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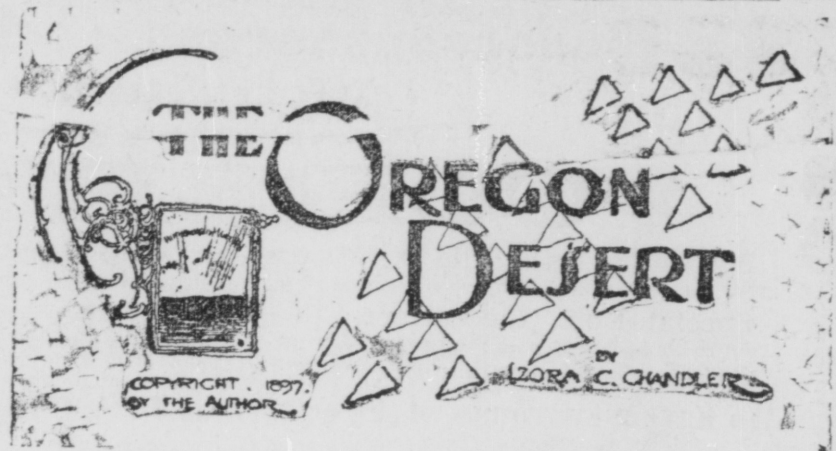
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(Continued.)

CHAPTER IV.

Another week passed, and Wilmot grew furious as he missed his companion day after day. McAlvord noticed the all day absences of his guest and explained indulgently to the other that he supposed it was the way with artists, though he had always thought this particular artist was too fond of society to spend so much time alone.

"Still, there's fascination in these great distances and mighty hills."

The cattle king bared his fine head and looked out toward the Cascades, standing like immense cones, sometimes shoulder to shoulder, often entirely alone. "If I were to stay here long," he said, "and did not break into the repose of thought by winter months spent in the city, I would surely come to have many debts and to enthrone them all about me. As it is I always lift my hat to Mount Hood in the morning."

McAlvord went on to look after his men, while in his visitor's heart there rang out like the voice of a bird, "Good mornin, ole Mount Hood, sweet mornin to yo'!"

Then he grew angry with himself and became sure that it was not good for him to be here. He was growing morbid. His great American novel would never be written at this rate. It was not well to grant himself this respite. Shut up within the walls of a city and meeting other small entities he had conceived himself to be some one. He could work there, in a paltry way, and could think. Here he was lost. It was too vast.

With the beginning of May Mrs. McAlvord, the host's mother, would come. Miss McAlvord, Craymer's fiancée, and several of her intimate friends, with a maid or two, were to accompany her. The old rancheira was to be gay with young life, and the Chinese who had chief control began to make elaborate preparations in that slow oriental fashion which astonishes every American by the ease with which mountains of work can be accomplished with smiling unhaste and rather with the air of one at leisure than of one burdened with many cares.

The day before the coming of the ladies Craymer disappeared. His sketching tackle was dutifully strapped to the saddle, but when once his pony had climbed the bridle path and brushes and paints were on the ground all thoughts of work were over.

Perhaps he might not come again in a long time. The purring of the tiny



"I always lift my hat to Mount Hood," stream was in his ears. It went singing down its rocky way into the bottomless pool as merrily as if it had not been stranded on the wrong side of the range from that on which flowed its larger sister—the mighty Columbia.

He looked at the fair face which, without his consciousness, was growing a necessity to him. He lifted the long braids that fell below her waist and wound them like a crown about her head. He fastened them there with the polished ebony handles of his brushes.

Then he took her by the shoulders and held her at arm's length to study the effect. Artistic pleasure at the result of his skill shone in his face. Presently something else awakened there—something which held the girl in thrall.

But she met it with steady eyes. The innocence of her own heart made her take on a dignity which conquered the man before her. He began to realize something of that which he had hardly thought worth the analysis.

"Laurel," he said suddenly, "you are a goddess. Great heaven, why cannot I have you always as I have you now? Society and conventionalities, what bosh they are! Simplicity and dignity constitute manner. And you would win homage at the court of any queen."

He clasped the shoulders until they hurt. But she did not move. She only looked at him calmly, unbewildered.

"Ye' kin hav me," she said in her

slow, tender tone that pulsed and trembled as she spoke. "Before yo' come—yo' 'n th' tall un—I blonged t' th' clouds 'n the great mountain. S'city? I d'uno what that do mean."

There were gentleness, innocence and reserve in her nature. It shook the shal-lower one. Craymer lowered his head until the pure eyes could not look into his own. He was sitting a little below her upon the mossy hillside, and his face had been lifted as he spoke. Now she slid her arm about his neck and drew his head against her breast. She ran her fingers lightly through his hair. She touched his cheek with a slow, gentle motion. Then, bending her head, she pressed her lips upon his forehead with a slow, solemn kiss, as she might have kissed the child if it had been kneeling in prayer before her.

His lips had never touched her. Hers had never touched him. He had sometimes reached out to caress her hands—they were so like to brown birds in their slow, fluttering motions. And he had smoothed the long braids of her hair as he had done today, but whenever he encountered the fierce, reproachful eyes of Wilmot after each of these later visits he had comforted himself that no harm had been done. She was the same untamed girl woman that they had found at the first, with her heart untouched by anything earthly—a devotee of the clouds and of the stately, snow wreathed mountain.

CHAPTER V.

The ladies arrived next day. McAlvord and his guests went to meet them upon long, swinging buckboards of the primitive sort, with chains upon which to rest the feet and long, yielding straps for the back. These were voted by the merry party to be more delightful pleasure wagons than even the Irish jaunting car.

The days that followed were filled with laughter, with music, with break-neck canter upon swift ponies and with evening promenades upon the long veranda of the old rancheira.

After a time Craymer became restless and complained that he must do something beside sketching merry people in stylish clothing—however picturesque they might be "set." He must get off for a whole day's work. He would not plan another day's pleasure until he had earned it with work.

Wilmot was not with the others when this complaint in its final strength was entered upon. He chanced, however, to come up in time to catch its import. Craymer did not seem to notice his coming, but turned toward his betrothed, who looked at him kindly.

A half hour later the two men stood alone together.

"My reason for speaking," said Wilmot, "is that I would warn you, Craymer. You are an attractive fellow and"

"Thanks, awfully!"

"This is not play," said the other fiercely. Then calming himself, "You are to be married soon?"

"Not until September."

"Well, September is coming," he insisted in a Nemesias tone. "In September then?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you ask?"

"For this reason: With that answer I want you to relinquish going where you intend to go tomorrow."

"And by what right do you ask it? It's about time that your volunteer espionage should cease. I shall do as I hanged please in this and every other matter." He turned and walked away.

Wilmot by a strong effort smothered the indignation that stirred him and, following him, laid a hand upon his shoulder and said in gentle tone: "I beg your pardon. If you will wait a few days and give the subject a little serious thought, I will not trouble you again."

Craymer said something which sounded like an assent. Wilmot accepted it and was turning away, when the other asked bluntly:

"Why don't you go there yourself and take her out of those brutal surroundings? You haven't been foolish enough to bind yourself to any one. There are ways of getting on with it. Some elderly aunt or maiden cousin could chaperone, and 'twould take blamed little worldly contact for her to outshine them all. I say," he insisted with a sort of fury, "why don't you do it?"

Wilmot ground his teeth. "You have done your best to make it impossible," he answered.

An eruptive denial rose to Craymer's lips, but for once he grew manly. "I understand you," he said. "I haven't been exactly square in this thing, but she was always asking about you and trying to get me to talk about you. I told you of it. If you'd gone, I would have staid away. But—I'm frank now. Believe me for once, never till that last day did one word pass my lips that need

vex you. When there was something in her look as I was planning to paint her that made me say that I wanted her with me always."

Wilmot turned fiercely away. "Spare me," he said, "a recital of one of your amours."

But this time Craymer followed and laid a hand upon his shoulder. "Hear the rest of it," he insisted. "Even then she said that she thought she was happy before I came—I 'an th' tall un—and, as I live, I did not harm her. She leaned over and kissed my forehead as she might kiss the snow mountain if it were near enough. But there was something about her that awed me. It's the something that's drawing me now. She doesn't care for me, though she thinks that she does. It is you for whom she cares. And because I was with you and you do not come to her she is trying to satisfy her beautiful, true, pure heart with me. Gods, but I am a fool!"

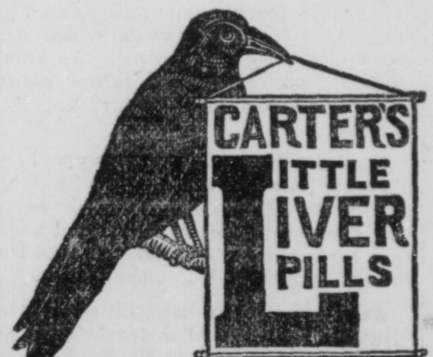
Then Wilmot spoke through his teeth. "This is the truth, and all of it?"

"All, as I am alive," answered Craymer, looking directly into his face. Then he turned and went alone into the rancheira.

An evening breeze, like the beating of great wings, stirred the leaves. The Chinaman began to light the veranda lamps. Their tinted rays seemed quivering with deceit. As Wilmot strode out into the shadow he began to understand the old brutality that could insist upon a satisfaction whose medium was made of gunpowder or steel.

He had got but a little distance when his hand was seized by another hand, and he was dragged with all the strength of a youthful figure out beyond the skirting of shrubbery into the pale moonlight.

(To be Continued.)



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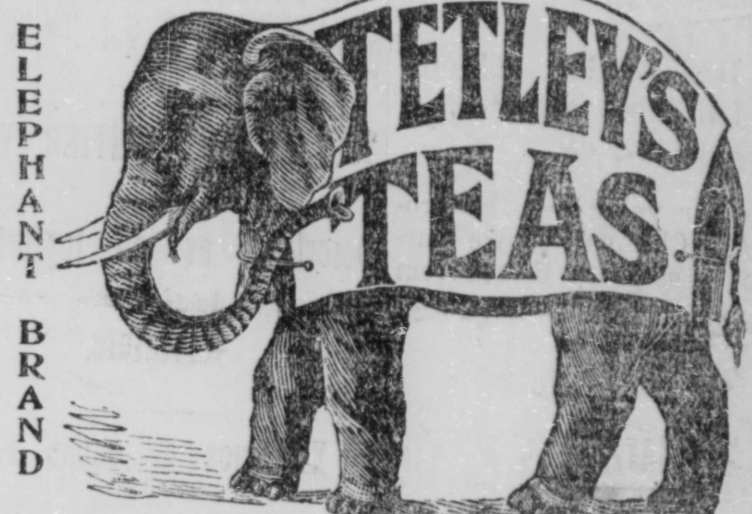
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