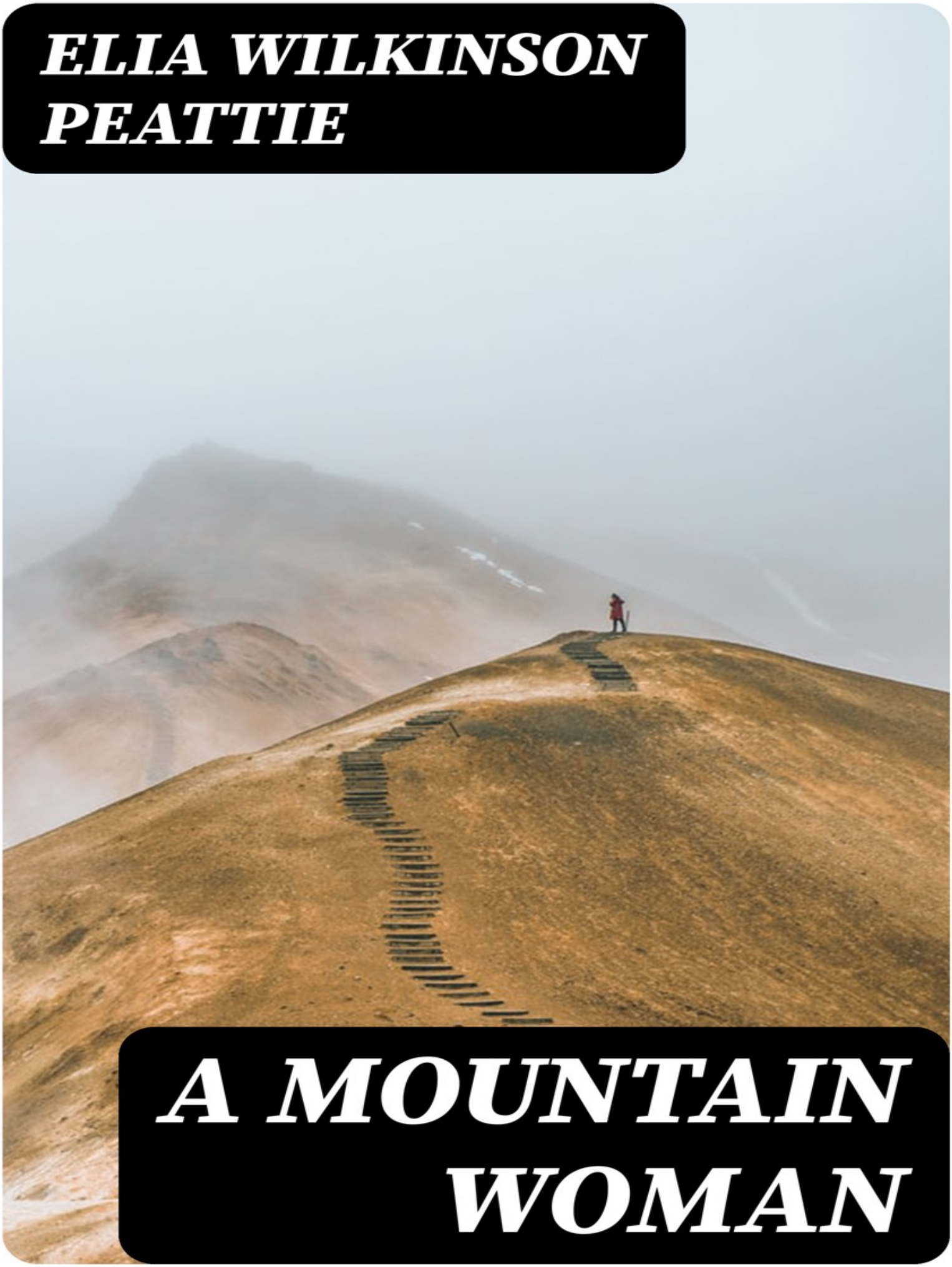
ELIA WILKINSON PEATTIE



A MOUNTAIN WOMAN

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

A Mountain Woman

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To

My best Friend, and kindest Critic,

My Husband.

FOREWORD.

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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 Cosmopolitan, “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 acknowledged.

E. W. P.

A Mountain Woman

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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 rondeaux and triolets 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 triolets 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."

She was looking at me with her face transfigured, as if it, like the mountains she told me of, had been lying in shadow, and waiting for the dazzling dawn.

"I had a terrible dream once," she went on; "the most terrible dream ever I had. I dreamt that the mountains had all been taken down, and that I stood on a plain to which there was no end. The sky was burning up, and the grass scorched brown from the heat, and it was twisting as if it were in pain. And animals, but no other person save myself, only wild things, were crouching and looking up at that sky. They could not run because there was no place to which to go."

"You were having a vision of the last man," I said. "I wonder myself sometimes whether this old globe of ours is going to collapse suddenly and take us with her, or whether we will disappear through slow disastrous ages of fighting and crushing, with hunger and blight to help us to the end. And then, at the last, perhaps, some luckless fellow, stronger than the rest, will stand amid the ribs of the rotting earth and go mad."

The woman's eyes were fixed on me, large and luminous. “Yes,” she said; “he would go mad from the lonesomeness of it. He would be afraid to be left alone like that with God. No one would want to be taken into God's secrets.”

“And our last man,” I went on, “would have to stand there on that swaying wreck till even the sound of the crumbling earth ceased. And he would try to find a voice and would fail, because silence would have come again. And then the light would go out—”

The shudder that crept over her made me stop, ashamed of myself.

“You talk like father,” she said, with a long-drawn breath. Then she looked up suddenly at the sun shining through a rift in those reckless gray clouds, and put out one hand as if to get it full of the headlong rollicking breeze. “But the earth is not dying,” she cried. “It is well and strong, and it likes to go round and round among all the other worlds. It likes the sun and moon; they are all good friends; and it likes the people who live on it. Maybe it is they instead of the fire within who keep it warm; or maybe it is warm just from always going, as we are when we run. We are young, you and I, Mr. Grant, and Leroy, and your beautiful sister, and the world is young too!” Then she laughed a strong splendid laugh, which had never had the joy taken out of it with drawing-room restrictions; and I laughed too, and felt that we had become very good companions indeed, and found myself warming to the joy of companionship as I had not since I was a boy at school.

That afternoon the four of us sat at a table in the Casino together. The Casino, as every one knows, is a place to

amuse yourself. If you have a duty, a mission, or an aspiration, you do not take it there with you, it would be so obviously out of place; if poverty is ahead of you, you forget it; if you have brains, you hasten to conceal them; they would be a serious encumbrance.

There was a bubbling of conversation, a rustle and flutter such as there always is where there are many women. All the place was gay with flowers and with gowns as bright as the flowers. I remembered the apprehensions of my sister, and studied Leroy's wife to see how she fitted into this highly colored picture. She was the only woman in the room who seemed to wear draperies. The jaunty slash and cut of fashionable attire were missing in the long brown folds of cloth that enveloped her figure. I felt certain that even from Jessica's standpoint she could not be called a guy. Picturesque she might be, past the point of convention, but she was not ridiculous.

“Judith takes all this very seriously,” said Leroy, laughingly. “I suppose she would take even Paris seriously.”

His wife smiled over at him. “Leroy says I am melancholy,” she said, softly; “but I am always telling him that I am happy. He thinks I am melancholy because I do not laugh. I got out of the way of it by being so much alone. You only laugh to let some one else know you are pleased. When you are alone there is no use in laughing. It would be like explaining something to yourself.”

“You are a philosopher, Judith. Mr. Max Mueller would like to know you.”

“Is he a friend of yours, dear?”

Leroy blushed, and I saw Jessica curl her lip as she noticed the blush. She laid her hand on Mrs. Brainard's arm.

“Have you always been very much alone?” she inquired.

“I was born on the ranch, you know; and father was not fond of leaving it. Indeed, now he says he will never again go out of sight of it. But you can go a long journey without doing that; for it lies on a plateau in the valley, and it can be seen from three different mountain passes. Mother died there, and for that reason and others—father has had a strange life—he never wanted to go away. He brought a lady from Pennsylvania to teach me. She had wonderful learning, but she didn't make very much use of it. I thought if I had learning I would not waste it reading books. I would use it to—to live with. Father had a library, but I never cared for it. He was forever at books too. Of course,” she hastened to add, noticing the look of mortification deepen on her husband's face, “I like books very well if there is nothing better at hand. But I always said to Mrs. Windsor—it was she who taught me—why read what other folk have been thinking when you can go out and think yourself? Of course one prefers one's own thoughts, just as one prefers one's own ranch, or one's own father.”

“Then you are sure to like New York when you go there to live,” cried Jessica; “for there you will find something to make life entertaining all the time. No one need fall back on books there.”

“I'm not sure. I'm afraid there must be such dreadful crowds of people. Of course I should try to feel that they were all like me, with just the same sort of fears, and that it

was ridiculous for us to be afraid of each other, when at heart we all meant to be kind."

Jessica fairly wrung her hands. "Heavens!" she cried. "I said you would like New York. I am afraid, my dear, that it will break your heart!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Brainard, with what was meant to be a gentle jest, "no one can break my heart except Leroy. I should not care enough about any one else, you know."

The compliment was an exquisite one. I felt the blood creep to my own brain in a sort of vicarious rapture, and I avoided looking at Leroy lest he should dislike to have me see the happiness he must feel. The simplicity of the woman seemed to invigorate me as the cool air of her mountains might if it blew to me on some bright dawn, when I had come, fevered and sick of soul, from the city.

When we were alone, Jessica said to me: "That man has too much vanity, and he thinks it is sensitiveness. He is going to imagine that his wife makes him suffer. There's no one so brutally selfish as your sensitive man. He wants every one to live according to his ideas, or he immediately begins suffering. That friend of yours hasn't the courage of his convictions. He is going to be ashamed of the very qualities that made him love his wife."

There was a hop that night at the hotel, quite an unusual affair as to elegance, given in honor of a woman from New York, who wrote a novel a month.

Mrs. Brainard looked so happy that night when she came in the parlor, after the music had begun, that I felt a moisture gather in my eyes just because of the beauty of her joy, and the forced vivacity of the women about me

seemed suddenly coarse and insincere. Some wonderful red stones, brilliant as rubies, glittered in among the diaphanous black driftings of her dress. She asked me if the stones were not very pretty, and said she gathered them in one of her mountain river-beds.

“But the gown?” I said. “Surely, you do not gather gowns like that in river-beds, or pick them off mountain-pines?”

“But you can get them in Denver. Father always sent to Denver for my finery. He was very particular about how I looked. You see, I was all he had—” She broke off, her voice faltering.

“Come over by the window,” I said, to change her thought. “I have something to repeat to you. It is a song of Sydney Lanier's. I think he was the greatest poet that ever lived in America, though not many agree with me. But he is my dear friend anyway, though he is dead, and I never saw him; and I want you to hear some of his words.”

I led her across to an open window. The dancers were whirling by us. The waltz was one of those melancholy ones which speak the spirit of the dance more eloquently than any merry melody can. The sound of the sea booming beyond in the darkness came to us, and long paths of light, now red, now green, stretched toward the distant light-house. These were the lines I repeated:—

“What heartache—ne'er a hill!
Inexorable, vapid, vague, and chill
The drear sand levels drain my spirit low.
With one poor word they tell me all they know;
Whereat their stupid tongues, to tease my pain,
Do drawl it o'er and o'er again.
They hurt my heart with griefs I cannot name;