

THE NATIVE STAR

M. K. HOBSON



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The Native Star

“M. K. Hobson dazzles! *The Native Star* is an awesome mash-up of magic and steam-age technology—call it witchpunk. This debut novel puts a new shine on the Gilded Age.”

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“Splendid! In *The Native Star*, M. K. Hobson gives us a Reconstruction-era America, beautifully drawn and filled with the energy of a young nation—and magic! Her heroine, Emily Edwards, is outspoken, brash, loving, and true; a delight to spend time with. Could there be a sequel, please?”

—MADELEINE ROBINS

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For Nora

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book is like a pearl. The author supplies the grit in the middle, but it is friends and colleagues who add the thin bright layers that make it shine.

(Following this metaphor through, one might suppose they do this because they find the author and her grit so damned irritating—but let's leave such hobgoblinish consistency to littler minds, shall we?)

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It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH



Prologue

Charleston, South Carolina

July 15, 1865

Five loud, hard, sharp crashes. Someone was knocking—no, not knocking, rather *pounding*—at the door of Mr. Everdene Baugh's house on Church Street.

It was well past midnight. A violent tempest of bird-shot rain and screaming wind—the biggest storm to hit Charleston in a decade—was raging outside. *Anarchy and insolence*, Baugh fumed as he fumbled his way down the dark, narrow stairs, wool-stockinged feet sliding on bare wood. Every day he was unpleasantly surprised at how much closer to savagery the world had drifted.

Baugh threw open his door with the intention of telling the pounders to go to Hell and exactly how to get there. But when he saw that it was a detachment of Union soldiers on his doorstep, their rifles gleaming, the words froze in his mouth. Before the soldiers stood a hulking officer with dripping muttonchops, who seemed hardly to notice the rain sluicing down on him from the broken gutters above.

"Captain John Caul," the man introduced himself curtly, not bothering to touch the brim of his hat. "You're Baugh, of E. W. Baugh and Company?"

Baugh clutched the edge of the door, knuckles white. Sherman's bloody march was only a few months in the past. The ashes of Columbia had barely cooled, and the once-fertile fields of South Carolina were barren, ruined by the despoiling northern Warlock squadrons who had sown every field with black sorcerer's salt. And since Lincoln's assassination, the Yankee garrisons had been itching for blood.

Baugh prayed they weren't here for his.

"Your firm operated a warehouse before the recent conflicts," Caul said. His voice was strangely flat, as if he was attempting to make each word balance precisely with the next. "I have been informed that you might be willing to let it. I've come on behalf of an associate who wishes a viewing."

"You want me to take you 'round to see the warehouse?" Baugh blinked in astonishment. "But ... but it's ..."

"... *haunted*," Caul finished for him, with a distinct sneer. "Yes. I know all about that. Get dressed. My associate is waiting."

The walk to the warehouse was brief but no less unpleasant for being so. The driving rain was cold and stinging, and Baugh had to lean forward

against the hard wind to make headway. Better, though, to lean forward into the wind than back against the rifle that one of Caul's men was jabbing between his shoulder blades.

When they reached the warehouse, Baugh saw a black carriage waiting in the street. Caul's associate.

"It'll be just a moment," Baugh said apologetically as he went to the great rusting padlock. He unlocked it carefully; then, when no one was looking, he placed his hand on the door's wooden frame.

"Ghost," he whispered. "It's me."

There was a soft, cool exhalation from within the building, a distant moaning of recognition.

Feeling the presence of his ghost cheered Baugh immeasurably. The ghost was the most useful sorcellement he'd ever purchased. During the recent unpleasantness, its talent for striking terror into the hearts of the living had been the only thing that kept the Union armies from commandeering his warehouse. Baugh glanced back at the ruffians in blue who'd escorted him here. It would be awfully satisfying to instruct the ghost to send them packing, too.

However, Captain Caul had used the word "let." And the word "let" implied money. And Baugh, like every other hungry Confederate son, very much needed money.

"Your services won't be required," he whispered, patting the door frame tenderly. "Not yet, anyway. But stand ready in case I need you." A creaking sound of understanding and compliance came in reply.

If these Yankees wanted to let his warehouse, he'd take their money. Otherwise he'd call his haunt down on them quicker than rain off a tin roof.

Baugh made a great show of removing the padlock, as if he'd been fiddling with it the whole time. Only when the doors of the warehouse were opened did Caul's associate, a man in a shining beaver top hat, suffer himself to be handed down from his carriage by a soggy sergeant.

And it was not until they were inside, and one of Caul's soldiers had kindled a lamp, that Baugh got a good look at the mysterious stranger. The man's limbs seemed to have been molded precisely to fit his elegantly tailored chamois trousers and fashionably cut coat. His fingers sparkled with gem-set gold rings, he wore a neat Vandyke, and his eyes were an alarming shade of peacock blue.

"Monsieur Rene," Caul said. "Comte d'Artaud."

"Pleased to meet you," Baugh said. Artaud didn't even look in his direction. Instead, the Frenchman walked around the building slowly, hands loosely clasped behind his back. He looked up at the cobwebbed rafters, then at the dirty windows. He squinted at a sudden flash of lightning.

"How large is this warehouse?" he asked, his accent pleasantly elliptical.

Baugh threw out his chest proudly. "Why, it's the only warehouse hereabouts rigged up with an extradimensional enchantment ... I had it done before the war. The warehouse is five thousand square feet on the outside, eighty thousand on the inside. I paid dearly for that ..." He paused. "Not that I'd pass the cost along—"

"A very useful enchantment," came a voice from behind him. Baugh startled. Caul was standing right at his shoulder. How had the big man crept up on him like that? The captain was staring down at him, eyes flat and still as those of a corpse.

"Very ... very useful." Baugh licked his lips. "The Warlock who sold it to me was a traveling fellow, from Boston." How he wanted to get out from under those horrible eyes! "He ... sold me quite a few little witcheries."

"Yes," Caul said. "I've heard."

"Here, Captain." Artaud was pointing to a spot on the floor. Caul snapped fingers at his men, and two of them hurried out into the storm. They returned carrying a huge iron-banded chest, which they set near the place Artaud had indicated. One of them handed Caul a crowbar.

Before Baugh could say a word, Caul thrust one end of the bar between two floorboards, prying them up with a creak of iron nails and a scream of pine. Caul set the boards aside, and he and the Frenchman peered down into darkness, where the building's foundations were sunk in the murky swamp of the delta.

"What are you doing!" Baugh cried. But neither Caul nor Artaud answered, and since no further destruction seemed forthcoming, Baugh said nothing more. He did, however, move closer for a better look.

Artaud opened the iron-banded chest and withdrew a narrow cherrywood box, the kind that might hold a billiard cue. Within it, seated in velvet, lay five long tubes of silver, gradating from the circumference of a child's wrist to that of a lady's pinkie. Four were designed to telescope out into longer sections; the Frenchman pulled these out and began screwing them together.

While Artaud did this, the captain reached into the iron-banded chest and strained to remove a final object, wide as a washtub and tall as a tea table. Caul kicked the chest closed and set the object on top of it. It was a machine of polished steel and glass. On each side it had a large flywheel with a bulbous wooden crank handle.

Artaud had finished connecting the silver tubes, and now had a long, flexible pole. He threaded this through the hole in the floor thin-end first, letting it slide through his fingers until it hit the mud with a distant *plip*. He twisted the pole until it was well seated. Then he took the fifth piece from the cherrywood box and fitted it onto the pole's end. This piece was different from the others; it was a kind of cap, with a long, cloth-wrapped cord sprouting from its terminating end. Artaud connected the cord to the machine, then gestured to two of Caul's soldiers, who began vigorously

cranking the machine. The machine came alive with a warbling hum—a slightly irregular sound that rose and fell with the minutely varying speed of the men’s exertions.

“What are you ...”

The Frenchman threw his hand up curtly, stopping the words in Baugh’s mouth. He was peering at an enameled gauge that was domed with blown glass and inscribed with beautifully scrolled French indicators. He stared at it for some time before making a sound of disgust.

“It is hopeless!” he muttered, glaring at Caul. “Your Boston man said the readings were unprecedented!”

“So they must have been,” Caul said. “Try again.”

“*Non*,” Artaud snapped. “Your scout was an idiot. There is nothing here.”

He seized the pole as if he meant to wrench it out of the ground. But the instant his skin touched the metal, a flash of ice-blue light crackled like a thousand tiny Chinese firecrackers, knocking him across the room. He landed with a thud. He did not move for a moment, but then he groaned and stirred.

Horrified, Baugh rushed to help Artaud to his feet. A thick lock of brilliantined hair flopped across his forehead and his cheek was streaked with grime—but oddly enough, the Frenchman was grinning broadly.

“What could have happened?” Baugh stammered, brushing dust from Artaud’s coat. “Some kind of lightning bolt, perhaps? These storms—”

“No, no,” Artaud said, waving away Baugh’s fussings. He smoothed back his hair, then straightened his collar. “Thank you, my dear sir. We’ve seen all we need to see.”

Baugh’s heart sunk at the finality with which the words were spoken.

“Then you won’t be wanting the place?”

Artaud fixed his gaze on Baugh, and Baugh almost screamed. The Frenchman’s eyes had gone completely black from iris to lid. It was like looking into an open grave. Fumbling backward, Baugh found that Caul was right behind him. The big man grabbed him, held him.

“On the contrary.” Artaud’s black eyes were dull as wells of tar. “We’ll take it immediately.”

“Ghost!” Baugh choked. “Ghost, help me!”

Before the words had left his lips, a spectral form began to coalesce. Greasy ectoplasm dripped from the walls—a miasma that made the warehouse glow with a sickly yellow light. It grew until it was a vast figure, vaguely human in form, with a distended head and long spindly limbs. It opened its black mouth and began to shriek—a sound that was the pure distillation of death and torture, terror and misery, sorrow and despair.

Even Baugh, who owned the ghost, found it terrifying.

Caul, however, did not. Shoving Baugh toward one of his men, he strode

toward the atrocity. His impassive face was illuminated by the haunt's shifting yellow glow. Pulling a two-chambered glass pendant from beneath his collar, Caul thrust it toward the ghost. He began speaking in guttural cadences that resounded against the walls, beating against the howling of the ghost like a base drum contending with a steam siren. He spoke louder, and knives of light shone in the air, threads and wires of gleaming red and black that tangled around the ghost, slicing it into shining blobs of ectoplasm that fell from the air to sizzle and quiver on the floor like spat mucus. The ghost's shrieks grew fainter and fainter. Finally, they faded away entirely.

"Ghost?" Baugh called softly.

"It has served its purpose." Caul turned to look at Baugh. "The Warlock from Boston—the one who sold you the ghost—he was one of mine. He put down wards against fire and flood, too." Caul paused. "We commandeered this warehouse long before the war, Baugh. You just never knew it."

Caul walked slowly toward him, his hand going to his belt.

"Now, one final sacrifice is required of you." He drew a long silver knife that gleamed in the half-light of the lanterns. "To exorcise the haunt completely, I must have the blood of its master."

Caul gave him no chance to scream. The knife's cold edge flashed up, then down. His own blood, spraying cherry-red in a flash of lightning, was the last thing Baugh saw.

CHAPTER ONE



Ashes of Amour

Lost Pine, California

Wednesday, April 23, 1876

When the sun's first rays touched the tops of the pines in the creek hollow, Emily Edwards shivered as if thin pink and gold fingers were creeping stealthily up her spine.

She hid for a moment under her quilt, chewing on her lip. The instructions in Pap's grimoire said the words had to be spoken at first light. No use dawdling over it.

Snatching the little blue and red calico spell bag from the pine table beside her bed, she squeezed her eyes shut and whispered:

*"My decision is firm,
My will is strong,
Let this spell bind him
All his life long."*

It was done. The Ashes of Amour were finished.

Emily threw off her covers, sending a pair of raggedy cats into grumpy flight. The chill morning air had a crisp, pitchy smell that mingled with the fragrance of the dried flowers and herbs that hung from the rafters. She tucked the little bag of ashes into a pouch she wore around her neck then dressed quickly, gray wool over scratchy underwear, thick knitted socks over icy toes. Then it was time to face the not-inconsiderable task of brushing and braiding her hair.

Emily's chestnut-colored hair was thick and shiny as silk floss—an extraordinary female endowment. But like most female endowments, it was generally more trouble than it was worth. In particular, it possessed a prodigious ability to tangle—a perverse genius that could be thwarted only by keeping it tightly braided at all times.

But the grimoire had indicated that the Witch must wear nothing knotted or tied or sewn or fastened while working the spell. That meant unbraided and naked. At midnight. In April. In the Sierra Nevada mountains.

She had built a small fire, over which she'd burned the ingredients in a small brass cauldron, but the spell's directions hadn't allowed her to linger by

it; she had to complete an intricate series of steps and turns and rhymes around the fire as the ingredients crumbled to a potent ash guaranteed to compel the eternal love of anyone who touched it. By the time she'd gotten back to the cabin, she'd been so cold that all she could do was dive under her quilt and hope that some tonsorial miracle would greet her on the morrow.

Sighing her regret that no such miracle had occurred, she picked up her boxwood comb and began picking the snarls out from the ends.

This was not a good start to what was supposed to be the happiest day of her life.

By the time her accustomed plaits were tickling the backs of her knees, the sun was well up. She climbed down from the attic loft quietly so as not to wake Pap, who was snoring in the iron bedstead by the banked fire, blanketed by a half dozen purring cats. Pap had been her adoptive father for twenty years and Lost Pine's charm maker for twice that, and all of those years had been filled with hard work. Since fever took his eyesight last summer, the work that had been Pap's livelihood—gathering plants, compounding salves, charming buildings, reading fortunes—had fallen to Emily. She was glad to do it.

She went to the table where items were collected in a willow basket: brushes and pots of milk paint, sticks of charcoal and a platter-size slab of white oak. The oak had been edged and planed by Dag Hansen, the most prosperous lumberman in Lost Pine, who had commissioned a protective hex plaque for the topmost eave of his big new timber shed. Taking the basket, she stole quietly from the cabin.

Her foot was on the threshold when a vivid flash of rust-red caught her eye. A robin, the first of spring, flew from where it had been perched on the sill of the small front window. She watched it vanish into the top of a blue spruce.

A robin on the windowsill—an omen of true love. That seemed encouraging. But less so the question it begged: true love for whom?

Not you. The robin's call drifted down from the spruce's crown. *Not you.*

Tucking the basket under her arm, Emily walked quickly, as if she could outrun the sound. But it followed her, high and piercing:

Not you.

On a grassy swale overlooking the main road from Dutch Flat to Lost Pine, where the rapidly rising sun was bright and hot in the cloudless sky, Emily set herself down to work.

She laid the slab of oak on her lap and looked at it for a long time. It showed the signs of Dag Hansen's strong, industrious hands. He was a good man. A good, kind, trusting man.

He'd make a wonderful husband.

She opened the pots of milk paint. Reaching into the silk pouch she wore

around her neck, she took out the little bag of ashes. She put a generous pinch into each pot.

Then she dipped a horsehair brush into the yellow and began dabbing carefully at the oak, muttering rhyming incantations as she laid the bright color onto the wood. She focused her intentions, concentrating on prosperity and happiness, goodwill and success, love and (Heaven help her) fertility.

She focused closely on her work, so deeply engrossed that when an echoing “Hey there” came up from the road, she almost knocked over the pot of red. Shading her eyes with a paint-stained hand, she noticed how high the sun had climbed.

“Hey, Em Edwards!”

On the road, a pair of heavy bays stood in front of a stout buckboard. It was Mr. Orta, the delivery agent for the Wells, Fargo & Company express office in Dutch Flat. She waved, set her work aside, and hurried down, glad to stretch her stiff legs.

“I thought it was you,” he said, pushing his cap back. “What are you up to?”

“I’m painting a hex for Dag Hansen’s new shed.” Emily was aware of a high, tense note in her voice. For goodness’ sake, it sounded like she was confessing to a shooting! She licked her lips and continued. “They’re putting it up this afternoon.”

“Folks say he’ll have the narrow-gauge track laid into Dutch Flat before summer, and you folks won’t have to wait for me to haul deliveries up to you.” He gave her a sly look. “I suppose there’ll be a dance later?”

“I suppose,” Emily said, not wanting to talk about Dag and dancing. She craned her neck to see what Mr. Orta had in his buckboard. Two huge crates, half covered with canvas.

“Who are *those* for?” She pointed.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he chuckled. “But I guess it can’t do no harm to a sturdy young Witch like you. One’s for that easterner, that fellow Stanton. The other’s a bunch of separate deliveries from Baugh’s Patent Magicks—an order in it for almost everyone up here, it seems.”

Emily looked at the crates more closely. Sure enough, one was marked with the distinctive blue logo of Baugh’s Patent Magicks—a saucy genie rising out of a bottle in a cloud of smoke.

A whole crate of Baugh’s. Emily felt like spitting in the dust.

“I don’t suppose I could talk you into dumping that crate into a ditch and pretending it never came?” Emily gave Mr. Orta a winsome, slightly desperate smile.

Mr. Orta chuckled awkwardly. They were, after all, joking about her livelihood.

“Sorry, Em.” He scratched the back of his head. “I guess times change. Anyway, you need a ride? I can get you closer to Hansen’s place than you are now.”

“No, *thank* you,” she said, entertaining the dramatic notion that she’d rather walk than ride in a buckboard with a crate of Baugh’s Patent Magicks. “I have to go see about Pap’s lunch.”

Mr. Orta slapped the lines and clucked to the horses. Whistling, he disappeared beyond the bend, and Emily climbed the hill to gather up her paints. The hex she’d painted had dried nicely in the warm sun. She ran her fingers over the bright rough surface. She’d done it up neat, but the plaque was ... *rustic*. Not shiny and precise like a hex of baked enamel from Baugh’s Patent Magicks would be.

Damn that Baugh, whoever he was! After looking to make sure Mr. Orta was gone, she *did* spit in the dust, and muttered a curse, too. But her curses seemed to be of little avail when it came to Baugh’s.

Over the past year, more and more folks had taken to buying patent magic from Baugh’s. Advertised in colorful chromolithographed catalogues, the products came in shiny pasteboard boxes stamped with gold foil and lined with blood-red tissue paper. They made Emily’s hand-sewn charm bundles and home-brewed potions look shoddy and questionable by comparison. And business had suffered for it.

The past winter had been the worst. Paying Pap’s doctor had left them short on cash-money, and as the hungry snow months had closed around them, Emily had watched Pap’s cheeks grow hollow, his collarbones grow sharp, and his spirit grow tired. She’d gotten them through on mangy possums and stringy jackrabbits, but having to watch him starve ... starve! After forty years of hard, honest work! It wasn’t fair. Something had to be done.

And that something was Dag Hansen.

It seemed the perfect solution. All she had to do was get him to marry her, and Pap could live in comfort and plenty. And she was no cheat; she’d take on the job of being a pleasant and loyal wife just as she’d taken on Pap’s magical work. It was just trading one job for another.

But how to catch the prosperous lumberman? Her twenty-fifth birthday was a half year gone, which made her a pretty shelf-worn item. So she’d turned to Pap’s grimoire for help, and she’d gone to the Hanging Oak, and she’d danced naked in the light of the full moon, and she’d made the Ashes of Amour.

Tucking her paints away, she put the hex plaque in the willow basket and didn’t look at it again.

“I only want what’s best for everyone,” she muttered to herself. “And if you’re going to make an omelette, you have to break a few eggs ...”

Then she stopped and pressed her lips together, resolving not to think about what she’d have to break to make a marriage.

She climbed back up Moody Ridge to Pap's cabin, walking as fast as she could, making her legs burn. The exertion felt good. Loose wisps of hair tangled around her lips and ears; she pushed them back with annoyance. The chickens in the front yard welcomed her with low chuckles; she scattered the lazy biddies with a swing of the basket.

Inside, brightly colored bottles shone on the windowsills, and the bones of powerful animals dangled from braids of dyed red string. Scrolls of old vellum and parchment were rolled in stacks, ready to have spells writ upon them with eagle quills in ink of blood red or black gall. Pap's most important tools hung above the stone fireplace: the ceremonial dagger that he called an *athame*, and his purple charm cap. Pap himself sat in front of a hugely roaring fire, wrapped in a bright wool trade blanket. As usual, he was surrounded by cats. Most regarded Emily with boredom, but one or two bumped their soft heads against her legs as she came in.

"Em's back!" Pap smiled a greeting. A barn fire in Pap's youth had left the right side of his face a cobweb of shining pink scars. When he smiled, his face crumpled like crepe fabric.

There was the sound of movement in the cooking part of the room (while it was screened by a sheet hung from the ceiling, it could hardly be called a kitchen), and Mrs. Lyman poked her head out.

"I made your pap some lunch, and brought some fresh cornbread and a dried-apple pie." Mrs. Lyman, a mining widow with no fewer than ten grown children, lived on the place about a mile over. Pap had once cured her of recurrent warts on her hands, and she had been devoted to the old man ever since. "I thought you'd go straight over to Dag Hansen's. I reckon he's the only man in Lost Pine can make you forget about your poor ol' pap."

Emily flushed, and not just from the heat of the room.

"There's not any man in the world who could make me forget Pap." Emily gave his shoulder a squeeze as she carried her paintbrushes to the table to wash. She poured water into a bowl and began working the almost-dried color from the horsehair. "But if you've already eaten ..."

"I've eaten," Pap said. "And Mrs. Lyman's going to stay and read to me."

"From *Ladies' Repository*," Mrs. Lyman added, her tone suggesting that Emily was missing a treat. She had settled into a chair by the fire and already had the magazine spread across her lap.

Emily, however, was heartily glad that she would miss a night of *Ladies' Repository*. It was a magazine that jumbled articles of an improving nature (often subtitled, quite annoyingly, "A Warning to Young Ladies") with sickly sweet tales of love and romance. Emily much preferred it when Mrs. Lyman read from one of her mail-order subscription novels; at least they could be counted on to feature a clever mystery-solving Witch or the grand magical doings of eminent European Warlocks.

"Go on to your dance, Em." Pap's voice was gentle. "You deserve a little

fun.”

“Or you can stay and listen for a while.” Mrs. Lyman tapped a luridly colored illustration on cheap newsprint. “Listen to this one I been saving out ... a real *juicy* one! ‘*Her Tragic Mistake*’...”

“No thanks,” Emily blurted, letting the brushes drop with a clatter. “I guess I *had* better get a move on.”

After bolting up the ladder to her garret, Emily sat on the edge of her bed for a moment, closing her eyes and trying to swallow down her hard-thudding heart. Then, flinging open her trunk, she dragged out a vibrant spring calico that had been packed away since fall. She gave it a hard, mean shake. She debated whether to forego her long underwear; the dress would look better without the red flannel showing at the ankles and wrists. But if she shed the flannels, Mrs. Lyman would certainly notice and nag poor Pap about it all night. And after all, what did it matter? Dag was going to fall in love with her anyway.

What a depressing thought.

Well, at least she could spare Pap the aggravation. She left the flannels on, then slid the dress over her head and did up the blackened bone buttons. Smoothing the fabric over her hips, she then bent to retrieve an embossed morocco case from under her bed. From it, she withdrew two long, heavy hair sticks of beautifully engraved silver—one of the few inheritances from her mother. She twisted her heavy braids on top of her head and stabbed them through with the sticks. Regarding herself in her bit of cracked mirror, she rubbed stray streaks of paint from her face with a wetted thumb, then nodded soberly. At the very least, falling in love with her would not be a downright embarrassment.

Since she’d be walking home late, and she knew from recent experience just how cold April nights in the Sierras could get, she threw on her big buffalo coat before shinnying down the loft ladder.

She took Pap’s big leather charm satchel from its place next to the door and slung it over her shoulder. When Pap had been younger, he’d carried it with him everywhere like a badge of office—and since she’d assumed most of his responsibilities, she never went without it either. She tucked Dag’s painted hex into the satchel and pulled down the flap.

Mrs. Lyman wagged a finger at Emily. “Now, if it gets too late, you stay in town at Annie Bargett’s, or walk home with one of my girls.” She leaned toward Pap conspiratorially. “Things just aren’t safe anymore! Why, I heard tell of the most awful spate of Aberrancies outside of Sacramento. Mrs. Foster’s boy, Harlan, he was just telling me the other day ...”

Emily slipped out of the cabin quietly, smiling to herself. Mrs. Lyman loved to talk about the Aberrancies—“the horrible, slaving monstrosities that roamed the wilderness in vast numbers; terrifying beasts of native legend that beggared description and made strong men blanch and tremble” (in the words

of a true-to-life account from *Men's Adventure Monthly*). In fact, Emily felt certain that Mrs. Lyman would be positively tickled if she could actually encounter one of the semimythical terrors. But while Emily had often heard talk about the Aberrancies that bothered the trains, she'd never seen one, and would be willing to swear that she never would.

You never will now, anyway, she told herself. *For you've set yourself to become a good wife. And good wives don't have much to do with slavering monstrosities.*

Emily was surprised at how disappointing this thought was, but she lifted her chin resolutely. She'd take disappointment over starvation any day.

Following the well-worn trail that led from the cabin, Emily headed down the ridge toward Lost Pine, Dag Hansen, and her future.

Dag Hansen's new timber shed was being raised near the planned terminus of the narrow-gauge railroad tracks he was having laid into Dutch Flat. He'd managed to build half of the side line the past summer. This year he intended to finish the job and bring prosperity to Lost Pine. The way he said "prosperity," with such delicious anticipation and pride, made it seem as though he were talking about an actual person: a big jolly fellow with luxurious face whiskers and gold-capped teeth.

Over the past decade, prosperity had been no stranger to Dag Hansen. He'd made good money selling his timber to the railroad companies. The new side line would allow him to send moss-covered logs down from the slopes of Moody Ridge to the mills in Dutch Flat year-round.

Emily followed the ringing of hammers and the rasping of saws. There wasn't much to Lost Pine—a small saloon, a smaller general store, a few diminutive homes, and the silver-gray buildings of the old timber camp. The shed was being raised at the edge of the settlement, in a big sunny clearing. The smell of fresh-cut fir hung in the air, and the clean new wood gleamed golden in the warm afternoon light. The walls had been raised already, and Dag and his men were nailing up stout crossbeams.

Dag was large and sturdy, with cornsilk hair and elk-brown eyes, a deeply tanned face and a strong brown throat. He'd unbuttoned his shirt against the heat of the day, and the sweat filming his bare arms and powerful chest made him seem to glisten. All in all, he wasn't exceptionally difficult to look at. A perfect target for a designing Witch.

She'd known him since they were children. He had been a unique specimen of boyhood—one who did not find it great fun to do painful things to her long braids—and had grown into a stalwart, kindhearted man. Not an overly deep thinker, but an excellent lumberman.

When Dag saw her, he laid down his hammer and hurried over.

"Hey, Em!" he said, slightly breathless. He gestured to the shed proudly. "What do you think? We've made some progress, eh?"

Emily made herself smile.