

## "NIL."

THE Wallowa valley lies like a gem in the heart of the Blue mountains, in Oregon. Sometimes it is an emerald, softly, palely green under the April sun; again, the warm breath of August blows across, and it is a rippling sea, far as the eye can reach, of yellow topaz; a little later, autumn reaches out her full hand and gives it a thousand opaline tints, so rich and deep, and yet so softly blended, that the eye never wearies of the ever restless panorama. Even when white winter comes on, it is still a gem—a great, cold diamond of crusted snow, sending out a myriad of pure, sparkling, changeful rays as the sunlight falls upon it. Half way up the side of the mountain, in a little, old house built partly of logs and partly of rough boards, lived Nil. Ever since she could remember, she had lived there, so that at last she came to regard herself as nearly a part of the mountains, as were the sweet-scented pine trees, growing so straight and tall that their shadows lay down the mountain side and out into the valley.

Nil used to slip out sometimes in the evening, forgetting all about the chickens to be fed and the kindling wood to be gathered, and, lying in a mossy nook behind a big rock, watch these shadows wavering, shifting, reaching ever farther and farther till their fine, spear-like points seemed at last to touch the mountains on the other side of the valley. Then, all in a moment, the rich tints would die out of the western sky, leaving only a soft, pale flush of amber; the shadows of the mountains would spread out, covering up those of the pine trees and the long flakes of color that had lain between, and a little chill wind would spring up and go about among the tall grasses, sighing and whispering in a mournful way. Then Nil knew that the sun had gone down, and that night lay over the whole Wallowa valley.

She was only a little girl, born of ignorant mountaineer parents, and the only life she knew was that of the mountains about her. There was a houseful of brothers and sisters, wrangling, quarreling and fighting from morning till night; but Nil seemed to be always alone, always wandering off by herself in the woods, with no other companion than some dumb animal—a dog, a horse, a cat. There was even an old lame hen that used to hop after her on one foot and cluck contentedly while Nil scratched about for pretty cones, or stand in the shade and sleep, with one yellow eye wide open and head turned to one side, when her mistress sat quietly upon some old log and watched, in silence, the sunlight falling in fantastic shapes through the leaves.

In Nil's little heart there was always a song—the song that the lark sings early in the morning from

over the meadows, that the little mountain brook sings as it runs over shining pebbles and goes hurrying away to the valley below, that the summer wind sings as it kisses the flowers and rises and falls among the trees.

"Let 'er alone," the old grandmother, sitting by the fire smoking her pipe, would say, when Nil was scolded for being idle and lazy, "she's not like the other uns."

"The Lord knows I hope not," the mother would say, with a sour look at Nil. "She's not right in 'er head, thet she be not, 'r she'd never go foolin' about alone es she do, with nothin' but a dog 'r a hen. Th' good Lord ferbid that I ever hev another un like 'er, with sech a daft look to 'er eye, an' sech a daft way o' pokin' 'round alone, a-talkin' to 'erself."

"It's you thet be daft," the old woman would always reply, puffing away at her pipe. But, though her dim eyes recognized something in Nil that the others saw not, she was too old to care for anything save her warm corner by the fireside, so the child got no kind word from her ever, only she knew that gran'ma always took her part when the others set upon her, and in a vague, dreamy way, she appreciated it.

Sometimes there were terrible scenes in the old, tumble-down house, violent quarrels in which the whole family took part—all save Nil, who, at these times, would run far out on the mountain, almost wild with terror, and throwing herself prone upon the ground, would pray passionately that the scene which so terrified her might come to an end.

Not that she had ever been taught to pray, nor, indeed, did she know that there was such a word in her simple language; but yet, the words she uttered so vehemently, the supplications her little heart poured out were most pathetic prayers. To whom she addressed them, she knew not; only there was a vague, indistinct idea in her mind that she was talking to the mountains, to the silent rocks, to the restless shadows of the pine trees, and, without knowing it, she had become, as natural as the sunflower turns to the sun, a little Druidess of the woods.

One day in spring she had slipped quietly away and hid herself out in the grass where the warm sunlight lay, and looked down over the valley—an emerald now—below her. She watched the soft play of the lights and shadows over the fields of waving grain, while a long line of yet leafless trees, like a wide network of fine, gray lace, told where the river, leaping from its birthplace in the mountain fastnesses, wound away through the fertile valley, while over her bent the soft blue sky, that, better than anything else—better, even, than the mountains or the flowers or the woods—Nil loved.