Bertha Muzzy Sinclair

The Ranch at the Wolverine

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CHAPTER I

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LET US START AT THE BEGINNING

Four trail-worn oxen, their necks bowed to the yoke of patient servitude, should really begin this story. But to follow the trail they made would take several chapters which you certainly would skip—unless you like to hear the tale of how the wilderness was tamed and can thrill at the stern history of those who did the taming while they fought to keep their stomachs fairly well filled with food and their hard-muscled bodies fit for the fray.

There was a woman, low-browed, uncombed, harsh of voice and speech and nature, who drove the four oxen forward over lava rock and rough prairie and the scanty sage. I might tell you a great deal about Marthy, who plodded stolidly across the desert and the low-lying hills along the Blackfoot; and of her weak-souled, shiftless husband whom she called Jase, when she did not call him worse.

They were the pioneers whose lurching wagon first forded the singing Wolverine stream just where it greens the tiny valley and then slips between huge lava-rock ledges to join the larger stream. Jase would have stopped there and called home the sheltered little green spot in the gray barrenness. But Marthy went on, up the farther hill and across the upland, another full day's journey with the sweating oxen.

They camped that night on another little, singing stream, in another little valley, which was not so level or so green or so wholly pleasing to the eye. And that night two of the oxen, impelled by a surer instinct than their human owners, strayed away down a narrow, winding gorge and so discovered the Cove and feasted upon its rich grasses. It was Marthy who went after them and who recognized the little, hidden Eden as the place of her dreams—supposing she ever had dreams. So Marthy and Jase and the four oxen took possession, and with much labor and many hard years for the woman, and with the same number of years and as little labor as he could manage on the man's part, they tamed the Cove and made it a beauty spot in that wild land. A beauty spot, though their lives held nothing but treadmill toil and harsh words and a mental horizon narrowed almost to the limits of the grim, gray, rock wall that surrounded them.

Another sturdy-souled couple came afterwards and saw the Wolverine and made for themselves a home upon its banks. And in the rough little log cabin was born the girl-child I want you to meet; a girl-child when she should have been a boy to meet her father's need and great desire; a girl-child whose very name was a compromise between the parents. For they called her Billy for sake of the boy her father wanted, and Louise for the girl her mother had longed for to lighten that terrible loneliness which the far frontier brings to the women who brave its stern emptiness.

Do you like children? In other words, are you human? Then I want you to meet Billy Louise when she was ten and had lived all her life among the rocks and the sage and the

stunted cedars and huge, gray hills of Idaho. Meet her with her pink sunbonnet hanging down the back of her neck and her big eyes taking in the squalidness of Marthy's crude kitchen in the Cove, and her terrible directness of speech hitting squarely the things she saw that were different from her own immaculate home. Of course, if you don't care for children, you may skip a chapter and meet her later when she was eighteen—but I really wish you would consent to know her at ten.

"Mommie makes cookies with a raising in the middle. She gives me two sometimes when the Bill of me has been workin' like the deuce with dad; one for Billy and one for Louise. When I'm twelve, Mommie's goin' to let the Louise of me make cookies all myself and put a raising on top. I'll put two on top of one and bring it over for you, Marthy. And—" Billy Louise was terribly outspoken at times—"I'll put four raisings on another one for Jase, 'cause he don't have any nice times with you. Don't you ever make cookies with raisings on 'em, Marthy? I'm hungry as a coyote—and I ain't used to eating just bread and the kinda butter you have. Mom says you don't work it enough. She says you are too scared of water, and the buttermilk ain't all worked out, so that's why it tastes so funny. Does Jase like that kind of butter, Marthy?"

"If your mother had to do the outside work as well as the inside, mebbe she wouldn't work her butter so awful much, either. I dunno whether Jase likes it or not. He eats it," Marthy stated grimly.

Billy Louise sighed. "Well, of course he's awful lazy. Daddy says so. I guess I won't put but one raising on Jase's

cookie when I'm twelve. Has Jase gone fishing again, Marthy?"

A gleam of satisfaction brightened Marthy's hard, blue eyes. "No, he ain't. He's in the root suller. You want some bread and some nice, new honey, Billy Louise? I jest took it outa the hive this morning. When you go home, I'll send some to your maw if you can carry it."

"Sure! I can carry anything that's good. If you put it on thick, so I can't taste the bread, I'll eat it. Say, you like me, don't you, Marthy?"

"Yes," said Marthy, turning her back on the slim, wide-eyed girl, "I like yuh, Billy Louise."

"You sound like you wish you didn't," Billy Louise remarked. Even at ten Billy Louise was keenly sensitive to tones and glances and that intangible thing we call atmosphere. "Are you sorry you like me?"

"No-o, I ain't sorry. A person's got to like something that's alive and human, or—" Marthy was clumsy with words, and she was always coming to the barrier between her powers of expression and the thoughts that were prisoned and dumb. "Here's your bread 'n' honey."

"What makes you sound that way, Marthy? You sound like you had tears inside, and they couldn't get out your eyes. Are you sad? Did you ever have a little girl, Marthy?"

"What makes you ask that?" Marthy sat heavily down upon a box beside the rough kitchen table and looked at Billy Louise queerly, as if she were half afraid of her.

"I dunno—but that's the way mommie sounds when she says something about angel-brother. Did you ever—"

"Billy Louise, I'm going to tell you this oncet, and then I don't want you to ast me any more questions, nor talk about it. You're the queerest young one I ever seen, but you don't hurt folks on purpose—I've learnt that much about yuh." Marthy half rose from the box, and with her dingy, patched apron shooed an investigative hen out of the doorway. She knew that Billy Louise was regarding her fixedly over the huge, uneven slice of bread and honey, and she felt vaguely that a child's grave, inquiring eyes may be the hardest of all eyes to meet.

"I never meant—"

"I know yuh never, Billy Louise. Now don't tell your maw this. Long ago—long before your maw ever found you, or your paw ever found your ranch on the Wolverine, I had a little girl, 'bout like you. She was a purty child—her hair was like silk, and her eyes was blue, and—we was Mormons, and we lived down clost to Salt Lake. And I seen so much misery amongst the women-folks—you can't understand that, but mebby you will when you grow up. Anyway, when little Minervy kep' growin' purtyer and sweeter, I couldn't stand it to think of her growin' up and bein' a Mormon's wife. I seen so many purty girls... So I made up my mind we'd move away off somewheres, where Minervy could grow up jest as sweet and purty as she was a mind to, and not have to suffer fer her sweetness and her purtyness. When you grow up, Billy Louise, you'll know what I mean. So me and Jase packed up—we kinda had to do it on the sly, on account uh the bishops—and we struck out with a four-ox team.

"We kep' a-goin' and kep' a-goin', fer I was scared to settle too clost. I seen how they keep spreadin' out all the

time, and I wanted to git so fur away they wouldn't ketch up. And we got into bad country, where there wasn't no water skurcely. We swung too fur north, and got into the desert back there. And over next them three buttes little Minervy took sick. We tried to git outa the desert—we headed over this way. But before we got to Snake river she—died, and I had to leave 'er buried back there. We come on. I hated the church worse than ever, and I wanted to git clear away from 'em. Why, Billy Louise, we camped one night by the Wolverine, right about where your paw's got his big corral! We didn't stay there, because it was an Injun camping-ground then, and they wasn't no use getting mixed up in no fuss, first thing. In them days the Injuns wasn't so peaceable as they be now. So we come on here and settled in the Cove.

"And so—I like yuh," said Marthy, in a tone that was half defiance, "because I can't help likin' yuh. You're growin' up sweet and purty, jest like I wanted my little Minervy to grow up. In some ways you remind me of her, only she was quieter and didn't take so much notice of things a young one ain't s'posed to notice. Now I don't want you askin' no more questions about her, 'cause I ain't going to talk about it ag'in; and if yuh pester me, I'll send yuh home and tell your maw to keep yuh there. If you're the nice girl I think yuh be, you'll be good to Marthy and not talk about—"

Billy Louise opened her eyes still wider, and licked the honey off one whole corner of the slice without really tasting anything. Marthy's square, uncompromising chin was actually quivering. Billy Louise was stricken dumb by the spectacle. She wanted to go and put her arms around

Marthy's neck and kiss her; only Marthy's neck had a hairy mole, and there was no part of her face which looked in the least degree kissable. Still, Billy Louise felt herself all hot inside with remorse and sympathy and affection. Physical contact being impossible because of her fastidious instincts, and speech upon the subject being so sternly forbidden, Billy Louise continued to lick honey and stare in fascinated silence.

"I'll wash the dishes for you, Marthy," she offered irrelevantly at last, as a supreme sacrifice upon the altar of sympathy. When that failed to stop the slow procession of tears that was traveling down the furrows of Marthy's cheeks, she added ingratiatingly: "I'll put six raisings on the cookie I'm going to make for you."

Whereupon Marthy did an unprecedented, an utterly amazing thing. She got up and gathered Billy Louise into her arms so unexpectedly that Billy Louise inadvertently buried her nose in the honey she had not yet licked off the bread. Marthy held her close pressed to her big, flabby bosom and wept into her hair in a queer, whimpering way that somehow made Billy Louise think of a hurt dog. It was only for a minute that Marthy did this; she stopped almost as suddenly as she began and went outside, wiping her eyes and her nose impartially upon her dirty apron.

Billy Louise sat paralyzed with the mixture of unusual emotions that assailed her. She was exceedingly sticky and uncomfortable from honey and tears, and she shivered with repugnance at the odor of Marthy's unbathed person. She was astonished at the outburst from phlegmatic Marthy Meilke, and her pity was now alloyed with her promise to

wash all those dirty dishes. Billy Louise felt that she had been a trifle hasty in making promises. There was not a drop of water in the house nor a bit of wood, and Billy Louise knew perfectly well that the dishpan would have a greasy, unpleasant feeling under her fastidious little fingers.

She sighed heavily. "Well, I s'pose I might just as well get to work at 'em," she said aloud, as was her habit—being a child who had no playmates. "I hate to dread a thing I hate."

She looked at the messy slice of sour bread and threw it out to the speckled hen that had returned and was standing with one foot lifted tentatively—ready for a forward step if the fates seemed kind—and was regarding Billy Louise fixedly with one yellow eye. "Take it and go!" cried the donor, impatient of the scrutiny. She picked up the wooden pail and went down to the creek behind the house, by a pathway bordered thickly with budding rosebushes and tall lilacs.

Billy Louise first of all washed her face slowly and with a methodic thoroughness which characterized her—having lived for ten full years with no realization of hours and minutes as a measure for her actions. She dried her face quite as deliberately upon her starched calico apron. Then she spent a few minutes trying to catch a baby trout in her cupped palms. Never had Billy Louise succeeded in catching a baby trout in her hands; therefore she never tired of trying. Now, however, that rash promise nagged at her and would not let her enjoy the game as completely as usual. She took the wooden pail, and squatting on her heels in the wet sand, waited until a small school swam incautiously close to the bank, and scooped suddenly, with a great

splash. She caught three tiny, speckled fish the length of her little finger, and she let the half-full pail rest in the shallow stream while she watched the fry swimming excitedly round and round within.

There was no great fun in that. Billy Louise could catch baby trout in a pail at home, from the waters of the Wolverine, whenever she liked. Many a time she had kept them in a big bottle until she tired of watching them, or they died because she forgot to change the water often enough. She could not get even a languid enjoyment out of them now, because she could not for a minute forget that she had promised to wash Marthy's dishes—and Marthy always had so many dirty dishes! And Marthy's dishpan was so greasy! Billy Louise gave a little shudder when she thought of it.

"I wish her little girl hadn't died," she said, her mind swinging from effect back to cause. "I could play with her. And she'd wash the dishes herself. I'm going to name my new little pig Minervy. I wish she hadn't died. I'd show her my little pig, if Marthy'd let her come over to our place. We could both ride on old Badger; Minervy could ride behind me, and we'd go places together." Billy Louise meditatively stirred up the baby trout with a forefinger. "We'd go up the canyon and have the caves for our play-houses. Minervy could have the secret cave away up the hill, and I'd have the other one across from it; and we'd have flags and wigwag messages like daddy tells about in the war. And we'd play the rabbits are Injuns, and the coyotes are big-Injun-chiefs sneaking down to see if the forts are watching. And whichever seen a coyote first would wigwag to the other one..." A baby trout, taking advantage of the pail

tipping in the current, gave a flip over the edge and interrupted Billy Louise's fancies. She gave the pail a tilt and spilled out the other two fish. Then she filled it as full as she could carry and started back to pay the price of her sympathy.

"I don't see what Minervy had to go and die for!" she complained, dodging a low-hanging branch of bloom-laden lilac. "She could wash the dishes and I'd wipe 'em—and I s'pose there ain't a clean dish-towel in the house, either! Marthy's an awful slack housekeeper."

Billy Louise, being a young person with a conscience—of a sort—washed the dishes, since she had given her word to do it. The dishpan was even more unpleasant than experience had foretold for her; and of Marthy's somewhat meager supply there seemed not one clean dish in the house. The sympathy of Billy Louise therefore waned rapidly; rather, it turned in upon itself. So that by the time she felt morally free to spend the rest of the afternoon as she pleased, she was not at all sorry for Marthy for having lost Minervy; instead, she was sorry for herself for having been betrayed into rashness and for being deprived of a playmate.

"I don't s'pose Marthy doctored her right, at all," she considered pitilessly, as she returned down the lilac-bordered path. "If she had, I guess she wouldn't have died. I'll bet she never gave her a speck of sage tea, like mommie always does when I'm sick—only I ain't ever, thank goodness. I'm just going to ask Jase if Marthy did."

On the way to the root cellar, which was dug into the creek-bank well above high-water mark, Billy Louise

debated within herself the ethics of speaking to Jase upon a forbidden subject. Jase had been Minervy's father, and therefore knew of her existence, so that mentioning Minervy to him could not in any sense be betraying a secret. She wondered if Jase felt badly about it, as Marthy seemed to do. On the heels of that came the determination to test his emotional capacity.

At the root cellar her attention was diverted. The cellar door was fastened on the outside, with the iron hasp used to protect the store of vegetables from the weather. Jase must be gone. She was turning away when she heard him clear his throat with that peculiar little hacking, rasping noise which sounded exactly as one would expect a Jase to sound. Billy Louise puckered her eyebrows, pressed her lips together understandingly—and disapprovingly—and opened the door.

Jase, humped over a heap of sprouting potatoes, blinked up apathetically into the sudden flood of sweet, spring air and sunshine. "Why, hello, Billy Louise," he mumbled, his eyes brightening a bit.

"Say, you was locked in here!" Billy Louise faced him puzzled. "Did you know you was locked in?"

"Yes-s, I knowed it. Marthy, she locked the door." Jase reached out a bony hand covered with carrot-colored hairs and picked up a shriveling potato with long, sickly sprouts proclaiming life's persistence in perpetuating itself under adverse circumstances. He broke off the sprouts with a wipe of his dirty palm and threw the potato into a heap in the corner.

"What for?" Billy Louise demanded, watching Jase reach languidly out for another potato.

"She seen me diggin' bait," Jase said tonelessly. "I did think some of ketchin' a mess of fish before I went to sproutin' p'tatoes, but Marthy she don't take no int'rest in nothin' but work."

"Are the fish biting good?" Billy Louise glanced toward the wider stream, where it showed through a gap in the alders.

"Yes-s, purty good now. I caught a nice mess the other day; but Marthy, she don't favor my goin' fishin'." The lean hands of Jase moved slowly at his task. Billy Louise, watching him, wondered why he did not hurry a little and finish sooner. Still, she could not remember ever seeing Jase hurry at anything, and the Cove with its occupants was one of her very earliest memories.

"Say, I'll dig some more bait, and then we'll go fishing; shall we?"

"I—dunno as I better—" Jase's hand hovered aimlessly over the potato pile. "I got quite a lot sprouted, though—and mebby—"

"I'll lock you in till I get the bait dug," suggested Billy Louise craftily. "And you work fast; and then I'll let you out, and we'll lock the door agin, so Marthy'll think you're in there yet."

"You're sure smart to think up things," Jase admired, smiling loose-lipped behind his scraggly beard, that was fading with the years. "I dunno but what it'd serve Marthy right. She ain't got no call to lock the door on me. She hates like sin t' see me with a fish-pole in m' hand—but she's

always et her share uh the messes I ketch. She ain't a reasonable woman, Marthy ain't. You git the bait. I'll show Marthy who's boss in this Cove!"

He might have encouraged himself into defying Marthy to her face, in another five minutes of complaining. But the cellar door closed upon him with a slam. Billy Louise was not interested in his opinion of Marthy; with her, opinions were valueless if not accompanied by action.

"I never thought to ask him about Minervy," occurred to her while she was relentlessly dragging pale, fleshly fishworms from the loose black soil of Marthy's onion bed. "But I know she was mean to Minervy. She's awful mean to Jase—locking him up in the root cellar just 'cause he wanted to go fishing. If I was Jase I wouldn't sprout a single old potato for her. My goodness, but she'll be mad when she opens the cellar door and Jase ain't in there; I—guess I'll go home early, before Marthy finds it out."

She really meant to do that, but the fish were hungry fish that day, and the joy of having a companion to exclaim with her over every hard tug—even though that companion was only Jase—enticed her to stay on and on, until a whiff of frying pork on the breeze that swept down the Cove warned Billy Louise of the near approach of supper-time.

"I guess mebby I might as well go back to the suller," Jase remarked, his defiance weakening as he climbed the bank. "You come and lock the door agin, Billy Louise, and Marthy won't know I ain't been there all the time. She'll think you caught the fish." He looked at her with a weak leer of conscious cunning.

Billy Louise, groping vaguely for the sunbonnet that was dangling between her straight shoulder-blades, stared at him with wide eyes that held disillusionment and with it a contempt all the keener because it was the contempt of a child, whose judgment is merciless.

"I should thing you'd be ashamed!" she said at last, forgetting that the idea had been born in her own brain. "Cowards do things and then sneak about it. Daddy says so. I don't care if Marthy is mad 'cause I let you out, and I don't care if she knows we went fishing. I thought you wanted Marthy to see she ain't so smart, locking you up in the cellar. I ain't going to bake you a single cookie with raisings on it, like I was going to."

"Marthy's got a sharp tongue in 'er head," Jase wavered, his eyes shifting from Billy Louise's uncompromising stare.

"Daddy says when you do a thing that's mean, do it and take your medicine," Billy Louise retorted. "The boy of me that belongs to dad ain't a sneak, Jase Meilke. And," she added loftily, "the girl of me that belongs to mommie is a perfeck lady. Good day, Mr. Meilke. Thank you for a pleasant time fishing."

Whereupon the perfect lady part switched short skirts up the path and held a tousled head high with disdain.

Jase, thus deserted, went shambling back to the cellar and fell to sprouting potatoes with what might almost be termed industry.

It pained Jase later to discover that Marthy was not interested in the open door, but in the very small heap of potatoes which he had "sprouted" that afternoon. There was other work to be done in the Cove, and there were but two

pairs of hands to do it; that one pair was slow and shiftless and inefficient was bitterly accepted by Marthy, who worked from sunrise until dark to make up for the shirking of those other hands.

It was the trail experience over again, and it was an experience that dragged through the years without change or betterment. Marthy wanted to "get ahead." Jase wanted to sit in the sun with his knees drawn up, just—I don't know what, but I suppose he called it thinking. When he felt unusually energetic, he liked to dangle an impaled worm over a trout pool. Theoretically he also wanted to get ahead and to have a fine ranch and lots of cattle and a comfortable home. He would plan these things sometimes in an expansive mood, whereupon Marthy would stare at him with her hard, contemptuous look until Jase trailed off into mumbling complaints into his beard. He was not as able-bodied as she thought he was, he would say, with vague solemnity. Some uh these days Marthy'd see how she had driven him beyond his strength.

When one is a Marthy, however, with ambitions and a tireless energy and the persistence of a beaver, and when one listens to vague mutterings for many hard laboring years, one grows accustomed to the complainings and fails to see certain warning symptoms of which even the complainer is only vaguely aware.

She kept on working through the years, and as far as was humanly possible she kept Jase working. She did not soften, except toward Billy Louise, who rode sometimes over from her father's ranch on the Wolverine to the flowery delights of the Cove. The place was a perfect jungle of sweetness,

seven months of each year; for Marthy owned and indulged a love of beauty, even if she could not realize her dream of prosperity. Wherever was space in the house-yard for a flower or a fruit tree or a berry bush, Marthy planted one or the other. You could not see the cabin from April until the leaves fell in late October, except in a fragmentary way as you walked around it. You went in at a gate of pickets which Marthy herself had split and nailed in place; you followed a narrow, winding path through the sweet jungle—and if you were tall, you stooped now and then to pass under an apple branch. And unless you looked up at the black, lava-rock rim of the bluff which cupped this Eden incongruously, you would forget that just over the brim lay parched plain and barren mountain.

When Billy Louise was twelve, she had other ambitions than the making of cookies with "raisings" on them. She wanted to do something big, though she was hazy as to the particular nature of that big something. She tried to talk it over with Marthy, but Marthy could not seem to think beyond the Cove, except that now and then Billy Louise would suspect that her mind did travel to the desert and Minervy's grave. Marthy's hair was growing streaked with yellowish gray, though it never grew less unkempt and dusty looking. Her eyes were harder, if anything, except when they rested on Billy Louise.

When she was thirteen, Billy Louise rode over with a loaf of bread she had baked all by herself, and she put this problem to Marthy:

"I've been thinking I'd go ahead and write poetry, Marthy—a whole book of it with pictures. But I do love to make

bread—and people have to eat bread. Which would you be, Marthy; a poet, or a cook?"

Marthy looked at her a minute, lent her attention briefly to the question, and gave what she considered good advice.

"You learn how to cook, Billy Louise. Yuh don't want to go and get notions. Your maw ain't healthy, and your paw likes good grub. Po'try is all foolishness; there ain't any money in it."

"Walter Scott paid his debts writing poetry," said Billy Louise argumentatively. She had just read all about Walter Scott in a magazine which a passing cowboy had given her; perhaps that had something to do with her new ambition.

"Mebby he did and mebby he didn't. I'd like to see our debts paid off with po'try. It'd have to be worth a hull lot more 'n what I'd give for it."

"Oh. Have you got debts too, Marthy?" Billy Louise at thirteen was still ready with sympathy. "Daddy's got lots and piles of 'em. He bought some cattle and now he talks to mommie all the time about debts. Mommie wants me to go to Boise to school, next winter, to Aunt Sarah's. And daddy says there's debts to pay. I didn't know you had any, Marthy."

"Well, I have got. We bought some cattle, too—and they ain't done 's well 's they might. If I had a man that was any good on earth, I could put up more hay. But I can't git nothing outa Jase but whines. Your paw oughta send you to school, Billy Louise, even if he has got debts. I'd 'a' sent—"

She stopped there, but Billy Louise knew how she finished the sentence mentally. She would have sent Minervy to school.

"Your paw ain't got any right to keep you outa school," Marthy went on aggressively. "Debts er no debts, he'd see 't you got schoolin'—if he was the right kinda man."

"Daddy is the right kinda man. He ain't like Jase. He says he wishes he could, but he don't know where the money's coming from."

"How much's it goin' to take?" asked Marthy heavily.

"Oh, piles." Billy Louise spoke airily to hide her pride in the importance of the subject. "Fifty dollars, I guess. I've got to have some new clothes, mommie says. I'd like a blue dress."

"And your paw can't raise fifty dollars?" Marthy's tone was plainly belligerent.

"Got to pay interest," said Billy Louise importantly.

Marthy said not another word about debts or the duties of parents. What she did was more to the point, however, for she hitched the mules to a rattly old buckboard next day and drove over to the MacDonald ranch on the Wolverine. She carried fifty dollars in her pocket—and that was practically all the money Marthy possessed, and had been saved for the debts that harassed her. She gave the money to Billy Louise's mother and said that it was a present for Billy Louise, and meant for "school money." She said that she hadn't any girl of her own to spend the money on, and that Billy Louise was a good girl and a smart girl, and she wanted to do a little something toward her schooling.

A woman will sacrifice more pride than you would believe, if she sees a way toward helping her children to an education. Mrs. MacDonald took the money, and she promised secrecy—with a feeling of relief that Marthy

wished it. She was astonished to find that Marthy had any feelings not directly connected with work or the shortcomings of Jase, but she never suspected that Marthy had made any sacrifice for Billy Louise.

So Billy Louise went away to school and never knew whose money had made it possible to go, and Marthy worked harder and drove Jase more relentlessly to make up that fifty dollars. She never mentioned the matter to anyone. The next year it was the same; when, in August, she questioned Billy Louise clumsily upon the subject of finances, and learned that "daddy" still talked about debts and interest and didn't know where the money was coming from, she drove over again with money for the "schooling." And again she extracted a promise of silence.

She did this for four years, and not a soul knew that it cost her anything in the way of extra work and extra harassment of mind. She bought more cattle and cut more hay and went deeper into debt; for as Billy Louise grew older and prettier and more accustomed to the ways of town, she needed more money, and the August gift grew proportionately larger. The mother was thankful beyond the point of questioning. An August without Marthy and Marthy's gift of money would have been a tragedy; and so selfish is mother-love sometimes that she would have accepted the gift even if she had known what it cost the giver.

At eighteen, then, Billy Louise knew some things not taught by the wide plains and the wild hills around her. She was not spoiled by her little learning, which was a good thing. And when her father died tragically beneath an overturned load of poles from the mountain at the head of

the canyon, Billy Louise came home. The Billy of her tried to take his place, and the Louise of her attempted to take care of her mother, who was unfitted both by nature and habit to take care of herself. Which was, after all, a rather big thing for anyone to attempt.

CHAPTER II

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A STORM AND A STRANGER

Jase began to complain of having "all-gone" feelings during the winter after Billy Louise came home and took up the whole burden of the Wolverine ranch. He complained to Billy Louise, when she rode over one clear, sunny day in January; he said that he was getting old—which was perfectly true—and that he was not as able-bodied as he might be, and didn't expect to last much longer. Billy Louise spoke of it to Marthy, and Marthy snorted.

"He's able-bodied enough at mealtimes, I notice," she retorted. "I've heard that tune ever since I knowed him; he can't fool me!"

"Not about the all-goneness, have you?" Billy Louise was preparing to wipe the dishes for Marthy. "I know he always had 'cricks' in different parts of his anatomy, but I never heard about his feeling all-gone, before. That sounds mysterious, don't you think?"

"No; and he never had nothin' the matter with his anatomy, neither; his anatomy's just as sound as mine. Jase was born lazy, is all ails him."

"But, Marthy, haven't you noticed he doesn't look as well as he used to? He has a sort of gray look, don't you think? And his eyes are so puffy underneath, lately."

"No, I ain't noticed nothing wrong with him that ain't always been wrong." Marthy spoke grudgingly, as if she resented even the possibility of Jase's having a real ailment.

"He's feelin' his years, mebby. But he ain't no call to; Jase ain't but three years older 'n I be, and I ain't but fifty-nine last birthday. And I've worked and slaved here in this Cove fer twenty-seven years, now; what it is I've made it. Jase ain't ever done a hand's turn that he wasn't obliged to do. I've chopped wood, and I've built corrals and dug ditches, and Jase has puttered around and whined that he wasn't able-bodied enough to do no heavy lifting. That there orchard out there I planted and packed water in buckets to it till I got the ditch through. Them corrals down next the river I built. I dug the post-holes, and Jase set the posts in and held 'em steady while I tamped the dirt! In winter I've hauled hay and fed the cattle; and Jase, he packed a bucket uh slop, mebby, to the pigs! If he ain't as able-bodied as I be, it's because he ain't done nothing to git strong on. He can't come around me now with that all-gone feeling uh his; I know Jase Meilke like a book."

There was more that she said about Jase. Standing there, a squat, unkempt woman with a seamed, leathery face and hard eyes now quite faded to gray, she told Billy Louise a good deal of the bitterness of the years behind; years of hardship and of slavish toil and no love to lighten it. She spoke again of Minervy, and the name brought back to Billy Louise poignant memories of her own lonely childhood and of her "pretend" playmate.

Half shyly, because she was still sometimes touched with the inarticulateness of youth, Billy Louise told Marthy a little of that playmate. "Why, do you know, every time I rode old Badger anywhere, after that day you told me about Minervy, I used to pretend that Minervy rode behind me. I used to

talk to her by the hour and take her places. And up our canyon is a cave that I used to play was Minervy's cave. I had another one, and I used to go over and visit Minervy. And I had another pretend playmate—a boy—and we used to have adventures. It's a queer place; I just found that cave by accident. I don't believe there's another person in the country who knows it's there at all. Well, that's Minervy's cave to me yet. And, Marthy—" Billy Louise giggled a little and eyed the old woman with a sidelong look that would have set a young man's blood a-jump—"I hope you won't be mad; I was just a kid, and I didn't know any better. But just to show you how much I thought: I had a little pig, and I named it Minervy, after you told me about her. And mommie told me that was no name for it; it was—it wasn't a girl pig, mommie said. So I called it Man-ervy, as the next best thing." She gave Marthy another wasted glance from the corners of her eyes. "Oh, Marthy!" she cried remorsefully, setting down the gravy bowl that she might pat Marthy on her fat, age-rounded shoulder. "What a little beast I am! I shouldn't have told that; but honest, I thought it was an honor. I—I just worshiped that pig!"

Jase maundered in at that moment, and Marthy, catching up a corner of her dirty apron—Billy Louise could not remember ever seeing Marthy in a perfectly clean dress or apron—wiped away what traces of emotion her weathered face could reveal. Also, she turned and glared at Jase with what Billy Louise considered a perfectly uncalled-for animosity. In reality, Marthy was covertly looking for visible symptoms of the all-goneness. She shut her harsh lips together tightly at what she saw; Jase certainly was puffy

under his watery, pink-rimmed eyes, and the withered cheeks above his thin graying beard really did have a pasty, gray look.

"D' you turn them calves out into the corral?" she demanded, her voice harder because of her secret uneasiness.

"I was goin' to, but the wind's changed into the north, 'n' I thought mebby you wouldn't want 'em out." Jase turned back aimlessly to the door. His voice was getting cracked and husky, and the deprecating note dominated pathetically all that he said. "You'll have to face the wind goin' home," he said to Billy Louise. "More 'n likely you'll be facin' snow, too. Looks bad, off that way."

"You go on and turn them calves out!" Marthy commanded him harshly. "Billy Louise ain't goin' home if it storms; I sh'd think you'd know enough to know that."

"Oh, but I'll have to go, anyway," the girl interrupted. "Mommie can't be there alone; she'd worry herself to death if I didn't show up by dark. She worries about every little thing since daddy died. I ought to have gone before—or I oughtn't to have come. But she was worrying about you, Marthy; she hadn't seen or heard of you for a month, and she was afraid you might be sick or something. Why don't you get someone to stay with you? I think you ought to."

She looked toward the door, which Jase had closed upon his departure. "If Jase should—get sick, or anything—"

"Jase ain't goin' to git sick," Marthy retorted glumly. "Yuh don't want to let him worry yuh, Billy Louise. If I'd worried every time he yowled around about being sick, I'd be dead or crazy by now. I dunno but maybe I'll have somebody to

help with the work, though," she added, after a pause during which she had swiped the dish-rag around the sides of the pan once or twice, and had opened the door and thrown the water out beyond the doorstep like the sloven she was. "I got a nephew that wants to come out. He's been in a bank, but he's quit and wants to git on to a ranch. I dunno but I'll have him come, in the spring."

"Do," urged Billy Louise, perfectly unconscious of the potentialities of the future. "I hate to think of you two down here alone. I don't suppose anyone ever comes down here, except me—and that isn't often."

"Nobody's got any call to come down," said Marthy stolidly. "They sure ain't going to come for our comp'ny and there ain't nothing else to bring 'em."

"Well, there aren't many to come, you know," laughed Billy Louise, shaking out the dish towel and spreading it over two nails, as she did at home. "I'm your nearest neighbor, and I've got six miles to ride—against the wind, at that. I think I'd better start. We've got a halfbreed doing chores for us, but he has to be looked after or he neglects things. I'll not get another chance to come very soon, I'm afraid; mommie hates to have me ride around much in the winter. You send for that nephew right away, why don't you, Marthy?" It was like Billy Louise to mix command and entreaty together. "Really, I don't think Jase looks a bit well."

"A good strong steepin' of sage'll fix him all right, only he ain't sick, as I see. You take this shawl."

Billy Louise refused the shawl and ran down the twisted path fringed with long, reaching fingers of the hare berry bushes. At the stable she stopped for an aimless dialogue

with Jase and then rode away, past the orchard whose leafless branches gave glimpses of the low, sod-roofed cabin, with Marthy standing rather disconsolately on the rough doorstep watching her go.

Absently she let down the bars in the narrowest place in the gorge and lifted them into their rude sockets after she had led her horse through. All through the years since Marthy had gone down that rocky gash in search of Buck and Bawley, no human being had entered or left the Cove save through that narrow opening. The tingle of romance which swept always the nerves of the girl when she rode that way fastened upon her now. She wished the Cove belonged to her; she thought she would like to live in a place like that, with warlike Indians all around and that gorge to guard day and night. She wished she had been Marthy, discovering that place and taming it, little by little, in solitary achievement the sweeter because it had been hard.

"It's a bigger thing," said Billy Louise aloud to her horse, "to make a home here in this wilderness, than to write the greatest poem in the world or paint the greatest picture or—anything. I wish..."

Blue was climbing steadily out of the gorge, twitching an ear backward with flattering attention when his lady spoke. He held it so for a minute, waiting for that sentence to be finished, perhaps; for he was wise beyond his kind—was Blue. But his lady was staring at the rock wall they were passing then, where the winds and the cold and heat had carved jutting ledges into the crude form of cabbages; though Billy Louise preferred to call them roses. Always they