

# **HER PRAIRIE KNIGHT**

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# Contents

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CHAPTER 1. Stranded on the Prairie.

CHAPTER 2. A Handsome Cowboy to the Rescue.

CHAPTER 3. A Tilt With Sir Redmond.

CHAPTER 4. Beatrice Learns a New Language.

CHAPTER 5. The Search for Dorman.

CHAPTER 6. Mrs. Lansell's Lecture.

CHAPTER 7. Beatrice's Wild Ride.

CHAPTER 8. Dorman Plays Cupid.

CHAPTER 9. What It Meant to Keith.

CHAPTER 10. Pine Ridge Range Ablaze.

CHAPTER 11. Sir Redmond Waits His Answer.

CHAPTER 12. Held Up by Mr. Kelly.

CHAPTER 13. Keith's Masterful Wooing.

CHAPTER 14. Sir Redmond Gets His answer.

# **HER PRAIRIE KNIGHT**

## CHAPTER 1. Stranded on the Prairie.

“By George, look behind us! I fancy we are going to have a storm.” Four heads turned as if governed by one brain; four pairs of eyes, of varied color and character, swept the wind-blown wilderness of tender green, and gazed questioningly at the high-piled thunderheads above. A small boy, with an abundance of yellow curls and white collar, almost precipitated himself into the prim lap of a lady on the rear seat.

“Auntie, will God have fireworks? Say, auntie, will He? Can I say prayers widout kneelin’ down’? Uncle Redmon’ crowds so. I want to pray for fireworks, auntie. Can I?”

“Do sit down, Dorman. You’ll fall under the wheel, and then auntie would not have any dear little boy. Dorman, do you hear me? Redmond, do take that child down! How I wish Parks were here. I shall have nervous prostration within a fortnight.”

Sir Redmond Hayes plucked at the white collar, and the small boy retired between two masculine forms of no mean proportions. His voice, however, rose higher.

“You’ll get all the fireworks you want, young man, without all that hullabaloo,” remarked the driver, whom Dorman had been told, at the depot twenty miles back, he must call his Uncle Richard.

“I love storms,” came cheerfully from the rear seat—but the voice was not the prim voice of “auntie.” “Do you have thunder and lightning out here, Dick?”

“We do,” assented Dick. “We don’t ship it from the East in refrigerator cars, either. It grows wild.”

The cheerful voice was heard to giggle.

“Richard,” came in tired, reproachful accents from a third voice behind him, “you were reared in the East. I trust you have not formed the pernicious habit of speaking slightly of your birthplace.”

That, Dick knew, was his mother. She had not changed appreciably since she had nagged him through his teens. Not having seen her since, he was certainly in a position to judge.

“Trix asked about the lightning,” he said placatingly, just as he was accustomed to do, during the nagging period. “I was telling her.”

“Beatrice has a naturally inquiring mind,” said the tired voice, laying reproving stress upon the name.

“Are you afraid of lightning, Sir Redmond?” asked the cheerful girl-voice.

Sir Redmond twisted his neck to smile back at her. “No, so long as it doesn’t actually chuck me over.”

After that there was silence, so far as human voices went, for a time.

“How much farther is it, Dick?” came presently from the girl.

“Not more than ten—well, maybe twelve—miles. You’ll think it’s twenty, though, if the rain strikes ‘Dobe Flat before we do. That’s just what it’s going to do, or I’m badly mistaken. Hawk! Get along, there!”

“We haven’t an umbrella with us,” complained the tired one. “Beatrice, where did you put my raglan?”

“In the big wagon, mama, along with the trunks and guns and saddles, and Martha and Katherine and James.”

“Dear me! I certainly told you, Beatrice—”

“But, mama, you gave it to me the last thing, after the maids were in the wagon, and said you wouldn’t wear it. There isn’t room here for another thing. I feel like a slice of pressed chicken.”

“Auntie, I want some p’essed chicken. I’m hungry, auntie! I want some chicken and a cookie—and I want some ice-cream.”

“You won’t get any,” said the young woman, with the tone of finality. “You can’t eat me, Dorman, and I’m the only thing that looks good enough to eat.”

“Beatrice!” This, of course, from her mother, whose life seemed principally made up of a succession of mental shocks, brought on by her youngest, dearest, and most irrepressible.

“I have Dick’s word for it, mama; he said so, at the depot.”

“I want some chicken, auntie.”

“There is no chicken, dear,” said the prim one. “You must be a patient little man.”

"I won't. I'm hungry. Mens aren't patient when dey're hungry." A small, red face rose, like a tiny harvest moon, between the broad, masculine backs on the front seat.

"Dorman, sit down! Redmond!"

A large, gloved hand appeared against the small moon and it set ignominiously and prematurely, in the place where it had risen. Sir Redmond further extinguished it with the lap robe, for the storm, whooping malicious joy, was upon them.

First a blinding glare and a deafening crash. Then rain—sheets of it, that drenched where it struck. The women huddled together under the doubtful protection of the light robe and shivered. After that, wind that threatened to overturn the light spring wagon; then hail that bounced and hopped like tiny, white rubber balls upon the ground.

The storm passed as suddenly as it came, but the effect remained. The road was sodden with the water which had fallen, and as they went down the hill to 'Dobe Flat the horses strained at the collar and plodded like a plow team. The wheels collected masses of adobe, which stuck like glue and packed the spaces between the spokes. Twice Dick got out and poked the heavy mess from the wheels with Sir Redmond's stick—which was not good for the stick, but which eased the drag upon the horses wonderfully—until the wheels accumulated another load.

"Sorry to dirty your cane," Dick apologized, after the second halt. "You can rinse it off, though, in the creek a few miles ahead."

"Don't mention it!" said Sir Redmond, somewhat dubiously. It was his favorite stick, and he had taken excellent care of it. It was finely polished, and it had his name and regiment engraved upon the silver knob—and a date which the Boers will not soon forget, nor the English, for that matter.

"We'll soon be over the worst," Dick told them, after a time. "When we climb that hill we'll have a hard, gravelly trail straight to the ranch. I'm sorry it had to storm; I wanted you to enjoy this trip."

"I am enjoying it," Beatrice assured him. "It's something new, at any rate, and anything is better than the deadly monotony of Newport."

"Beatrice!" cried her mother "I'm ashamed of you!"

"You needn't be, mama. Why won't you just be sorry for yourself, and let it end there? I know you hated to come, poor dear; but you wouldn't think of

letting me come alone, though I'm sure I shouldn't have minded. This is going to be a delicious summer—I feel it in my bones.”

“Be-atrice!”

“Why, mama? Aren't young ladies supposed to have bones?”

“Young ladies are not supposed to make use of unrefined expressions. Your poor sister.”

“There, mama. Dear Dolly didn't live upon stilts, I'm sure. Even when she married.”

“Be-atrice!”

“Dear me, mama! I hope you are not growing peevish. Peevish elderly people—”

“Auntie! I want to go home!” the small boy wailed.

“You cannot go home now, dear,” sighed his guardian angel. “Look at the pretty—” She hesitated, groping vaguely for some object to which she might conscientiously apply the adjective.

“Mud,” suggested Beatrice promptly “Look at the wheels, Dorman; they're playing patty-cake. See, now they say, ‘Roll ‘em, and roll ‘em,’ and now, ‘Toss in the oven to bake!’ And now—”

“Auntie, I want to get out an' play patty-cake, like de wheels. I want to awf'ly!”

“Beatrice, why did you put that into his head?” her mother demanded, fretfully.

“Never mind, honey,” called Beatrice cheerfully. “You and I will make hundreds of mud pies when we get to Uncle Dick's ranch. Just think, hon, oodles of beautiful, yellow mud just beside the door!”

“Look here, Trix! Seems to me you're promising a whole lot you can't make good. I don't live in a 'dobe patch.”

“Hush, Dick; don't spoil everything. You don't know Dorman.’

“Beatrice! What must Miss Hayes and Sir Redmond think of you? I'm sure Dorman is a sweet child, the image of poor, dear Dorothea, at his age.”

“We all think Dorman bears a strong resemblance to his father,” said his Aunt Mary.

Beatrice, scenting trouble, hurried to change the subject. "What's this, Dick—the Missouri River?"

"Hardly. This is the water that didn't fall in the buggy. It isn't deep; it makes bad going worse, that's all."

Thinking to expedite matters, he struck Hawk sharply across the flank. It was a foolish thing to do, and Dick knew it when he did it; ten seconds later he knew it better.

Hawk reared, tired as he was, and lunged viciously.

The double-trees snapped and splintered; there was a brief interval of plunging, a shower of muddy water in that vicinity, and then two draggled, disgusted brown horses splashed indignantly to shore and took to the hills with straps flying.

"By George!" ejaculated Sir Redmond, gazing helplessly after them. "But this is a beastly bit of luck, don't you know!"

"Oh, you Hawk—" Dick, in consideration of his companions, finished the remark in the recesses of his troubled soul, where the ladies could not overhear.

"What comes next, Dick?" The voice of Beatrice was frankly curious.

"Next, I'll have to wade out and take after those—" This sentence, also, was rounded out mentally.

"In the meantime, what shall we do?"

"You'll stay where you are—and thank the good Lord you were not upset. I'm sorry,"—turning so that he could look deprecatingly at Miss Hayes—"your welcome to the West has been so—er—strenuous. I'll try and make it up to you, once you get to the ranch. I hope you won't let this give you a dislike of the country."

"Oh, no," said the spinster politely. "I'm sure it is a—a very nice country, Mr. Lansell."

"Well, there's nothing to be done sitting here." Dick climbed down over the dashboard into the mud and water.

Sir Redmond was not the man to shirk duty because it happened to be disagreeable, as the regiment whose name was engraved upon his cane could testify. He glanced regretfully at his immaculate leggings and followed.



“I fancy you ladies won’t need any bodyguard,” he said. Looking back, he caught the light of approval shining in the eyes of Beatrice, and after that he did not mind the mud, but waded to shore and joined in the chase quite contentedly. The light of approval, shining in the eyes of Beatrice, meant much to Sir Redmond.

## CHAPTER 2. A Handsome Cowboy to the Rescue.

Beatrice took immediate possession of the front seat, that she might comfort her heartbroken young nephew.

“Never mind, honey. They’ll bring the horses back in a minute, and we’ll make them run every step. And when you get to Uncle Dick’s ranch you’ll see the nicest things—bossy calves, and chickens, and, maybe, some little pigs with curly tails.”

All this, though alluring, failed of its purpose; the small boy continued to weep, and his weeping was ear-splitting.

“Be still, Dorman, or you’ll certainly scare all the coyotes to death.”

“Where are dey?”

“Oh, all around. You keep watch, hon, and maybe you’ll see one put the tip of his nose over a hill.”

“What hill?” Dorman skipped a sob, and scoured his eyes industriously with both fists.

“M-m—that hill. That little one over there. Watch close, or you’ll miss him.”

The dove of peace hovered over them, and seemed actually about to alight. Beatrice leaned back with a relieved breath.

“It is good of you, my dear, to take so much trouble,” sighed his Aunt Mary. “How I am to manage without Parks I’m sure I cannot tell.”

“You are tired, and you miss your tea.” soothed Beatrice, optimistic as to tone. “When we all have a good rest we will be all right. Dorman will find plenty to amuse him. We are none of us exactly comfortable now.”

“Comfortable!” sniffed her mother. “I am half dead. Richard wrote such glowing letters home that I was misled. If I had dreamed of the true conditions, Miss Hayes, I should never have sanctioned this wild idea of Beatrice’s to come out and spend the summer with Richard.”

“It’s coming, Be’trice! There it is! Will it bite, auntie? Say, will it bite?”

Beatrice looked. A horseman came over the hill and was galloping down the long slope toward them. His elbows were lifted contrary to the mandates of the riding-school, his long legs were encased in something

brown and fringed down the sides. His gray hat was tilted rakishly up at the back and down in front, and a handkerchief was knotted loosely around his throat. Even at that distance he struck her as different from any one she had ever seen.

"It's a highwayman!" whispered Mrs. Lansell "Hide your purse, my dear!"

"I—I—where?" Miss Hayes was all a-flutter with fear.

"Drop it down beside the wheel, into the water. Quick! I shall drop my watch."

"He—he is coming on this side! He can see!" Her whisper was full of entreaty and despair.

"Give them here. He can't see on both sides of the buggy at once." Mrs. Lansell, being an American—a Yankee at that—was a woman of resource.

"Beatrice, hand me your watch quick!"

Beatrice paid no attention, and there was no time to insist upon obedience. The horseman had slowed at the water's edge, and was regarding them with some curiosity. Possibly he was not accustomed to such a sight as the one that met his eyes. He came splashing toward them, however, as though he intended to investigate the cause of their presence, alone upon the prairie, in a vehicle which had no horses attached in the place obviously intended for such attachment. When he was close upon them he stopped and lifted the rakishly tilted gray hat.

"You seem to be in trouble. Is there anything I can do for you?" His manner was grave and respectful, but his eyes, Beatrice observed, were having a quiet laugh of their own.

"You can't get auntie's watch, nor gran'mama's. Gran'mama frowed 'em all down in the mud. She frowed her money down in the mud, too," announced Dorman, with much complacency. "Be'trice says you is a coyote. Is you?"

There was a stunned interval, during which nothing was heard but the wind whispering things to the grass. The man's eyes stopped laughing; his jaw set squarely; also, his brows drew perceptibly closer together. It was Mrs. Lansell's opinion that he looked murderous.

Then Beatrice put her head down upon the little, blue velvet cap of Dorman and laughed. There was a rollicking note in her laughter that was

irresistible, and the eyes of the man relented and joined in her mirth. His lips forgot they were angry and insulted, and uncovered some very nice teeth.

“We aren’t really crazy,” Beatrice told him, sitting up straight and drying her eyes daintily with her handkerchief. “We were on our way to Mr. Lansell’s ranch, and the horses broke something and ran away, and Dick—Mr. Lansell—has gone to catch them. We’re waiting until he does.”

“I see.” From the look in his eyes one might guess that what he saw pleased him. “Which direction did they take?”

Beatrice waved a gloved hand vaguely to the left, and, without another word, the fellow touched his hat, turned and waded to shore and galloped over the ridge she indicated; and the clucketycluck of his horse’s hoofs came sharply across to them until he dipped out of sight.

“You see, he wasn’t a robber,” Beatrice remarked, staring after him speculatively. “How well he rides! One can see at a glance that he almost lives in the saddle. I wonder who he is.”

“For all you know, Beatrice, he may be going now to murder Richard and Sir Redmond in cold blood. He looks perfectly hardened.”

“Oh, do you think it possible?” cried Miss Hayes, much alarmed.

“No!” cried Beatrice hotly. “One who did not know your horror of novels, mama, might suspect you of feeding your imagination upon ‘penny dreadfuls.’ I’m sure he is only a cowboy, and won’t harm anybody.”

“Cowboys are as bad as highwaymen,” contended her mother, “or worse. I have read how they shoot men for a pastime, and without even the excuse of robbery.”

“Is it possible?” quavered Miss Hayes faintly.

“No, it isn’t!” Beatrice assured her indignantly.

“He has the look of a criminal,” declared Mrs. Lansell, in the positive tone of one who speaks from intimate knowledge of the subject under discussion. “I only hope he isn’t going to murder—”

“They’re coming back, mama,” interrupted Beatrice, who had been watching closely the hilltop. “No, it’s that man, and he is driving the horses.”

“He’s chasing them,” corrected her mother testily. “A horse thief, no doubt. He’s going to catch them with his snare—”

“Lasso, mama.”

“Well, lasso. Where can Richard be? To think the fellow should be so bold! But out here, with miles upon miles of open, and no police protection anything is possible. We might all be murdered, and no one be the wiser for days—perhaps weeks. There, he has caught them.” She leaned back and clasped her hands, ready to meet with fortitude whatever fate might have in store.

“He’s bringing them out to us, mama. Can’t you see the man is only trying to help us?”

Mrs. Lansell, beginning herself to suspect him of honest intentions, sniffed dissentingly and let it go at that. The fellow was certainly leading the horses toward them, and Sir Redmond and Dick, appearing over the hill just then, proved beyond doubt that neither had been murdered in cold blood, or in any other unpleasant manner.

“We’re all right now, mother,” Dick called, the minute he was near enough.

His mother remarked skeptically that she hoped possibly she had been in too great haste to conceal her valuables—that Miss Hayes might not feel grateful for her presence of mind, and was probably wondering if mud baths were not injurious to fine, jeweled time-pieces. Mrs. Lansell was uncomfortable, mentally and physically, and her manner was frankly chilly when her son presented the stranger as his good friend and neighbor, Keith Cameron. She was still privately convinced that he looked a criminal—though, if pressed, she must surely have admitted that he was an uncommonly good-looking young outlaw. It would seem almost as if she regarded his being a decent, law-abiding citizen as pure effrontery.

Miss Hayes greeted him with a smile of apprehension which plainly amused him. Beatrice was frankly impersonal in her attitude; he represented a new species of the genus man, and she, too, evidently regarded him in the light of a strange animal, viewed unexpectedly at close range.

While he was helping Dick mend the double-tree with a piece of rope, she studied him curiously. He was tall—taller even than Sir Redmond, and more slender. Sir Redmond had the straight, sturdy look of the soldier who had borne the brunt of hard marches and desperate fighting; Mr. Cameron, the lithe, unconscious grace and alertness of the man whose

work demands quick movement and quicker eye and brain. His face was tanned to a clear bronze which showed the blood darkly beneath; Sir Redmond's year of peace had gone far toward lightening his complexion. Beatrice glanced briefly at him and admired his healthy color, and was glad he did not have the look of an Indian. At the same time, she caught herself wishing that Sir Redmond's eyes were hazel, fringed with very long, dark lashes and topped with very straight, dark brows—eyes which seemed always to have some secret cause for mirth, and to laugh quite independent of the rest of the face. Still, Sir Redmond had very nice eyes—blue, and kind, and steadfast, and altogether dependable—and his lashes were quite nice enough for any one. In just four seconds Beatrice decided that, after all, she did not like hazel eyes that twinkle continually; they make one feel that one is being laughed at, which is not comfortable. In six seconds she was quite sure that this Mr. Cameron thought himself handsome, and Beatrice detested a man who was proud of his face or his figure; such a man always tempted her to “make faces,” as she used to do over the back fence when she was little.

She mentally accused him of trying to show off his skill with his rope when he leaned and fastened it to the rig, rode out ahead and helped drag the vehicle to shore; and it was with some resentment that she observed the ease with which he did it, and how horse and rope seemed to know instinctively their master's will, and to obey of their own accord.

In all that he had done—and it really seemed as if he did everything that needed to be done, while Dick potted around in the way—he had not found it necessary to descend into the mud and water, to the ruin of his picturesque, fringed chaps and high-heeled boots. He had worked at ease, carelessly leaning from his leathern throne upon the big, roan horse he addressed occasionally as Redcloud. Beatrice wondered where he got the outlandish name. But, with all his imperfections, she was glad she had met him. He really was handsome, whether he knew it or not; and if he had a good opinion of himself, and overrated his actions—all the more fun for herself! Beatrice, I regret to say, was not above amusing herself with handsome young men who overrate their own charms; in fact, she had the reputation among her women acquaintances of being a most outrageous flirt.

In the very middle of these trouble-breeding meditations, Mr. Cameron looked up unexpectedly and met keenly her eyes; and for some reason—let us hope because of a guilty conscience—Beatrice grew hot and confused; an unusual experience, surely, for a girl who had been out three seasons, and has met calmly the eyes of many young men. Until now it

had been the young men who grew hot and confused; it had never been herself.

Beatrice turned her shoulder toward him, and looked at Sir Redmond, who was surreptitiously fishing for certain articles beside the rear wheel, at the whispered behest of Mrs. Lansell, and was certainly a sight to behold. He was mud to his knees and to his elbows, and he had managed to plaster his hat against the wheel and to dirty his face. Altogether, he looked an abnormally large child who has been having a beautiful day of it in somebody's duck-pond; but Beatrice was nearer, at that moment, to loving him than she had been at any time during her six weeks' acquaintance with him—and that is saying much, for she had liked him from the start.

Mr. Cameron followed her glance, and his eyes did not have the laugh all to themselves; his voice joined them, and Beatrice turned upon him and frowned. It was not kind of him to laugh at a man who is proving his heart to be much larger than his vanity; Beatrice was aware of Sir Redmond's immaculateness of attire on most occasions.

"Well," said Dick, gathering up the reins, "you've helped us out of a bad scrape, Keith. Come over and take dinner with us to-morrow night. I expect we'll be kept riding the rim-rocks, over at the Pool, this summer. Unless this sister of mine has changed a lot, she won't rest till she's been over every foot of country for forty miles around. It will just about keep our strings rode down to a whisper keeping her in sight."

"Dear me, Richard!" said his mother. "What Jargon is this you speak?"

"That's good old Montana English, mother. You'll learn it yourself before you leave here. I've clean forgot how they used the English language at Yale, haven't you, Keith?"

"Just about," Keith agreed. "I'm afraid we'll shock the ladies terribly, Dick. We ought to get out on a pinnacle with a good grammar and practice."

"Well, maybe. We'll look for you to-morrow, sure. I want you to help map out a circle or two for Trix. About next week she'll want to get out and scour the range."

"Dear me, Richard! Beatrice is not a charwoman!" This, you will understand, was from his mother; perhaps you will also understand that she spoke with the rising inflection which conveys a reproof.

When Keith Cameron left them he was laughing quietly to himself, and Beatrice's chin was set rather more than usual.

### CHAPTER 3. A Tilt With Sir Redmond.

Beatrice, standing on the top of a steep, grassy slope, was engaged in the conventional pastime of enjoying the view. It was a fine view, but it was not half as good to look upon as was Beatrice herself, in her fresh white waist and brown skirt, with her brown hair fluffing softly in the breeze which would grow to a respectable wind later in the day, and with her cheeks pink from climbing.

She was up where she could see the river, a broad band of blue in the surrounding green, winding away for miles through the hills. The far bank stood a straight two hundred feet of gay-colored rock, chiseled, by time and stress of changeful weather, into fanciful turrets and towers. Above and beyond, where the green began, hundreds of moving dots told where the cattle were feeding quietly. Far away to the south, heaps of hazy blue and purple slept in the sunshine; Dick had told her those were the Highwoods. And away to the west, a jagged line of blue-white glimmered and stood upon tip-toes to touch the swimming clouds—touched them and pushed above proudly; those were the Rockies. The Bear Paws stood behind her; nearer they were—so near they lost the glamour of mysterious blue shadows, and became merely a sprawling group of huge, pine-covered hills, with ranches dotted here and there in sheltered places, with squares of fresh, dark green that spoke of growing crops.

Ten days, and the metropolitan East had faded and become as hazy and vague as the Highwoods. Ten days, and the witchery of the West leaped in her blood and held her fast in its thralldom.

A sound of scrambling behind her was immediately followed by a smothered epithet. Beatrice turned in time to see Sir Redmond pick himself up.

“These grass slopes are confounded slippery, don’t you know,” he explained apologetically. “How did you manage that climb?”

“I didn’t.” Beatrice smiled. “I came around the end, where the ascent is gradual; there’s a good path.”

“Oh!” Sir Redmond sat down upon a rock and puffed. “I saw you up here—and a fellow doesn’t think about taking a roundabout course to reach his heart’s—”

“Isn’t it lovely?” Beatrice made haste to inquire.



“Lovely isn’t half expressive enough,” he told her. “You look—”

“The river is so very blue and dignified. I’ve been wondering if it has forgotten how it must have danced through those hills, away off there. When it gets down to the cities—this blue water—it will be muddy and nasty looking. The ‘muddy Missouri’ certainly doesn’t apply here. And that farther shore is simply magnificent. I wish I might stay here forever.”

“The Lord forbid!” cried he, with considerable fervor. “There’s a dear nook in old England where I hope—”

“You did get that mud off your leggings, I see,” Beatrice remarked inconsequentially. “James must have worked half the time we’ve been here. They certainly were in a mess the last time I saw them.”

“Bother the leggings! But I take it that’s a good sign, Miss Lansell—your taking notice of such things.”

Beatrice returned to the landscape. “I wonder who originated that phrase, ‘The cattle grazing on a thousand hills’? He must have stood just here when he said it.”

“Wasn’t it one of your American poets? Longfellow, or—er—”

Beatrice simply looked at him a minute and said “Pshaw!”

“Well,” he retorted, “you don’t know yourself who it was.”

“And to think,” Beatrice went on, ignoring the subject, “some of those grazing cows and bossy calves are mine—my very own. I never cared before, or thought much about it, till I came out and saw where they live, and Dick pointed to a cow and the sweetest little red and white calf, and said: ‘That’s your cow and calf, Trix.’ They were dreadfully afraid of me, though—I’m afraid they didn’t recognize me as their mistress. I wanted to get down and pet the calf—it had the dearest little snub nose but they bolted, and wouldn’t let me near them.”

“I fancy they were not accustomed to meeting angels unawares.”

“Sir Redmond, I wish you wouldn’t. You are so much nicer when you’re not trying to be nice.”

“I’ll act a perfect brute,” he offered eagerly, “if that will make you love me.”

“It’s hardly worth trying. I think you would make a very poor sort of villain, Sir Redmond. You wouldn’t even be picturesque.”

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