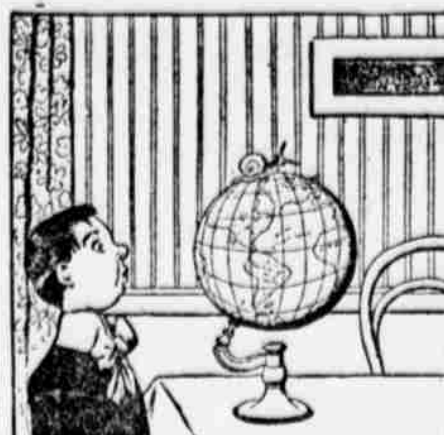




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SYNOPSIS.

Senator John Calhoun is invited to become secretary of state in Tyler's cabinet. He declines that if he accepts Texas and Oregon must be added to the Union. He sends the secretary, Nicholas Trent, to ask the baroness von Ritz, wife of the British minister, to give up her apartments. While searching for the baroness' home, a carriage drives up and Nicholas is invited to enter. The occupant is the baroness, and she asks Nicholas to assist in evading pursuers. Nicholas notes where she has hidden a slipper. She gives him the remaining slipper as a pledge that she will tell Calhoun what he wants to know regarding England's intentions toward Mexico. As security Nicholas gives her a trinket he intended for the sweetheart, Elizabeth Churchill. Calhoun becomes secretary of state. Nicholas enters Nicholas Trent on state business, and the latter plans to be married that night. The baroness says she will try to prevent the marriage. A drunken congressman whom Nicholas asks to assist in the wedding arrangements sends the baroness a note. Elizabeth, by mistake, and the wedding is declared off. Nicholas finds the baroness in Montreal, she having succeeded, where he failed, in discovering England's intentions regarding Oregon. She tells him that the slipper he had in his possession contained a note from the attaché of Texas to the British ambassador, saying that if the United States did not annex Texas within 30 days, she would lose both Texas and Oregon. Nicholas meets a naturalist, Von Rittenhofen, who gives him information about Oregon. The baroness and a British warship disappear from Montreal simultaneously. Calhoun orders Nicholas to head a party of settlers bound for Oregon. Calhoun expresses the jealousy of Senora Yturro and thereby secures the signature of the Texas attaché to a treaty of annexation. Nicholas starts for Oregon. He wins the race over the British party. A British warship arrives with the baroness as a passenger. She tells Nicholas that she placed a note in the slipper which caused the breaking off of his marriage, and that she intends to return to Washington to repair the damage she has done.

CHAPTER XXVII—Continued.

"If I do not find her worthy of you, then she cannot have you," went on Helena von Ritz.
"But, madam, you forget one thing. She is worthy of me, or of any other man!"
"I shall be judge of that. If she is what you think, you shall have her—and Oregon!"
"But as to myself, madam? The bargain?"
"I arrive, monsieur! If she falls you, then I ask only time."
"I begin to see, madam," said I, "how large these stakes may run."
"In case I lose, be sure at least I shall pay. I shall make my atonement," she said.
"I doubt not that, madam, with all your heart and mind and soul."
"And body!" she whispered. The old horror came again upon her face. She shuddered, I did not know why. She stood now as one in devotions for a time, and I would no more have spoken than had she been at her prayers, as, indeed, I think she was. At last she made some faint movement of her hands. I do not know whether it was the sign of the cross.
She rose now, tall, white-clad, shimmering, a vision of beauty such that part of the world certainly could not then offer. Her hair was loosened now in its masses and dropped more widely over her temples, above her brow. Her eyes were very large and dark, and I saw the faint blue shadows coming again beneath them. Her hands were clasped, her chin raised just a trifle, and her gaze was rapt as that of some longing soul. I could not guess of these things, being but a man, and, I fear, clumsy alike of body and wit.
"What are my stakes? How may I pay?"
"There is one thing, madam, which we have omitted," said I at last. She swayed a little on her feet, as though she were weak. "I want," said she, "I wish—I wish—"
The old childlike look of pathos came again. I have never seen so sad a face. She was a lady, white and delicately clad; I, a rude frontiersman in camp-grimed leather. But I stepped to her now and took her in my arms, and held her close, and pushed back the damp waves of her hair. And because a man's tears were in my eyes, I have no doubt of absolution when I say I had been a cad and a coward had I not kissed her own tears away. I no longer made pretense of ignorance, but ah! how I wished that I were ignorant of what it was not my right to know.
I led her to the edge of the little bed of husks and found her kerchief. Ah, she was of breeding and courage! Presently, her voice rose steady and clear as ever. "Threlka!" she called. "Please!"
When Threlka came, she looked closely at her lady's face, and what she read seemed, after all, to content her.
"Threlka," said my lady in French, "I want the little one."
I turned to her with query in my eyes.
"Tiens!" she said. "Wait. I have a little surprise."
"You have nothing at any time save surprises, madam?"
"We things I have," said she, sighing: "a little dog from China, Chow by name. He sleeps now, and I must not disturb him, else I would show you how lovely a dog is Chow. Also here I have found a little Indian child running about the post. Dr. McLaughlin was rejoiced when I adopted her."
"Well, then, madam, what next?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

When a Woman Would.
The two pleasantest days of a woman are her marriage day and the day of her funeral.—Hippocrates.

My garden at the Willamette might languish if it like, and my little cabin might stand in uncut wheat. For me, there were other matters of more importance now. I took leave of hospitable Dr. McLaughlin at Fort Vancouver with proper expressions of the obligation due for his hospitality; but I said nothing to him, of course, of having met the mysterious baroness, nor did I mention definitely that I intended to meet them both again at no distant date. None the less, I prepared to set out at once upon the Columbia river trail.
From Fort Vancouver to the missions at Wallatpu was a distance by trail of more than 200 miles. This I covered horseback, rapidly, and arrived two or three days in advance of the English. Nothing disturbed the quiet until, before noon of one day, we heard the gun fire and the shoutings which in that country customarily made announcement of the arrival of a party of travelers. Being on the lookout for these, I soon discovered them to be my late friends of the Hudson bay post.
One old brown woman, unhappily astride a native pony, I took to be Threlka, my lady's servant, but she rode with her class, at the rear. I looked again, until I found the baroness, clad in buckskins and blue cloth, brave as any in finery of the frontier. Dr. McLaughlin saw fit to present us formally, or rather carelessly, it not seeming to him that two so different would meet often in the future; and of course there being no dream even in his shrewd mind that we had ever met in the past. This supposition fitted our plans, even though it kept us apart. I was but a common emigrant farmer, camping like my kind. She, being of distinction, dwelt with the Hudson bay party in the mission buildings.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In Exchange.
Great women belong to history and to self-sacrifice.—Leigh Hunt.

For sufficient reasons of my own, which have been explained, I did not care to mingle more than was necessary with the party of the Hudson bay folk who made their headquarters with the missionary families. I kept close to my own camp when not busy with my inquiries in the neighborhood, where I now began to see what could be done in the preparation of a proper outfit for the baroness. Herself I did not see for the next two days; but one evening I met her on the narrow log gallery of one of the mission houses. Without much speech we sat and looked over the pleasant prospect of the wide flats, the fringe of willow trees, the loom of the mountains off toward the east.
"I am not under his orders, monsieur. I only thought that, since you were used to this western travel, you could, perhaps, be of aid in getting me proper guides and vehicles. I should rely upon your judgment very much, monsieur."
"You are asking me to aid you in your own folly," said I discontentedly, "but I will be there; and be sure also you can not prevent me from following—if you persist in this absolute folly. A woman—to cross the Rockies!"
I rose now, and she was gracious enough to follow me part way toward the door. We hesitated there, awkwardly enough. But once more our hands met in some sort of fellowship. "Forget!" I heard her whisper. And I could think of no reply better than that same word.
"Continually you surprise me, madam," I began at last. "Can we not persuade you to abandon this foolish plan of your going east?"
"I can see no reason for abandoning it," said she. "There are some thousands of your people, men, women and children, who have crossed that trail. Why should not I?"
"But they come in large parties; they come well prepared. Each helps his neighbor."
"The distance is the same, and the method is the same."
I ceased to argue, seeing that she would not be persuaded. "At least, madam," said I, "I have done what little I could in securing you a party. You are to have eight mules, two carts, six horses, and two men, besides old Joe Meek, the best guide now in Oregon. He would not go to save his life. He goes to save yours."
"You are good special pleader," said she; "but you do not shake me in my purpose, and I hold to my terms. It does not rest with you and me, but with another. As I told you—as we have both agreed—"
"Then let us not speak her name," said I.
Again her eyes looked into mine, straight, large and dark. Again the spell of her beauty rose all around me, enveloped me as I had felt it do before. "You cannot have Oregon, except through me," she said at last. "You cannot have her—except through me!"
"It is the truth," I answered. "In God's name, then, play the game fair."

CHAPTER XXX.

Counter Currents.
Woman is like the reed that bends to every breeze, but breaks not in the tempest.—Bishop Richard Whately.

The Oregon immigration for 1845 numbered, according to some accounts, not less than 3,000 souls. Our people still rolled westward in a mighty wave. The history of that great west-bound movement is well known. The story of a yet more decisive journey of that same year never has been written—that of Helena von Ritz, from Oregon to the east. The price of that journey was an empire; its cost—ah, let me not yet speak of that.
Although Meek and I agreed that he should push east at the best possible speed, it was well enough understood that I should give him no more than a day or so start. I did not purpose to allow so risky a journey as this to be undertaken by any woman in so small a party, and made no doubt that I would overtake them at least at Fort Hall, perhaps 500 miles east of the missions, or at farthest at Fort Bridger, some 700 miles from the starting point in Oregon.
The young wife of one of the missionaries was glad enough to take passage thus for the east; and there was the silent Threlka. These two could offer company, even did not the little Indian maid, adopted by the baroness, serve to interest her. Their equipment and supplies were as good as any purchasable. What could be done, we now had done.
Yet, after all, Helena von Ritz had her own way. I did not see her again after we parted that evening at the mission. I was absent for a couple of days with a hunting party, and on my return discovered that she was gone, with no more than brief farewell to those left behind! Meek was anxious as herself to be off, but he left word for me to follow on at once.
It may be supposed that I myself now hurried in my plans. I was able to make up a small party of four men, about half the number Meek took with him; and I threw together such equipment as I could find remaining, not wholly to my liking, but good enough, I fancied, to overtake a party headed by a woman. But one thing after another cost us time, and we did not average 20 miles a day. I felt half desperate, as I reflected on what that might mean. As early fall was approaching, I could expect, in view of my own lost time, to encounter the annual wagon train 200 or 300 miles farther westward than the object of my pursuit naturally would have done. As a matter of fact, my party met the wagons at a point well to the west of Fort Hall.
It was early in the morning we met them coming west—that long, weary, dust-covered, creeping caravan, a mile long, slow serpent, crawling westward across the desert. In time I came up to the head of the tremendous wagon train of 1845, and its leader and myself threw up our hands in the salutation of the wilderness.
(TO BE CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XXXI.

An Adherent.
By mistake a farmer had got aboard a car reserved for a party of college graduates who were returning to their alma mater for some special event. There was a large quantity of refreshments on the car, and the farmer was allowed to join the others. Finally some one asked him: "Are you an alumnus?" "No," said the farmer earnestly; "but I believe in it!"—Lippincott's.



"What are my stakes? How may I pay?"
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