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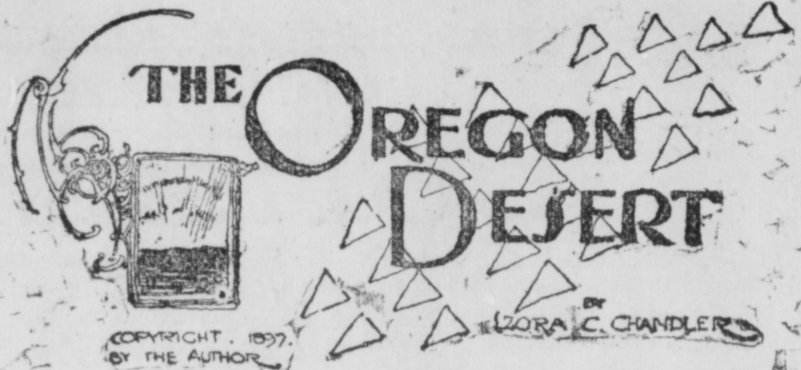
1. VANCOUVER is the best outfitting point on the coast, goods being considerably cheaper than in the United States.
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CHAPTER I
"Wilmot! I say, Wilmot! Let's stop where we are and wait till it's light. McAlvord's bound to hunt us up in the morning."
"Come ahead. I smell smoke. There must be some sort of humanity not far off."
"Well, in heaven's name, don't explore. There never was a blacker night. And now that we've escaped ornamenting the Oregon desert with our bones don't let's run the risk of tumbling off the mountain into a canyon."
"Come a little farther up. I hear a child's voice, and a moment ago I surely saw a light."

They pushed on up the steep trail, when suddenly a child appeared before them encircled with a wavering light. They were neither superstitious nor particularly reverent young men, but they drew rein in momentary awe. However, they soon discovered that the door of a rude hut, which seemed to cross their bridle path, had been opened by a very human little hand. A youth came and stood beside the child, and a young girl looked over its head, while an old woman came slowly forward from a seat by the great blazing fire.

They made inquiry for the settlement on McAlvord's ranch and found that it was miles away. Then the old woman asked them to "put up their beasts and stop for the night," and they were glad to accept.

In another minute the youth was leading the way, with a rickety lantern, to a shed for the horses, and shortly after the travelers were within the hut before a great crackling fire of fir logs.

"Yo' mus' be hungry," said the old woman. "Laurel, git surmat fur 'em."
"They were hungry. There was no denying the fact. They were sorry to make trouble, but they would be grateful for a bit of food."
"Tain't no trouble," said the grandmother in slow western speech, with slow emphasis of every word. Then she drew a fir wood table from against the wall and began to make ready for the meal.

Laurel hung a Kettle over the fire, and when the water boiled she took a great stick in one hand and stirred it slowly while sifting through the fingers of the other something that shone in the firelight like dusky gold. The mixture sputtered and steamed and sent forth a most savory odor. The girl set the kettle beside the fire and hung another in its place. After a few moments she broke some eggs into this latter. Two or three swift errands back and forth for the lithe young figure, and the food was upon the table and the chairs were in place.

Then she turned and with shy cordiality said: "Won't yo' set by? It be all ready."

She had not spoken before, but there was a charm in her gentle voice which, by some divine magic, made the uncouth words sound like a new, sweet tongue.

Craymer, now that the danger of being lost was passed, inclined to look upon the scene as a farce enacted for their entertainment. He looked quizzically at Wilmot, who arose and thanked her courteously.

She laid her hand on the better chair. "This un is fur yo'," she said softly, and Wilmot accepted it simply.

Craymer's nature was not large enough to understand the attitude of his companion. This was a scene of such bare poverty that he could see in Wilmot's manner nothing more than a continuation of the farce. So he waited in mock gravity, with neither open smile nor open sneer upon his lips.

The girl looked up in surprise. Then she made a little motion toward the other chair. "That thar is yourn," she said.

Craymer sat down after an elaborate bow, which brought an angry flash



"Thank yo', kindly," said the young hostess.
into the eyes of the other. Laurel went about and poured rich milk from a great brown pitcher into small brown bowls that had tiny blue and white stripes around them. Then she lifted with her slight hands the dish that was piled high with the steaming golden mass and set it near to Wilmot.

"If yo' jes' help yo' rself 'n de kin's ef yo' was t' yo' own home," she said, with a little appeal in her voice.
Craymer bent over his bowl and gave Wilmot a nag with his foot.
"Thank you," said the latter gravely. "We shall do so gladly." Then, as she stood silently by, he added: "Do not think that you must wait upon us. Maybe we'll not dare to eat all we want if some one looks at us." He smiled, and the shy eyes turned for an instant toward his face with a look that was not a smile, but something more rare, more like an inner irradiation. Though of the poorest, something within had kept her from descending to their bold, hard manner. The simple, unconscious grace with which she left her guests to their own will would have become a loftier station.

Craymer stared after her. Something in the turn of her head as the great wave of firelight fell upon it caught his attention.

"Fine model for a picture," he said, with an awakened interest.

Laurel felt the difference between these and the other visitors who came at long intervals to sit at their table. There was something new and strange in the look and manner of these men. Their words were unlike any they had heard, yet she understood the meaning. It was like new music to one who loves music, or like rare beauty to the eye of an artist. She kept the echo of it in her heart and thought of it late into the night.

The meal was nearly over when she came and stood beside Wilmot once more. "We ha'n't got s' much 's we'd order hev fur yo'," she said in her clear voice that sounded as if some wild bird had taken to speaking words.

"We were two very hungry men," was the reply. "Nothing could be more delicious than this rich milk and the mush and the bread and butter."

"Thank yo', kindly," said the young hostess. She turned away without looking at him this time.

The child began a petulant whimper. She took it in her arms and soothed it to sleep. Then she carried it to a door at the end of the room. Wilmot started to open the door for her, but, noting the look on his companion's face, leaned back again in his chair. The next moment he mentally kicked himself for a coward.

While she was gone the grandmother cleared away the things and began a slow, unaccented monologue. The grandfathers had gone to the settlement to do some trading and would not be back for another day. The youth and the child had lost their mother three years back, but their father had gone below—the usual manner in which Oregonians refer to San Francisco—and was doing fair. He wrote to them once a year and sent a box of things.

Laurel didn't belong to them. Her father died crossing the plains. The mother was most dead, so the train left her, with the baby and the wagon and other belongings, at the hut.

"But Laurel be growed into a comfort t' me," added the grandmother, "an th' young uns take t' her mighty. We couldn't git 'long nohow 'bout Laurel."

"It doesn't seem safe for you," said Wilmot, "to live here so far from any one else."

"Eugh! Yes," answered the old voice. "It be perfectly safe. We don't see no one fur moons t'geth'er. 'N thur beant no more trouble with Injins here 'bonts. Onct in awhile one comes 'long, but we don't mind 'em. Th' gran'ther hid th' hut 'way up here out o' sight when him 'n me was young folks. 'N nobody much don't knowt we be here. The farm be th' little good spot o' groun jest out thar in th' desert. He lotted out t' build a big house down thar, but 'pears like we dunno how t' tear oursel's 'way from th' old place. I s'pose some folks ud think it be lonesomelike livin so by oursel's. But thar's th' beasts. They be a heap o' comp'ny."

The two men looked at each other. The wind moaned out a cry of terror, and the pleasant crackling of the fir wood in the huge fireplace turned to a ghastly sound. The young girl came into the room while the grandmother was speaking and paused just where the flickering light touched her slight figure.

"Some days," she said, with a little quiver in her voice—"some days I'm feared when thar beant no need to fear, 'n some days, ag'in, when thar be, seems like th' fear do all go. I shook at ev'ry noise I hear 'n all day, 'n t'night I couldn' open my mouth when I seen you, I been that feared."

It was an eerie figure, young, slight and fair, standing in the wavering light and uttering those uncouth words in that tender, thrilling tone. Craymer shivered and drew near to the fire.
"Don't be afraid tonight," said Wilmot. "We don't pretend to great bravery, but we'll do our best to take care

of you and the grandmother and the child."

She did not answer, though she stood with hands locked before her until he had finished. She went to the youth, a sturdy fellow, who had fallen asleep on the skin covered lounge, and aroused him gently. Then she drew aside some curtains of skins and displayed a recess containing a bed and a tiny washstand.

"This be yo' r place," she said to the strangers. "It be all clean ag'in th' comp'ny's comin'."

Then she slid a long wooden bar through iron loops to fasten the outer door, wound the clock and with swift silence set the chairs at rights. Meanwhile the grandmother covered the embers with ashes. When all was done, they each said "Good night t' yo'" and disappeared.

The two men sat before the ash covered embers until the candle burned low. Then they rose silently and prepared for bed.

"It's the eeriest place I was ever in,"

said Craymer. "I wish the wind would stop its wretched groans. We are in a witch's care, and we shall be boiled in a caldron at midnight by a spirit with sunny eyes and serious lips."

"It's an atmosphere of innocence and trust," said Wilmot. "And we are nearer heaven than we way ever climb again."

(To be Continued.)



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