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Across the Aisle

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"That's Eagle's Nest pass, now," said the man across the aisle, eagerly. "Mighty pretty in this sunset light, eh?"

Jess opened her eyes. She had been drowsing for the last hour. The view was gorgeous from the car windows. She leaned forward, and looked out at the great encircling mountains, the still, dark lake far below the track, the vast, outstretching distances beyond the pass itself. Somewhere over toward the golden sunset lay her brother's ranch, and the new life that had swept her out of the rut down east. After ten years of school teaching in the country, it seemed like enchantment that she should be out here, skimming over the last ridge of the Rockies.

"It won't be all easy work, Jess," Tom had written, "but I've got the upper hand of things here now, and I think you'll like it."

The man across the aisle was talking to his fellow passenger, a sleepy old man, who had been dozing comfortably, and refused to warm up to the glories of the scenery.

"I wouldn't give a hand's breadth of this country up here for all Manhattan."

"Where you from?" growled back the other.

"Deerfoot, sir. Finest section and richest out here. Come into the smoking compartment with me and let me tell you about it."

He rose impulsively, a tall, strong-limbed youngster, with all the vivid assurance and hope of the west in his face. Suddenly he hesitated and looked across the aisle at the girl there. Their eyes met. He almost smiled, and reached for a handbag in the upper rack.

"Could I leave this with you just while I step into the smoker?" he asked. "I won't be more than half an hour."

Jess bowed her head assentingly and he slipped the bag in beside her own suitcase on the floor. It seemed very heavy. After he had gone Jess threw her fur scarf over it and wondered who its owner was.

Not ten minutes later the train slowed up. There was the sharp hiss of air brakes. The wheels seemed to grate and grind along on the rails. Almost instantly shots sounded up forward. Some of the men passengers rose. Jess held her breath and wondered if, after all, she was not to reach her new life.

The doors at the end of the car swung open. Two masked, armed men entered.

"Hands up and shut up, and nobody'll be hurt," said one tersely. The other started systematically to search. At Jess' seat he reached for her suitcase and saw the girl had fainted. Her pretty head lay back on the roll top of the seat, white and death-like, and it checked him. He glanced at the suit case, back at her face, and passed on. Under her skirts rested the leather satchel unobserved.

When she came to some one was bathing her face in cold water.

"Plucky? Well, rather. That's better. It's all right now. We're on our way and the gang didn't get what it wanted after all," he leaned nearer; "thanks to you."

"I don't know what you mean," faltered Jess.

"Of course you don't, but I'm mighty obliged to you just the same. They passed by the smoker and missed me, and didn't look for my belongings in your seat, that's all."

"You mean the satchel?"

"You didn't try to lift it, did you? It's full of solid gold. I think you deserve to know, don't you? Do you mind if I sit here? We'll be into Eagle View in 20 minutes, and I leave the train there."

"So do I," said Jess, shyly.

"Where bound?" There was no mistaking his eagerness.

"To the Sawtooth ranch. It's my brother's."

"Tom McQuaid's? Why, we're neighbors. It's a queer little juggler's ball that we dance on, this world, isn't it? I'm Raleigh Sayres, superintendent at the Deerfoot works. Why, when I first spoke to you, and you looked at me, I—why, I just felt as if we must know each other. Don't you know what I mean?"

Jess' long dark lashes drooped downward.

"I know," she said. "I'm glad too, that you will be near—Tom."

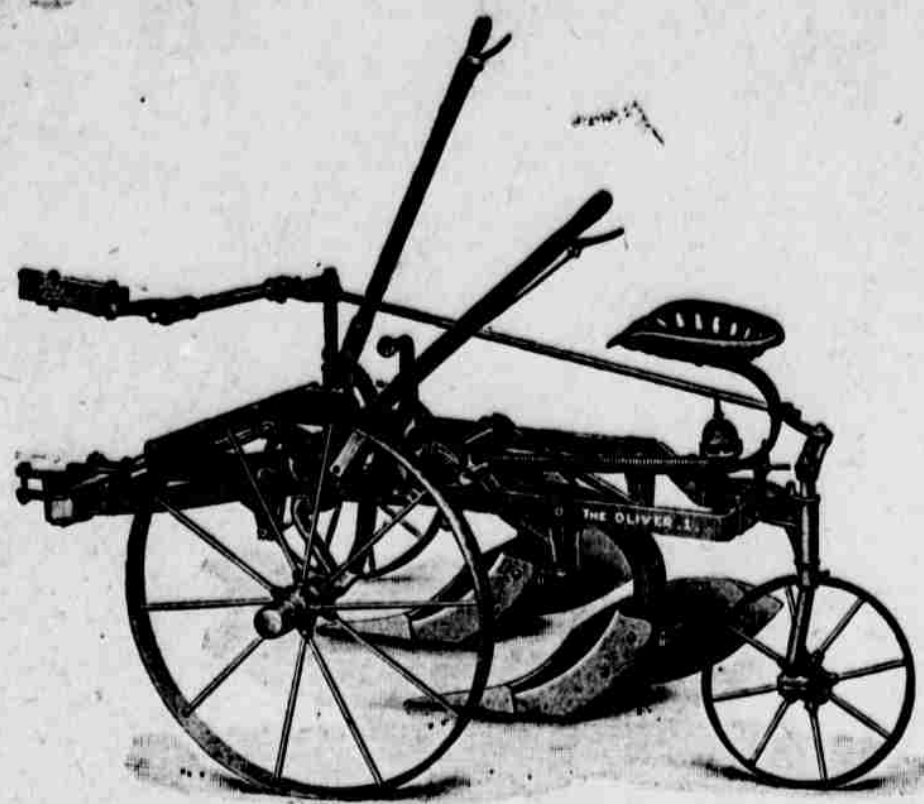
"But do you know what you've done this day? Why, you'll be the heroine of the whole valley! We pay off in gold up there. So, well—the gold is in that satchel, and back yonder in the pass there's a band of train robbers wondering who gave the wrong tip that the Deerfoot money was to go through on this train. Do you see now? It rested safely right here under your blessed feet."

"But I fainted. I wasn't a bit brave," protested Jess.

"And made doubly sure thereby," he laughed.

The train was pulling around the last mountain curve into Eagle View. He helped to slip her long cloak about her and fold the dark furs close about her throat. Then he reached down for the satchel and her suitcase.

"I think Tom will meet me," said Jess, demurely. "But you may come all the same—soon."



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