” she said, slipping an arm about her friend, “you are regretting having taken my advice, aren’t you?”

They were in the bedroom which they shared, removing their tams and sweaters when, to Merry’s surprise and grief, Jane threw herself down on the bed and sobbed as though her heart would break. “Oh, I can’t bear the humiliation of it all! How I wish we could leave for the East today, this very minute. While I am here, I may meet Jean Sawyer, and if he looks at me scornfully, as of course he will, I would rather be dead, honestly I would!”

Merry indeed regretted that she had asked Jane to send the letter which was causing her so much unhappiness. “Try to forget about it, Janey, just for today,” she implored, “while we are celebrating your eighteenth birthday.” Then an inspiration came to her and she asked: “What would your mother have done if she had had a sorrow that would sadden others if they knew about it?”

Jane sat up on the side of the bed, and, after glancing at the miniature on the table near, she turned and looked thoughtfully out of the wide window and into the sun-shimmering valley. Merry wondered what her reply would be. A moment later she knew, for Jane sprang up and after kissing the golden-haired girl impulsively, she caught her by the hand, saying: “I’m going out to the brook to wash my face in that clear, cold water, just as Dan and I did the first day that we came. And I’ll try to wash away all selfish grievings and to think, if I can, only of the happiness of the guests at my birthday party. That’s what my mother

would have done. I am so glad that Dan told me that we can choose a model or an ideal and carve our own characters like it and I'm grateful to you for having recalled it to me, because, for the moment, I had forgotten." The girls took their towels and hand in hand they skipped around to the brook. Jane knelt by the big boulder and splashed the cold spring water over her tear-stained eyes. When she looked up her wet cheeks were rosy. And later, when they had gone back to the bedroom to complete their preparations for the party, Merry begged Jane to wear a wine-colored dress which was especially becoming to her. It was of soft, clinging crepe de chine and had a deep collar of Irish crochet. Then they went into the living-room to await the coming of their guest. Merry, whose dainty blue summer dress made her lovely eyes the color of a June sky, sat smiling admiringly at her friend. "Jane," she said, "you are wonderful. But there is just one more touch needed to make you look a bit more partified. I will get it."

Springing up, Merry went into their bedroom, took from her suitcase a box which contained a beautiful scarlet rose with satin and velvet petals. This she pinned into Jane's soft, dark hair just above her left ear. Standing off to note the effect, Merry declared that her friend was certainly the most beautiful girl she had ever seen. A short month before Jane would have considered this praise her just due, but, so greatly had she changed, her reply was given in entire sincerity: "I may be the most beautiful to you, because you love me, but Meg Heger is really the more beautiful." Before Merry could reply, there was an excited shouting without. Both girls leaped to the open door. They saw Meg Heger riding on her spotted pony, while Dan on the big brown mare was at her side, but they were conversing quietly. The halloos came from the brook. Turning to look in that direction, the girls saw Julie, Bob and Gerald racing toward them as fast as they could over the rocky way, and it was quite evident that they were all very much excited. "I wonder what they have seen?" Jane said.

Before the children and Bob could reach the cabin, Meg and Dan had climbed the stairway and had been greeted by the two girls.

The trapper's daughter wore a simply fashioned Scotch plaid gingham dress in which many colors were mingled.

They all turned toward the brook when the three, who were racing toward them, neared.

"What, ho!" Dan called gayly, and Jane noted that never before had she seen in

her brother's face an expression of such radiant happiness. "Did you three see a bear? It never will do for us to go back East without having at least sighted a grizzly."

To the surprise of the four who awaited them, the newcomers became suddenly embarrassed, and even Bob acted as though he hardly knew what to say, which was quite unusual in so straightforward and impulsive a lad.

"Dan," he said, "may I speak with you a moment?"

The older boy walked away from the curious group of girls.

"We did not know that Meg Heger had come," Bob began, "and we were just going to call out that we had found another place where we would like to look for the lost box. It's such a queer place, Dan, but it is one that as yet we have not investigated. Can't we get away from the girls somehow? Gerald and Julie and I want to show the spot to *you* at least."

"Why, I presume so," Dan agreed, and after explaining to the three older girls that Bob and the youngsters wished to show him something, he followed them back along the brook. It was the way that he had gone on that day when he had first visited the Heger cabin. When they reached the waterfall which Dan had thought so pretty, they climbed down to the red rock basin into which it fell. Excitedly, Gerald pointed back of the tumbling water.

"Look-it, Dan!" he fairly shouted. "See that little cave opening in there! Doesn't it look to you as if it had been made with a pickaxe? Bob thinks it does."

Dan looked through the transparent sheet of hurrying water and smilingly shook his head as he replied:

"I don't suppose that a human being has ever been through that crevice, and, moreover, I don't quite see how we can investigate, do you, Bob?"

Dan, noting the disappointed expression on his small brother's face, turned toward the older boy.

"We sort of had it figured out that Gerald could stand back of the waterfall and then he could see better whether that is just a crevice in the rocks or the mouth of a cave."

The youngest boy looked up eagerly. “You know, Dan, I fetched along my bathing suit. Mayn’t I go back to the cabin and put it on? Mayn’t I, Dan?”

“Why, of course, if you wish, but perhaps you had better say nothing to the girls about it. I do not like to have Meg know that we are searching for that box, since there is no real likelihood of our finding it.”

Luckily the girls were not in sight, and so no questions were asked of the small boy, who dived into his own room, donned his bathing suit and raced away, without having been seen. Dan held the younger boy’s hand in a tight clasp as Gerald went down into the clear, cold pool.

“Now, hold your breath and step up on that ledge back of the waterfall,” the older brother advised.

Julie watched wide-eyed, almost frightened.

“Oh, Danny,” she suddenly exclaimed, “couldn’t there be something terrible hiding in that crack?”

But before Dan could assure her that it was not likely, Gerald had leaped back into the rock basin, crying: “It’s a cave in there! Oh, boy! Shall I go in it, Dan; shall I?”

“Not alone!” The older boy was almost sorry that the crevice had been found. “Bob,” he said, turning to the lad who stood meditatively looking at the waterfall, “I don’t believe that it would be wise to permit Gerald to go into that cave. He might suddenly drop into a pit filled with water. Let’s give it up, shall we, and go back to the girls?”

It was plain to see that Bob was disappointed, but his reply was: “Of course, Gerald ought not to go into that cave, if it is one. I had no intention of permitting him to do more than see if it really is an opening. I also have a bathing suit and a flashlight. I never will be satisfied unless I investigate, but of course I will not take a step inside unless it is solid rock.”

Against his better judgment, Dan said, “Well, go ahead, Bob, if you want to.”

The girls had evidently sauntered away from the cabin, for Bob did not see them when he went there to don his bathing suit. He rejoined the others in a very short

time. Having been an athlete in college, he swung himself down and back of the waterfall without aid. Then flashing the light into the crevice, he sang out: “There’s a solid floor, all right, Dan, but I think Gerald had better not come.”

For a long five minutes the group on the outside waited, listening with ever-increasing anxiety. Dan thought that he would be sincerely glad when this foolhardy adventure was over. At last he called:

“Bob, haven’t you investigated enough? Come on out!”

But there was no reply. Another five minutes elapsed and Dan was just about to have Gerald again climb back of the waterfall to look through the crevice, when Bob appeared, carrying a pickaxe and a shovel, rusted and dirt encrusted.

“What do you say to that?” he exulted, as he plunged through the fall and waded out of the red rock pool.

Dan was amazed. “Bob,” he exclaimed, “you were right about one thing at least. The cave was made with a pick. Was it large?”

“No; that is, not wide. It is a narrow tunnel which stops abruptly. I found these tools at the very end.”

Dan lifted his shovel and looked at the handle. Then he examined it more closely. Picking up a stone, he knocked away the dirt with which it was crusted. A name was carved in the handle. Letter by letter was deciphered and Dan wrote each in his small notebook. When they had reached the last, Bob asked: “Is it a message telling where the box is?”

“No,” Dan replied, “merely the name and address of the owner of the shovel and pick, I judge. A French name, Giguette. Yes, that is it, Franc Giguette.”

“But there is more to it, Danny.” Gerald was trying to see the pad. “What’s the rest?”

“Where the miner lived, I suppose,” Dan told him. “Cabin 10, I think it is.”

Bob leaped around wild with joy. “Talk about a clue! Why, that’s the number of the cabin at Crazy Creek where this miner lived. Can’t we go right over and hunt for it, Dan? Do you suppose that the girls would care if Gerald and I go? We

aren’t at all necessary to the birthday party. You and Julie are.”

“Of course, you may do as you wish,” Dan acquiesced. “It’s a long way to the camp, though.”

“Not if we can ride,” Gerry put in. “You and Meg came down on the horses. Where are they?”

“Back at the Heger cabin by this time,” the older brother replied. “Meg turned her pony’s head up the mountain road and said, ‘Go home, Pal,’ and the brown mare seemed to be quite content to follow. Perhaps you will overtake them.”

Bob caught hold of Gerald’s hand as he said: “We’ll have to hustle, old man, if we get back before dark.”

Gerry glanced at Julie to see if she were terribly disappointed, but the small girl smiled, though a bit waveringly. Dan, noting this, spoke for her: “Julie and I will stay at the cabin. It would hardly do for us all to leave Jane on her birthday.”

These two sauntered slowly along the brook, and before they reached the cabin they saw Bob and Gerald, fully clothed, starting to run up the mountain road.

Dan had little expectation that they would find the box of which the old Indian had told Meg, but he knew that Bob would not be able to enjoy the quiet party when be might be out following a clue.

The girls were seated on the rustic front porch when Dan and Julie appeared. Jane smiled a greeting to them, then asked: “Do tell us what has happened to Bob and Gerry. They dashed in and out again, nor would they stop when we called to ask where they were going?”

“Boys will be boys,” was Dan’s evasive answer as he sank down on the porch step and smiled up at Meg. Then he heard his questioning thought asking: “Is it possible that Meg’s real name is Giguette?”

The five who remained at the cabin that afternoon found it difficult to converse idly, for the thoughts of each kept returning to a subject of great interest to that individual. Meg's good friend Teacher Bellows had told her that as soon as her examinations were completed he would accompany her and Pa Heger to a distant valley in the mountains where he had heard that the Ute tribe was then dwelling. They believed the finding of the box to be impossible since all through the years the old Indian had searched for it.

Merry, who had slipped her ring back into its case before any of her friends, except Jane, had seen it, was wondering when would be the best time to put it on her finger and announce to them all that she was to become the wife of Jean's brother. She had wanted to wait until Jean Willoughby should be with them, but when that would be, she could not conjecture.

Dan and Julie were very much excited over the discovery of the pick and shovel, and the lad could see by the small girl's manner that she was finding the secret almost more than she could keep. Every now and then, in childish fashion, Julie would look over at her brother, hump her shoulders and put a finger on her lips. Jane noted this, but was too miserably unhappy to wonder about little girl secrets. But she was being true to her resolve. She was ever keeping the memory of her mother in thought, and trying to be interested in what her companions were saying.

It was indeed a long afternoon, tense with suppressed excitement. At five-thirty, when the boys had not returned, Dan began to regret that he had granted the permission, for, of course, Gerry would not have gone to Crazy Creek Camp if his older brother had thought it unwise, and Bob, in all probability, would not have gone alone.

Jane, after glancing at her wrist watch, sprang up, announcing with evident gaiety: "Merry and I have a supper planned."

Then, turning to the younger girl, she invited: "Julie, dear, wouldn't you like to set the table and make it look real partified?"

"Oh, goodie!" The small girl was glad to be asked to accompany the older two and away she skipped. Meg and Dan were left alone, for their offers of assistance had been refused.

“Suppose we climb to Bald Rock and watch the sunset,” Dan suggested. The girl, smiling up at him, arose at once. As soon as they had started to climb along the singing brook, Meg looked at her companion inquiringly. “Dan,” she said, “won’t you share your secret with me?”

“Perhaps,” the lad countered, “if you will share yours with me.” A merry, rippling laugh, as silvery as the song of the brook they were following, was the girl’s first response. Then, “We must be mind readers,” she told him.

Dan glanced down into the dusky uplifted face and in his eyes there was an expression almost of adoration. “Meg,” he said, “doesn’t that alone prove that we are perfect comrades? We can sense each other’s unspoken thought.” Then, with greater seriousness: “I have hesitated about telling you, and moreover you have been in Scarsburg during the past week, but it is your right to know. Bob and Gerald and I have been searching for the box of which the dying Indian told you.”

“Why, Dan,” the girl’s surprise was unmistakable, “it is but wasting time. If the old Ute could not find it, surely it is not findable. There is a simpler way to learn of my parentage, and one which Pa Heger, Teacher Bellows and I are planning to undertake.” Then she told of the journey into the mountains upon which they expected to start when her examinations were completed. While Meg talked, she realized that Dan had still more to tell, and so she asked: “Where did you boys search, and did you find anything at all?”

“Yes, Meg, we did unearth something and that is why Bob and Gerry hurried away in so mysterious a fashion.” Then the lad told about the dirt-crusted shovel and pick and of the carved name.

“Giguette!” the girl repeated as though she were searching her memory for something forgotten. Then lifting a radiant face, she exclaimed: “Dan Abbott, that is my name. I was only a little thing, less than three, when someone taught me to lisp that my name was ‘Lalie Giguette’ when anyone asked. Until now, I had completely forgotten.”

CHAPTER XXXV.
JANE AND JEAN

Meanwhile the three girls in the kitchen were preparing the evening meal with much nonsensical chatter, but Jane was finding the strain almost more than she could bear. She felt that she might overcome her desire to go to her room and sob her heart out, if only she could get away by herself for a few moments, and so she suddenly, exclaimed, “The one thing needed for our table is a bouquet. I saw a clump of the prettiest wild flowers yesterday, and if you girls will excuse me I’ll go and get them.” Merry at once saw through the ruse. Jane’s flushed cheeks, quivering lips and tear-brimmed eyes told the story, and so she urged, “Do go, Jane, before it is dark. The cool mountain air will do you good.” She did not offer to accompany her friend, realizing that she wanted to be alone.

Jane left the cabin, and after crossing the brook, she hurried toward the cleft in a rock where she had seen the flowers of which she had spoken, but instead of gathering them, she threw herself down on a wide, flat boulder and sobbed bitterly. She did not hear footsteps hurrying toward her, but suddenly she was conscious that someone had taken her hand and was holding it with great tenderness. “Of course it is Dan,” she thought, without glancing up. Dear old Dan who always understood. But in another second, when the someone spoke, Jane knew that it was Jean Willoughby and not her brother. Instantly she was on her feet, her cheeks flaming, her hand pressed over her pounding heart. There was a wild, frightened expression in her eyes and she was about to run, but she could not, for two strong arms caught and held her, as the lad implored, “Jane, dear, dear Jane, don’t spurn me any longer. Don’t you understand that I love you? The very fact that you could write that letter to me reveals the true nobility of your soul. I don’t blame you in the least for finding it hard, at first, to adjust yourself to the changed conditions, but when it came to the testing, you would have told your father to do just what he did.” Then, putting a hand over her

quivering lips, he begged, “Don’t let’s talk about that subject now. There’s something ever so much more interesting that I want to say. Jane, can you care enough for me to promise to be my wife?”

The sudden change from misery to joy had been so great that the girl could hardly believe that it was real, and she gazed uncomprehendingly into the eager, handsome face of the lad. Then slowly she read in his glowing eyes the truth of all he had said, and she smiled tremulously. It was enough for Jean Willoughby. Joyfully he cried, “You *do* care, Jane!” Then taking from his pocket a ring, he added (and there was infinite tenderness in his voice), “That last summer on the coast of Maine, when little mother and I were alone together, she gave me this for *you*, dearest girl.”

Again there were sudden tears in the dark eyes that were lifted to his. “Not for *me*, Jean. Your mother would have chosen a girl who could do useful things; pare potatoes, sew and darn.”

The lad laughed happily, and catching the slim left hand, he slipped the ring on the finger for which it was intended. Then he kissed each of the five finger tips as he confessed, “It may seem inconsistent, but I want these lovely hands kept stainless. We will have a Chinaman to pare and cook.” Then slowly they walked toward the cabin.

Meg and Dan had returned and with Merry and Julie were standing on the rustic front porch wondering where Jane had wandered, and why she remained away so long. When they saw the two coming toward them, hand in hand, their faces, even in the dusk, that had so quickly fallen, revealing their secret, there was joy in the hearts of Merry and Dan. Jane would no longer be unhappy. When they had entered the lighted living-room of the cabin, Merry exclaimed as she held out her left hand, “I also am to be congratulated. I am to be married to Jean’s brother on the first day of September.” “Let’s make it a double wedding, Jane, can’t we?” her fiance implored.

“I’d like to!” The radiant girl glanced at Dan, then added, “If my big brother will give his consent.” “Indeed you have it, Jane,” that lad said heartily. “I know that I am voicing our father’s sentiments-to-be, when I say that I am proud to welcome Jean Willoughby into our family.”

Of their own secret Meg and Dan had decided to say nothing.

Then remembering the commonplaces, Jane said: “We’re waiting supper for the boys. Where did they go and why?” She looked at both Julie and Dan. “You two surely know, since you were with them. It is nearly seven and getting dark rapidly. Aren’t you anxious about them, Dan?”

“I shall be if they do not soon return,” the lad replied. “Perhaps we had better have the good supper you have prepared. There is no need to spoil it for all.”

“I’m not a bit hungry,” Jane said and Merry teased: “Why, Janey, you must be in love.”

The table had been placed in the middle of the cabin living-room. Over it hung a drop lamp with a crimson shade and, as there was a log burning on the hearth, the room presented a most festive appearance. It was with sincere regret that the six young people seated themselves, leaving two chairs vacant. All during the meal, at intervals, they paused to listen, hoping that they would hear the halloos of the returning boys.

Dan was becoming thoroughly alarmed and, at last, after a consultation with Meg, he turned to the others and said: “We have decided to tell you the mission on which the boys started out so hurriedly.”

Of course Jane and Merry had surmised that they had gone in quest of the hidden box, but they knew nothing of the finding of the pick, shovel and carved name, and they were much interested.

At eight o’clock Jean Willoughby rose. “I had better be going,” he said. “I have a long hike ahead of me.” But Dan protested. “Indeed you shall not go tonight. Mr. Packard will not be worried if you remain with us, will he? I may need your help to locate the boys if they do not soon return.”

That settled the matter, for Jean had not wished to leave. Another hour passed, and Dan, who had really become very anxious, arose, but before he could get his coat and cap, the halloos for which they had long listened were heard.

Leaping to the door, Dan threw it open and a welcoming light streamed out into the darkness.

Bob and Gerry, looking almost exhausted, staggered into the room (although Dan well knew that it was for effect) and sank down on the vacant chairs. “Say,

talk about a climb! We certainly had a steep one!” Bob gasped.

The young people at once noted that neither boy was carrying a box and so they decided that it had not been found. “It isn’t such a terrible steep climb to Crazy Creek Camp,” Dan commented. “Half of the way is down grade.”

The two younger boys exchanged glances that were hard for the watchers to interpret. Then Bob sprang up, exclaiming: “Come on, kid. Let’s wash and have some of the good grub.”

“You must be nearly starved,” Jane said, also rising and going toward the kitchen. “We are keeping your share of the party warm.”

When they were gone, Dan said softly: “I’m inclined to believe that the boys have something of a surprising nature to tell us, but after Gerry’s usual fashion he wants to keep us guessing for a time.”

The two mountain climbers were indeed hungry and they ate heartily, talking aggravatingly of everything but the matter which they knew was uppermost in the minds of their companions. When they declared that another bite could not be taken, the table was cleared, magazines and books again spread upon it, and then Dan, feeling it unfair to Meg to keep her longer in suspense, exclaimed, “Now, boys, tell us your adventures.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.
MYSTERIES HALF SOLVED

“It didn’t take us long to get to Crazy Creek Camp, I can tell you.” Bob, glancing from one to another of the group about the fireplace, saw in each face an eager interest in the tale he had to tell. But in Meg’s face there was more than interest, and suddenly Bob realized that the finding of the lost box was of vital importance to the mountain girl, while, to him, it had been merely an exciting adventure, the mystery of which had lured him on.

After a thoughtful moment, he continued: “We found most of the cabins unnumbered, or, if they had once been so marked, time and storms had done away with the numerals. But we did find a tunnel above which the figures 10 had been chipped out of solid stone. The opening of the small tunnel was closed, however, by red rocks that had fallen evidently in a landslide. I suggested that we lift them away one by one, but Gerry thought it a waste of time as the carving on the handle had been ‘Cabin 10’ and not Tunnel 10. But I was not so sure, and so we went to work and in half an hour we had an opening large enough to enter one at a time. I had my flashlight with me, and stooping, I looked in. Strangely enough, I saw a faint gleam of daylight at the other end.”

Bob paused and glanced about the group to make sure that they were all properly curious before he continued: “The tunnel was not high enough for even Gerry to stand in erect and so on all fours we crept through it. Since the opening had been stopped up I did not fear meeting wild creatures, but as we neared the other end, the daylight grew brighter and then to our great surprise we came out upon a wide ledge which hung there in the most dizzying manner. On it was a rustic cabin, and back of that a fenced-in dooryard. Surely, we decided, this was Cabin 10. There was no way of reaching it except through the tunnel, as the mountain wall was almost perpendicular above and below the ledge.

“We were greatly elated and at once tried the door and found it unlocked. There was only one room and it looked like the den of a student. Books and papers were everywhere in evidence; dust-covered and yellowed with the years. On the desk a bottle of dried ink was uncorked and a rusted pen lying there seemed to indicate that someone had suddenly stopped writing, and, for some reason, had never again taken up the pen. As further proof of this we found a letter which was lying near, with even the last sentence unfinished. It is addressed to ‘My dear petite daughter—Eulalie.’ We didn’t stop to read it because it was getting late and so we started for home.”

Meg, no longer able to keep silent, leaned forward, asking eagerly, “Bob, may I see the letter that my father left for me?”

“*Your father?*” Jane and Merry exclaimed almost simultaneously. Even then Meg’s calm was not outwardly disturbed.

“Yes,” she said, turning her wonderful eyes toward her friends. In them the girls saw an expression of radiant happiness which told them more than words could how great was Meg’s joy that she had at last learned who her father really was. Jane and Merry were perplexed. How did Meg know? Their question was answered before it was asked. “I should have told you girls this afternoon. When Dan spoke the name that he had found carved on the handle of the old shovel, instantly memory recalled to me that, as a very small child, I had been taught to lisp that my name was Lalie Giguette.”

“O Meg, what a beautiful name. May we begin at once to call you Eulalie?” The mountain girl smiled at Jane. “If you wish, dear friend.” She then held out her hand for the letter which Bob had gone to his sweater coat to procure.

“We found several books with your father’s name on them as author,” the boy informed her, and the girl looked up brightly to say, “O, I am so glad! Did you bring them?”

“No,” Bob replied, “we thought perhaps you would like to visit the cabin and find everything there just as he left it.”

“I would indeed!” Meg rose, and going to the center table, she spread the letter under the hanging lamp. After a moment’s scrutiny, she turned toward the silently waiting group. “It is clearly written,” she said. “I will read it aloud:

“‘To my dear petite daughter Eulalie,’” Meg read,

“‘Poor little wee lassie! Not yet three and no one to care for you. I shall try to get back to New York before the end comes, but there is no one, not even in France, where I lived as a boy. All—all are dead.

“‘But you will want to know much and I will be gone when you are old enough to question. When I was twenty-one I came to New York and married a girl who was as all alone as I. We were very happy, but my loved one, your mother, died when you were born. For a long year I grieved until my health was broken. For your sake, Lalie, I followed my doctor’s advice and came to the Rocky Mountains. I was about to put you in a convent school, but you clung to me and would not loosen your hold. I feared I had not long to live and I did so want you with me, hence I brought you here. But if I do not get stronger soon, I will take you back to the kind sisters, who will make you a home.

“‘We reached this deserted mining camp after weeks of wandering and I built for us a cabin where we could be alone and unmolested. At last my lost ambition had returned. I wrote the book of my dreams and sent it to my publisher in New York. I hope, dear little daughter, that it will be a success for your sake, but as yet I do not know.’”

Meg looked up and her dusky eyes were filled with tears. “That is all on the first sheet,” she said. “The next was written at a later date.” Then again she read:

“‘A tribe of Ute Indians has taken possession of the deserted cabins in the camp, but, as there is little game hereabouts, I doubt if they will long remain.’

“Two weeks later: ‘I have not been as well as I had hoped to be. I did very wrong to spend so many hours writing my dream book, but now that it is completed I will write no more until I am stronger. Every day with a pick and shovel I dig in different places for recreation and exercise, endeavoring to find the fabled gold mine, the vein of which was lost, or so I have been told by an occasional miner who has passed this way. Before starting out I take you each afternoon to the cabin of a most kindly squaw who understands some English and since I pay her well, she is willing to care for you during my absence.’”

For a long moment Meg ceased reading and Dan, noting that her hands trembled, went to her side, saying with tender solicitude: “Dear girl, what is it? I fear that reading aloud this letter from your father is very hard for you. Wouldn’t you

rather read it to yourself?" The girl lifted tear-filled eyes. "It isn't that, Dan," she said. "I want to share it with my friends who are so loving and loyal, but I cannot decipher the rest."

There was a faded blur on the paper as though the pen had fallen. Then it had evidently been picked up again, but the scrawled letters that followed were very hard to read. Slowly the girl deciphered: "Lalie, when you are eighteen, get box ——" Then there was another blot and the pen had evidently rolled across the paper.

The girl held the letter up to Dan. "I fear we will never know where the box is," she said, "for that is all."

But the lad, after scrutinizing the sheet, held it up to the light.

"There is more written, but evidently a drop of ink spread over it. Gerry, bring the magnifying glass." The small boy, glad to be of assistance, leaped to get it. Dan gazed through it for a long five minutes. Then he began to name the letters, and Bob, who had seized a pencil and paper, wrote them down. "*B-a-n-k.*" Dan glanced questioningly at Meg. "What kind of a bank do you suppose it means?" Then to Bob: "Were there any banks of dirt near the cabin?" That lad shook his head.

Jane suggested: "Would it not be more natural to suppose it to be a New York bank, since that had been Mr. Giguette's home for years?"

They all decided this to be true. Then Merry asked: "Meg, or may I say Eulalie, are you willing that I should wire my father all that we know? He is a lawyer in New York and be will gladly find out what he can."

How the dusky face brightened. "Oh, thank you, Merry. Please do!" Then, rising, the mountain girl held out both hands to Jane and Merry. "I must go now," she said, "to the dear old couple who have been all the father and mother I have ever known."

Dan accompanied Meg up the winding mountain road.

CHAPTER XXXVII.
THE MYSTERY SOLVED

“What a glorious moonlit night it is!” Merry exclaimed when, Meg and Dan having gone, the others turned back toward the cabin.

“I say, sis,” Bob exclaimed, “why not get that telegram written and let me take it down to the village. You can put heaps more into a night letter.”

“Why, Bobby, it must be after nine. The innkeeper’s family will be asleep by the time you could get there.”

Jean Willoughby explained: “They have two sons, and one of them is always on duty as night clerk. Strangers motoring through put up there at all hours.” Then the young overseer added: “I wish now that I had ridden over and you could have used my horse.”

“We sent the two we had back to the Heger cabin,” Bob said, but added, as he took a handspring to prove to his sister that he was not at all tired, “I’d just as soon walk.” Then, as another thought occurred to him, he turned to the younger lad, asking, “If you’re game, Gerry, come along with me. We’ll put up at the inn for the night and bring back the answer from father as soon as it comes.”

Since there was no particular reason why they should not do this, Merry and Jane made no further remonstrances. Going indoors, a carefully planned night letter was prepared and in great glee the two boys started out, each carrying a gun, as Jean told them that they *might* meet a wildcat.

“Huh! I hoped you were going to say a grizzly bear.”

Gerry’s tone seemed to imply that they were quite fearless.

Soon after the boys had departed, Dan returned. Glancing at Jean, he questioned: “Ought we to follow them?” But the other lad replied:

“They’re safe enough! Moreover, I told Bob to swing a red lantern three times when they reach the inn. The night is so clear, we surely can see it.”

And so they waited, and an hour later the expected signal was plainly seen by all of them.

“Now to bed, everybody!” Dan sprang up and held both hands toward his sister Jane. Julie had been prevailed upon to retire soon after the lads started out and was sound asleep.

The girls had decided to be up at an early hour, but because they had gone to bed much later than usual they overslept.

It was after noon before Meg appeared.

“Ma Heger” had needed her help, was all that she said. Jane and Merry decided not to tell her about the night letter, for the suspense would be far harder for her to bear than it was for them.

But after a time Meg began to wonder why, at frequent intervals, one or another of the young people went to the top of the stone stairs, and through field glasses, gazed down the mountain road. It was two o’clock when the old stage was seen slowly ascending.

“I entirely forgot that the stage passes us on Saturday afternoon,” Dan exclaimed. “Of course, Bob and Gerry waited to ride up.”

But as the lumbering vehicle neared, the passengers were seen to be all adults—a west valley rancher, his wife and grown daughters. Then, just as the watchers had given up hope, the two laughing boys dropped from the back of the stage and ran up the stone stairs.

Paying no heed to the others, Bob leaped over to where Meg was standing, and making a deep bow, he handed her a yellow envelope.

“But this is for Merry,” the mountain girl told him.

“True enough!” and Bob gave the telegram to his sister. Opening it, she read:

“Franc Giguette, author of ‘The Star that Set.’ Book was great success! Publishers holding royalties, as they were uncalled for. Box in name of Eulalie Giguette at the First National Bank. Contains contracts and papers of value, also jewels. Await further advice.”

While all of the others congratulated the beautiful girl, Dan stood aside with sorrow in his heart. He had asked Meg to marry him when he thought her poor. Even then they would have had a long wait, for he had wanted to help his father for a time before he considered his own happiness.

Meg looked over at the lad whom she so loved. “Aren’t *you* also glad for me, Dan?” she asked.

“Yes, very glad,” he said, but he was more than ever pleased that he and Meg had not told of their engagement, which might never be fulfilled.

When the excitement had somewhat subsided, Bob recalled that he had a letter for Jean Willoughby, and, bringing it forth, presented it to the young man, who looked inquiringly at the handwriting; then with a quick, questioning glance at Merry, he tore it open and read its message.

“Marion Starr,” he cried, “you wrote my father, did you not, telling him where you found me?”

It was evident that he was *not* displeased.

The golden haired girl nodded, then waited eagerly to hear what manner of message the letter contained.

“Dan,” said Bob, “your father and mine are again partners, for Dad has restored the money that had been supposedly lost. Since your father had recompensed the investors, the firm of Abbott & Willoughby, as re-established, is much richer than it was, for while holding the money, Dad made investments that have tripled the capital of the firm. Nor is that all! Father has set aside money to start my brother and me in any business we may choose, and your father is to do the same for each of his boys as the need arises.”

Before Dan could speak, Jean hurried on with, “Mr. Packard has offered to divide his ranch in three parts, and Jane and I are to have one of them. Dan, you love the West. It agrees with you. Won’t you take the third?”

“That’s wonderful news!” Dan cried glowingly. “Indeed I would like to own a third of the Green Hills ranch.”

Then to the surprise of the others, he went to the mountain girl with hands outstretched, and said, his voice tense with feeling: “Meg—Eulalie—may I set the day for our wedding?”

The dusky eyes of the beautiful girl were more than ever starlike as she nodded up at him.

“Great!” he cried joyfully. “Then we will *all* be married on the first of September.”

Transcriber's Note

- A few typographical errors were corrected without comment.
- Nonstandard spellings and dialect were left as in the original.
- Rearranged front matter to a more-logical order.

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