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Chapter I

THE MOUNTAIN HOME

Far up on the mountain-side the little shack stood alone in the clearing. It was roughly yet warmly built. Behind it jagged cliffs broke the north wind, and towered gray-white in the sunshine. Before it a tiny expanse of green sloped gently away to a point where the mountain dropped in another sharp descent, wooded with scrubby firs and pines. At the left a footpath led into the cool depths of the forest. But at the right the mountain fell away again and disclosed to view the picture David loved the best of all: the far-reaching valley; the silver pool of the lake with its ribbon of a river flung far out; and above it the grays and greens and purples of the mountains that climbed one upon another's shoulders until the topmost thrust their heads into the wide dome of the sky itself.

There was no road, apparently, leading away from the cabin. There was only the footpath that disappeared into the forest. Neither, anywhere, was there a house in sight nearer than the white specks far down in the valley by the river.

Within the shack a wide fireplace dominated one side of the main room. It was June now, and the ashes lay cold on the hearth; but from the tiny lean-to in the rear came the smell and the sputter of bacon sizzling over a blaze. The furnishings of the room were simple, yet, in a way, out of the common. There were two bunks, a few rude but comfortable chairs, a table, two music-racks, two violins with their cases, and everywhere books, and scattered sheets of music. Nowhere was there cushion, curtain, or knickknack that told of a woman's taste or touch. On the other hand, neither was there anywhere gun, pelt, or antlered head that spoke of a man's strength and skill. For decoration there were a beautiful copy of the Sistine Madonna, several photographs signed with names well known out in the great world beyond the mountains, and a festoon of pine cones such as a child might gather and hang.

From the little lean-to kitchen the sound of the sputtering suddenly ceased, and at the door appeared a pair of dark, wistful eyes.

"Daddy!" called the owner of the eyes.

There was no answer.

"Father, are you there?" called the voice, more insistently.

From one of the bunks came a slight stir and a murmured word. At the sound the boy at the door

leaped softly into the room and hurried to the bunk in the corner. He was a slender lad with short, crisp curls at his ears, and the red of perfect health in his cheeks. His hands, slim, long, and with tapering fingers like a girl's, reached forward eagerly.

"Daddy, come! I've done the bacon all myself, and the potatoes and the coffee, too. Quick, it's all getting cold!"

Slowly, with the aid of the boy's firm hands, the man pulled himself half to a sitting posture. His cheeks, like the boy's, were red — but not with health. His eyes were a little wild, but his voice was low and very tender, like a caress.

"David — it's my little son David!"

"Of course it's David! Who else should it be?" laughed the boy. "Come!" And he tugged at the man's hands.

The man rose then, unsteadily, and by sheer will forced himself to stand upright. The wild look left his eyes, and the flush his cheeks. His face looked suddenly old and haggard. Yet with fairly sure steps he crossed the room and entered the little kitchen.

Half of the bacon was black; the other half was transparent and like tough jelly. The potatoes were soggy, and had the unmistakable taste that comes from a dish that has boiled dry. The coffee was lukewarm and muddy. Even the milk was sour.

David laughed a little ruefully.

“Things aren’t so nice as yours, father,” he apologized. “I’m afraid I’m nothing but a discord in that orchestra to-day! Somehow, some of the stove was hotter than the rest, and burnt up the bacon in spots; and all the water got out of the potatoes, too,— though THAT didn’t matter, for I just put more cold in. I forgot and left the milk in the sun, and it tastes bad now; but I’m sure next time it’ll be better— all of it.”

The man smiled, but he shook his head sadly.

“But there ought not to be any ‘next time,’ David.”

“Why not? What do you mean? Aren’t you ever going to let me try again, father?” There was real distress in the boy’s voice.

The man hesitated. His lips parted with an indrawn breath, as if behind them lay a rush of words. But they closed abruptly, the words still unsaid. Then, very lightly, came these others:—

“Well, son, this isn’t a very nice way to treat your supper, is it? Now, if you please, I’ll take some of that bacon. I think I feel my appetite coming back.”

If the truant appetite “came back,” however, it could not have stayed; for the man ate but little. He frowned, too, as he saw how little the boy ate. He sat silent while his son cleared the food and dishes away, and he was still silent when, with the

boy, he passed out of the house and walked to the little bench facing the west.

Unless it stormed very hard, David never went to bed without this last look at his "Silver Lake," as he called the little sheet of water far down in the valley.

"Daddy, it's gold to-night — all gold with the sun!" he cried rapturously, as his eyes fell upon his treasure. "Oh, daddy!"

It was a long-drawn cry of ecstasy, and hearing it, the man winced, as with sudden pain.

"Daddy, I'm going to play it — I've got to play it!" cried the boy, bounding toward the cabin. In a moment he had returned, violin at his chin.

The man watched and listened; and as he watched and listened, his face became a battleground whereon pride and fear, hope and despair, joy and sorrow, fought for the mastery.

It was no new thing for David to "play" the sunset. Always, when he was moved, David turned to his violin. Always in its quivering strings he found the means to say that which his tongue could not express.

Across the valley the grays and blues of the mountains had become all purples now. Above, the sky in one vast flame of crimson and gold, was a molten sea on which floated rose-pink cloud-boats. Below, the valley with its lake and river picked out