

**A NYMPH OF THE
WEST; A NOVEL**

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A nymph of the West; a novel by Howard Seely

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HOWARD SEELY

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OF THE WEST

A NOVEL

BY
HOWARD SEELY

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A NYMPH OF THE WEST.

I.

MIDWAY between Lampasas and San Saba, the Colorado River runs—a wild, romantic, winding stream. At times its placid current flows evenly over dimpling shoals and gleaming pebbles. Again, the waters deepen, and by flower-bordered banks its current eddies sullen, slow, and grand. But there is one place where the river plunges madly downward to roar at the base of precipitous rocks and writhe over bowlders in its shallow bed. Overhead dark hemlocks curtain this rage of waters from the gaze of day. The sunlight enters only by stealth, and then in tremulous pencils. At such moments, against the somber green of the swaying pines, the red-bird flashes, or the indigo-bird is seen—a living sapphire in the sudden light; and the rippling melody of rival mocking-birds enters the solemn aisles as though the gate of heaven were left ajar. Within these aisles the foot sinks luxuriously amid cushions of hemlock-boughs and pine-needles; the tall, time-scarred trunks lift themselves dimly like pillars of some leafy Gothic dome; the vague ranks of forest exhale their cool, damp spicery. All Nature is hushed and wan. Only the river's moan comes faintly; and everywhere

roundabout, and pervading all things, are the twilight and seclusion beloved by the dryad.

Whether Miss Cynthia Dallas, on a certain mild February afternoon, was at all impressed by any of these sylvan suggestions, I can not say. Her untutored mind was as yet guiltless of mythology, and no vision of straying god or goddess, no whimsical train of nymph and faun, had hitherto invaded her slumbering fancy. Yet, swinging lightly in a netted hammock, within an innermost recess of this spicy vault, just where a slanting beam of sunlight fell full upon her graceful figure, she might well have been mistaken for some wood-nymph surprised amid her favorite haunts—so quaint a figure was she, and yet so essentially in keeping with the woodland stillness, of which she seemed a part. She reclined at ease, and lazily, as the hammock swung, noted the soft play of sunlight through the boughs above, and the trembling arabesques of spray and shadow. Her hands, holding a small leathern whip with deer-foot handle, were clasped behind her head, at once with graceful and careless *abandon*. A blonde beauty, somewhat suntanned and freckle-strewn, her attire a plain blue woolen gown, that clung almost tenderly to the charming curves of her figure; but, swinging thus, and with a little silver spur upon the shoe of her left foot, tinkling as she swung, a fascinating picture, certainly, for some stumbling Strephon.

Of such amatory interruption Miss Cynthia was happily unconscious. The dark lashes that fringed her eyes of velvet-blue had a certain deprecatory curve, as though they waved a playful warning against all approaches of the tender passion. Mischief, not

sentiment, as yet dwelt behind the roguish lids. The curves of her rosy lips swept upward at the corners, where two little lines, like accents, gave her an elfish look, and mocked the sweetness of the mouth with subtle irony. And yet, so graciously had Nature touched and molded the face, so charmingly lavished upon this woodland maiden a wealth of tresses of auburn gold—tresses amid which the sun loved to linger, and glint his reckless admiration—that the impression left was at once piquant and bewitching. Possibly it was owing to this that the sun sought her out so persistently in her dim retreat, this very afternoon, thinking, with pardonable fascination, he had found his Daphne.

I must protest, however, that this fascination of Phœbus was not without its detractions. Certain locks upon the top of Miss Cynthia's head, where the golden hue had been bleached into a lighter tint, betrayed the damaging tendencies of his caresses, as well as a reckless disregard for the bondage of head-gear. Miss Cynthia was at present bareheaded. I regret that this negligence had become a habit. There was, I believe, a felt something lying on the ground among the pine-needles, which, from the fact that it was decorated with a ribbon or two, and a gaudy woodpecker's wing at an extravagant angle, like a sail upon the port tack, may have been once intended for a becoming bonnet. But, at the unexpected moment of the young lady's introduction, a pet antelope fawn was attempting to browse upon it, and, from present indications, meeting with gratifying success. The antelope was assisting his prandial experiments by a vicious attack upon the hat with his sharp fore-feet.

A grave hound, seated upon his haunches at a respectful distance from this serious campaign against modern dress, regarded the antelope's sincere efforts with a solemn approval that was certainly flattering. Cynthia, her abstracted eyes still lost in contemplation of the swaying canopy of green above her head, or watching through a sudden vista the calm poise of a gray hawk circling aloft in the limitless ether, was rapt and all unconscious.

Suddenly she raised her head with a start. A sharp, articulate cry broke the stillness. The antelope dashed away in sudden panic to a remote corner of the bower, where he stood eying her askance—a few feathers from the gaudy wing still clinging to his mouth. The great hound raised himself with a preliminary stretch and monstrous yawn, as if expecting a departure.

The girl caught up the luckless hat with a gesture of annoyance, and a snap of her whip in the direction of the terrified fawn—a movement at which the hound, with drooping ears and tail, was stricken into an attitude of eloquent reproach.

“Not you, old boy,” she said kindly, patting his broad head; “but his impudence yonder! He knows it, the cute rascal, and he'll hear from me later! P'raps he thinks I'm sittin' up nights makin' lovely hats jes' to give him a chance to try his new teeth. Naturally not, I reckon.—But, Aulus,” she continued interrogatively, addressing the grave hound, “I'm sure I heard a noise, old boy, didn't you? What *was* that? Didn't you get to hear it?”

The hound, raising his ears with the droll interest of dogs of that family, walked gravely to the edge

of a cliff on which the bower abutted, and looked solemnly down. Suddenly his tail began to wag with lively interest. The girl sprang from the hammock with a lithe activity that left it swinging furiously behind her. Creeping forward cautiously beside him, she gazed below. Far, abrupt, and sheer, down the precipitous descent, she beheld a man floundering in the rapids. A dog, dripping wet and timorously wretched, was following him. It was the latter which had awakened the interest of the grave Aulus.

Both were in evident distress, and endeavoring to effect a crossing by leaping from bowlder to bowlder amid the whirling waters. But the rocks were slippery and moss-grown, the current dizzy and swift. All at once the man's feet slipped on a treacherous stone, and he tottered heavily backward. He sat down rather than fell upon his wretched dog, who was following him closely with frantic leaps. The animal uttered an agonizing yelp, and with a great splash both dog and man were precipitated into the angry waters.

The girl threw her head back and laughed long and musically in her sylvan bower. At the unaccustomed sound a mocking-bird, that had strayed into her retreat and perched upon a high limb, apparently for rest and meditation, turned his pretty head to one side and listened attentively, as if about to favor her with an imitation. The antelope trotted coyly up to her. Aulus, with rapidly wagging tail and whimpering muzzle, testified the humor of the catastrophe from a canine standpoint. In this sympathetic merriment Cynthia half reclined between her pets, one arm about the hound's neck, the other