

THE NYMPH OF THE WEST. HOWARD SEELY.

CHAPTER V.

It was still early morning at the Mesquite valley ranch. A calm tranquillity rested upon the limitless prairie.

The scattered files of trees that everywhere straggled across the undulating plain and gave the locality its distinguishing title were mute and motionless.

A few plovers piped mournfully from the uplands. The quarrelsome cawing of ravens, holding a stormy convulse in some remote treetop, at times rose angrily upon the morning air.

The house which the horse was thus approaching was large and substantial and built in the fashion of ranches of the better class.

Over the floor of the porch, where the sunlight lay in broad squares and patches, a half dozen Mexican saddles were strewed, their bridles slung upon the circular pommels.

The wide entrance of the ranch stood invitingly open to the balmy morning air. Within the broad, bare hallway, with its adjacent doors upon either hand opening into various rooms, was dimly seen.

Several colossal rocking chairs occupied the foreground, with a general air of proprietorship enhanced by their unwieldy bulk.

A young girl came suddenly to the door and looked out over the broad valley, shading her brown eyes against the glare of the sunlight with the fingers of a jeweled hand.

She stood quietly a few moments in the corner of the doorway, gazing out dreamily over the limitless prospect at the vast billows of prairie stretching before her like an emerald sea.

She laughed an anxious, nervous little laugh. The man regarded her with grave solicitude.

"You don't seem as well lately," he said. "I fear you find this wild life of ours less beneficial than we anticipated, or perhaps, Edith, you neglect your exercise.

"Just see the state that Edith is in!" said Phil Kernochan pityingly, directing the gaze of this blond and radiant apparition to the figure in the chair.

"Hello!" he shouted, his eyes falling for the first time on the sorrel pony standing by the rancho gate.

"Why, it can't be," he said in amazement, "that his horse has walked off and left him, and he's been obliged to lay out a night or two on the bald prairie! Well, that's rich, I declare!"

Kernochan regarded him critically, taking his meerschaum pipe from his lips, an amused smile accentuating the curves of his mouth beneath his light mustache.

"Rube!" he shouted, turning his head in the direction of the neighboring corral, where a thick set and sun tanned individual was busy doctoring some ailing sheep.

He turned back to the veranda, laughing quietly to himself, as if some pleasant revelation had dawned upon him.

"Well, ladies," he said, coming tranquilly up the steps, his recent amazement still lingering in his eyes.

"Do you think, then, he isn't dead?" she inquired, sitting up with sudden animation.

"The sudden neighing of a horse startled her. She sprang to her feet abruptly, the color mounting to her cheeks and suffusing her neck with blushes.

"One moment," said Kernochan, catching up a leather quirt from the veranda and flicking his boot with it.

"Oh, that would be charming!" cried Miss Stafford, turning back to flash her gratification upon Kernochan.

The vertical rays of noontide were beating down upon Cynthia's bower. The leafy ceiling above was bright with a thousand luminous points from the steady glare without.

notes of a banjo struck at intervals, the low murmur of voices in conversation, and above all the odor of burning tobacco, overmastering the aromatic incense of the wilds, announced the presence of visitors.

The young girl was seated at the base of a scarred and denuded hemlock, the light sifting through the branches above and falling full upon her head and shoulders.

A sudden breath of air dispersed the smoke, favoring the dog with a passing whiff. He sneezed violently and looked annoyed, as if the last test had been put upon his patience.

"I don't know," he said, blowing a huge ring that shot forward with curling folds until it broke upon the nose of the nodding antelope.

"Light or dark complected?" asked Cynthia breathlessly, not raising her eyes.

"Darling," said Bruce in the same tone—"a rich, creamy brown. I don't think that even that beautiful tint there," he continued, indicating where the soft white of the stem was faintly dyed.

"Ladies!" she exclaimed. "An is that the reason you're smoking that thing all the while, 'cause ye just naturally expect one day to make it look like the chocolate colored woman?"

"Well, I wouldn't try," she rejoined, "for by the time you've done it ye'll probably be dead. Father had a meerschaum that he was colorin' once, but he said before he got through it colored him instead. I reckon so."

"Where does she live?" inquired Miss Dallas, nothing daunted.

"Oh!" said Cynthia. She was suddenly silent. The soft sunlight played amid the tresses of her golden hair as with downcast lashes she caressed the antelope, burying her fingers in his rough coat.

"Do you expect to see her soon?" "See—whom?"

"That girl you're so gone on?" she inquired with matter of fact gravity.

"So, sir," she said, laying her slim gloved hand upon Bruce's shoulder with a certain familiar air of proprietorship.

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"We have found you out at last!"

She glanced coldly down at Cynthia, who, intuitively recognizing a rival, returned the glance with the customary feminine cordiality.

"Why, Edith—you here?" exclaimed Bruce, springing to his feet and clasping the gloved hand in both his own.

"No such thing!" replied Edith, with spirit, lashing a small cedar with her riding whip in her embarrassment.

"Cynthia," she heard the cordial voice of Bruce say a minute later, "this is Miss Stafford—the lady of whom I spoke as having given me the pipe. Let me make you acquainted; also with Mrs. Kernochan—my partner's wife."

A few moments later they were all wending their way back to the ranch. Cynthia preceding them, escorted by the gracefully tripping fawn and the dignified Aulus. Bruce accompanied the ladies.

"This picturesque gypsy acquaintance of yours is quite enchanting, with her quaint simplicity and original pets," remarked Miss Stafford, glancing at Bruce from under her eyelids as they faded on.

"Nonsense, Edith!" Bruce returned, with some impatience, breaking a small twig of dry brush as they passed and hurling it from him violently as if to give vent to his irritation.

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