

"Well, I don't suppose you care whether there is anyone within five miles or not, so you can have your adored Carlos," said Ruth, winking at me. "Then, there will be the children. Oh, Fan, imagine them calling Shirley 'mother!' Wouldn't we like to be little birds for awhile?"

Her sister blushed a little, but looked very happy and proud. "I know I shall love them."

"How old are they?" I asked.

"Oh, really—well, you see—I don't know, exactly. Carlos says Will is quite a boy, and then there is Mary and Mig, younger."

Christmas that year with us was a genuine Wisconsin one—snow drifts piled everywhere and the thermometer at zero. The keen air seemed to fairly reverberate with the music of bells.

"How perfect!" cried Shirley, joyously, as she perched in childish abandon on the broad window seat. At that moment a ray of sunlight fell on the proud little head with its wealth of long black curls. "Happy is the bride that the sun shines on," she quoted, gaily, catching at the beam with her slim, white fingers. A moment later some one else was at her side, and had imprisoned the fluttering hands in his own. I turned away. For some unaccountable reason I shared John's distrust of the stranger. There was a restless watchfulness about him that made me nervous, and I could not account for the invariable start he gave when the door bell rang. They made a handsome couple, but in spite of his florid complexion and smoothly-shaven face, he looked old enough to be her father.

The day following we bade them farewell. How sweet she looked, smiling through her tears.

"God keep you, sister," I heard John whisper, as he held her for a moment in his arms. "If anything happens, or you need a friend, let me know."

"I will, John, if anything happens to my husband," she answered, a little proudly, and then she went away, blindly changing the known for the unknown.

Owing to heavy storms the bridal journey proved rather tedious, but they finally arrived in safety at Seattle. Here they were met by the "boy" of whom Lee had told his wife. Imagine her surprise when introduced to a broad-shouldered six-footer, about whose rather firm-set lips curled a dark, heavy mustache. As she raised her eyes to his she encountered a look of surprise equal to her own, yet in the midst of it all she was mentally saying: "John would like his eyes," they were so frank and blue.

It seemed a long way that they rode, catching glimpses now and then of the beautiful waters of Puget sound, while in the distance gleamed the snowy summits of the Cascade range.

"And that is Mount Baker," explained Lee, pointing to the solitary sentinel looming up against the northern sky.

"How grand!" exclaimed the bride, her whole face indicative of extreme appreciation. "And it does not seem like winter here. I can scarce believe it is the new year time."

There had been no rainfall for several days, and the sun shone out fitfully.

"Do you think you will like our free west?" asked Will.

Looking brightly into the blue eyes that had instantly won her confidence, she answered—

"Yes, I'm sure I shall like it, but not love it as I do dear old Wisconsin. There is no place like home, you know."

"But this is your home now, Shirley, so you may as well take the oath of fealty first as last," said her husband, looking down at her in a fond, proud manner. Will, turning at the moment, caught the look, and a troubled expression came into his face, that did not leave it again for days.

That evening he whispered something into the ear of his favorite horse. Now, Ross was used to his master's confidence, and merely replied by rubbing his head against his shoulder. "Yes, sir, old fellow, it's a burning shame, I say; only think of bringing such an angel out here to share this torment—curse his selfishness!"

This last was spoken aloud, just as a form darkened the barn door.

"Who you talking to?" questioned Carlos Lee, looking suspiciously about.

"Only Ross," was the short reply.

The Lee farm was twenty-five miles from Seattle, in a little valley upon which nature had lavished her choicest gifts; but, as Shirley soon learned to her dismay, with the exception of a family of Danes, there were no neighbors within four miles.

The house was a long, low, frame building, containing four rooms. One of these, a large square, cheerless one, served as kitchen, dining room and family sitting room. The other three were used as sleeping apartments. To say that the young wife's heart did not well-nigh fail her as she stood on the threshold, would be but to pervert facts; but she was young and hopeful.

In the family, besides her husband and Will, were Mary, a delicate, misshapen creature, who looked with illy-concealed disfavor on the intruder from the first; Miggie, a golden-haired child of six years, destined to be the light of the young wife's life through many a home-sick, gloomy hour; and old Madge. The latter seemed to share Mary's dislike and prejudice, though she said nothing.