

Maniates Belle Kanaris

Penny of Top Hill Trail



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CHAPTER I

On an afternoon in early spring a man lounged against the wall of the station waiting for the express from the east. Slender of waist and hip, stalwart of shoulder, some seventy-two inches of sinewy height, he was the figure of the typical cattleman. His eyes were deep-set and far-seeing; his lean, brown face, roughened by outdoor life, was austere and resolute in expression.

The train had barely stopped when a boyish-looking, lithe-limbed youth leaped from the platform. The blue serge suit and checked cap he wore did not disguise the fact that his working clothes – his field uniform – were those of a cow-puncher. A few quick strides brought him to the man in waiting.

“Hoped you’d be on hand to meet me, Kurt, so I could get out to the ranch to-night. How’s things up there?”

“Just the same as they were when you left, Jo,” said the one addressed in whimsical tone. “You’ve only been gone ten days, you know.”

“You don’t say!” ejaculated Jo, following his companion through the depot. “City does age a man.”

Gone are the days of The Golden West when spurred and revolvered horsemen sprang into saddles and loped out of the brush, or skimmed over matted mesquite on a buckboard drawn by swift-running ponies.

A long racing car was waiting for the two men and they were soon speeding over a hard-baked, steel-like road that led up, around and over the far-flung, undulating hills before them.

“I thought Kingdon’s best car was worth a million bucks before I went to Chicago,” said Joe critically, “but it sure would look like a two-spot on Michigan Avenue.”

The other smiled indulgently.

“I trust everything out here won’t suffer by comparison with the things you have seen during your journey.”

“I should say not! It all looks pretty good to me. I wouldn’t change this trail to Top Hill for all the boulevards and asphalts of Chicago, and our ranch-house has got any hotel I saw skinned by a mile for real living. I had *some* vacation, though, and it was mighty good of you to send me on that business. I tended to it, all right as soon as I got there, before I took in any of the sights or let loose for my ‘time.’ I won’t forget it in you, Kurt – to send me instead of going yourself.”

“Well, Jo, you’d been cooped up here a long time for a youngster,” said Kurt, laying a hand on the younger man’s shoulder, “and I saw you were rarin’ for a little recreation. I thought you would settle down to a hard season’s work if you let out a little. I received your report and check. You managed that cattle deal very shrewdly. Kingdon was much pleased.”

“That’s encouraging, but I feel better at pleasing you, Kurt.”

They rode on without talking for some distance. From time to time Kurt cast a searching glance at the young man whose eyes shone with a strange, steady light – a look of exaltation and despair combined.

The car slowed down to conversational need.

“What ’tis, Jo? Did you come to grief when you ‘let loose?’ Let go all your earnings in one big game without any way-slips, or did you have such a round of theatres, cabarets and night-life that you are feeling the depression of reaction?”

“You’re guessing wrong,” replied Jo quietly. “I know that’s the way most of us grass-fed men act when we get a chance at white lights. I had a beautiful time that was as short and as far off as a pleasant dream. As I said, I started out for a regular time, but I didn’t take a drink, or touch a card, or – say, Kurt, I think I’d like to tell you about it! I know you won’t kid me, for I’m in earnest and – in trouble.”

Another quick glance at the blue eyes, usually so brimming with sparkling gayety but which were now serious and despondent, brought a transformation to the grim face of the older man, making him look kinder, warmer, younger.

“Shoot, Jo!” was all he said, but the lad felt that the crude word was backed up by a real interest, a readiness to hear and advise.

“Some one gave me a steer to a dance place,” he began. “Hurricane Hall, I think it was called, and as soon as I looked in, I saw it was tougher even than a cowboy’s cravings called for; but I sort of stuck around until I happened to look at one of the tables over in a cornered-off place. A little girl was sitting there alone, different from all those other fierce-looking ones who were dressed in high water skirts and with waists that looked as if they needed inside blinds to get by.

“She had on a white dress, a real dress – not a skirt and bib – that covered her, and without much fixings. Her hair was drawn back plain like a kid’s. I knew right off she’d got in wrong, and I thought it was up to me to get her out of that joint.

“I went over to her and said: ‘Excuse my nerve, little girl, but I guess you’re in the wrong pew.’

“She looked at me sort of funny; then she smiled and said: ‘Same to you!’

“Her voice sounded like low, soft music – contralto kind.

“Yes;’ I said. ‘You’re right. I’m a cowboy, not a country boy, and I’m in Chicago to see the sights; but I’d ask for blinders if I stayed around here much longer. Who brought you here?’

“Nobody,’ she said, looking down. ‘I came by myself.’

“I’m glad of it,’ I tell her, ‘and I’m the guy that’s going to take you away from here.’

“Why?’ she asked me, ‘and how do you know I’ll go with you.’

“She’d kept her eyes away from me all this time. I said: ‘Look at me.’

“She did. Right at me, the way kids do – not bold – just curious. Good night! It did something to my heart when her eyes looked into mine that way.

“Can you trust me?’ I asked after a minute.

“Yes,’ she said; and I knew she meant it.

“I want to dance with you,’ I told her, ‘but I don’t want to do it here.’

“Where can we go?’ she asked.

“I know a man in Chicago,’ I said, ‘who has asked me to come to his place. It ain’t stylish enough for you, but it’s run right and respectable. It ain’t very far from here. Reilly’s. Know it?’

“I’ve heard of it,’ she said, ‘but I’ve never been there.’

“Of course she hadn’t. I’d seen right off she was just a kid and hadn’t been around to places.

“Will you go there with me now?’ I asked her.

“Yes;’ she said. ‘I know you’re all right.’

“Maybe I wasn’t feeling good when I’d got her out of there and steered her through the streets! She was a little mite of a thing, and young, but very quiet; her eyes had a sad look.

“We went to Reilly’s: He was up here in the hill country once for a vacation – the time you were out on the coast. We fellows gave him some time, and he liked it fine. Well, he told us the place was ours. The music was great, and we started right out on the floor. Say! I was feeling as fit and stepping as lively as if I had had a million drinks, but I hadn’t had one. There was no getting around it. That little girl in her white dress had landed me one right over the heart. She slipped into my arms as quick as she had into my heart, too. I danced the way I felt, and she – well, she was right with me every time: the slickest little stepper I ever saw. Not dance-mad, like those professional kind; she let me set the pace and she followed any lead.

“Reilly came up to us on the floor and offered to introduce us to folks. I asked him if he remembered the time I gave him out west, and he said he could never forget it and he was now aiming to return it best he knew how. ‘Take it from me,’ I said, ‘that I can get right returns from you if you’ll not give any other fellow the chance to butt in on these dances.’ ‘I’m on,’ he said, and he let us alone.

“We danced every time without talking any. When it came closing time, Reilly came up again and said: ‘This is the hour we quit, but it don’t mean for my guests. Come back in this little room and have refreshments on me.’

“He showed us into a little ring-around-the-rosy room with lights half off and asks: ‘What’ll you have?’

“‘Coffee,’ I said quickly and warningly, and the kid said: ‘I’ll have the same.’

“Reilly laughed – because I took coffee, I suppose. We got it good and hot, with sandwiches and pickles thrown in. Then we talked. Someway she got me to do most of the talking. She wanted to hear all about ranches and cowboys and me. Her eyes got bright, and she said it was better than movies, and she wished she could see my country. I told her she would, because I was going to take her there. She didn’t say anything to that. Pretty soon Reilly comes in and tells me he wants to give us the best time he knows how all right, but were we planning to stay to breakfast? When I saw what time it was, I took the hint and we got right up. I asked him what there was to pay, and he said if I tried to pay, I’d have to do it over his dead body. We went out into the night, only ’twas morning. I asked her what her folks would say.

“‘I have no folks,’ she said kind of sad-like.

“That made me feel good.

“‘I am glad of that,’ I told her, ‘because I want you all to myself.’

“Then I thought she must be working, and I told her I was sorry to have kept her up so late because she’d be too tired to go to work. She said she was out of a job, but was expecting something soon.

“‘I am glad of that, too,’ I said.

“She looked sort of surprised, so I knew I’d been too sudden, but you see, time was short with me. I told her I’d be in Chicago another twenty-four hours and would she help show me around. I had never been on one of the big boats and Reilly had told me about a fine tour to take to some Saint place. She knew where he meant, though she had never been there. She said folks who lived in Chicago didn’t go outside much. They left the trips for visitors. She promised to meet me at the dock in a few hours.

“She wouldn’t let me go all the way home with her. She said she had reasons, and made me leave her on a corner which she said was quite close to where she lived. It was an awful poor part of the city, and I suppose she didn’t want me to know how humble her home was. As if I cared for that! It was so near light I knew she would be safe, but I stood there on guard for a few minutes after she left.

“Believe me, I was right on time at the dock, and she came soon after I did. She had on a plain, dark suit, neat, little shoes, and a hat down over her eyes like the girls in movies wear. I’d passed a corner on the way to the boat where they sold flowers. There were some violets that looked like her. I bought a big bunch and when I gave them to her, she sort of gasped and said no one had ever bought flowers for her before. I was glad to hear that. I asked her hadn’t she ever had a fellow, and she said she hadn’t. I told her I couldn’t see why, unless it was because she didn’t want one. She looked up at me sort of shy and said she might have had one most any time, but that there had never been one she cared for before.

“I could have hugged her right there on the dock for that ‘before,’ but it was time for the boat to start. There weren’t many going. It was early in the season, she said. We went up on deck and sat by the rail and maybe old Lake Michigan didn’t look sparkling! Everything looked sparkling to me. She was as happy as a kid with a new doll, because she had never been on a boat before. When we got to the place – St. Joe, she said it was – there were all sorts of things to do that beat Chicago all to bits for

a good time. There was a big sandy beach that made me want to go in the water, but she said it was too early. So we sat in the sun-warmed sand and watched the waves, and we got our pictures taken, and tried a Wheel of Fortune. We went to a big hotel and had a good dinner, though they didn't have any of the things that were down on their program. The waiter said it was a bill of fare left over from last year. We didn't mind that. After dinner we rode out to a place to see some guys that looked like pictures in the Old Testament. They lived in David's House, too.

"It was an awfully short afternoon someway. We had supper at the hotel and took the boat home. What few passengers there were besides us stayed shut up in the cabin, so we had the deck and the light of the new moon all to ourselves.

"She shivered a little, but I had brought an extra coat, because I had seen Reilly before I went and he told me to take one. I wrapped her up in it, and when I buttoned it around her chin, I did what I'd been aching to do since I first met her, but had slipped on my courage. She was looking down in a shy, little way she has – and I kissed her. When she lifted her eyes, there was such a surprised little look in them, I felt just as if I had hurt a baby.

"I didn't mean to do it,' I said, 'but I couldn't help it. Will you forgive me?"

"I'll forgive you,' she said in a low voice after a moment, 'but you mustn't – again.'

"She meant it, so I didn't, but she let me hold her hand and we sat quiet and watched the moon-shine on the water.

"I asked her if she'd had a good time, and she told me it had been the most wonderful day of her life – different from all others.

"Honest?" I asked.

"She didn't answer, but looked off over the water, and I saw a tear on her cheek.

"Honest?" I said again.

"Yes;' she said. '*Honest*, and I never knew before what it was to be honest.'

"I didn't know what she meant, but we had got to Chicago now. It wasn't very late and I asked her should we go to Reilly's again, and she said it would spoil the day. I thought so, too. On the way to where I'd left her the night before, there was a little park. We went in and sat on one of the benches. It was only a little clump of trees, but it made a nice place to visit, because there was no one around. People in cities don't act like they were seasoned to outdoors except when it's hot weather.

"I was booked to leave the next morning, so I couldn't let any grass grow. I asked her to marry me.

"I wish you hadn't asked me,' she said, and her voice sounded like there were tears in her eyes.

"Why?" I asked.

"I wish,' she went on without taking any notice of me – just like she was talking to herself – 'that I dared love a man like you.'

"That was all I cared to know. For the ghost of a second I held her in my arms, but she slipped out of them, and I saw her face was pale.

"You *do* love me!' I said.

"I do,' she repeated after me. 'A lot. If it was a little bit, I'd marry you, but I love you so much, I'll tell you why I can never marry you. You're the first man that ever treated me like I was white. I'm pretty bad, I know, but I am not so bad as to do you wrong.'

"I told her I didn't know what she meant, but there was nothing in the world that should come between us.

"I tried to tell you to-night on the boat, when you asked me to tell you how much I had enjoyed the day,' she went on just as though I hadn't spoken, 'when you said "*Honest*." But I couldn't. I was afraid to tell you I couldn't do anything *honest*.'

"Then she told me she was a thief. She didn't try to make any excuses for herself, but when I heard her little hard luck story and knew what she'd always been up against, I didn't wonder that she stole or committed any crime. She had had a regular Cinderella stepmother who had licked her

when she was a kid because she took food from the pantry when she was hungry. The old hag called it stealing and warned the school teacher, and the other kids got hold of it and of course you know what it does to any one to get a black eye. She had the name of a thief wished on her until she got to be one. She was expelled from school; put in a reformatory; ran away; stole to keep herself alive. Then they all took a hand at her – ministers, society girls, charitable associations; they gave her a bum steer and made her feel she was a hopeless outcast, so she felt more at home with the vagrant class. The only person who had ever made her feel she wanted to be straight was a Salvation Army woman, but she had gone away and no one was left to care now.

“I didn’t let her go any further. I told her *I* cared and I cared all the more since I had heard her story; and that she *was* honest, or she wouldn’t have told me about herself. What did I care what she had been or done? Her life was going to begin right then with me. I couldn’t budge her. I talked and pleaded, and at last she gave in – a little. She said she’d think it over and meet me at the little park in the morning, and then she’d talk some more about it.

“So we parted until morning came. But I made up my mind that if she wouldn’t consent, I’d simply kidnap her and bring her up here to Mrs. Kingdon.

“I was on hand bright and early at the park next morning, and after a while a slovenly slip of a girl came up to me and asked my name. I told her. She gave me a note and then started off like a skyrocket, but I’m some spry myself and I caught her and held her till I’d read the note. It was from her and she said she couldn’t give me the worst of the bargain. That she was going to try hard to see if she could make good and live without stealing, and when she was sure, she’d send word to me through Mr. Reilly, and if I never heard, I could know she had failed and for me to forget her.

“Where is she?” I asked the girl, who was squirming like an eel.

“I dunno,” she said. ‘She’s left town.’

“I don’t believe it!” I said.

“Yes, she has,” said the girl. ‘She pawned all her togs – that new white dress and the swell shoes and her new suit and hat to get money to make a getaway.’

“I might as well have tried to hang on to a fish as to hold that slippery little street Arab. She broke away and ran. I was after her, but it was no use. She knew the ins and outs of the alleys like a rat and I lost her. You see, I didn’t know my girl’s last name. When I asked her, she said: ‘Call me Marta.’ I didn’t care about knowing her last name then, because I was so keen to give her my own name.

“I was just about crazy. I hunted all over the part of the city where I’d left her the first night. Then I went to see Reilly, but he didn’t know who she was. I made him see what it meant to me to find her, and he promised to try his best and to forward at once any letter that came to him. If I don’t hear after a while, when work gets slack so you can spare me, I’m going to Chicago and go through it with a fine tooth comb. Reilly will help me follow every girl by the name of Marta that’s ever lived there.”

Kurt’s eyes, full of infinite pity and regret, turned to Jo as he broke the little pause that followed.

“She is doubtless a poor little stray of a girl and luck has been against her, but, Jo, put all thoughts of marrying her away, just as she has. Wait – ” he hurried on, seeing the anger kindling in the lad’s eyes – “if it were any other offense – But a thief! ‘Once a thief, always a thief,’ is the truest saying I know. Your love couldn’t – ”

“It didn’t make any change in my feelings when she told me,” said Joe staunchly. “She could steal anything I had.”

“It might not change your feelings, but it should change your intentions. Do you mean you’d marry – ” Kurt had an incredulous expression on his face.

“In a second, if she’d have me. I’d buy her everything she wanted so she wouldn’t have to steal.”

“But after you were married and people found out what she was, you’d be ashamed – ”

“Ashamed! I’d put my little thief on a throne, and whoever dared to try to take her off would get it in the neck.”

The car speeded up again. The man at the wheel saw the utter futility of further expostulation.

“I’ll leave it to time and cow-punching,” he thought sagely. “Time and work are the best healers, especially for the young. Preaching is of no avail.”

Night came on. Jo looked up at a little lone star which was trying to make its light shine without a properly darkened background.

“That’s a poor little orphan star – like her. I’ll look for it every night now. I wish I hadn’t blabbed to Kurt. He hasn’t a nose for orange blossoms.”

In the fortnight that followed, Jo worked indefatigably, but his heart and his thoughts were back in Chicago, except when now and then his eyes turned to a fertile little beauty-spot valleyed between the hills. For here he had located an imaginary cottage – his cottage and hers. This mirage, of course, always showed a little slip of a girl standing in the doorway. To the surprise and dismay of his associates Jo the spender became Jo the saver that his dream might come true.

He offered no addendum to the revelation he had made to Kurt. They met often, but in ranch life discourse is not frequent, and Jo instinctively felt that his recital of Love’s Young Dream had fallen upon unsympathetic ears, while the foreman, unversed in the Language of Love, was mystified by the lad’s silence.

Three weeks later the “man without a nose for orange blossoms” was again in town. As acting sheriff of the county lately, Kurt had dropped in to see the jailer.

“How’s business, Bender? Any new boarders?” he asked.

“Yes; a gal run in for stealing. Didn’t find the goods on her; but she’s a sly one with the record of being a lifelong thief. She strayed up here from Chicago.”

“What’s her name?” he asked casually.

“Marta Sills.”

“I wonder if it could be Jo’s Marta,” the acting sheriff thought suddenly. “She may have followed him up here.”

He walked back to the hotel, trying to decide whether he should tell Jo. If she should prove to be his girl, her arrest up here should show him that his love hadn’t worked the miracle he expected. Jo had been a little more quiet since his return, but he gave no signs of pining away, and maybe if nothing revived his interest, it might die a natural death. The story Jo had told him of the little waif had made a deep impression upon him, however.

“Poor little brat!” he thought. “What chance does her kind have? I suppose I ought to give her one. There is one person in the world who might be able to reform her, and I’d put her in that person’s charge if it weren’t for wrecking Jo’s life.”

All through the afternoon while transacting the business that had brought him to town, his heart and his head were having a wrestling match, the former being at the disadvantage of being underworked.

“I’ll go up and take a look at her,” he suddenly decided. “Maybe I can tell from Jo’s description whether she is his Marta or not.”

On his way to the jail he was accosted by a big, jovial man.

“Don’t know where I can get an extra helper, do you, Kurt? Simpson, my right-hand, has gone back to Canada to enlist.”

“How providential!” thought Kurt.

“Why, yes; Mr. Westcott,” he replied: “We’re well up with our work, and I could spare Jo Gary for a few weeks.”

“Jo Gary! May Heaven bless you! When can I get him?”

“Going out home now?”

“Yes; on my way.”

“Stop at the ranch and take him along with you. Tell him I said to go. It’ll be all right with Kingdon.”

Westcott renewed his blessings upon Kurt and drove on.

At the jail Kurt looked in on the latest arrival. She was sitting at a table in Bender's back office, her head bowed in her hands. There was something appealing in the drooping of her shoulders and in her shabby attire.

“Now Jo is disposed of, she shall have her chance, anyway,” he decided.

Without speaking to the girl, he sought Bender and they held a brief consultation.

CHAPTER II

“Aren’t we going to stop at all, Mr. Sheriff Man?”

A soft, plaintive note in the voice made Kurt Walters turn the brake of an old, rickety automobile and halt in the dust-white road, as he cast a sharply scrutinizing glance upon the atom of a girl who sat beside him. She was a dejected, dusty, little figure, drooping under the jolt of the jerking car and the bright rays of hills-land sunshine. She was young – in years; young, too, in looks, as Kurt saw when she raised her eyes which were soft and almond-shaped; but old, he assumed, in much that she should not have been.

She had found it a long, hard ride across the plains, and the end of her endurance had been prefaced by frequent sighs, changes of position and softly muffled exclamations, all seemingly unnoted by the man beside her, whose deep-set eyes had remained fixed on the open space ahead, his slim, brown hands gripping the wheel, his lean, sinewy body bending slightly forward.

His tenseness relaxed; a startled, remorseful look came into his eyes as he saw two tears coursing down her cheeks. They were unmistakably real tears, – though, as he was well aware, they came from physical causes alone. Still, they penetrated the armor of unconcern with which he had girded himself.

“What for?” he asked curtly.

“What for!” she echoed, her mouth quivering into pathetic droops. “For rest, of course. You may be used to this kind of locomotion, but I’m not very well upholstered, and I’m shaken to bits. Fact is, I’m just all pegged out, old man. Have a heart, and stop for repairs. What’s your rush, anyway? I can’t get loose hereabouts, and I haven’t anywhere to go, anyhow. Didn’t mind getting ‘took’ at all, at all. How many more miles is it to the end of your trail? This is a trail, isn’t it?”

“A great many miles,” he replied, “and it was on your account more than any other that I was hurrying to get to the – ”

“Jail,” she answered supinely, as he hesitated.

“No,” he said grimly. “I was going to take you home – for to-night, anyway.”

“Home! Oh, how you startle me! I didn’t know there was any of those home-stuff places left except in the movies. I never was much stuck on home, so you needn’t be afraid to call it ‘jail’ for fear of hurting my feelings.”

“You can’t work on my sympathy that way,” he said coldly.

“Dear me!” she replied with a silly, little giggle. “I gave up trying to work the sympathy racket long ago. Everyone’s too smart nowadays. Honest, I’ve no longings for home. I feel sorry for anyone who’s tied down to one. Why don’t you kick over the traces and come off your trail and see what’s on the other side of your hills? I’d hate to take root here. Say, Mr. Sheriff Man, you look a good sort, even if you have played you were deaf and dumb for the whole of this awful ride. Let’s sidetrack the trail and go – home – by moonlight.”

His eyes remained rigid and relentless, but there was a slight twitching of his strongest feature, the wide, mobile mouth.

He looked at his watch.

“We can wait for a few minutes,” he said in a matter of fact voice.

“Please, may I get out and stretch?” she asked pleadingly.

Taking silence for consent, she climbed out of the car.

“Do you want a drink?” he asked, as he poured some water from an improvised Thermos bottle into a traveling cup.

“Thanks for those first kind words,” she exclaimed, taking the cup from him and drinking eagerly.

“Why didn’t you say you were thirsty?” he asked in a resentful tone, without looking at her. He had, in fact, studiously refrained from looking at her throughout the journey.

“I’m not used to asking for anything,” she answered with a chuckle. “I take what comes my way. ‘Taking’ is your job, too, isn’t it?”

“To hell with my job!” he broke out fiercely. “I’d never have taken it if I knew it meant this.”

“It’s your own fault,” she retorted. “It wouldn’t have been ‘this’ if you hadn’t been so grouchy. We could have had a chummy little gabfest, if you hadn’t been bunging holes in the landscape with your lamps all the way.”

He made no response but began to examine the workings of his car.

“Does the county furnish it to you?” she asked. “It doesn’t seem as if you’d pick out anything like this. Was it ‘Made in America?’ Funny outfit for a cowboy country, anyway.”

“Get in,” he commanded curtly. “We must be away.”

“Oh, please, not yet,” she implored. “It’s so awful hot, and I won’t have all this outdoors for a long time, I suppose. I see there’s a tidy little bit of shade yonder. Let’s go there and rest awhile. I’ll be good; honest, I will, and when I get rested, you can hit a faster gait to even up. I get tired just the same as honest folks do. Come, now, won’t you?”

In a flash she had taken advantage of this oasis of shade that beckoned enticingly to the passer-by.

He followed reluctantly.

“This is Heaven let loose,” she said, lolling luxuriously against the trunk of a tree. “You’re the only nice sheriff man that ever run me in.”

He sat down near her and looked gloomily ahead.

“Cheer up!” she urged, after a short silence. “It may not be so bad. Any one would think you were the prisoner instead of poor little me.”

“I wish I were,” he said shortly.

She looked at him curiously.

“Say, what’s eating you, anyway? If you hate your job so, what did you take it for?”

“It was forced on me. I’m only sworn in as acting sheriff for the county until the sheriff returns.”

“How long you been ‘it’?”

“Two weeks. You’re my second – arrest.”

“Who was the first?”

“So Long Sam.”

She sat upright.

“Are you the man who caught So Long Sam? Every one has been afraid to tackle him. I’d never have thought it of you!”

“Why?” he asked curiously, not proof against the masculine enjoyment of hearing himself analyzed in spite of his reluctance to talk to her. “Do I seem such a weakling I couldn’t take one man?”

“No; you look like you’d take a red-hot stove if you wanted to; but they said – Say; is your maiden name ‘Kurt?’ No! It can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“Because they called the man who took So Long Sam, ‘Kind Kurt.’ You haven’t been over-kind to me till just lately. Whirling me over sands in that awful fore-shortened car.”

“It must be better,” he said dryly, “than the kind you’ve been used to.”

“You mean the jail jitney. Do you know, they never yet put me in one. Always conveyed me other ways. Weren’t so bad to me either. I guess maybe your heart is in the right place or you wouldn’t have let me rest and given me the drink, even if you did wait till the eleventh hour. Can’t you look pleasant like you were going to sit for a picture to give to your best girl instead of posing for ‘Just before the battle, Mother’? You look so sorry you came.”

“I am,” he said angrily. “I guess ‘Kind Kurt’ is a blankety blank fool, as some people say. I’ve been a lot kinder to you than you know. When I heard of your case and Bender pointed you out to me and said he’d got you locked up, I thought you were one of the many young city girls who go

wrong because they have no chance to know better. The kind bred in slums, ignorant, ill-fed – the kind who never had a fair show. So I resolved that you should have one. Bender wanted you out of town with the surety that you would never come back.

“I felt sorry for you. I offered to take you off his hands and bring you out here among the hills, where the best woman in the world would teach you to *want* to be honest. Do you suppose I’d have done it if I’d known the kind you are – a bright, smart brat who is bad because she wants to be, and boasts of it? There is no hope for your kind.”

It was the longest speech the acting sheriff had ever made. He had been scarcely conscious that he was talking, but was simply voicing what had been in his thoughts for the last half hour.

“How old is this ‘best woman in the world?’” asked the girl, seemingly unconcerned in his summing up of her case. “Is she your sweetheart or your wife? If she is either one, you’d better take me back to Bender, or spill me out on the plains here. She won’t be real glad to try to reform a young, good-looking girl like me. I *am* good-looking, honest, if I was slicked up a little.”

He looked away, an angry frown on his lean, strong face. She gazed at him curiously for a moment and then laid a slim, brown hand on his arm.

“Listen here, Kurt,” she said. “You were right in what you thought about me never having had a fair show. Everything, everyone, including myself, seems to have been against me. I was born with ‘taking ways.’ I couldn’t seem to live them down. Lately things have been going wrong awfully fast. I’ve been sick and no one acted as if I were human up to a short time ago. I didn’t know that was why you took me from Bender’s jail. Honest, I’m not so bad as I talk.”

He looked at her sceptically. Her eyes, now turned from him, were soft, feminine and without guile. He wouldn’t let himself be hoodwinked.

“No; there’s no excuse for you,” he declared emphatically. “You are educated. You could have earned an honest living. You didn’t have to steal.”

“No;” she said slowly and thoughtfully. “I didn’t have to.”

“Then why do you? Bender told me you had a lifelong record of pilfering.”

“Lifelong! Kind Kurt, I am young – only twenty.”

“He said you’d been given a chance over and over again, but that you were hopeless. I – think you are.”

“I think so, too,” she acknowledged, with a little giggle that brought back his scowl. “You’ve got a white elephant on your hands, Kurt. What are you going to do with me?”

“There’s only one thing I can do, now,” he said glumly. “Carry out a bad bargain. I’ll see it through.”

“Oh, Mr. Britling!” she murmured *sotto voce*.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Traveling libraries evidently don’t hit this trail. What is it the trail to, anyway? Your house?”

“To Top Hill Tavern.”

“Gee! That sounds good. A tavern! I hope it’s tiptop as well as tophill. How did you come to build a hotel way off here? Summer boarders? Will there be dances?”

“Top Hill Tavern,” he said coldly, “is the name of a ranch – not mine. The owners live there.”

“And does she, ‘the best woman in the world,’ live there?”

“We must start now,” he said, rising abruptly and leading the way to the car.

“I should think,” remarked the girl casually after his fourth ineffectual effort to start the engine, “that if she owns a ranch, she might buy a better buzz wagon than this.”

He made no reply, but renewed his futile attempts at starting, muttering words softly the while.

“Don’t be sore, Kurt. I can’t help it because your old ark won’t budge. I didn’t steal anything off it. Wouldn’t it be fierce if you were marooned on the trail with a thief who has a lifelong record!”

He came around the car and stood beside her. His face was flushed. His eyes, of the deep-set sombre kind that grow larger and come to the surface only when strongly moved, burned with the light of anger.

“Did anyone ever try whipping you, I wonder?”

“Sure,” she said cheerfully. “I was brought up on whippings by a – stepmother. But do you feel that way toward me? You look like a man who might strike a woman under certain provocation, perhaps; but not like one who would hit a little girl like me. If you won’t look so cross, I’ll tell you why your ’mobile won’t move.”

He made no reply, but turned to the brake.

“Say, ’bo,” she continued tantalizingly, “whilst you are a lookin’, just cast your lamps into the gasoline tank. That man who filled it didn’t put a widow’s mite in.”

Unbelievably he followed this lead.

“Not a drop, damn it!”

“The last straw with you, isn’t it? I’m not to blame, though. If you think I stole your gasoline, just search me. How far are we from your tiptop tavern?”

“Twenty miles. I suppose you couldn’t walk it,” he said doubtfully.

“Me? In these?” she exclaimed, thrusting forth a foot illy and most inadequately shod. “But you can walk on.”

“No:” he refused. “You don’t put one over on me in that way.”

“You know I couldn’t walk back to town.”

“Some one might come along in a car.”

“Wouldn’t you trust me, if I gave you my word to wait for you?”

“The word of – ”

“A thief,” she finished. “All right. I’m in no hurry. What are you going to do?”

“We’ll wait here until some one comes along.”

“Then let’s go back to the trees while we wait,” she proposed, climbing out of the car and taking a small box from the seat.

“Didn’t Bender have one tiny good word for me?” she asked as they sat down in the welcome shade.

“He said stealing was the only offense you’d been up for, and he guessed you couldn’t help it. What was your little game in making him think you were stupid?”

“Did he say I was? Horrid thing! I’m glad I put one over on him and lifted this,” and she held up the box.

“What is it?” he demanded sternly.

“His supper. A peroxided wife brought it to him – just before he presented me to you. It’ll come in handy now, or won’t you partake of stolen goods?”

“I’ll pay him for it the next time I see him.”

“Shucks, Kurt! You got such a bad bargain when you drew me, you ought to have something thrown in. It’s all done up in a nice napkin – looks as if it would taste good. Oh, what a feast! Pork sandwiches, deviled eggs, dills, a keep-hot bottle of coffee, layer cake and pie. Bender knew how to pick a partner. What shall we drink out of?”

He produced a drinking cup, poured some coffee in it and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said. “Shall we make it a loving cup, Kurt?”

He ignored her question and plunged greedily into a pork sandwich. He had had so much business in town that day, he had taken no time to eat.

The girl partook of Bender’s pilfered luncheon sparingly and without zest.

“Aren’t you hungry?” he asked her presently, his temper disappearing as his appetite was appeased.

“No; it’s a long time since I’ve been hungry.”

“What did you steal this food for then?”

“I don’t know. Yes, I do. It was because that Bender woman gave me such a once-over, and decided I was the scum of the earth. Is that the way your topside tavern woman will look at me?”

“No;” he replied earnestly. “She’s made a woman out of worse than you.”

“Thanks!” she said, folding the napkin neatly. “I thought you had my number for the worst ever. It’s wonderful what food will do for a man. Hope she will let me stay at the top of the hill while I get an appetite. The doctor said I didn’t need medicine – just the right kind of food, rest and good air. I wouldn’t have got them, maybe, but for you, and I suppose I haven’t been very grateful.”

Her tone was low and wistful. A look she hadn’t seen before – a kindly, sympathetic look – leapt to his eyes and softened the harshness of his features.

“Have you been sick, real sick?” he asked.

“Yes; clean played out, the doctor said.”

“Then I am glad I brought you. We will make you well physically, anyway.”

“And maybe the other will follow?”

“It will, if you will try to do right. Will you?”

“Sure. I’ve always tried – most always. I can’t be very bad up at the top of a hill, unless I get lonesome. You’d better tell that ‘best woman’ to double-lock things. It’s with stealing the same as with drinking – if anything you crave is lying around handy, good-bye to good resolutions.”

“I’ll see to that. I’m a sheriff, remember.”

“Look, sheriff!”

With a mocking smile, she held up a watch.

“I took that off you slick as anything when you passed the coffee. It was like taking candy from a baby.”

Anger at her nerve and chagrin that he had been so neatly tricked kept him silent.

“It’s not altogether a habit,” she continued in mock apology; “it’s a gift.”

“Jo got her number wrong,” he thought. “She was just playing him with her sad, nice, little-girl manner. For his sake, I’ll see that they don’t meet. I wonder just why she is playing this role with me?”

“You might give me credit for returning your ticker,” she said in abused tone.

“I never knew but one other person,” he said coolly, “that affected me as unpleasantly as you do.”

“Who was that?” she asked interestedly.

“A cow-puncher – Centipede Pete.”

“Some name! Why don’t you ask me my name, Kurt? Don’t look so contemptuous. I am going to tell you, because it doesn’t sound like me. It’s Penelope.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, with something like a groan in his voice.

“Nobody can help her name,” she complained. “Don’t you like it? I kind of thought it would suit you, because it doesn’t sound like me. Sort of suggests respectability, don’t you think?”

“It was my mother’s name,” he replied tensely, as he walked a few paces away.

Night that comes so fleetly in this country dropped like a veil.

The girl followed him.

“I didn’t steal that – your mother’s name, you know, Kurt,” she said in an odd, confiding voice. “They gave it to me, you see, and maybe it will help that I’ve never been called by it. They used to call me Pen or Penny – a bad penny, I suppose you think.”

“Your name,” he said frigidly, “or at least the one Bender knows you by – the one you went by in Chicago, is Marta Sills.”

She made an articulate sound suggestive of dismay.

“That is one of my names,” she admitted. “I had forgotten I gave that one to Bender.”

He made no comment.

“You said,” she continued pleadingly, “that there was no excuse for me and girls like me. Maybe you would find one if you knew what we are up against. Every one knocks instead of boosts, and tells us how low-down we are. Just as if a mirror were held up to an ugly-looking girl, and she were asked how anyone who looked like that could expect to be different. Suppose I should tell you I’d been to reformatories and places where I had learned that I must play the stupid act as I did with Bender so as to be kept from being sent up. There is no mercy for those who exhibit any glimpses of intelligence, you see. This time I thought I was a goner for life until you pried me loose. All doors seemed closed, but you opened the window. No one was ever really kind to me before, except a Salvation Army woman and – some one else.”

“What was the name of that some one else?” he interrupted.

She hesitated, and for the first time seemed confused.

“Was it,” he demanded, “*Jo Gary?*”

“Oh!” she gasped. Then quickly recovering, she continued: “You’re quite a detective for an acting one. If you were the real thing, you’d be a regular Sherlock Holmes and make a clean sweep of crooks.”

“Answer my question.”

“It doesn’t seem necessary to tell you anything; you know so much. I seem to know that name. Was he at a dance in Chicago – let me see, Hurricane Hall?” she asked serenely. “Is this his part of the country, and shall I see him?”

“It *was* his part of the country. You can *not* see him.”

A wistful note crept into her voice as she said:

“I should like to see him just once, but I suppose you won’t tell me where he is. I don’t dare let on to you how grateful I really feel to you, because I might lose my nerve and I’ve just got to hang on to that. It’s my only asset in trade. We have to use lots of bluff. Besides, somehow you make me feel contrary. Maybe I am the lightning and you the thunder.”

“Why did you leave Chicago?” he asked abruptly. “Bender said that was where you drifted from. I want the real reason – the absolute truth.”

It was very dark now, but she could feel his eyes, as piercing as search lights, demanding the truth.

“The gate was open and I just walked out, or maybe I stole out. I didn’t follow Jo, because he didn’t say where he lived – just the hill country. I’ll tell you the real reason – thieves don’t always lie – I had been sick and the doctor said air like this for mine, and so I followed this trail. I picked it up here and I’d have been all right if I hadn’t run up against that lightning-chaser of a Bender. I guess folks are keener out this way than they are in the cities. More time to hunt crooks, maybe.”

“No;” he denied. “It isn’t that. It’s because we have a beautiful, clean country and we are going to –”

“Have no blots on the landscape,” she interrupted. “I suppose Bender catches them and you reform them. Is that the system? Well, no one can be good till they are comfortable. I’m not very strong yet, and I’m not used to being out untethered like this. I’m cold and sleepy. If you don’t object, I’ll crawl into your old wagon if I can find it in the dark.”

She caught a note of contrition in a muffled exclamation.

“Wait!”

She heard him walk on to the car and come back. Then she felt a coat wrapped snugly about her. He guided her to the clumps of trees and spread a robe on the ground.

“Sit down here,” he said peremptorily.

She gave a little smile of victory which, if he had seen it, would have strangled all his new-born compassion.

“Why didn’t you tell me your story in the first place?” he demanded.

“When you are out in the world alone, you know,” she said sagely, “and everyone is taking a shot at you, you have to put out a bluff of bravado, same as a porcupine shoots out his quills.”

He gave another murmur of sympathy.

“Don’t feel too bad about it, Kind Kurt, because being knocked about sharpens your wits and makes you an expert dodger when you aren’t equal to fighting in the open.”

Suddenly into the black-purple sky shot forth a moon and stars.

“Makes the white lights of a city look like thirty cents, eh, Kurt?” she commented.

He made no response, and she was serenely aware of his silent disapproval.

“What’s matter, Kurt?”

“My name,” he replied frigidly, “is Walters.”

“Is it, then? And what might your middle name be?”

“You can call me ‘Mr. Walters,’” he replied, striving for dignity and realizing instantly how lame was the attempt.

“Oh, can I now? Well, I’ll do nothing of the kind to the first real friend I’ve ever had. As I said, I am all in, and I’m going to snooze while you watch for a gasoliner to come along.”

She stretched herself out and closed her eyes. In a semi-slumber she was dreamily conscious of a firm roll slipped deftly under her head. She made a faint murmur of content and acknowledgment and knew no more. Her sleeping sense didn’t tell her that a tall sheriff came and looked down upon her small, pale, moonlit face from which sleep, the great eliminator, had robbed of everything earthy and left it the face of an innocent, sleeping child. She didn’t dream that as he gazed he remitted sentence and told himself that she was but a stray little kitten lost in the wide plains of life, and solely in need of patient guidance to a home hearth.

“She was right,” he confessed. “I did make her feel contrary. It seems to be a characteristic of mine. Maybe her true little self is the one Jo saw and she can be made worthy of him yet.”

CHAPTER III

When the first faint edges of light outlined the coming day, she sat bolt upright and stared about her. As far as eye could see was the tortuous trail leading up sculptured hills that were the preface to the mother mountains of the West.

The wonder-stare in her eyes gradually disappeared as memory awakened. Down beyond the trees in a little valley the sheriff was attending to a fire he had built.

She arose, cramped and unrefreshed, and hastened toward the welcome blaze.

“Good morning. Any gasoline yet?”

“No; not an automobile passed during the night.”

“How do you know? Didn’t you sleep?”

“No.”

“Guarding your car and me? No!” she added quickly. “That wasn’t the reason. I had all the robes and your coat. You had to stay awake to keep warm.”

He smiled slightly and spoke in the hushed voice that seems in keeping with the dawn.

“I’ve been used to night watches – tending sheep and cattle on the plains. What’s the difference whether it’s night or day so long as you sleep somewhere in the twenty-four hour zone?”

“I never was up ahead of the sun before,” she said with a little shiver, as she came close to the fire.

“I am heating over the coffee that was left. That will make you feel better.”

“I suppose there isn’t any water hereabouts to wash in. You know they teach us to be sanitary in the reformatories.”

He pointed to a jar.

“I always carry some in the car. Help yourself.”

“Arctic ablutions never appeal to me,” she said when she had used the cold water freely and returned to the fire. “I found another left-over in the shape of a sandwich minus the pork, so we can each have a slice of toast with our coffee.”

She put a piece of bread on a forked stick and held it out to the blaze. He did the same with the other half of the sandwich. Then they partook of a meagre but welcome breakfast.

“Look!” he said presently in an awed voice.

The sun was sending a glorious searchlight of gold over the highest hill-line.

“Swell, isn’t it?” she commented cheerily.

Her choice of adjectives repelled any further comments on Nature by him.

“I’m not used to sleeping out,” she said, as he carefully raked over the remains of the fire, “and it didn’t seem to rest me. Thank you for making me so comfortable, Mr. Walters.”

She spoke gently; altogether her manner was so much more subdued this morning that he felt the same wave of pity he had felt when Bender had first mentioned her case to him.

“I am sorry,” he said, “that you had to stay out here all night. It was my fault; but you will have a more comfortable resting place to-night.”

A sound was heard: a modern, welcome sound, breaking in distractingly on the primeval silence. Kurt hastened to the road and saw the encouraging prelude of dust. The passing tourist gave him the requisite supply of gasoline and continued on his way.

“Come on, Pen!” called the sheriff.

She suppressed a smile as she followed.

“You called me by my first name,” she couldn’t resist reminding him.

“I didn’t know your last one,” he responded quickly and resentfully as he helped her into the car.

“Let me think. I’ve had so many aliases – suppose I make out a list and let you take your choice. Most of my pals call me ‘The Thief.’”

The look of yesterday came back to his eyes at her flippant tone and words.

“Don’t!” he said harshly. “This morning I had forgotten what you were.”

“I wish I could,” she said forlornly. “We won’t talk about it any more. Play I am pink perfect until we get to this ‘first lady of the land’ up at Top Hill. Oh, but motoring in the dawn is shivery! I loathe early morning when you get up to it. If you *stay up* for it, it’s different.”

He looked down at her quickly.

In the crisp morning air, her little figure was shaking as if with a chill. Her face was very white, and there was a bluish look about her mouth.

He stopped the car suddenly.

She smiled faintly at his look of concern.

“I’m all right,” she said reassuringly, a spark of raillery again showing in her eyes before they closed, and she fell limply against him.

When she had recovered the consciousness she had lost but momentarily, he was vigorously rubbing her hands.

“How warm and strong your hands feel,” she said with a little sigh of content. “I never did anything so out of date before. I couldn’t help it.”

“You are nearly frozen,” he said brusquely. “Why don’t you wear more clothes?”

“I am wearing all I have,” she said plaintively, with an attempt at a giggle.

A sudden recollection came to him. From under the seat he brought forth a heavy, gray sweater.

“I forgot I had this with me. Put it on.”

“It’s a slip-on. I’ll have to take off my hat and coat to get into it.”

When she removed her soft, shabby, battered hat which she had worn well down over her eyes even while she slept, her hair, rippling bronze and golden lights, fell about her face and shoulders in semi-curles.

He helped her into the sweater.

“It’s sure snug and warm,” she said approvingly, as her head came out of the opening. “I won’t need my coat.”

“No; there’s no warmth in it,” he said, looking disdainfully at the thin, cheap garment. “Throw it away.”

“With pleasure,” she replied gaily. “Here’s to my winter garment of repentance.”

She flung the coat out on the road.

“What did you say?” he asked perplexedly.

“Nothing original. Just some words I st-t – I mean, borrowed.”

She fastened back her hair and picked up her hat.

“Don’t put that on!” he exclaimed, making another search under the seat and bringing forth a soft cap. She set it jauntily on her curls.

“How do you feel now? Well enough to ride on?”

“Yes; I am feeling ‘fair and warmer’ every minute.”

When the car started, she relapsed into silence. The sunshine was flooding the treeless hills and mellowing the cool, clean air. Up and down, as far as the eye could follow, which was very far in this land of great distances, the trail sought the big dominant hills that broke the sky-line before them. The outlook was restful, hopeful, fortifying.

“How are you – all right?” he asked presently.

“Perfectly all right. It’s grand up here in all these high spots.”

“Wait until we reach the hills around our ranch,” he boasted. Then he laughed shortly. “I say ‘our.’ I’m only the foreman.”

“What are you going to tell *her* about me?” she asked curiously, after another silence.

He slackened the pace and looked at her closely. The sweater and the sunshine had brought a faint tinge of wild-rose color to the transparency of her skin. The flippancy and boldness so prominent

in her eyes the day before had disappeared. She looked more as she had when she was asleep in the moonlight. A wave of kindness and brotherliness swept over him.

“I am going to tell her,” he said gently, “that you are a poor little girl who needs a friend.”

“Is that all you will tell her?”

“You may tell her as much or as little of your story as you think you should.”

“You are a good man, but,” she added thoughtfully, “the best of men don’t understand women’s ways toward each other. If I tell her my sordid little story, she may not want to help me – at least, not want to keep me up here in her home. I’ve not found women very helpful.”

“She will help you and keep you, because – ” he hesitated, and then continued earnestly, “before she was married, she was a settlement worker in a large city and she understood such – ”

“As I,” she finished. “I know the settlement workers. They write you up – or down – in a sort of a Rogue Record, and you are classified, indexed, filed and treated by a system.”

“She isn’t that kind!” he protested indignantly. “She does her work by her heart, not by system. Have you ever really tried to reform?”

“Yes,” she exclaimed eagerly. “I left Chicago for that purpose. I couldn’t find work. I was cold and hungry; pawned everything they would take and got shabby like this,” looking down disdainfully at herself, “but I didn’t steal, not even food. I would have starved first. Then I was arrested up here for stealing. I wasn’t guilty. Bender had no case, really; but he wouldn’t give me a square deal or listen to anything in my favor, because my record was against me. You can’t live down a record. There is no use trying.”

“Yes, there is!” he declared emphatically. “I have always thought a thief incurable, but I believe *she* could perform the miracle.”

“How old is she?” demanded Pen suddenly.

“I don’t know,” he answered vaguely, as if her age had never occurred to him before. “She has been married ten years.”

“Oh! Did she marry the right man?”

“She certainly did. Kingdon is a prince.”

“Any children?”

“Three; two little fellows as fine as are made, and a girl.”

“I adore children.”

“I am glad to hear you say that. Every good woman loves children.”

“And you really think there’s the makings of a good woman in me?”

“Yes; I think so,” he answered earnestly, “and if there’s but a spark of goodness in you, she will find it and fan it to a glow.”

She made a wry little grimace which fortunately he did not see.

“This goodness is nauseating me,” she thought. “I shall beat it back about to-morrow.”

“Look!” he cried, as the road made a sharp curve. “There it is!”

“You can lift your eyes to the hills! What a love of a place – way up on tiptoes. I’ll be the little fish out of water up there!”

Top Hill Tavern was on a small plateau at the summit of one of the hills. The ranch-house, long, low and fanciful in design, connected by a covered portico with the kitchen, dairies and buildings, was misleading in name, for a succession of higher hills was in sight. A vined pergola, flower gardens, swings, tennis courts and croquet grounds gave the place a most unranch-like appearance.

As they rode up to the entrance porch, a woman came out of the house, and instantly the big, appraising eyes of the little newcomer felt that here was a type unknown to her. She was slender, not very tall, but with a poise and dignity of manner that compelled attention. Her eyes were gray; her lashes, brows and hair quite dark. There was a serenity and repose of manner about her – the Madonna expression of gentleness – but with an added force.

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