

***GRACE  
LIVINGSTON  
HILL***



***A VOICE  
IN THE WILDERNESS***

**Grace Livingston Hill**

# **A Voice in the Wilderness**

**Western Novel**

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## **CHAPTER I**

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With a lurch the train came to a dead stop and Margaret Earle, hastily gathering up her belongings, hurried down the aisle and got out into the night.

It occurred to her, as she swung her heavy suit-case down the rather long step to the ground, and then carefully swung herself after it, that it was strange that neither conductor, brakeman, nor porter had come to help her off the train, when all three had taken the trouble to tell her that hers was the next station; but she could hear voices up ahead. Perhaps something was the matter with the engine that detained them and they had forgotten her for the moment.

The ground was rough where she stood, and there seemed no sign of a platform. Did they not have platforms in this wild Western land, or was the train so long that her car had stopped before reaching it?

She strained her eyes into the darkness, and tried to make out things from the two or three specks of light that danced about like fireflies in the distance. She could dimly see moving figures away up near the engine, and each one evidently carried a lantern. The train was tremendously long. A sudden feeling of isolation took possession of her. Perhaps she ought not to have got out until some one came to help her. Perhaps the train had not pulled into the station yet and she ought to get back on it and wait. Yet if the train started before she found the conductor she might be carried on somewhere and be justly blame her for a fool.

There did not seem to be any building on that side of the track. It was probably on the other, but she was standing too near the cars to see over. She tried to move back to

look, but the ground sloped and she slipped and fell in the cinders, bruising her knee and cutting her wrist.

In sudden panic she arose. She would get back into the train, no matter what the consequences. They had no right to put her out here, away off from the station, at night, in a strange country. If the train started before she could find the conductor she would tell him that he must back it up again and let her off. He certainly could not expect her to get out like this.

She lifted the heavy suit-case up the high step that was even farther from the ground than it had been when she came down, because her fall had loosened some of the earth and caused it to slide away from the track. Then, reaching to the rail of the step, she tried to pull herself up, but as she did so the engine gave a long snort and the whole train, as if it were in league against her, lurched forward crazily, shaking off her hold. She slipped to her knees again, the suit-case, toppled from the lower step, descending upon her, and together they slid and rolled down the short bank, while the train, like an irresponsible nurse who had slapped her charge and left it to its fate, ran giddily off into the night.

The horror of being deserted helped the girl to rise in spite of bruises and shock. She lifted imploring hands to the unresponsive cars as they hurried by her — one, two, three, with bright windows, each showing a passenger, comfortable and safe inside, unconscious of her need.

A moment of useless screaming, running, trying to attract some one's attention, a sickening sense of terror and failure, and the last car slatted itself past with a mocking clatter, as if it enjoyed her discomfort.

Margaret stood dazed, reaching out helpless hands, then dropped them at her sides and gazed after the fast-retreating train, the light on its last car swinging tauntingly, blinking now and then with a leer in its eye, rapidly vanishing from her sight into the depth of the night.

She gasped and looked about her for the station that but a short moment before had been so real to her mind; and, lo! on this side and on that there was none!

The night was wide like a great floor shut in by a low, vast dome of curving blue set with the largest, most wonderful stars she had ever seen. Heavy shadows of purple-green, smoke-like, hovered over earth darker and more intense than the unfathomable blue of the night sky. It seemed like the secret nesting-place of mysteries wherein no human foot might dare intrude. It was incredible that such could be but common sage-brush, sand, and greasewood wrapped about with the beauty of the lonely night.

No building broke the inky outlines of the plain, nor friendly light streamed out to cheer her heart. Not even a tree was in sight, except on the far horizon, where a heavy line of deeper darkness might mean a forest. Nothing, absolutely nothing, in the blue, deep, starry dome above and the bluer darkness of the earth below save one sharp shaft ahead like a black mast throwing out a dark arm across the track.

As soon as she sighted it she picked up her baggage and made her painful way toward it, for her knees and wrist were bruised and her baggage was heavy.

A soft drip, drip greeted her as she drew nearer; something plashing down among the cinders by the track. Then she saw the tall column with its arm outstretched, and looming darker among the sage-brush the outlines of a water-tank. It was so she recognized the engine's drinking-tank, and knew that she had mistaken a pause to water the engine for a regular stop at a station.

Her soul sank within her as she came up to the dripping water and laid her hand upon the dark upright, as if in some way it could help her. She dropped her baggage and stood, trembling, gazing around upon the beautiful, lonely scene in horror; and then, like a mirage against the distance, there

melted on her frightened eyes a vision of her father and mother sitting around the library lamp at home, as they sat every evening. They were probably reading and talking at this very minute, and trying not to miss her on this her first venture away from the home into the great world to teach. What would they say if they could see their beloved daughter, whom they had sheltered all these years and let go forth so reluctantly now, in all her confidence of youth, bound by almost absurd promises to be careful and not run any risks.

Yet here she was, standing alone beside a water-tank in the midst of an Arizona plain, no knowing how many miles from anywhere, at somewhere between nine and ten o'clock at night! It seemed incredible that it had really happened! Perhaps she was dreaming! A few moments before in the bright car, surrounded by drowsy fellow-travelers, almost at her journey's end, as she supposed; and now, having merely done as she thought right, she was stranded here!

She rubbed her eyes and looked again up the track, half expecting to see the train come back for her. Surely, surely the conductor, or the porter who had been so kind, would discover that she was gone, and do something about it. They couldn't leave her here alone on the prairie! It would be too dreadful!

That vision of her father and mother off against the purple-green distance, how it shook her! The lamp looked bright and cheerful, and she could see her father's head with its heavy white hair. He turned to look at her mother to tell her of something he read in the paper. They were sitting there, feeling contented and almost happy about her, and she, their little girl — all her dignity as school-teacher dropped from her like a garment now — she was standing in this empty space alone, with only an engine's water-tank to keep her from dying, and only the barren, desolate track to connect her with the world of men and women. She dropped her head upon her breast and the tears came, sobbing,



choking, raining down. Then off in the distance she heard a low, rising howl of some snarling, angry beast, and she lifted her head and stood in trembling terror, clinging to the tank.

That sound was coyotes or wolves howling. She had read about them, but had not expected to experience them in such a situation. How confidently had she accepted the position which offered her the opening she had sought for the splendid career that she hoped was to follow! How fearless had she been! Coyotes, nor Indians, nor wild cowboy students — nothing had daunted her courage. Besides, she told her mother it was very different going to a town from what it would be if she were a missionary going to the wilds. It was an important school she was to teach, where her Latin and German and mathematical achievements had won her the place above several other applicants, and where her well-known tact was expected to work wonders. But what were Latin and German and mathematics now? Could they show her how to climb a water-tank? Would tact avail with a hungry wolf?

The howl in the distance seemed to come nearer. She cast frightened eyes to the unresponsive water-tank looming high and dark above her. She must get up there somehow. It was not safe to stand here a minute. Besides, from that height she might be able to see farther, and perhaps there would be a light somewhere and she might cry for help.

Investigation showed a set of rude spikes by which the trainmen were wont to climb up, and Margaret prepared to ascend them. She set her suit-case dubiously down at the foot. Would it be safe to leave it there? She had read how coyotes carried off a hatchet from a camping-party, just to get the leather thong which was bound about the handle. She could not afford to lose her things. Yet how could she climb and carry that heavy burden with her? A sudden thought came.

Her simple traveling-gown was finished with a silken girdle, soft and long, wound twice about her waist and falling in tasseled ends. Swiftly she untied it and knotted one end firmly to the handle of her suit-case, tying the other end securely to her wrist. Then slowly, cautiously, with many a look upward, she began to climb.

It seemed miles, though in reality it was but a short distance. The howling beasts in the distance sounded nearer now and continually, making her heart beat wildly. She was stiff and bruised from her falls, and weak with fright. The spikes were far apart, and each step of progress was painful and difficult. It was good at last to rise high enough to see over the water-tank and feel a certain confidence in her defense.

But she had risen already beyond the short length of her silken tether, and the suit-case was dragging painfully on her arm. She was obliged to steady herself where she stood and pull it up before she could go on. Then she managed to get it swung up to the top of the tank in a comparatively safe place. One more long spike step and she was beside it.

The tank was partly roofed over, so that she had room enough to sit on the edge without danger of falling in and drowning. For a few minutes she could only sit still and be thankful and try to get her breath back again after the climb; but presently the beauty of the night began to cast its spell over her. That wonderful blue of the sky! It hadn't ever before impressed her that skies were blue at night. She would have said they were black or gray. As a matter of fact, she didn't remember to have ever seen so much sky at once before, nor to have noticed skies in general until now.

This sky was so deeply, wonderfully blue, the stars so real, alive and sparkling, that all other stars she had ever seen paled before them into mere imitations. The spot looked like one of Taylor's pictures of the Holy Land. She half expected to see a shepherd with his crook and sheep approaching her out of the dim shadows, or a turbaned,

white-robed David with his lifted hands of prayer standing off among the depths of purple darkness. It would not have been out of keeping if a walled city with housetops should be hidden behind the clumps of sage-brush farther on. 'Twas such a night and such a scene as this, perhaps, when the wise men started to follow the star!

But one cannot sit on the edge of a water-tank in the desert night alone and muse long on art and history. It was cold up there, and the howling seemed nearer than before. There was no sign of a light or a house anywhere, and not even a freight-train sent its welcome clatter down the track. All was still and wide and lonely, save that terrifying sound of the beasts; such stillness as she had not ever thought could be — a fearful silence as a setting for the awful voices of the wilds.

The bruises and scratches she had acquired set up a fine stinging, and the cold seemed to sweep down and take possession of her on her high, narrow seat. She was growing stiff and cramped, yet dared not move much. Would there be no train, nor any help? Would she have to sit there all night? It looked so very near to the ground now. Could wild beasts climb, she wondered?

Then in the interval of silence that came between the calling of those wild creatures there stole a sound. She could not tell at first what it was. A slow, regular, plodding sound, and quite far away. She looked to find it, and thought she saw a shape move out of the sage-brush on the other side of the track, but she could not be sure. It might be but a figment of her brain, a foolish fancy from looking so long at the huddled bushes on the dark plain. Yet something prompted her to cry out, and when she heard her own voice she cried again and louder, wondering why she had not cried before.

"Help! Help!" she called; and again: "Help! Help!"

The dark shape paused and turned toward her. She was sure now. What if it were a beast instead of a human!

Terrible fear took possession of her; then, to her infinite relief, a nasal voice sounded out:

"Who's thar?"

But when she opened her lips to answer, nothing but a sob would come to them for a minute, and then she could only cry, pitifully:

"Help! Help!"

"Whar be you?" twanged the voice; and now she could see a horse and rider like a shadow moving toward her down the track.

## CHAPTER II

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The horse came to a standstill a little way from the track, and his rider let forth a stream of strange profanity. The girl shuddered and began to think a wild beast might be preferable to some men. However, these remarks seemed to be a mere formality. He paused and addressed her:

"Heow'd yeh git up thar? D'j'yeh drap er climb?"

He was a little, wiry man with a bristly, protruding chin. She could see that, even in the starlight. There was something about the point of that stubby chin that she shrank from inexpressibly. He was not a pleasant man to look upon, and even his voice was unprepossessing. She began to think that even the night with its loneliness and unknown perils was preferable to this man's company.

"I got off the train by mistake, thinking it was my station, and before I discovered it the train had gone and left me," Margaret explained, with dignity.

"Yeh didn't 'xpect it t' sit reound on th' plain while you was gallivantin' up water-tanks, did yeh?"

Cold horror froze Margaret's veins. She was dumb for a second. "I am on my way to Ashland station. Can you tell me how far it is from here and how I can get there?" Her tone was like icicles.

"It's a little matter o' twenty miles, more 'r less," said the man protruding his offensive chin. "The walkin's good. I don't know no other way from this p'int at this time o' night. Yeh might set still till th' mornin' freight goes by an' drap atop o' one of the kyars."

"Sir!" said Margaret, remembering her dignity as a teacher.

The man wheeled his horse clear around and looked up at her impudently. She could smell bad whisky on his breath.

"Say, you must be some young highbrow, ain't yeh? Is thet all yeh want o' me? 'Cause ef 'tis I got t' git on t' camp. It's a good five mile yet, an' I 'ain't hed no grub sence noon."

The tears suddenly rushed to the girl's eyes as the horror of being alone in the night again took possession of her. This dreadful man frightened her, but the thought of the loneliness filled her with dismay.

"Oh!" she cried, forgetting her insulted dignity, "you're not going to leave me up here alone, are you? Isn't there some place near here where I could stay overnight?"

"Thur ain't no palace hotel round these diggin's, ef that's what you mean," the man leered at her. "You c'n come along t' camp 'ith me ef you ain't too stuck up."

"To camp!" faltered Margaret in dismay, wondering what her mother would say. "Are there any ladies there?"

A loud guffaw greeted her question. "Wal, my woman's thar, sech es she is; but she ain't no highflier like you. We mostly don't hev ladies to camp, But I got t' git on. Ef you want to go too, you better light down pretty speedy, fer I can't wait."

In fear and trembling Margaret descended her rude ladder step by step, primitive man seated calmly on his horse, making no attempt whatever to assist her.

"This ain't no baggage-car," he grumbled, as he saw the suit-case in her hand. "Well, h'ist yerself up thar; I reckon we c'n pull through somehow. Gimme the luggage."

Margaret stood appalled beside the bony horse and his uncouth rider. Did he actually expect her to ride with him? "Couldn't I walk?" she faltered, hoping he would offer to do so.

"'T's up t' you," the man replied, indifferently. "Try 't an' see!"

He spoke to the horse, and it started forward eagerly, while the girl in horror struggled on behind. Over rough, uneven ground, between greasewood, sage-brush, and

cactus, back into the trail. The man, oblivious of her presence, rode contentedly on, a silent shadow on a dark horse wending a silent way between the purple-green clumps of other shadows, until, bewildered, the girl almost lost sight of them. Her breath came short, her ankle turned, and she fell with both hands in a stinging bed of cactus. She cried out then and begged him to stop.

"L'arned yer lesson, hev yeh, sweety?" he jeered at her, foolishly. "Well, get in yer box, then."

He let her struggle up to a seat behind himself with very little assistance, but when she was seated and started on her way she began to wish she had stayed behind and taken any perils of the way rather than trust herself in proximity to this creature.

From time to time he took a bottle from his pocket and swallowed a portion of its contents, becoming fluent in his language as they proceeded on their way. Margaret remained silent, growing more and more frightened every time the bottle came out. At last he offered it to her. She declined it with cold politeness, which seemed to irritate the little man, for he turned suddenly fierce.

"Oh, yer too fine to take a drap fer good comp'ny, are yeh? Wal, I'll show yeh a thing er two, my pretty lady. You'll give me a kiss with yer two cherry lips before we go another step. D'yeh hear, my sweetie?" And he turned with a silly leer to enforce his command; but with a cry of horror Margaret slid to the ground and ran back down the trail as hard as she could go, till she stumbled and fell in the shelter of a great sage-bush, and lay sobbing on the sand.

The man turned bleared eyes toward her and watched until she disappeared. Then sticking his chin out wickedly, he slung her suit-case after her and called:

"All right, my pretty lady; go yer own gait an' I'arn yer own lesson." He started on again, singing a drunken song.

Under the blue, starry dome alone sat Margaret again, this time with no friendly water-tank for her defense, and

took counsel with herself. The howling coyotes seemed to be silenced for the time; at least they had become a minor quantity in her equation of troubles. She felt now that man was her greatest menace, and to get away safely from him back to that friendly water-tank and the dear old railroad track she would have pledged her next year's salary. She stole softly to the place where she had heard the suit-case fall, and, picking it up, started on the weary road back to the tank. Could she ever find the way? The trail seemed so intangible a thing, her sense of direction so confused. Yet there was nothing else to do. She shuddered whenever she thought of the man who had been her companion on horseback.

When the man reached camp he set his horse loose and stumbled into the door of the log bunk-house, calling loudly for something to eat.

The men were sitting around the room on the rough benches and bunks, smoking their pipes or stolidly staring into the dying fire. Two smoky kerosene-lanterns that hung from spikes driven high in the logs cast a weird light over the company, eight men in all, rough and hardened with exposure to stormy life and weather. They were men with unkempt beards and uncombed hair, their coarse cotton shirts open at the neck, their brawny arms bare above the elbow, with crimes and sorrows and hard living written large across their faces.

There was one, a boy in looks, with smooth face and white skin healthily flushed in places like a baby's. His face, too, was hard and set in sternness like a mask, as if life had used him badly; but behind it was a fineness of feature and spirit that could not be utterly hidden. They called him the Kid, and thought it was his youth that made him different from them all, for he was only twenty-four, and not one of the rest was under forty. They were doing their best to help him get over that innate fineness that was his natural inheritance, but although he stopped at nothing, and played



his part always with the ease of one old in the ways of the world, yet he kept a quiet reserve about him, a kind of charm beyond which they had not been able to go.

He was playing cards with three others at the table when the man came in, and did not look up at the entrance.

The woman, white and hopeless, appeared at the door of the shed-room when the man came, and obediently set about getting his supper; but her lifeless face never changed expression.

"Brung a gal 'long of me part way," boasted the man, as he flung himself into a seat by the table. "Thought you fellers might like t' see 'er, but she got too high an' mighty fer me, wouldn't take a pull at th' bottle 'ith me, 'n' shrieked like a catamount when I kissed 'er. Found 'er hangin' on th' water-tank. Got off 't th' wrong place. One o' yer highbrows out o' th' parlor car! Good lesson fer 'er!"

The Boy looked up from his cards sternly, his keen eyes boring through the man. "Where is she now?" he asked, quietly; and all the men in the room looked up uneasily. There was that tone and accent again that made the Boy alien from them. What was it?

The man felt it and snarled his answer angrily. "Dropped 'er on th' trail, an' threw her fine-lady b'longin's after 'er. 'Ain't got no use fer thet kind. Wonder what they was created fer? Ain't no good to nobody, not even 'emselves." And he laughed a harsh cackle that was not pleasant to hear.

The Boy threw down his cards and went out, shutting the door. In a few minutes the men heard two horses pass the end of the bunk-house toward the trail, but no one looked up nor spoke. You could not have told by the flicker of an eyelash that they knew where the Boy had gone.

She was sitting in the deep shadow of a sage-bush that lay on the edge of the trail like a great blot, her suit-case beside her, her breath coming short with exertion and excitement, when she heard a cheery whistle in the

distance. Just an old love-song dating back some years and discarded now as hackneyed even by the street pianos at home; but oh, how good it sounded!

From the desert I come to thee!

The ground was cold, and struck a chill through her garments as she sat there alone in the night. On came the clear, musical whistle, and she peered out of the shadow with eager eyes and frightened heart. Dared she risk it again? Should she call, or should she hold her breath and keep still, hoping he would pass her by unnoticed? Before she could decide two horses stopped almost in front of her and a rider swung himself down. He stood before her as if it were day and he could see her quite plainly.

"You needn't be afraid," he explained, calmly. "I thought I had better look you up after the old man got home and gave his report. He was pretty well tanked up and not exactly a fit escort for ladies. What's the trouble?"

Like an angel of deliverance he looked to her as he stood in the starlight, outlined in silhouette against the wide, wonderful sky: broad shoulders, well-set head, close-cropped curls, handsome contour even in the darkness. There was about him an air of quiet strength which gave her confidence.

"Oh, thank you!" she gasped, with a quick little relieved sob in her voice. "I am so glad you have come. I was — just a little — frightened, I think." She attempted to rise, but her foot caught in her skirt and she sank wearily back to the sand again.

The Boy stooped over and lifted her to her feet. "You certainly are some plucky girl!" he commented, looking down at her slender height as she stood beside him. "A 'little frightened,' were you? Well, I should say you had a right to be."

"Well, not exactly frightened, you know," said Margaret, taking a deep breath and trying to steady her voice. "I think perhaps I was more mortified than frightened, to think I made such a blunder as to get off the train before I reached my station. You see, I'd made up my mind not to be frightened, but when I heard that awful howl of some beast — And then that terrible man!" She shuddered and put her hands suddenly over her eyes as if to shut out all memory of it.

"More than one kind of beasts!" commented the Boy, briefly. "Well, you needn't worry about him; he's having his supper and he'll be sound asleep by the time we get back."

"Oh, have we got to go where he is?" gasped Margaret. "Isn't there some other place? Is Ashland very far away? That is where I am going."

"No other place where you could go to-night. Ashland's a good twenty-five miles from here. But you'll be all right. Mom Wallis 'll look out for you. She isn't much of a looker, but she has a kind heart. She pulled me through once when I was just about flickering out. Come on. You'll be pretty tired. We better be getting back. Mom Wallis 'll make you comfortable, and then you can get off good and early in the morning."

Without an apology, and as if it were the common courtesy of the desert, he stooped and lifted her easily to the saddle of the second horse, placed the bridle in her hands, then swung the suit-case up on his own horse and sprang into the saddle.

## CHAPTER III

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He turned the horses about and took charge of her just as if he were accustomed to managing stray ladies in the wilderness every day of his life and understood the situation perfectly; and Margaret settled wearily into her saddle and looked about her with content.

Suddenly, again, the wide wonder of the night possessed her. Involuntarily she breathed a soft little exclamation of awe and delight. Her companion turned to her questioningly:

"Does it always seem so big here — so — limitless?" she asked in explanation. "It is so far to everywhere it takes one's breath away, and yet the stars hang close, like a protection. It gives one the feeling of being alone in the great universe with God. Does it always seem so out here?"

He looked at her curiously, her pure profile turned up to the wide dome of luminous blue above. His voice was strangely low and wondering as he answered, after a moment's silence:

"No, it is not always so," he said. "I have seen it when it was more like being alone in the great universe with the devil."

There was a tremendous earnestness in his tone that the girl felt meant more than was on the surface. She turned to look at the fine young face beside her. In the starlight she could not make out the bitter hardness of lines that were beginning to be carved about his sensitive mouth. But there was so much sadness in his voice that her heart went out to him in pity.

"Oh," she said, gently, "it would be awful that way. Yes, I can understand. I felt so, a little, while that terrible man was with me." And she shuddered again at the remembrance.

Again he gave her that curious look. "There are worse things than Pop Wallis out here," he said, gravely. "But I'll grant you there's some class to the skies. It's a case of 'Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile.'" And with the words his tone grew almost flippant. It hurt her sensitive nature, and without knowing it she half drew away a little farther from him and murmured, sadly:

"Oh!" as if he had classed himself with the "man" he had been describing. Instantly he felt her withdrawal and grew grave again, as if he would atone.

"Wait till you see this sky at the dawn," he said. "It will burn red fire off there in the east like a hearth in a palace, and all this dome will glow like a great pink jewel set in gold. If you want a classy sky, there you have it! Nothing like it in the East!"

There was a strange mingling of culture and roughness in his speech. The girl could not make him out; yet there had been a palpitating earnestness in his description that showed he had felt the dawn in his very soul.

"You are — a — poet, perhaps?" she asked, half shyly. "Or an artist?" she hazarded.

He laughed roughly and seemed embarrassed. "No, I'm just a — bum! A sort of roughneck out of a job."

She was silent, watching him against the starlight, a kind of embarrassment upon her after his last remark. "You — have been here long?" she asked, at last.

"Three years." He said it almost curtly and turned his head away, as if there were something in his face he would hide.

She knew there was something unhappy in his life. Unconsciously her tone took on a sympathetic sound. "And do you get homesick and want to go back, ever?" she asked.

His tone was fairly savage now. "No!"

The silence which followed became almost oppressive before the Boy finally turned and in his kindly tone began to

question her about the happenings which had stranded her in the desert alone at night.

So she came to tell him briefly and frankly about herself, as he questioned — how she came to be in Arizona all alone.

"My father is a minister in a small town in New York State. When I finished college I had to do something, and I had an offer of this Ashland school through a friend of ours who had a brother out here. Father and mother would rather have kept me nearer home, of course, but everybody says the best opportunities are in the West, and this was a good opening, so they finally consented. They would send post-haste for me to come back if they knew what a mess I have made of things right at the start — getting out of the train in the desert."

"But you're not discouraged?" said her companion, half wonderingly. "Some nerve you have with you. I guess you'll manage to hit it off in Ashland. It's the limit as far as discipline is concerned, I understand, but I guess you'll put one over on them. I'll bank on you after to-night, sure thing!"

She turned a laughing face toward him. "Thank you!" she said. "But I don't see how you know all that. I'm sure I didn't do anything particularly nervy. There wasn't anything else to do but what I did, if I'd tried."

"Most girls would have fainted and screamed, and fainted again when they were rescued," stated the Boy, out of a vast experience.

"I never fainted in my life," said Margaret Earle, with disdain. "I don't think I should care to faint out in the vast universe like this. It would be rather inopportune, I should think."

Then, because she suddenly realized that she was growing very chummy with this stranger in the dark, she asked the first question that came into her head.

"What was your college?"

That he had not been to college never entered her head. There was something in his speech and manner that made it a foregone conclusion.

It was as if she had struck him forcibly in his face, so sudden and sharp a silence ensued for a second. Then he answered, gruffly, "Yale," and plunged into an elaborate account of Arizona in its early ages, including a detailed description of the cliff-dwellers and their homes, which were still to be seen high in the rocks of the cañons not many miles to the west of where they were riding.

Margaret was keen to hear it all, and asked many questions, declaring her intention of visiting those cliff-caves at her earliest opportunity. It was so wonderful to her to be actually out here where were all sorts of queer things about which she had read and wondered. It did not occur to her, until the next day, to realize that her companion had of intention led her off the topic of himself and kept her from asking any more personal questions.

He told her of the petrified forest just over some low hills off to the left; acres and acres of agatized chips and trunks of great trees all turned to eternal stone, called by the Indians "Yeitso's bones," after the great giant of that name whom an ancient Indian hero killed. He described the coloring of the brilliant days in Arizona, where you stand on the edge of some flat-topped mesa and look off through the clear air to mountains that seem quite near by, but are in reality more than two hundred miles away. He pictured the strange colors and lights of the place; ledges of rock, yellow, white and green, drab and maroon, and tumbled piles of red boulders, shadowy buttes in the distance, serrated cliffs against the horizon, not blue, but rosy pink in the heated haze of the air, and perhaps a great, lonely eagle poised above the silent, brilliant waste.

He told it not in book language, with turn of phrase and smoothly flowing sentences, but in simple, frank words, as a boy might describe a picture to one he knew would

appreciate it — for her sake, and not because he loved to put it into words; but in a new, stumbling way letting out the beauty that had somehow crept into his heart in spite of all the rough attempts to keep all gentle things out of his nature.

The girl, as she listened, marveled more and more what manner of youth this might be who had come to her out of the desert night.

She forgot her weariness as she listened, in the thrill of wonder over the new mysterious country to which she had come. She forgot that she was riding through the great darkness with an utter stranger, to a place she knew not, and to experiences most dubious. Her fears had fled and she was actually enjoying herself, and responding to the wonderful story of the place with soft-murmured exclamations of delight and wonder.

From time to time in the distance there sounded forth those awful blood-curdling howls of wild beasts that she had heard when she sat alone by the water-tank, and each time she heard a shudder passed through her and instinctively she swerved a trifle toward her companion, then straightened up again and tried to seem not to notice. The Boy saw and watched her brave attempts at self-control with deep appreciation. But suddenly, as they rode and talked, a dark form appeared across their way a little ahead, lithe and stealthy and furry, and two awful eyes like green lamps glared for an instant, then disappeared silently among the mesquite bushes.

She did not cry out nor start. Her very veins seemed frozen with horror, and she could not have spoken if she tried. It was all over in a second and the creature gone, so that she almost doubted her senses and wondered if she had seen aright. Then one hand went swiftly to her throat and she shrank toward her companion.

"There is nothing to fear," he said, reassuringly, and laid a strong hand comfortingly across the neck of her horse.



"The pussy-cat was as unwilling for our company as we for hers. Besides, look here!" — and he raised his hand and shot into the air. "She'll not come near us now."

"I am not afraid!" said the girl, bravely. "At least, I don't think I am — very! But it's all so new and unexpected, you know. Do people around here always shoot in that — well — unpremeditated fashion?"

They laughed together.

"Excuse me," he said. "I didn't realize the shot might startle you even more than the wildcat. It seems I'm not fit to have charge of a lady. I told you I was a roughneck."

"You're taking care of me beautifully," said Margaret Earle, loyally, "and I'm glad to get used to shots if that's the thing to be expected often."

Just then they came to the top of the low, rolling hill, and ahead in the darkness there gleamed a tiny, wizened light set in a blotch of blackness. Under the great white stars it burned a sickly red and seemed out of harmony with the night.

"There we are!" said the Boy, pointing toward it. "That's the bunk-house. You needn't be afraid. Pop Wallis 'll be snoring by this time, and we'll come away before he's about in the morning. He always sleeps late after he's been off on a bout. He's been gone three days, selling some cattle, and he'll have a pretty good top on."

The girl caught her breath, gave one wistful look up at the wide, starry sky, a furtive glance at the strong face of her protector, and submitted to being lifted down to the ground.

Before her loomed the bunk-house, small and mean, built of logs, with only one window in which the flicker of the lanterns menaced, with unknown trials and possible perils for her to meet.

## CHAPTER IV

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When Margaret Earle dawned upon that bunk-room the men sat up with one accord, ran their rough, red hands through their rough, tousled hair, smoothed their beards, took down their feet from the benches where they were resting. That was as far as their etiquette led them. Most of them continued to smoke their pipes, and all of them stared at her unreservedly. Such a sight of exquisite feminine beauty had not come to their eyes in many a long day. Even in the dim light of the smoky lanterns, and with the dust and weariness of travel upon her, Margaret Earle was a beautiful girl.

"That's what's the matter, father," said her mother, when the subject of Margaret's going West to teach had first been mentioned. "She's too beautiful. Far too beautiful to go among savages! If she were homely and old, now, she might be safe. That would be a different matter."

Yet Margaret had prevailed, and was here in the wild country. Now, standing on the threshold of the log cabin, she read, in the unveiled admiration that startled from the eyes of the men, the meaning of her mother's fears.

Yet withal it was a kindly admiration not unmixed with awe. For there was about her beauty a touch of the spiritual which set her above the common run of women, making men feel her purity and sweetness, and inclining their hearts to worship rather than be bold.

The Boy had been right. Pop Wallis was asleep and out of the way. From a little shed room at one end his snoring marked time in the silence that the advent of the girl made in the place.

In the doorway of the kitchen offset Mom Wallis stood with her passionless face — a face from which all emotions

had long ago been burned by cruel fires — and looked at the girl, whose expression was vivid with her opening life all haloed in a rosy glow.

A kind of wistful contortion passed over Mom Wallis's hopeless countenance, as if she saw before her in all its possibility of perfection the life that she herself had lost. Perhaps it was no longer possible for her features to show tenderness, but a glow of something like it burned in her eyes, though she only turned away with the same old apathetic air, and without a word went about preparing a meal for the stranger.

Margaret looked wildly, fearfully, around the rough assemblage when she first entered the long, low room, but instantly the boy introduced her as "the new teacher for the Ridge School beyond the Junction," and these were Long Bill, Big Jim, the Fiddling Boss, Jasper Kemp, Fade-away Forbes, Stocky, Croaker, and Fudge. An inspiration fell upon the frightened girl, and she acknowledged the introduction by a radiant smile, followed by the offering of her small gloved hand. Each man in dumb bewilderment instantly became her slave, and accepted the offered hand with more or less pleasure and embarrassment. The girl proved her right to be called tactful, and, seeing her advantage, followed it up quickly by a few bright words. These men were of an utterly different type from any she had ever met before, but they had in their eyes a kind of homage which Pop Wallis had not shown and they were not repulsive to her. Besides, the Boy was in the background, and her nerve had returned. The Boy knew how a lady should be treated. She was quite ready to "play up" to his lead.

It was the Boy who brought the only chair the bunk-house afforded, a rude, home-made affair, and helped her off with her coat and hat in his easy, friendly way, as if he had known her all his life; while the men, to whom such gallant ways were foreign, sat awkwardly by and watched in wonder and amaze.

Most of all they were astonished at "the Kid," that he could fall so naturally into intimate talk with this delicate, beautiful woman. She was another of his kind, a creature not made in the same mold as theirs. They saw it now, and watched the fairy play with almost childish interest. Just to hear her call him "Mr. Gardley"! — Lance Gardley, that was what he had told them was his name the day he came among them. They had not heard it since. The Kid! Mr. Gardley!

There it was, the difference between them! They looked at the girl half jealously, yet proudly at the Boy. He was theirs — yes, in a way he was theirs — had they not found him in the wilderness, sick and nigh to death, and nursed him back to life again? He was theirs; but he knew how to drop into her world, too, and not be ashamed. They were glad that he could, even while it struck them with a pang that some day he would go back to the world to which he belonged — and where they could never be at home.

It was a marvel to watch her eat the coarse corn-bread and pork that Mom Wallis brought her. It might have been a banquet, the pleasant way she seemed to look at it. Just like a bird she tasted it daintily, and smiled, showing her white teeth. There was nothing of the idea of greediness that each man knew he himself felt after a fast. It was all beautiful, the way she handled the two-tined fork and the old steel knife. They watched and dropped their eyes abashed as at a lovely sacrament. They had not felt before that eating could be an art. They did not know what art meant.

Such strange talk, too! But the Kid seemed to understand. About the sky — their old, common sky, with stars that they saw every night — making such a fuss about that, with words like "wide," "infinite," "azure," and "gems." Each man went furtively out that night before he slept and took a new look at the sky to see if he could understand.

The Boy was planning so the night would be but brief. He knew the girl was afraid. He kept the talk going

enthusiastically, drawing in one or two of the men now and again. Long Bill forgot himself and laughed out a hoarse guffaw, then stopped as if he had been choked. Stocky, red in the face, told a funny story when commanded by the Boy, and then dissolved in mortification over his blunders. The Fiddling Boss obediently got down his fiddle from the smoky corner beside the fireplace and played a weird old tune or two, and then they sang. First the men, with hoarse, quavering approach and final roar of wild sweetness; then Margaret and the Boy in duet, and finally Margaret alone, with a few bashful chords on the fiddle, feeling their way as accompaniment.

Mom Wallis had long ago stopped her work and was sitting huddled in the doorway on a nail-keg with weary, folded hands and a strange wistfulness on her apathetic face. A fine silence had settled over the group as the girl, recognizing her power, and the pleasure she was giving, sang on. Now and then the Boy, when he knew the song, would join in with his rich tenor.

It was a strange night, and when she finally lay down to rest on a hard cot with a questionable-looking blanket for covering and Mom Wallis as her room-mate, Margaret Earle could not help wondering what her mother and father would think now if they could see her. Would they not, perhaps, almost prefer the water-tank and the lonely desert for her to her present surroundings?

Nevertheless, she slept soundly after her terrible excitement, and woke with a start of wonder in the early morning, to hear the men outside splashing water and humming or whistling bits of the tunes she had sung to them the night before.

Mom Wallis was standing over her, looking down with a hunger in her eyes at the bright waves of Margaret's hair and the soft, sleep-flushed cheeks.

"You got dretful purty hair," said Mom Wallis, wistfully.

Margaret looked up and smiled in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"You wouldn't b'lieve it, but I was young an' purty oncet. Beats all how much it counts to be young — an' purty! But land! It don't last long. Make the most of it while you got it."

Browning's immortal words came to Margaret's lips —

Grow old along with me,  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life for which the first was made —

but she checked them just in time and could only smile mutely. How could she speak such thoughts amid these intolerable surroundings? Then with sudden impulse she reached up to the astonished woman and, drawing her down, kissed her sallow cheek.

"Oh!" said Mom Wallis, starting back and laying her bony hands upon the place where she had been kissed, as if it hurt her, while a dull red stole up from her neck over her cheeks and high forehead to the roots of her hay-colored hair. All at once she turned her back upon her visitor and the tears of the years streamed down her impassive face.

"Don't mind me," she choked, after a minute. "I liked it real good, only it kind of give me a turn." Then, after a second: "It's time t' eat. You c'n wash outside after the men is done."

That, thought Margaret, had been the scheme of this woman's whole life — "After the men is done!"

So, after all, the night was passed in safety, and a wonderful dawning had come. The blue of the morning, so different from the blue of the night sky, was, nevertheless, just as unfathomable; the air seemed filled with straying star-beams, so sparkling was the clearness of the light.

But now a mountain rose in the distance with heliotrope-and-purple bounds to stand across the vision and dispel the illusion of the night that the sky came down to the earth all