

Brodhead Eva Wilder

A Prairie Infanta



Eva Brodhead
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CHAPTER ONE THE POWER OF CONSOLATION

At the first glance there appeared to be nothing unusual in the scene confronting Miss Jane Combs as she stood, broad and heavy, in her doorway that May morning, looking up and down the single street of the little Colorado mining-town.

Jane's house was broad and heavy also – a rough, paintless "shack," which she had built after her own ideals on a treeless "forty" just beyond the limits of Aguilar. It was like herself in having nothing about it calculated to win the eye.

Jane, with her rugged, middle-aged face, baggy blouse, hob-nailed shoes and man's hat, was so unfeminine a figure as she plowed and planted her little vega, that some village wag had once referred to her as "Annie Laurie." Because of its happy absurdity the name long clung to Jane; but despite such small jests every one respected her sterling traits, – every one, that is, except Señora Vigil, who lived hard by in a mud house like a bird's nest, and who cherished a grudge against her neighbor.

For, years before, when Jane's "forty" was measured off by the surveyor, it had been developed that the Vigil homestead was out of bounds, and that a small strip of its back yard belonged in the Combs tract. Jane would have waived her right, but the surveyor said that the land office could not "muddle up" the records in any such way; she must take her land. And Jane had taken it, knowing, however, that thereafter even the youngest Vigil, aged about ten months, would regard her as an enemy.

Just now, too, as Alejandro Vigil, a ragged lad with a scarlet cap on his black head, went by, driving his goats to pasture, he had said "rogue!" under his breath. Jane sighed at the word, and her eyes followed him sadly up the road, little thinking her glance was to take in something which should print itself forever in her memory, and make this day different from all other days.

In the clear sun everything was sharply defined. From the Mexican end of town, – the old "plaza," – which antedated coal-mines and Americanisms, gleamed the little gold cross of the adobe Church of San Antonio. Around it were green, tall cottonwoods and the straggling mud-houses and pungent goat-corrals of its people. Toward the cañon rose the tipple and fans of the Dauntless colliery, banked in slack and slate, and surrounded by paintless mine-houses, while to the right swept the ugly shape of the company's store. The mine end of the town was not pretty, nor was it quiet, like the plaza. Just at present the whistle was blowing, and throngs of miners were gathering at the mouth of the slope. From above clamored the first "trip" of cars. Day and its work had begun.

Alejandro's red cap was a mere speck in the cañon, and his herd was sprinkled, like bread-crumbs, over the slaty hills. But over in the Vigil yard the numberless other little Vigils were to be seen, and Jane, as she looked, began to see that some sort of excitement was stirring them. The señora herself stood staring, wide-eyed and curious. Ana Vigil, her eldest girl, was pointing. Attention seemed to be directed toward something at the foot of the hill behind Jane's house, and she turned to see what was going on there.

A covered wagon, of the prairie-schooner type, was drawn up at the foot of the rise. Three horses were hobbled near by, and a little fire smoked itself out, untended. The whole thing meant merely the night halt of some farer to the mountains. Jane, about to turn away, saw something, however, which held her. In the shadow of the wagon the doctor's buggy disclosed itself. Some one lay ill under the tunnel of canvas.

She had just said this to herself when out upon the sunny stillness rang a sharp, lamentable cry, such as a child might utter in an extremity of fear or pain. The sound seemed to strike a sudden horror upon the day's bright face, and Jane shivered. She made an impulsive step out into her corn-field, hardly knowing what she meant to do. And then she saw the doctor alighting from the wagon, and pausing to speak to a man who followed him.

This man wore a broad felt hat, whose peaked crown was bound in a silver cord which glittered gaily above the startled whiteness of his face. He had on buckskin trousers, and there was a dash of color at his waist, like a girdle, which gave a sort of theatric air to his gesture as he threw up his arms wildly and turned away.

The doctor seemed perplexed. He looked distractedly about, and seeing Jane Combs in her field, called to her and came running. He reached the fence breathless, for he was neither so young nor so slim as the man leaning weeping against the wagon-step.

"Will you go over there, Miss Combs?" he panted. "There's a poor woman in that wagon breathing her last. They were on their way from Taos to Cripple Creek – been camping along the way for some time. Probably they struck bad water somewhere. She's had a low fever. The husband – Keene, his name is – came for me at daybreak, but it was too late. She seems to be a Mexican, though the man isn't. What I want you to do is to look after a child – a little girl of ten or twelve – who is there with her mother. She must be brought away. Did you hear her cry out just now? – that desperate wail? We'd just told her!"

"I guess everybody heard it," said Jane. Mechanically she withdrew the bolt of the gate, which forthwith collapsed in a tangle of barbed wire. Tramping over this snare, Jane faced the doctor as he wiped his brows. "I aint much hand with children," she reminded him. "You better send Señora Vigil, too."

As she strode toward the wagon, the man in the sombrero looked up. He was good-looking, in a girlish sort of way, with a fair skin and blue eyes. A lock of damp, yellow hair fell over his forehead, and he kept pushing it back as if it confused and blinded him.

"Go in, ma'am – go in!" he said, brokenly. "Though I do not reckon any one can do much for her. Poor Margarita! I wish I'd made her life easier – but luck was against me! Go in, ma'am!"

As Jane, clutching the iron brace, clambered up the step and pulled back the canvas curtain, the inner darkness struck blank upon her sun-blinded eyes. Then presently a stretch of red stuff, zigzagged with arrow-heads of white and orange and green, grew distinct, and under the thick sweep of the Navajo blanket, the impression of a long, still shape. The face on the flat pillow was also still, with closed eyes whose lashes lay dark upon the lucid brown of the cheek. A braid of black hair, shining like a rope of silk, hung over the Indian rug. Heavy it hung, in a lifeless fall, which told Jane that she was too late for any last service to the stranger lying before her under the scarlet cover.

Neither human kindness nor anything could touch her farther. "The tale of what we are" was ended for her; and from the peace of the quiet lips it seemed as if the close had been entirely free of bitterness or pain. Jane moved toward the sleeper. She meant to lay the hands together, as she remembered her mother's had been laid long ago in the stricken gloom of the Kansas farmhouse which had been her home; but suddenly there was a movement at her feet, and she stopped, having stumbled over some living thing in the shadows of the couch, something that stirred and struggled and gasped passionately, "*Vamos! Vamos!*"

Such was the wrathful force of this voice which, with so little courtesy, bade the intruder begone, as fairly to stagger the well-meaning visitor.

"I want to help you, my poor child!" Jane said. And her bosom throbbed at the sight of the little, stony face now lifted upon her from the dusk of the floor – a face with a fierce gleam in its dark eyes, and clouded with a wild array of black hair in which was knotted and twisted a fantastic *faja* of green wool, narrowly woven.

"I ask no help!" said the child, in very good English. "Only that you go away! We – we want to be by ourselves, here – " suddenly she broke off, glancing piteously toward the couch, and crying out in a changed, husky voice, "*Madre mia! muerta! muerta!*"

A ray of sunshine sped into the wagon as some hand outside withdrew the rear curtain a little. It shot a sharp radiance through the red and orange of the Indian blanket, and flashed across the array of tin and copper cooking things hung against one of the arching ribs of the canvas hood. Also it disclosed how slight and small a creature it was who spoke so imperatively, asking solitude for her mourning.

Jane, viewing the little, desperate thing, seemed to find in herself no power of consolation. And as she stood wordless, with dimming eyes, there came from without a sound of mingling voices. Others were come with offers of service and sympathy. A confusion of Spanish and English hurtled on Jane's uncomprehending ear; some one climbing the step cried, "*Ave Maria!*" as his eyes fell on the couch. It was Pablo Vigil, a mild-eyed Mexican, with a miner's lamp burning blue in his cap.

Behind him rose the round, doughy visage of his wife, blank with awe. She muttered a saint's name as she dragged herself upward, and said, "Ay! ay! ay! the poor little one! Let me take her away! So you are here, too, Mees Combs. But she will not speak to you, eh? *Lo se! lo se!* She will speak to one who is like herself, a Mexican!"

She seemed to gather up the child irresistibly, murmuring over her in language Jane could not understand, "Tell me thy name, *pobrecita!* Maria de los Dolores, is it? A name of tears, but blessed. And they call thee Lola, surely, as the custom is? Come, *querida!* Come with me to my house. It will please thy mother!"

It was not precisely clear to Jane how among them the half-dozen Mexican women, who now thronged the wagon and filled it with wailing exclamations, managed to pass the little girl from hand to hand and out into the air. Seeing, however, that this was accomplished, she descended into the crowd of villagers now assembled outside. There was a strange, dumb pain in her breast as she saw the little, green-tricked head disappear in the press about the doctor's buggy. She was sensible of wishing to carry the child home to her own dwelling; and there was in her a kind of jealous pang that Señora Vigil should so easily have accomplished a task of which she herself had made a distinct failure.

"If I'd only known how to call the poor little soul a lot of coaxing names!" deplored Jane, "Then maybe she'd have come with me. She'd have been better off sleeping on my good feather bed than what she will on those ragged Mexican mats over to Vigil's." Then, observing that two burros and several goats, taking advantage of the open gate, were now gorging themselves on her alfalfa, she proceeded to make a stern end of their delight.

Early in the morning of the stranger's burial, Mexicans from up the cañon and down the creek arrived in town in ramshackle wagons, attended by dogs and colts. She who lay dead had been of their race. It was meet that she should not go unfriended to the *Campo Santo*. Besides, the weather was fine, and it is good to see one's kinsfolk and acquaintances now and then. The church, too, would be open, although the *padre*, who lived in another town, might not be there. Young and old, they crowded the narrow aisles, even up to the altar space, where a row of tapers burned in the solemn gloom. Little children were there, also, hushed with awe. And many a sad-faced Mexican mother pressed her baby closer to her heart that day, taking note of the little girl in the front pew, sitting so silent and stolid beside her weeping father.

Jane Combs was in the back of the church. In their black *rebozos*, the poorest class of poor Mexican women were clad with more fitness than she. For Jane, weighted with the gravity of the occasion, had donned an austere black bonnet such as aged ladies wear, and its effect upon her short locks was incongruous in the extreme. No one, however, thought of her as being more queer than usual; for her sunburned cheeks were wet with tears, and her eyes were deep with tenderness and pity as they fixed themselves upon the small, rigid figure in the shadows of the altar's dark burden.

Upon the following day, as Miss Combs opened her ditch-gate for the tide of mine water which came in a flume across the arroyo, she saw the doctor and Mr. Keene approaching. They had an absorbed air, and as she opened the door for them the doctor said, "Miss Combs, we want you to agree to a plan of ours, if you can."

Keene tilted his chair restlessly. He looked as if life was regaining its poise with him, and his voice seemed quite cheerful as he said, "Well, it's about my little girl! I'm bound for a mountain-camp, and it's no place for a motherless child. Lola's a kind of queer little soul, too! My wife made a great deal of her. She was from old Mexico, ma'am. She was a *mestizo*— not pure Indian, you know, but part Spanish. Her folks were *rancheros*, near Pachuca, where I worked in the mines. I'm from Texas, myself. They weren't like these peons about here — they were good people. They never wanted Margarita to marry me." He laughed a little. "But she did, and the old folks never let up on her. They're both dead now. We've lived hither and yon around New Mexico these ten years past, and I aint been very successful; though things will be different now that I've decided to pull out for the gold regions!"

Keene paused with an air of growing good cheer. He seemed to forget his point. Whereupon the doctor said simply: "In view of these things, Mr. Keene would like to make some arrangement for leaving his daughter here until he can look round."

"And we thought of your taking her, ma'am," broke in Keene, with renewed anxiety. "Lola's delicate and high-strung, and I don't know how to manage her like my wife did. It'll hamper me terrible to take her along. Of course she's bright," he interpolated, hastily. "She was always picking up things everywhere, and speaks two languages well. And she'd be company for you, ma'am, living alone like you do. And I'd pay any board you thought right."

Jane's pulses had leaped at his suggestion. She was aware of making a resolute effort as she said, "Wouldn't Lola be happier with the Vigils?"

"Her mother wouldn't rest in her grave," cried Keene, "if she knew the child was being brought up amongst a tribe of peons! And me — I want my child to grow up an American citizen, ma'am!"

"Take the little girl, Miss Combs," advised the doctor. "It'll be good for you to have her here."

"I've got to think if it'll be good for her," said Jane.

"If that's all!" chorused the two men. They rose. The thing was settled. "I'll go and tell the Vigil tribe," said Keene, "and send Lola's things over here right off." With a wave of the hand and a relieved look, he went down the road.

That night a boy brought to Jane's door a queer little collapsible trunk of sun-cured hide, thonged fast with leather loops. The Navajo blanket was outside. Jane surmised that Mr. Keene had sent it because he dreaded its saddening associations. A message from him conveyed the information that he expected to leave town early the next morning, and that Lola would be sent over from the Vigils.

All during the afternoon Jane waited with breathless expectancy. The afternoon waned, but Lola did not come. Finally, possessed of fear and foreboding, Jane set forth to inquire into the matter.

Upon opening the Vigil gate, she saw Lola herself sitting on the doorstep, looking over toward the little wood crosses of the Mexican burying-ground. The girl hardly noted Jane's approach, but behind her, Señora Vigil came forward, shaking her head at Jane and touching her lip significantly.

"She does not know," whispered the señora. "Her papa did not say good-by. He said it was better for him to 'slip away.' And me — I could not tell her! I am only a woman."

"You think — she will not want — to live with me?"

The other's face grew very bland. "She said to-day 'how ugly' was your house," confessed Señora Vigil. "And when you was feeding your chickens she cried out, '*Hola*, what a queer woman is yonder!' Children have funny things in their heads. But it is for you to tell her you come to fetch her away!" And the señora called out, "*Lolita, ven acá!*"

The girl looked up startled. "*Que hay?*" she asked, coming toward them apprehensively.

"Lola," began Jane, "your papa wants you should stay with me for a while. He – he saw how lonesome I was," she continued, unwisely, "and – and so he decided to leave you here. Lola, I hope – I – " She could not go on for the strangeness in Lola's gaze.

"Is he *gone*– my father? But no! he would not leave me behind! No! no! *Dejeme! dejeme!* you do not say the truth! You shall not touch me! I will not – will not go with you!" She turned wildly, dizzily, as if about to run she knew not where; and then flung herself down before Señora Vigil, clasping the Mexican woman's knees in a frantic, fainting grasp.

CHAPTER TWO

A SACRED CHARGE

Jane helplessly regarded the child's despair, while Señora Vigil maintained an attitude curiously significant of deep compassion and a profound intention of neutrality. With the sound of Lola's distraught refusals in her ear, Jane felt upon her merely the instinct of flight. She rallied her powers of speech and set her hand on the gate, saying simply, "I'm going. She better stay here." But at this the señora's face, which had exhibited a kind of woful pleasure in the excitement of the occasion, took on an anxious frown. "And the board-money?" she exclaimed, with instant eagerness.

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"I guess it'll be all right. Mr. Keene said he'd send it every month."

The señora's eyes narrowed. "He said so! Ay, but who can say he shall remember? There are eight chickens to eat of our meal already. No, Mees Combs! The *muchacha* was left to you. It is a charge very sacred. Ave Maria! yes!"

Jane had closed the gate. "I can't force her," she repeated.

Señora Vigil, watching her go, felt a prey to lively dissatisfaction. "*Santo cielo!*" she thought. "What will my Pablo say to this? I must run to the mine for a word with him. It is most serious, this business!" And casting her apron over the whip-cord braids of her coarse hair, she started hastily down toward the bridge.

Lola, crouching on the ground, watched her go. It was very quiet in the grassless yard. The Vigil children were playing in the *arroyo* bed. Their voices came with a stifled sound. There was nothing else to hear save the far-off moaning of a wild dove somewhere up Gonzales cañon. The echo was like a soft, sad voice. It sounded like the mournful cry of one who, looking out of heaven, saw her hapless little daughter bereaved and abandoned, and was moved, even among the blessed, to a sobbing utterance.

Lola sat up to listen. Her father had spoken of going through that cañon from which the low call came. Even now he was traveling through the green hills, regretting that he had left his child behind him at the instance of a strange woman! Even now he was doubtless deploring that he should have been moved to consider another's loneliness before his own.

"Wicked woman," thought the girl, angrily, "to ask him to leave me here – my poor papa!" She sprang to her feet, filled with an impetuous idea. She might follow her father!

There was the road, and no one by to hinder her. Even the hideous wooden house of the short-haired woman looked deserted. Lola, with an Indian's stealth of tread, crossed the bridge, and walked without suspicious haste up the empty street.

At the mouth of the cañon, taking heart of the utter wilderness all about, she began to run. Before her the great Spanish Peaks heaved their blue pyramids against the desert sky. Shadows were falling over the rough, winding road, and as she rushed on and on, many a gully and stone and tree-root took her foot unaware in the growing gray of twilight. Presently a star came out, a strange-faced star. Others followed in an unfamiliar throng, which watched her curiously when, breathless and exhausted, she dropped down beside a little spring to drink. The water refreshed her. She lay back on the cattle-tramped hill to rest.

Dawn was rosy in the east when she awoke, dazed to find herself alone in a deep gorge. Her mission recurred to her, and again she took the climbing road. Now, however, the way was hard, for it rose ever before her, and her feet were swollen.

As the day advanced it grew sultry, with a menace of clouds to the west. After a time the great peaks were lost in dark clouds, and distant thunder boomed. A lance of lightning rent the nearer sky, and flashed its vivid whiteness into the gorge. This had narrowed so that between the steep hills there was only room for the arroyo and the little roadway beside it. Before the rain began to fall on Lola's bare head, as it did shortly in sheets, the stream-bed had become a raging torrent, down which froth and spume and uprooted saplings were spinning.

In an instant the cañon was a wild tumult of thunder and roaring water, and Lola, barely keeping her feet, had laid hold of a piñon on the lower slope and was burying her head in the spiked branches. Wind and rain buffeted the child. The ground began to slip and slide with the furious downpour, but she held fast, possessed of a great fear of the torrent sweeping down below her.

As she listened to the crashing of the swollen tide, another noise seemed to mingle with the sound of the mountain waters – a sound of bellowing and trampling, as of a stampeded herd. A sudden horror of great rolling eyes and rending horns and crazy hoofs hurtled through the girl's dizzy brain. Her hands loosened. She began to slip down.

The rain had slackened when Bev Gribble, looking from his herder's hut up on the *mesa*, saw that his "bunch" of cattle had disappeared. Certain tracks on the left of the upland pasture exhibited traces of a hasty departure. That there had been a cloudburst over toward the Peaks he was as yet ignorant; nor did he discover this until he had caught his cow-pony and descended into the ravine.

The sun was shining now, and the arroyo was nothing more than a placid, though muddy stream. Its gleaming sides, however, spoke lucidly to Bev's intelligence, and he set the pony at a smarter pace in the marshy road.

"*Sus! Sus!*" said Bev to his pony, who knew Spanish best, being a bronco from the south. But Coco did not respond. Instead, he came back suddenly on his haunches, as if the rope on the cow-puncher's saddle had lurched to the leap of a steer.

Coco knew well the precise instant when it is advisable for a cow-pony to forestall the wrench of the lasso. But now the loop of hemp hung limp on the saddle-horn, and Gribble, surprised at being nearly thrown, rose in the stirrups to see what was underfoot.

A drenched thing it was which huddled at the roadside; very limp, indeed, and laxly lending itself to the motions of Gribble's hands as he lifted and shook it.

"Seems to be alive!" muttered the cow-puncher. "Where could she have dropped from? Aha! here's a broken arm! I better take her right to town to the doctor. Hi there, Coco!" He laid Lola over the saddle and mounted behind his dripping burden.

When the coal-camp came in sight on the green skirt of the plains, with the Apishapa scrolling the distance in a velvet ribbon, sunset was already forward, and the smoke of many an evening fire veined the late sky.

A man coming toward the cañon stopped at sight of Gribble. He was the store clerk going home to supper. He shouted, "Hullo, Bev! Why, what have you struck? Bless me, it's the little girl they're all hunting! She belongs to Miss Combs, it seems. Her mother died here the other day. Found her up the cañon, eh? They been all ranging north, thinking she'd taken after her pa. Maybe she thought he'd headed for La Veta pass? Looks sure 'nough bad, don't she?"

Jane, when she heard the pony cross the bridge, ran to the door, as she had run so many times during the long, anxious day. She took the girl from Gribble without a word, and bore her into the house from which she had fled with so much loathing.

"Don't look so scared!" said Gribble, kindly. "It's only a broken bone or so." As this consoling assurance seemed not to lessen Jane's alarm, he went on cheerfully to say, "There isn't one in my

body hasn't been splintered by these broncos! Tinker 'em up and they're better than new. Here's doc coming lickety-switch! He'll tell you the same."

But the doctor was less encouraging. "It isn't merely a question of bones," he said, observing his patient finally in her splints and bandages. "It's the nervous strain she's lately undergone. She's been overtaxed with so much excitement and sorrow. If she pulls through, it'll be the nursing."

Jane drew a deep breath. "She won't die if nursing can save her!" said she. Her face shone with grave sacrificial tenderness, in the light of which the shortcomings of her uncouth dress and looks were for once without significance.

"She's a good woman," said the doctor, as he rode away, "though she wears her womanhood so ungraciously – as a rough husk rather than a flower. All the same, she's laying up misery for herself in her devotion to this fractious child; I wish I'd had no hand in it!"

Jane early came to feel what burs were in the wind for her. Lola soon returned to the world, staring wonderingly about; but even in the first moment she winced and turned her face away from Jane's eager gaze. As the girl shrank back into the pillows, Jane's lips quivered.

"Goose that I am!" she thought. "Of course my looks are strange to her! It'd be funny if she took to me right off. I aint good-looking. And her ma was real handsome!" For once in her life Jane sighed a little over her own plainness. "Children love their mothers even when they're plumb homely!" she encouraged herself. "Maybe Lola'll like me, in spite of my not being well-favored, when she finds how much I think of her."

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