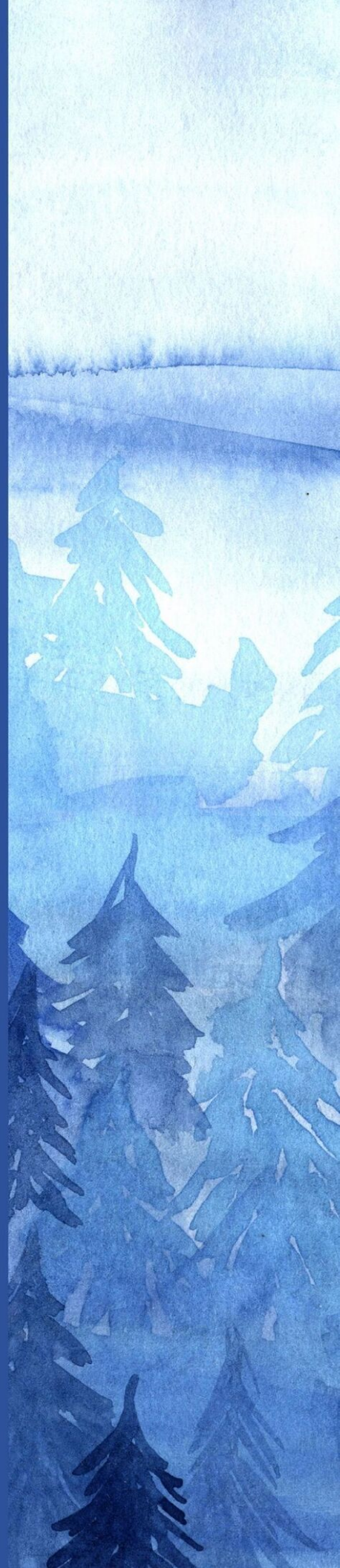


Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A MOUNTAIN WOMAN

Elia Wilkinson Peattie



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Elia Wilkinson Peattie asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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To
My best Friend, and kindest Critic,
My Husband.

Contents

Foreword

1. A Mountain Woman

2. Jim Lancy's Waterloo

3. A Resuscitation

4. Two Pioneers

5. Up the Gulch

6. A Michigan Man

7. A Lady of Yesterday.

About the Author

Foreword

MOST of the tales in this little book have been printed before. "A Mountain Woman" appeared in Harper's Weekly, as did "The Three Johns" and "A Resuscitation." "Jim Lancy's Waterloo" was printed in the Cosmo-politan, "A Michigan Man" in Lippincott's, and "Up the Gulch" in Two Tales. The courtesy of these periodicals in permitting the stories to be republished is cordially acknowl- edged.

E. W. P.

One

A Mountain Woman



IF Leroy Brainard had not had such a respect for literature, he would have written a book.

As it was, he played at being an architect — and succeeded in being a charming fellow. My sister Jessica never lost an opportunity of laughing at his endeavors as an architect.

“You can build an enchanting villa, but what would you do with a cathedral?”

“I shall never have a chance at a cathedral,” he would reply. “And, besides, it always seems to me so material and so impertinent to build a little structure of stone and wood in which to worship God!”

You see what he was like? He was frivolous, yet one could never tell when he would become eloquently earnest.

Brainard went off suddenly Westward one day. I suspected that Jessica was at the bottom of it, but I asked no questions; and I did not hear from him for months. Then I got a letter from Colorado.

“I have married a mountain woman,” he wrote. “None of your puny breed of modern femininity, but a remnant left over from the heroic ages, — a

primitive woman, grand and vast of spirit, capable of true and steadfast wifehood. No sophistry about her; no knowledge even that there is sophistry. Heavens! man, do you remember the *ron-deaux* and *triolet*s I used to write to those pretty creatures back East? It would take a *Saga* man of the old Norseland to write for my mountain woman. If I were an artist, I would paint her with the north star in her locks and her feet on purple cloud. I suppose you are at the Pier. I know you usually are at this season. At any rate, I shall direct this letter thither, and will follow close after it. I want my wife to see something of life. And I want her to meet your sister."

"Dear me!" cried Jessica, when I read the letter to her; "I don't know that I care to meet anything quite so gigantic as that mountain woman. I'm one of the puny breed of modern femininity, you know. I don't think my nerves can stand the encounter."

"Why, Jessica!" I protested. She blushed a little.

"Don't think bad of me, Victor. But, you see, I've a little scrap-book of those *triolet*s upstairs." Then she burst into a peal of irresistible laughter. "I'm not laughing because I am piqued," she said frankly. "Though any one will admit that it is rather irritating to have a man who left you in a blasted condition recover with such extraordinary promptness. As a *philanthropist*, one of course rejoices, but as a woman, Victor, it must be admitted that one has a right to feel annoyed. But, honestly, I am not ungenerous, and I am going to do him a favor. I shall write, and urge him not to bring his wife here. A primitive woman, with the north star in her hair, would look well down there in the Casino eating a pineapple ice, wouldn't she? It's all very well to have a soul, you know; but it won't keep you from looking like a guy among women who have good dressmakers. I shudder at the thought of what the poor thing will suffer if he brings her here."

Jessica wrote, as she said she would; but, for all that, a fortnight later she was walking down the wharf with the “mountain woman,” and I was sauntering beside Leroy. At dinner Jessica gave me no chance to talk with our friend’s wife, and I only caught the quiet contralto tones of her voice now and then contrasting with Jessica’s vivacious soprano. A drizzling rain came up from the east with nightfall. Little groups of shivering men and women sat about in the parlors at the card-tables, and one blond woman sang love songs. The Brainards were tired with their journey, and left us early. When they were gone, Jessica burst into eulogy.

“That is the first woman,” she declared, “I ever met who would make a fit heroine for a book.”

“Then you will not feel under obligations to educate her, as you insinuated the other day?”

“Educate her! I only hope she will help me to unlearn some of the things I know. I never saw such simplicity. It is antique!”

“You’re sure it’s not mere vacuity?” “Victor! How can you? But you haven’t talked with her. You must to-morrow. Good-night.” She gathered up her trailing skirts and started down the corridor. Suddenly she turned back. “For Heaven’s sake!” she whispered, in an awed tone, “I never even noticed what she had on!”

The next morning early we made up a riding party, and I rode with Mrs. Brainard. She was as tall as I, and sat in her saddle as if quite unconscious of her animal. The road stretched hard and inviting under our horses’ feet. The wind smelled salt. The sky was ragged with gray masses of cloud scudding across the blue. I was beginning to glow with exhilaration, when suddenly my companion drew in her horse.

“If you do not mind, we will go back,” she said.

Her tone was dejected. I thought she was tired.

“Oh, no!” she protested, when I apologized for my thoughtlessness in bringing her so far. “I’m not tired. I can ride all day. Where I come from, we have to ride if we want to go anywhere; but here there seems to be no particular place to — to reach.”

“Are you so utilitarian?” I asked, laughingly. “Must you always have some reason for everything you do? I do so many things just for the mere pleasure of doing them, I’m afraid you will have a very poor opinion of me.”

“That is not what I mean,” she said, flushing, and turning her large gray eyes on me. “You must not think I have a reason for everything I do.” She was very earnest, and it was evident that she was unacquainted with the art of making conversation. “But what I mean,” she went on, “is that there is no place — no end — to reach.” She looked back over her shoulder toward the west, where the trees marked the sky line, and an expression of loss and dissatisfaction came over her face. “You see,” she said, apologetically, “I’m used to different things — to the mountains. I have never been where I could not see them before in my life.”

“Ah, I see! I suppose it is odd to look up and find them not there.”

“It’s like being lost, this not having anything around you. At least, I mean,” she continued slowly, as if her thought could not easily put itself in words, — “I mean it seems as if a part of the world had been taken down. It makes you feel lonesome, as if you were living after the world had begun to die.”

“You’ll get used to it in a few days. It seems very beautiful to me here. And then you will have so much life to divert you.”

“Life? But there is always that everywhere.”

“I mean men and women.”

“Oh! Still, I am not used to them. I think I might be not — not very happy with them. They might think me queer. I think I would like to show your sister the mountains.”

“She has seen them often.”

“Oh, she told me. But I don’t mean those pretty green hills such as we saw coming here. They are not like my mountains. I like mountains that go beyond the clouds, with terrible shadows in the hollows, and belts of snow lying in the gorges where the sun cannot reach, and the snow is blue in the sunshine, or shining till you think it is silver, and the mist so wonderful all about it, changing each moment and drifting up and down, that you cannot tell what name to give the colors. These mountains of yours here in the East are so quiet; mine are shouting all the time, with the pines and the rivers. The echoes are so loud in the valley that sometimes, when the wind is rising, we can hardly hear a man talk unless he raises his voice. There are four cataracts near where I live, and they all have different voices, just as people do; and one of them is happy — a little white cataract — and it falls where the sun shines earliest, and till night it is shining. But the others only get the sun now and then, and they are more noisy and cruel. One of them is always in the shadow, and the water looks black. That is partly because the rocks all underneath it are black. It falls down twenty great ledges in a gorge with black sides, and a white mist dances all over it at every leap. I tell father the mist is the ghost of the waters. No man ever goes there; it is too cold. The chill strikes through one, and makes your heart feel as if you were dying. But all down the side of the mountain, toward the south and the west, the sun shines on the granite and draws long points of light out of it. Father tells me soldiers marching look that way when the sun strikes on their bayonets. Those are the kind of mountains I mean, Mr. Grant.”