

Enduring Promises



of the
Heart

Valerie Loveless

ENDURING
PROMISES *of the*
HEART

VALERIE LOVELESS

SWEETWATER
BOOKS

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The Hot Air Balloon

The *Pleasant View Gazette* sat on the pink-and-blue floral settee in the sitting room of the Clarences' home. The eldest Clarence daughter, Mary, walked past and casually picked it up as she sat down. Her full pink satin skirt flowed over the whole settee. Full skirts were going out of fashion, but Mary couldn't give them up. She loved the way they flowed with her every move. Mary skimmed the front page of the *Gazette*.

Pleasant View Gazette, September 5, 1887

Guest column by Harriet Black: *My Experiences Teaching in Florida's Outer Reaches*

Gazette Featurette: Enduring Promises of the Heart: The Hot Air Balloon.

Mary gasped but quickly stifled the sound with her hand. She'd never want to let on that she was actually interested in this nonsense. She had read of hot air balloons but had never seen one in person, not even in pictures; she had only seen it described in the pages of a book. She began to read.



From across the grassy field next to the town church, John spied a lovely young figure of a woman. He could recognize the grace and movements of that person anywhere, even in such a crowd as the one that had grown since the carnival came to town. She was his love at first sight, Lavender Johnson. Nodding and waving to her friends and neighbors politely, she was walking gracefully through the crowded field of carnival performers and townsfolk.

She glanced at John, and her eyes met his for a moment. She seemed to blush, but she was still too far away for him to know for sure. When her eyes met his, even just for a moment, the whole world became a blur and only Lavender was clear.

The townsfolk and business of the carnival became quiet as a soft love song began to play that only John could hear. John felt as though he had little control over his body as he began to float toward Lavender.

Lavender noticed him walking her way. His ruggedness made him stand out amongst the genteel townsfolk and costumed carnival workers. His gaze did not waver, and her face began to feel hot as she realized that John was coming to greet her.

He stopped right in front of her and bowed his head in a polite greeting. She nodded her head back and waited for him to say something. After an awkward silence, John nodded toward a sign that read "Three-legged Race."

"Are you too old for a three-legged race?" John smiled. "I see that the winners get to spend some time in the hot air balloon."

Lavender Johnson's heart beat like a wild drum whenever John was near. He was so tall and handsome. His eyes were green like the sea, and when his brown hair would flop in front of his eyes, he would use his fingers to gently brush it away.

Lavender touched her loose curls to make sure all her hair was in place. John lifted a hand to touch her locks but stopped himself. Lavender blushed. She had not seen him for weeks, since the last time John came to town and tried to ask her to escort him to a dance. Her father escorted him from his shop with a shotgun. Lavender was sure John would give up on her after that.

"Run this race with me?" he implored.

Lavender shrugged. "I don't think that would be a good idea." She straightened up. "I don't think it would be proper."

John sighed. There were times when he was all but certain she loved him too, times where there was heat between them that was too palpable to deny. But most of the time she simply shied away from him and avoided him. But today felt different. Today felt like this could be the day that Lavender Johnson would finally give him her heart. "I thought you might want to ride in the hot air balloon. It's a great adventure for a small-town girl like you."

"Father won't let me go, John, you know it. Ever since Ma died, he never lets me do anything. If he were here—"

John placed his finger gently on her lips. He took her hand and pulled her a little closer. "Don't worry about him . . . He is very busy at the shop."

Lavender did have a yearning for adventure that she was lacking, having grown up in such a small, quaint town. John coming to town last year and this carnival were the most exciting things that had ever happened to her. "All right. I'll do it if you promise me we'll win."

John smiled broadly, and Lavender couldn't help but return a hearty smile in kind.

"Thank you for letting me do this for you, Lavy." He pulled her by the hand as they leapt off to the starting line.



Mary's father entered the room. She quickly flipped to the front page of the *Gazette*.

"What are you doing, my darling?"

"Just reading the *Gazette*, Pa."

"Good girl. Keep up on the current events," he said, and then he winked at her.

"Yes, Pa." Mary smiled. Her father smiled back, grabbed a book off the nearby shelf, and left the room. She turned back to *Enduring Promises of the Heart*.



John and Lavender lined up at the starting line. A carnival worker handed them a rope to tie their legs together. Lavender obliged and tied the rope tightly around their ankles. "You are much taller than I. It's going to be difficult to keep stride."

"I'll make sure we can't lose," he reassured her confidently.

She felt his strong arm lift her ever so slightly, making her feel lighter.

The carnival worker finished handing out rope to all the participants and blabbed on about rules. Lavender couldn't focus on any of it, though, because her head was feeling fuzzy. She often felt this way around John.

BANG! The gun sounded the beginning of the race. Lavender had never moved so fast. With John holding her up, she felt weightless, like she was flying. They were almost to the end when she glanced back to find they were a few paces ahead of the rest. But looking back must have made John lose stride because suddenly their legs tangled, and down they fell onto the grassy ground. Lavender could smell the grass as her face almost hit the ground, but John had grabbed her and twisted mid fall so that she fell on top of him. Luckily, they fell just before the finish line, and as John saved Lavender's face from meeting the ground they ended up rolling over the line to a win. They both lay on the grass panting. The rest of the racers finished shortly thereafter, laughing and cheering.

John sat up and untied the rope that bound their legs together. He offered his hand and helped her up.

"Did we win? Did we win?" Lavender shouted.

"Yes, Lavy, we did! We won!" John yelled triumphantly. Lavender embraced John in a moment of unrestrained excitement and emotion. She quickly realized how improper it was and pulled away, her face flushed. No one seemed to notice, and the townspeople continued to cheer.



"Mary?" Mary's ma called from the hall.

"Yes, Ma?" She shoved the *Gazette* under her full skirt on the settee violently. It made a crumpling noise that made Mary wince. Her mother shortly entered the room. Mary pretended she had been fluffing the cushions on the settee.

"It's Beth to see you, dear."

"Liz," Mary corrected.

"Who?"

"She prefers to be called Liz, Ma, not Beth."

"It's all right, Mrs. Clarence," Liz assured Mrs. Clarence as she entered the room from behind her.

Mary's ma nodded in apology and left the sitting room.

"Liz!" Mary jumped from the settee, shoving the *Gazette* under a freshly fluffed cushion as she went. She gestured for Liz to join her on the pink-and-

blue stripe settee across the room, away from the evidence of her guilty pleasure reading under the cushion.

Liz pretended not to notice Mary's sleight of hand. She took in the small sitting room. A small, cozy fire in the stone hearth burned even though it was barely chilly outside. The Clarences owned a great many books and displayed them orderly on the shelves beside the fireplace. A settee graced each side of the hearth, and a fainting couch faced it directly. There were many side tables to place books, gazettes, and tea on. Each had lovely framed photographs and trinkets carefully placed.

"I hope you don't mind my dropping by."

"Not at all! It's so boring now that we are graduated. If I don't get married soon, I'm going to die of boredom." Mary sighed heavily, and she plopped next to Liz on the settee.

"I hardly think housework and child raising will cure your boredom . . ." Liz warned.

"I know. I was being facetious, but I don't want to be a teacher or a secretary. What else could I do? At least I would have a husband to care for and not be lonely."

"Depends on the husband," Liz stated. Mary nodded in agreement. Liz continued. "I wish I knew what to do myself. What's this about you being lonely? You should never be lonely! You have me!"

Mary dismissed Liz's remark with a shrug. "You seem to keep yourself busy. What is it that you do?" Mary asked.

Liz looked down and away. "I like to read and write."

"Of course. You always enjoyed writing in school. But what could you do with that talent? I've never heard of a female writer actually publishing anything, besides Penelope Pottifer."

"I guess there's not anything I could do with my writing. It's only to entertain myself. What were you doing before I arrived?" Liz asked, changing the subject.

Mary looked intensely guilty. "Nothing . . ." She was unable to maintain eye contact with her best friend. A sure sign of a lie, and Liz knew it.

"Nothing? You were just sitting here?" Liz asked accusingly. "No wonder you are bored."

“Yes . . . just thinking.” Again, Mary averted her gaze.

“Oh. You weren’t reading that gazette story again, were you? I always seem to catch you when you are *not* reading it,” Liz teased.

“Oh, fine!” Mary frowned. “I was reading it! It’s always lying around this house. Sarah loves it, and she leaves it all over the place. I can scarcely ignore it! As I said, I am bored!” Mary laughed, and Liz laughed with her.

“Well, what has happened this time? Did they get stuck in a mine? Or rescue someone from a well?”

“Oh, nothing even that exciting. They won a three-legged race together. I was just getting to the part where they were going to go on the hot air balloon when you came in.”

“A hot air balloon? How fantastic! I read about those in a magazine my father had.”

“Really? I’d be too afraid to ride one myself, but I’m not a silly character from Miss Penelope Pottifer’s make-believe.”

“Hm.” Liz looked down again, ashamed maybe. Mary could not read her reaction.

“Liz, have I put you off?” Mary asked, concerned. *She must love the Gazette featurette, and I was being so cruel about it being stupid*, Mary thought.

“No! Of course not! You know I don’t read it. I was just thinking how I would never get a chance to be in a hot air balloon or do anything exciting.”

“But we have a perfect, quiet, little sea village.”

Liz nodded in agreement. “I just wish we had a little more adventure.”

“You would be a good character in *Enduring Promises by the Heart*.”

“Of the,” Liz corrected, “*of the Heart*.”

“What?” Mary did not get her meaning at first, then she understood. “Oh. *Of the Heart*.”

“Never mind that. I was hoping you would like to stroll around town with me. We will get some warmth from the sun, visit with our friends, walk the beach. It’s a lovely day.”

“Indeed I would! I needed to get away from that ridiculous yet engrossing story!”



The carnival man with the felt top hat helped Lavender up the temporary steps to the giant basket of the hot air balloon. John, already in the basket, grabbed Lavender by her waist and assisted her down to join him.

The man in the felt top hat said in a thick Scottish accent, "T' cord will make t' balloon go up, and t' chain will make it go down. Don't ye worry lass, t' balloon can't go nowhere. It is tied and anchored down yonder, with over two hundred feet of rope. Let t' balloon go all the way up, and enjoy yer time up t'er alone." He winked at John. "Then t' balloon will come down slowly all on its own."

John reached up and pulled hard on the cord with the golden tassel on the bottom. A fire roared above their heads. The balloon began to rise. John continued to pull until the rope tugged on the basket of the balloon, halting their ascent toward the heavens. Lavender looked over the side of the basket at the people below. They looked small, like ants, as they cheered and waved. Lavender waved back. John took Lavender's hand gently. Lavender smiled but pulled it away and gingerly crossed the basket to the other side.

"What is it, Lavy?" John asked as he also crossed the basket to be next to her.

"Nothing," she said as she shirked from his touch on her shoulder.

"Have I insulted you? Did you want to ride the balloon alone?" John asked gently.

"I just—why fan the feelings that can't be? Father will never let us be together. You are just a mountain man to him . . ." She turned back toward him. His sea green eyes smoldered at her and his brow was furrowed. It softened her approach to him. "A kind and wonderful man . . . But still, you have no prospects other than . . . whatever it is that you do . . . Father wants me to marry a man who can take over the store when he is gone . . . You are not his first candidate." Her soft, loose curls bounced and waved in the wind, caressing her cheek and forehead. John brushed his hair out of his eyes, which glistened with emotion. It made Lavender's eyes glisten as well.

Every time circumstance brought them together, Lavender could feel love emerging and growing. She could feel the bond between them being forged more strongly each time they spoke. But each time they parted, the reality of the circumstance—that they could never be together—broke her heart.

"Lavy. Why do you worry so much about what your father thinks? You have to decide for yourself what you want out of life. Just a husband and children? To be

stuck in this town? Or do you want adventure too?" He smiled at her sparkling azure eyes. "I can give you both!"

Lavender turned away again, hoping to thwart oncoming tears, and looked over the side. "Let's not do this now, John." As she spoke, she noticed where the rope was tied to a giant metal stake in the ground. She saw Nan Fey Gallagher, the daughter of the store owner across the street that competed with her father's store. While their fathers had always gotten along, Nan Fey and Lavender did not. Nan was contemptuous and vile, to say the least. She was fiddling with the rope.

"Nan!" Lavender called, but they were too high for anyone on the ground to hear them, especially over the bustling sounds of the carnival. Before long Nan walked away, her oversized, purple bustled backside swaying back and forth.

"Lavender, what is it?" John questioned.

"It was Nan. I thought she was untying the rope! I'm just being silly. We've never gotten along well, and—"

John and Lavender experienced the sensation of rising and realized Nan had indeed untied the rope and they were rising higher. They both watched helplessly as the rope slipped through the loop on the top of the stake and the balloon became free. The people below quickly got even smaller, and the couple could feel the wind taking them away from the town toward the sea. No one on the ground noticed until it was too late. Lavender and John were drifting too high and too fast for anyone to reach the rope. John pulled the chain to bring the balloon down, but the chain was stuck. John used all his strength to loosen the chain, but it wouldn't come free, and it finally broke.



"Oh, that Nan! Such a devil!" Gladys cried out to the dismay of her husband, Theodore, who was busy helping a customer.

"Gladys! Language, please!" He returned to helping the little old lady in front of him, price and cut different yards of ribbons.

"If I had a daughter like her, I'd send her away to live with mean old Granny. That'd teach her a lesson." Gladys's southern accent was especially thick when she became put off.

"My mother is not mean, Gladys."

“Oh, well, of course not to you, darling. You are her perfect son. There’s Bessie and Mary. I must speak with them.” Gladys ran past her husband out to the street to greet her young friends.

“Bessie! Mary! Did you read it yet?” she hollered across the street. “Did you read it yet?” Gladys demanded again when they were close enough to answer.

“Read what?” Mary asked. She adjusted her mini top hat, offset on her crown and adorned with peacock feathers.

“*Enduring Promises of the Heart!* What else?”

“Oh, Gladys, you know I don’t read that.”

“Oh, Mary, I know you surely do!”

“She does,” Liz chimed in.

“Yes, see! Bessie knows you best.” She turned to Liz. “You look lovely, by the way.” Gladys smiled at Liz’s hat. Liz was wearing a new white and light-pink dress with lace over the finely draped bustle and a white lace trimmed hat in light pink. Liz purchased it from Gladys just the other day. Liz nodded in appreciation of the compliment.

“Liz,” Mary corrected Gladys.

“Who?” Gladys said.

“She goes by Liz, not Bessie. Only her father calls her that.”

“Oh. That’s right. Sorry, Liz. Forgive me!”

“It’s all right, Gladys. What happened this week?”

“Well, it’s been a slow week. We didn’t get that order of tallow I was supposed to get four weeks . . .”

“Not at the store Gladys, the featurette!” Mary prodded.

“Heavens! Of course. That is why I came out here, isn’t it? Well, they won a race together, and the prize was a hot air balloon ride. So they got up into the hot air balloon, and you’ll never guess who did what next!”

“Wait!” Mary stopped Gladys.

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear. I thought you read it.”

“Well, not the whole thing—but—I don’t read it, so if you want to tell us, you may continue.”

Gladys smiled at them knowingly. “Never mind. You two can figure it out for yourselves. I won’t ruin it for you! But it has to do with that no-good, man-

stealing, silver-spoon-eating-off-of Nan.” Gladys waved the two girls on and went back into the store. She settled onto the couch and back into the story.



“Oh, John! What are we going to do?” Lavender sobbed. The tears were raw and distilled straight from her soul.

“I don’t know, Lavy. We’re drifting toward the sea! Hold on to me! I won’t let anything happen to you.” John pulled Lavender into a tight embrace that brought Lavender immense comfort.

“John, if we go over the ocean, we could get lost at sea!” Lavender said softly.

“Don’t worry, Lavender. I won’t let any harm come to you.” They looked back at the town that was almost smaller than a postage stamp to their eyes. Men on horses were riding toward them, but to no avail—they could never catch up. Lavender buried her face in John’s shoulder and sobbed heartily.

To be continued in an upcoming featurette.



“Oh, shoot!” Gladys swore loudly.

“Gladys! Language,” Mr. Willis chastised.

“Sorry, dear, it’s just that I have to wait until next week to find out what happens to them in the hot air balloon. It’s drifting over the ocean, and if it runs out of hot air . . .” Gladys clutched at her bosom. “What will they do?” Gladys sighed and then realized that no one was listening to her. She put the *Gazette* down on the settee and got up to help Mrs. Baker with her son’s shoe selection. “These are very nice. They have little tassels on the toe . . .”

“You know, Gladys, *Enduring Promises of the Heart* comes out twice a week now. There should be a new one in today’s paper.”

“Oh, Mrs. Baker, you are right! Excuse me.” Gladys left them to go upstairs and fetch the new gazette that Theodore had been reading in their sitting room that morning.



Liz and Mary walked down the street discussing the finer points of selecting an appropriate hat for church when they walked past the *Gazette* and saw their friend from school sitting on a bench outside. “Hello, Mitzy!” they chimed in unison as they both came to a stop in front of the bench. Liz noticed that Mitzy was clutching a copy of the *Gazette* and that it was opened to *Enduring Promises of the Heart*.

“Oh, hello. It’s a fine day for a walk.” Mitzy spoke so fast it was hard to keep up. “I wish I could be out walking instead of cooped up inside of that old, stuffy editor’s office, fetching coffee and opening endless quantities of envelopes. I finally got a work break. Mr. Dixon smokes so incessantly that even with the oncoming autumn chill I have to crack a window by my desk just to get some fresh air.” She showed no indication of slowing down, so Liz nodded. Mary also nodded and gave a sideways glance at Liz. “I couldn’t wait to finish the newest volume of *Enduring Promises of the Heart* on my favorite bench that looks out over the sea, and I love to feel the fresh sea air wash over me as I read. It’s as if I’m in the story. Anyway, I have the pleasure of opening the letters from which the newest volume of *Enduring Promises of the Heart* arrive by mail!” Mitzy took a breath, and Liz took the opportunity to say, “Really?”

“Yes, and I sneak in a read of the first few paragraphs before I give them to the editor, Mr. Dixon. I always share them with Mother, who loves to know what is coming next before anyone else. We think Penelope Pottifer is a gifted writer. She has so much passion and wisdom. I hope to meet her someday. Perhaps I will run into her at Willis’s in the dress department. We could be looking at the same dress!” Mitzy sighed and smiled contentedly. Liz knew from experience that if Mitzy could get out all she was thinking, she would settle into a normal flow of conversation.

“Goodness, Mitzy,” Mary said, exasperated. Liz glanced at Mary as a warning to be careful with her words. Mitzy didn’t seem to notice the exchange.

“Did you read *Enduring Promises of the Heart* yet? I got a peek when I opened the parcel last week. Just the first few paragraphs.”

“Oh, well, I don’t read it, and neither does Mary,” Liz admitted.

“Well, I do. I just don’t admit to it!” Mary laughed. Liz joined her.

“Oh, Mary, bless your heart. I admit it openly. I am a fanatic. A huge fanatic. Her correspondence with us is one way, you know!” Before Liz or Mary could answer, Mitzy answered her own question. “Yes. There is no return address on any of her parcels. Mr. Dixon pays her via the bank. So, even if we wanted to find her, we would have no way of doing so. I am hoping that someday she will reveal herself and we can give her the praise she deserves.”

“Well, I wouldn’t praise her for her addictive, mind-numbing drivel,” Mary sneered, and Liz gave her a disapproving look.

“Addictive, yes. I can agree with you there, but mind numbing? No, on the contrary, Mary!” Mitzy reprimanded. “She knows so many things and must have gone so many places. It’s as if she has traveled the whole world. She writes with a passion and a wisdom that only one with an exciting life could understand. You can feel her characters’ emotions, you can sense their pain, their longing . . .” Mitzy trailed off.

“I guess you are right,” Mary conceded. “It’s just, my little sister reads it obsessively, and I can’t put it down either. It’s shameful to be so wrapped up in fiction as Sarah! She is a silly little girl. I am a fully grown woman. I should be reading the classics and other mature things.”

“There is no need to be ashamed, Mary. I assure you that everyone in town is completely addicted to it. Scandalous as they may see it, they are absolutely addicted.”

“It is scandalous . . .” Mary smiled wickedly. “You are right, Mitzy. I am being silly. I’m not the only one who wants adventure, love, and excitement sprinkled into my day. The whole town is reading it!”

“That’s right, Mary,” Liz confirmed. “I told you, our town is boring, and you agreed. There is no shame in partaking in a little exciting reading.” Liz sat next to Mitzy on her lovely bench, and Mary followed, sitting on the other side. Her skirt overflowed off the side of the bench. Mary contemplated her comment for a moment.

“You should read it too, Elizabeth,” said Mitzy.

“Liz,” Mary corrected.

“Hm?” Mitzy looked at Mary questioningly.

“She prefers Liz,” Mary stated, pointing at Liz.

“Oh, right. Sorry, Liz. Have you ever read *Enduring Promises of the Heart*?” Mitzy gently questioned.

Liz looked down at her small, white, lace-gloved hands. Then looking up toward the ocean with dignity and determination, she admitted, “I have read them all. I’m an expert on them.”

“I knew it! I knew it!” Mary exclaimed triumphantly. She jumped off the bench and leaned over Liz, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her with both hands.

“Goodness, Mary!” Liz unfastened herself from Mary’s grasp. “Why is this a triumph for you?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Mary demanded. “You’ve abandoned me in my angst!”

“It was fun,” Liz confessed.

“What was fun?” Mary demanded.

“To watch you hide your gazette whenever someone entered a room and to see you almost in despair over characters that you pretend to hate and pretending you never read it.”

“Oh! Liz! How could you?” Mary feigned heavy resentment and then smiled. They both laughed together along with Mitzy.

“Oh, you two. Best of friends, you are,” Mitzy said, beaming. “I wish I had a best friend like that . . . I must admit I am jealous. Maybe someday if I ever meet Penelope Pottifer, she could be my best friend. I just know from her writing that she is lovely.”

“Maybe we could find out who she is!” Mary exclaimed. She began plotting and scheming immediately, quietly talking to herself.

“I don’t know how. She has no return address, and Mr. Dixon says that Penelope Pottifer is surely just a pen name.”

“A pen name?” Mary questioned.

“Yes. He says some authors don’t want people to know who they are, especially in a town small as ours. So they take on a pen name. A name that no one would know them by.”

“Do you have any clues as to whom she could be?” Liz questioned.

“No. I’m afraid not,” she admitted. “Wait!” Mitzy jumped, giving both Liz and Mary a little fright. “Remember I said that Mr. Dixon pays her directly at the bank? Maybe someone there has seen her.”

“Yes!” Mary exclaimed. “Let us go to the bank, Liz. Perhaps Mrs. Vohn has seen someone or something that would give us more clues as to who Miss Pottifer is.”

“Mr. Dixon deposits the money on the first of the month. Perhaps she comes around that time and withdraws,” Mitzy said, tapping her finger on her chin.

“It’s a good start!” Mary chimed. “Come on, Liz! Let’s do some investigating.”

“Yes, all right. I’m up for a little investigation. Goodbye, Mitzy!” Liz and Mary floated up off the bench and toward the bank on the other end of the street.

“Bye!” Mitzy smiled and then quickly buried herself mind and nose in her copy of the *Gazette*.



The night sky darkened to an inky black and became chilly. The tempestuous winds of the sea rocked the basket. “Oh, John. We are getting further and further out to sea. We are going to fall into the ocean and drown,” Lavender cried.

“I’ll swim all the way back to the shore with you on my back if I have to, Lavy. I’ll never let anything happen to you.” He stroked her hair.

“But what about you, John! What if something happens to you? Who will save us then?”

Lavender began to cry again.

“Look at me, Lavy.” John pushed her away enough so that she could gaze up at him.

Lavender chuckled slightly. “You are the only one who calls me Lavy.” She sighed and then placed her head back on his shoulder, seemingly more comforted than before.

"It's going to be all right. You can count on me," John assured her, though he was quite unsure of himself. If they did get out of this, Lavender's father would never forgive him. In his quest to spend a little time with her, he may have just doomed them from ever being together. He closed his eyes and breathed in the soft scent of her hair. It took him back to the first time he came to town, when he had spotted the loveliest creature he had ever seen, a friendly and meek shop girl.

"Could I get some rope?" he had asked the shopkeeper, Jedediah Johnson.

"How much you need?"

"A hundred feet should do it."

"I ain't got enough up here. I gotta go get some more in the back."

"Thank you." John had nodded and turned his attention to the shop girl. He had smiled at her as she made eye contact.

"Is there anything else I can get for you while you're waiting?" Lavender blushed.

"How do you do? I am John Buxton." John had walked over to Lavender and offered her his hand. She took it graciously and shook it well.

"I'm Lavender Johnson." John had taken her hand up to his lips and kissed it gently as he bowed.

"What an extraordinarily beautiful name. It fits you perfectly." He had kissed her hand again just as Jedediah came back from the stockroom.

"Here's your rope. What else—" He started but stopped when he caught Lavender yanking her hand away from John, who had still been bowing. John had straightened up gracefully. Jedediah angrily thrust the rope on the ground. "We don't have nothing your kind would need, you get! Go on! Get!"

John had removed himself from the store, but just before he went out the door, he had turned toward Lavender, who was red faced from embarrassment, and said, "Good day, Lavy."

Lavender had smiled, and then shuddered when her father began yelling, "It's Miss Johnson to you! Ain't you mountain fellas have any manners?"

John was shaken from his memories when the balloon shook more violently from an oncoming wind. He felt Lavender hold him a little tighter. It made him feel even more keenly what could be lost this night if the balloon were to fail, if they were to end up in the sea.



Meanwhile back in town, Jedediah Johnson walked across the street to the neighboring store, where his friend Mr. Gallagher kept shop.

"Hello there, Jed. How's business?"

"Not bad, Pauly. About the same as yours, I expect. Especially since you brought in those fancy oil lamps that you ain't telling me who your supplier is." Both old friends' accents were thick with the south.

"Wouldn't be good business to do that, Jed." Pauly shook his head.

"Yeah? Well, it ain't good friendship not to," Jed barked.

"I ain't worried about your friendship, Jed. Time has told me that ain't never going away."

"You're right 'bout that, Pauly. You're right 'bout that." The two men nodded solemnly at each other. "You seen that daughter of mine? I told her she could go to the carnival as long as she was ladylike . . . meaning no risky stuff. She should be gettin' bored with it by now." The sun was beginning to set on the town, and the sky was painted with oranges, pinks, and purples that faded into dark blue.

"Nope. I've not seen her yet," Pauly responded.

"I've been so busy all day with new customers. I got all new customers from next town over. Said that they don't got a store and hear tell mine is the best," Jedediah boasted.

"Ain't no one new coming to my shop today. Wonder who told them that."

"That's the part I ain't liking. They all tell it was that John the mountain man fella that has been after my Lavender."

Just then Nan Fey came running up the street hollering. "Pa, Jed! Lavender Johnson got swept away by a balloon! Lavender got swept away by a balloon!"

Jedediah Johnson grabbed Nan by the shoulders. "What did you say, Nan? What happened to my Lavender?"

"Take it easy, Jed," soothed Pauly, "No way she could get lifted by a balloon!"

"It's a hot air balloon, Pa! She won the race with Mr. Buxton, and he took her up in that hot air balloon. Somehow, the rope got free and they floated off into the sky! We ain't never gonna see her again, are we?" Nan attempted to cry, but mostly her face just contorted and donkey-type sounds came out.



“Good afternoon,” Liz said, startling Mrs. Vohn, who was deeply entrenched in her gazette.

“Oh, Eliza, you startled me! How are you? What can I do for you today? Are you needing to withdraw for your Pa again?”

“Liz,” Mary corrected Mrs. Vohn.

“Where?” Mrs. Vohn searched the room with her eyes.

“Please call me Liz, Mrs. Vohn. I’ve never taken to Eliza,” Liz stated.

“I’m sorry, dear. I had no idea. I swear I heard your father call you Eliza.”

“My pa has about a hundred nicknames for me, and he uses them all, all over town. Just about everyone calls me something different. One time he called me Bethsheba, and I had no idea he was talking to me!” Liz sighed. “No matter. I’m not here for my pa. We are here investigating a mystery.” Liz smiled.

“Ooh. What mystery?” Gladys whispered.

“Well,” Mary interjected, “we want to find out who wrote that story you got your nose buried so deep in that we scared the sin out of you just before.”

“Oh, well, how could I help with that?” Mrs. Vohn looked perplexed.

Mary obliged. “Perhaps if you drank less coffee, you would be less prone to fright.”

“No, Mary, with the *Gazette*,” Liz said, pointing to the copy Mrs. Vohn was still clutching.

Mary nodded and continued. “Mitzy, from the *Gazette*, said that Mr. Dixon deposits money into an account here for Penelope Pottifer. We were wondering if you could look up her account and tell us where she lives.”

“Well, why don’t you just get the address from Mitzy?” Mrs. Vohn said as though she had solved the whole problem.

“Well, that’s the thing, the stories come to the *Gazette* in unmarked envelopes. They don’t have a return address!” Mary explained.

Mrs. Vohn was disappointed. “I see. I’m sorry, ladies. I’m not supposed to give out that kind of information, you know. It’s against bank policy. We’ve got to respect our customers’ privacy. Mr. Vohn would be very upset if I told you

an address. But I'm dying to know! Oh! What to do . . ." Mrs. Vohn was clearly torn between knowing who Miss Pottifer was and obeying the bank rules. She walked away from the counter toward the back desk, flustered, and then returned back to the counter in a more composed manner. Mary gave Liz a look. Liz interpreted it as meaning that Mary found Mrs. Vohn behaving strange.

"I'll tell you what," Mrs. Vohn began. "I know those deposits come on the first of the month or the following day, if it's a Sunday or bank holiday. Why don't you come back on the first? Loiter in the lobby a little. Have some of our complimentary tea. I'll wink at you if and when I'm helping the person that comes and withdraws from the account that Mr. Dixon deposits in. I never paid attention before, but now that I know that is Miss Pottifer's account, I'm going to pay attention next time!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Vohn," Mary chimed.

The girls walked out of the bank together, and Liz caught the eye of Peter Latter, the dashing handsome bank teller with sea-green eyes and floppy dark brown hair. She smiled nervously as she passed. He smiled nervously back. Mrs. Vohn put her nose back in page three of the *Gazette*.



The balloon sank closer and closer to the choppy surface of the inky black ocean. John gently pulled the cord over and over to keep the balloon flying above the water until the flame would no longer light above them. It was inevitable that the balloon would sink and be consumed by the dark, cold hands of the sea. Lavender had no more tears to shed. She held on to John tightly and shivered. John had already offered her his coat, which she took, but it could not keep out the chill of knowing she was about to drown in the depths of the sea.

"John, I'm sorry. I'm sorry we couldn't be together. I want that exciting life you spoke of, but I also can't leave my poor father. He would die a thousand deaths if I left him to operate the store alone. You know my mother died, and it broke his heart into a million pieces. I am the glue that holds those pieces together."

John put a rough hand on Lavender's petal-soft cheek, "I understand, Lavy. I don't want you to hurt your father. I want you and him to be happy."

“It wouldn’t make him happy if I married a mountain man and left town.” Lavender paused, knowing the statement would cut him like a knife. Lavender didn’t much care that John was a mountain man, but she had been through this with her father. He hated the idea. He wanted someone like himself for his precious daughter. Someone who could take care of her, specifically by taking over the store.

“What if I told you there is a way that we could all be happy? That if I were to propose to you, your father couldn’t deny us.”

“What is it, John? Tell me!”

Just then the basket hit the water and the sea began to stream in through the spaces between the reeds. This was the end.



“I cannot read anymore! I can’t!” Sarah Clarence threw the *Gazette* on the tea table next to the settee, where Mary was arranging flowers on a hat. “Read it! Tell me everything turns out all right!” Sarah shouted at Mary with tears streaming down her face. She shoved the *Gazette* at her and ran from the room sobbing.

“Oh, good heavens, Sarah!” Mary called after her little sister. “It’s just a bit of fiction!” Mary eyed the paper for a few moments. *I wonder what could make Sarah so desperately distraught?*

“Fine. I will finish it, for Sarah.” Mary convinced herself knowing full well she was dying to know what could make Sarah so agitated.

She read up to the point Sarah had stopped and could go on no further. A little tear had welled in her eye. How ridiculous she must look, crying over the *Gazette* featurette. It wasn’t even by a real author!

“Dagum story!” Mary clutched the paper, crumpling it slightly in her tightened fists, wrenching it the same way the literature wrenched her heart.

“Mary! Language!” her mother chastised from in the kitchen.

“Sorry, Ma!” Mary took a deep breath as she wiped the errant tears from her cheeks.



John held on to Lavender in the icy cold water of the ocean. He helped her stay afloat and rest when she could swim no longer. His powerful arms took them miles and miles while she rested on his back as he tried to get her back to shore. But the shore was not even visible anymore.

“How do you know where the shore is? We could be swimming away from it by now or end up in the north country . . . or the south! We could end up on some savage island!”

“I’m following the stars.”

“You surprise me, John! A mountain man that knows how to navigate by the stars also?”

“That is how I got to this country, Lavy. I sailed.”

“John! You’re not from America? I never knew. What else do I not know about you?”

“Much . . .” He was struggling to speak with the exertion of swimming.

“Don’t talk, John. Save your strength.” But Lavender knew he had little strength left, and soon, they would sink together into the cold sea. A watery grave.

Before all hope was lost, Lavender saw a light bobbing in the distance. John stopped stroking the waves and was doing his best to float and rest.

“John! Look! It’s a ship! A ship, John!” It was coming straight for them. They would be saved. Lavender held John up, renewed with energy at the prospect of being saved and longing to know what it was that John could do so that she and her father could both be happy with her marrying him.

“No. No, Lavy.” John was weak and could barely speak.

“I don’t understand, John. They can save us. HELP! HELP OVER HERE!” The ship had surely spotted them as she heard men calling, “Man overboard!” But there was something strange about their speech. Then a colder shiver shot through her. Colder than the ocean waves in winter. Pirates.



*“Oh. Oh, heavens. Sarah! You won’t believe it. I promise they don’t die!” Mary was beside herself. “We are silly to get so worked up over a story. It’s not proper! Good heavens.” She threw the *Gazette* on the settee and went upstairs to her room for bed.*



Liz settled into her cozy chair next to her white claw-foot desk. Her father gave it to her when he realized she had a talent for writing. The lamplight glimmered and flickered across her room. She thought about Penelope and Mitzy being best friends. *That would be nice for Mitzy*, she thought. Perhaps Penelope could keep up with Mitzy's fast-talking ways. She thought about Mary and how desperately she didn't want to feel weak and silly. *It's okay to be silly and weak sometimes. It makes people like you more, to know you are just as frail as they are.* She closed her eyes for a moment and listened to waves roaring in and out upon the shore. She saw a pirate ship swaying on fierce waves. She pulled out her quill and began writing.



Lavender was hoisted aboard the ship by the scroungy pirates. They grabbed her arms and took no care not to injure her. Then they used a large hook to hoist John aboard by his pants.

"Be careful! Do not hurt him!" Lavender yelled. She was wet and cold and shivering. The pirates prodded them, forcing them below deck through a small hatch with a creaky ladder. A small stove was the only light for them to see by. A fat pirate threw them damp, stinking blankets and then shut the hatch. Lavender shook out a blanket and tried to wrap it tightly around John as he lay next to the stove. She grabbed one for herself and hunkered down next to him.

"Lavy . . ." John weakly cried out. "It will be all right . . ." Then he slipped away into a deep slumber induced by exhaustion.



Liz wrote through the late hours of the night. When she finished, she pulled a fresh envelope from her drawer and addressed it *Gazette Featurette, C.O. Mr. Dixon, Pleasant View Gazette*. For the return address she simply wrote *Penelope Pottifer*, and then she went to bed.

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