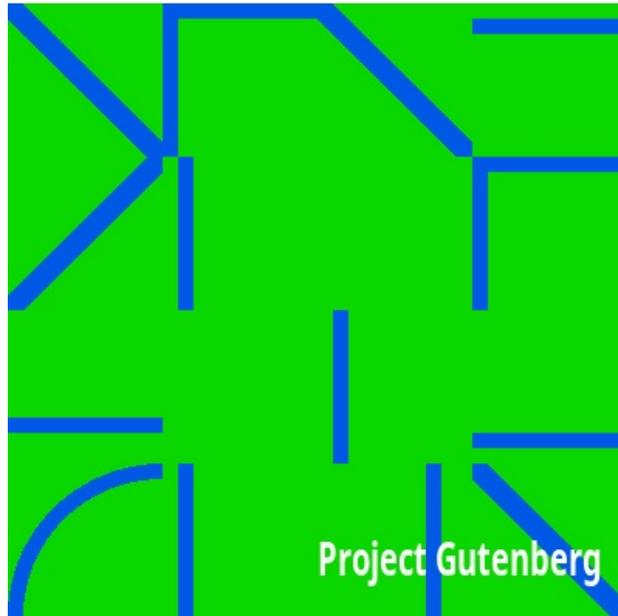

Moment of Truth

Basil Wells



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOMENT OF TRUTH ***

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Basil Wells, who lives in Pennsylvania, has been doing research concerning life in the area during the period prior to and following the War of 1812. Here he turns to a different problem—the adjustment demanded of a pioneer woman, not in those days but Tomorrow—on Mars.

**moment
of
truth**

by *BASIL WELLS*

Beyond the false windows she could see the reddish wasteland where dust clouds spun and shifted so slowly.

SHE HAD been asleep. Now she stretched luxuriously beneath the crisp white sheet that the vapid August heat decreed. From memory to memory her dream-fogged mind drifted, and to the yet-to-be. It was good to remember, and to imagine, and to see and feel and hear...

She smiled. She was Ruth Halsey, fourteen, brunette, and pretty. Earl, and Harry, and Buhl had told her she was pretty. Especially Buhl. Buhl was her favorite date now.

The room closed around her with its familiar colors and furnishings. Sometimes she would dream that she was elsewhere, unfamiliar, ugly places, but then she would awaken to the four long windows with their coarse beige drapes of monk's cloth and the fantasies were forever dispelled.

Her eyes loved the two paintings, the dark curls of the pink-and-white doll sitting prissily atop the dresser, and the full-length mirror on the open closet door.

The pictured design of the wallpaper, its background merging with the pastel blue of the slanted ceiling.... Almost as they had blended together that first day when she was twelve. Yet not the same, she corrected her thoughts, frowning. Sometimes, as today, the design seemed faded and changed. The gay little bridges and the flowered, impossibly blue trees seemed to change and threaten to vanish.

She laughed over at the demurely sitting doll. Essie had been her favorite doll when she was younger. Of course now that she was fourteen she did not play with dolls any more. But it was permissible that she keep her old friend neatly dressed and ever at hand as a confidant. She smiled at the thought. Essie never tattled.

"It must be from that polio," she told Essie, knowing all the time that she was almost well now and needed plenty of rest and careful doses of exercise. "It makes my eyes—funny."

Essie smiled back glassily and Ruth laughed. It was good to awaken and see the thick black arms of the maple tree outside the windows. It was good to have the cool green leaves waving at her, and see the filtered dapplings of sunshine cross and recross them.

She loved that old tree. She had played among its long horizontal branches from childhood. Her brother, Alex, who had been killed in the Normandy Landing during World War Three, had loved the tree too. He had built the railed, shingled-roofed little nest high up in the tree's crotched heart where Ruth kept some of her extra-special notes and jewelry and a book of poems.

One of the two paintings on the bedroom walls was of the old tree. The tree dominated the old story-and-a-half white house with the green shutters that was the Halseys' home. Her home. Alex had painted that picture as well as the other showing the graceful loop of the river and the roofs of the village of Thayer in the distance. Ruth had been with him as he painted that second picture from the jutting rock ledge five hundred feet above the river.

"I was just ten then, Essie," she chirped gaily. "I remember how afraid I was of the height and how Alex scolded."

But Alex was dead now and all she had to remember of him was the paintings and the photographs that Mother kept in a battered brown leather folder. For a moment the bright sunlight in her beloved maple tree's leaves seemed to dim and the room wavered about her. She wondered about that. She must tell her father or her mother.

Perhaps the polio, light touch of it or not, had hurt her eyesight. Glasses! She shuddered at the thought.

The room shimmered and blurred—and suddenly broke apart to reform into something.... She

squinted her eyes shut to the hideous vision. And then opened them the merest slit.

Nothing had changed...

"MOTHER!" she cried. "Daddy!" she cried. "What has happened?"

She heard the door to—to this hideous travesty of a room opening. Her eyes darted around the shrunken metal-walled shell, even the ceiling curved overhead, and she saw two grotesque daubs taped to the walls that parodied the paintings of her dead brother Alex. The coloring was ugly and the proportions out of line. And it was not canvas but curling sheets of paper taped and painted to resemble frames!

A big man, sandy-haired and with vertical wrinkles deep between piercing blue eyes, came into the room. She shrank into the bed, seeing that the sheet she tugged taut across her breast was ragged and blue.

"Ruth," he said, a slow smile making his face almost handsome, "you're better. You haven't spoken in weeks."

Ruth wanted to giggle. As though they could keep her quiet. Daddy was always shushing her... But who was this big man in his dusty drab coveralls and dropped dust mask dangling upon his chest?

"Don't you know me, Dear? It's Buhl, your husband."

Buhl was fifteen and only a couple of inches taller than Ruth. Of course he had sandy hair like this man. But this man was old enough to be Buhl's father. This was crazy—like one of the dreams that always made her unhappy.

So? So it was a dream. She felt warmth and release. Why not see what this dream had to offer that might be amusing to remember and tell Buhl sometime soon. Wouldn't he laugh when he heard she had dreamed about him? And been married to him.

She saw the strip of shiny metal that masqueraded as her mirror, and where her four long windows, with their thick, loose-woven drapes, had been there were only four taped strips of paper with crude pictures of draped windows daubed on them. There were even green dabs of paint and black splashes to stimulate her beloved maple tree.

"Ruth! Do you feel better now? Please don't smile at me like that. I know you loved the baby, but this Martian atmosphere is tough even for men. It wasn't your fault."

"Go ahead and talk," Ruth laughed gaily. "This is just another bad dream and I know it. I'll wake up in a little while and be back in my cool old room."

"Blast your room and your dreams!"

The man went across the room in a swift rush and tore down one of the false windows, the painted strip of paper. And beyond, through a dusty oval glass window, Ruth could see a reddish brown wasteland, where dust clouds spun and shifted slowly, and a dusty huddle of what looked like quonset huts or storage sheds of metal.

"That is reality, Ruth. You must face it. This pretense, this sleazy imitation of your old room is wrong. You're strong enough, and I love you—you can accept truth."

His face changed, all expression sponged from it in an instant as he looked into her eyes, and then it seemed to dissolve into something ugly and yet childish. She saw tears burst through and furrow the dust on his cheeks.

"Dear Lord," he cried, almost reverently, "must this go on forever? Will she ever come back to me?"

His voice choked off and he stumbled across the room and out the door. She heard it shut behind him, and she was hunting for Essie, already having forgotten the ill-mannered intruder.

There was no Essie, only a mannikin of cloth-stuffed white nylon and lipstick, with black nylon for hair.

And then the room shimmered and broke apart and reformed and she was back in her bed with the sun on the slowly dancing green leaves outside the four long windows. Essie was smiling down at her from the dresser, and the paintings were as always, soft colors and

perfectly drafted.

Had she thought there were four windows? How silly of her. The second from the right was a small oval of glass, or rather, a glass-covered picture of desert scene. Odd that she had forgotten about that picture. Oh well, what did it matter.

In a few days she would be well enough again to climb out on the giant limbs and into the tree nest that her brother, Alex, had built. And the boys would come to see her and take her to the drugstore for sodas and sundaes.

Yes, she was sure now. She *did* like Buhl Austin best....

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