



A PIECE OF STRING

BARTLETT MILL creek runs by a big sandbar into the San Joaquin, between a firm array of stones it has pounded down in its many cliff leaping—no doubt having the last swirl and meeting in mind. For in a high drop on the mountain side it can see the sandbar, and that wild little stream would not want the most important event in its life to be absorbed by, soaked and weakened in sand. Three women sit where they can see a silver rope twisting down a sheer cut of granite and mountain ash trees clutching the slide and leaning over to see where the silver rope is going. Above the rush of the small, excited stream, where they can hear it calling to the great, grey, heavy river, "I'm coming, I'm coming," on a lifted white dune where the "sourberry" bushes grow in a thicket, sprouting long, straight shoots, sit three women, and they are very busy.

They are scraping the brown wands of the sourberry bush to a satin whiteness. They are splitting some wands with thumbnail and teeth, stripping down flat, thin strands. Bundles of creamy sticks, hanks of more pliant brown and white strands lie beside the workers. These are coils and weavers to carry home to make baskets.

But one woman is having trouble with her bundle of sticks. They will not stay tied. She cannot get a tight enough twist around the wands with the rather stiff bark ribbons.

"I wish I had a soft string," she says, idly.

Old Nocomis leans forward and pulls down a tall, harsh weed stalk. She goes by the name of Susie, but she was found hushing a round-

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eyed grandson, crooning in Western Indian words—

"Who is this that lights the wigwam?

With his great eyes lights the wigwam?

Ewah-ay my little owlet."

After that, what could one call her but "Old Nocomis?"

She crushes the weed stalk flat, she chews the end of it. It is a milkweed stalk, grey and dry, hollow and brittle. It looks the most unprofitable thing that one could imagine.

Nocomis turns her back and the white woman does not notice what she is about. The white woman's heart is beating fast. She is only pretending to be unobserving, for she has worked over a month to make the old Chuc-chances woman take hold of a milkweed stalk like that.

Nocomis forgets, or perhaps she does not forget, that six weeks ago she was asked "Can you make rope out of milkweeds?" and that she answered, with a blandly regretful stare, "No—no can make." But in her house on the hillside hung an old harness with grey-braided trappings still as strong as when they were first made, forty odd years ago.

Nocomis did not know that the other woman knew what that grey cord was made of and bided her time until a friendship grew. Even

then she asked no more outright questions. Even now she was not sure that she would see the grey string made.

A soft, strong piece of twisted cord was presently laid on her lap. "Oh, where did you get it?"

"I make him."

"What! What did you make it of?"

Amusement and some approval glint from under the old tribeswoman's heavy brows. "I show," she says.

She pinches another stalk flat, snapping it here and there. Her brown claws fumble over the stalk, picking at it, running it down, shaking it, rolling it lightly between her palms, holding the stuff high, in a last quivering shower of chaff. Yet there seems to be no businesslike direction in her hands.

She trifles with a dry weed stalk and it turns into a skein of soft silver-grey silk.

Then Nocomis bares her shrunken leg. She throws the silk over it. Holding one end in her left hand and keeping the strand taut under the flat of her right hand, she twirls the fiber up the calf of her leg. The cord whips over double. Hooking a finger between the doubling, she hitches her knee up. On the round of her knee she rubs and twirls again, first one cord then the other, crossing each strand as she takes it up. This counter twist keeps the finished string from curling upon itself. She jerks and snaps the long cord out straight. It lies flat and soft, silver and strong.

She has no need of distaff, spindle and reel other than her old hands and leg, and out of a milkweed stick she makes a string, the like of which for beauty and strength there is no other.