

North Grace May

Meg of Mystery Mountain



Grace North

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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, bouquets 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 ’t isn’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 prophesied 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 Abbots 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 ahold 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.

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