

*** A Distributed Proofreaders US eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: We Were There at the Oklahoma Land Run

Date of first publication: 1957

Author: James Arthur Kjelgaard (1910-1959)

Date first posted: November 4, 2013

Date last updated: November 4, 2013

Faded Page eBook #20131103

This eBook was produced by: Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders US team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

WE WERE THERE AT THE OKLAHOMA LAND RUN

BY JIM KJELGAARD

Historical Consultant: SAVOIE LOTTINVILLE

Illustrated by CHRIS A. KENYON, JR.

[Transcriber's Note: illustrations omitted due to copyright considerations]

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers*, New York

© JIM KJELGAARD 1957

For

ROSALYN LOUISE ALBERS

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NO. 57-5035
We Were There at the Oklahoma Land Run

Thousands of land-hungry people edged the Oklahoma border that April day in 1889, awaiting the signal that would send them across! What was in store for them? Wild riding! Possibly danger. Certainly adventure. And young Alec Simpson with his twin sisters, Cindy and Mindy, was to be a part of it.

It had been a long, hard journey for Jed Simpson and his family up the Cherokee Trail from Missouri. But the promised prize of a homestead in the rich, fertile land of Oklahoma was worth it.

Then came the long-awaited starting shot! And men on horseback, on foot, in buckboards and covered wagons careened across the border to stake their claims. Jed Simpson, riding alongside his partner, Pete Brent, leapt out in front. And just as fast, tomboy Cindy raced after them to give her father his forgotten gun. So it was three, rather than two, who staked claim to the sweetest land in all of Oklahoma.

Their joy was short-lived, however, with the sudden disappearance of gentle Mindy and the arrival of a short, swarthy man with cat's eyes. It took all of Alec and Cindy's own special brand of magic to spirit Mindy back.

The Simpsons had indeed earned the proud name of homesteaders. And for Alec, Cindy and Mindy it was a new life just begun in a golden land.

WE-WERE-THERE BOOKS are easy to read and provide exciting, entertaining stories, based upon true historic events. Each story is checked for factual accuracy by an outstanding authority on this particular phase of our history. Though written for young readers, they make interesting reading for boys and girls well into their teens.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE	Witch Girl
CHAPTER TWO	Pete's Story
CHAPTER THREE	The Sooners
CHAPTER FOUR	Ready for the Run
CHAPTER FIVE	April 22, 1889
CHAPTER SIX	Mindy
CHAPTER SEVEN	Wild Ride
CHAPTER EIGHT	Alec
CHAPTER NINE	The Claims
CHAPTER TEN	Hungry
CHAPTER ELEVEN	Alec Comes
CHAPTER TWELVE	Plains City
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	The Man with Cat's Eyes
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	Spirits Walk
About the Author	
About the Artist	
About the Historical Consultant	

Illustrations

Pete gave one of the flags to Jed Simpson

Mindy vaulted to his back

"Go back or I shoot!" he said

"You dug that big a hole since noon?" asked the man on the horse

"Nothin' like a little fight to clear the air, Jud boy!"

Mr. Simpson added a big boulder to the cairn

When everything was ready, she called her father and Pete

"Need any law work done?" he asked

Alec went into the oak grove

He liked the rough and broken land

"Unless they turn their claims over to us, they'll never see the girl again"

WE WERE THERE AT THE OKLAHOMA LAND RUN



CHAPTER ONE

Witch Girl

In a few minutes, Cindy thought excitedly, she would "kill" herself. Her eyes strayed from the tailboard of the wagon on which she stood, over the scene around her. By day, with wagons and tents stretching as far as one could see in either direction along the Oklahoma border, all was bustle and excitement.

Now, with twilight just shading into darkness, it was delightfully different. She could see only the nearest camps, and though most of the wagon covers and tents too were stained with use, the night took away every sign of ugliness, and everything was again beautiful. Here and there, both near and far, the embers of cooking fires glowed like bright red eyes.

The kerosene lantern hanging over the tailboard cast its glow for no great distance. She could see clearly only the nearest rows of people who had come to watch this amateur show, the talent for which had been recruited from the campers themselves. Everything else was in shadow. Cindy took a deep breath and announced:

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I, the Great Cindy Simpson, will thrill you with feats of magic and leaderdemain! I will prove to you that the hand is quicker than the eye! Watch closely!"

She saw her brother grinning up at her and winked at him. Alec was two and a half years older than she. But, she thought proudly, even though he was only fourteen, still he was taller than some of the grown men present. Of course, in this crowd of people, all waiting to join the run into Oklahoma to claim land, there were short men as well as tall.

Cindy tried and failed to find her mother in the crowd. Thinking of her mother, she also thought of Mindy and was suddenly and terribly lonesome. Mindy, Cindy's identical twin sister, had suffered a winter fever. It was thought that she could not stand the long wagon trip from Missouri into Kansas, and down through the Cherokee Outlet, or Strip, as it was often called, on the north to the border of the lands that were being opened for settlement. So Mindy had been left in Missouri with Grandpa and Grandma Simpson. But she was coming by train, and Cindy hoped it would be soon. This very afternoon her father had gone to the nearest railroad station, which was two miles away, to see if there was a message.

Giving herself back to the spirit of her act, Cindy took one of her mother's silk handkerchiefs from the little table of articles beside her and waved it gracefully. She continued:

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, keep your eyes on the handkerchief! You can see for yourselves that there is nothing unusual about it! It is just an ordinary handkerchief, until I fold it in my hand!"

Cindy folded it carefully in her hand, clamped her small fist about it, and waved her arm aloft. When she opened her fist the handkerchief was gone. A small wire hook on the end of an elastic band attached to the armhole of her camisole had drawn the handkerchief only part way up her sleeve. Still, it was out of the crowd's sight. Cindy tossed the long black braids that hung over her shoulders and pretended shocked surprise.

"Oh! It's gone!" she exclaimed. "One of my mother's best, too! Now what shall I do?"

She waved her arm again, bending it as she did so, to let the stretched elastic go slack. At the same time she pulled a silk thread, one end of which had been tied to the handkerchief before she picked it up. The other end was looped, and she'd slipped the loop over her finger. As magically as it had disappeared, the handkerchief was there again. Cindy cried happily, "Ah! It's back! See what magic can do?"

She returned the handkerchief to the table, picked up a short wand, and showed it to her audience. "The witches' wand!" she said darkly. "But it has no power over the Great Cindy! Listen!"

She tapped the wand on the table, and the sound of the thumping reached the farthest edges of the crowd.

"As you can see," she announced, "it's very solid! Now I'll roll it in this magic paper!"

She rolled it in a piece of ordinary paper and held it up in full view of the crowd. Then she tore wand and paper into tiny

bits, threw them into the air, and let them float down among her audience. Nobody except Cindy and Alec knew that the wand itself was paper, with a small chunk of lead, to make the thumping sound, in one end.

Cindy did half a dozen more tricks and then picked up the only real magic prop she had. It was a wicked-looking knife given to her by a farmhand whom she had known on the Missouri farm where her father had worked before coming to seek his own land in Oklahoma. The same farmhand had also taught her the rest of her magic.

"Before I perform this last and greatest feat," she said, "I wish to prove to all of you that this is a real knife. One of you must examine it. You!"

Her eyes fell on a short, swarthy man who wore a red handkerchief around his neck and another bound over his hair. Cindy hesitated. Did the man have eyes like a cat? Or did she only think so? She was not sure, and she stepped forward to press the knife into his hand.

"Take it!" she urged.

He took it, but he seemed to do so unwillingly, and his eyes remained on Cindy.

"Cut something, please," she requested.

He slid the knife along the wagon's tailboard, and a long sliver of wood curled up. Cindy smiled sweetly.

"Do you want to try it on something else?" she asked.

The man merely stared at her. When Cindy stretched out her hand, he put the knife in it and backed hastily away. Cindy thanked him and went on with her show.

"You have seen for yourselves, ladies and gentlemen, that this knife is razor-sharp! Watch closely!"

Before the crowd could guess what was going to happen, they saw Cindy seemingly plunge the cruel blade into her heart. Blood spurted, and just before she fell Cindy heard a woman scream. A moment later Cindy got up, bowed, and to the mad applause of everyone except the man with cat's eyes, leaped lightly from the tailboard.

Still grinning, Alec joined her. "Gee! You were great, sis!" he exclaimed.

"Was I really?"

"Best ever. And you sure bowled over one member of your audience."

"The woman who screamed?"

"No, the man who tested your knife, the one with a bandana over his hair and another around his neck. I was standing right next to him, and he said, 'Weetch girl! Weetch girl! Did you know you're a witch girl?'"

"Oh, no!" Cindy groaned.

"Oh, yes," Alec teased. "Wonder what he'd say if he knew that when you press the handle of that knife just right, the blade slides back into it and a squirt of catsup jumps out?"

"Alec," Cindy was thoughtful, "did you notice anything strange about that man?"

"He looked like an Indian."

"Do you remember what old Mrs. Bevers said when we left Missouri?"

"Sure. She said, 'Luck will follow you if you beware a man with cat's eyes.'"

"Alec, that man had cat's eyes!"

"Aw now, Cindy!"

"He did," Cindy said firmly.

"Now, sis, don't go believing your own magic!"

"Have it your own way, but he still had cat's eyes."

"Then I'll sic a dog onto him," Alec laughed. "Come on, sis. There's somebody I want you to meet."

He led her away from the lighted tailboard back into the shadows. Cindy saw her father, mother, and Pete Brent, the man with whom her father would make the ride into Oklahoma as soon as the border was opened. But there was also someone else.

Too surprised to move for a second, Cindy stopped in her tracks. Then she raced forward to fling herself into the arms of a slender, lovely girl whose soft, dark eyes reflected only delight and who, like Cindy, wore a gingham dress that covered her from her neck to the tops of her shoes.

"Mindy!"

They hugged each other, and still holding hands, stepped apart. "When did you come?" Cindy asked happily.

"Daddy met the train to see if there was a message from me. He found me instead."

"Oh! It's so nice to have you back!"

"Sit down, children," Mrs. Simpson said quietly. "If you become too excited neither one of you will sleep tonight. Oh dear, Cindamine! Catsup all over your dress again!"

"I'll wash it, Mother," Cindy said cheerfully.

"I know, dear," her mother said, "but you're eleven now, going on twelve. Isn't it time you were becoming a lady, like Miranda?"

"Sure, Mom," Cindy said agreeably.

She sat in the trampled grass beside her sister, and their arms stole about each other. Pete Brent, a tall, lean, dark-haired man with friendly eyes and a ready smile, chuckled.

"I declare! If 'twasn't for that catsup, I couldn't tell 'em apart!"

"Neither can anyone else," their father said.

"Not unless they watched them," Mrs. Simpson spoke up. "Miranda's always the lady, and Cindamine always the tomboy. She's forever in some scrape."

"Cindy will be a lady some day," Mindy defended her twin.

"Sure I will, Mom," Cindy agreed. "How did I do?"

"Except that you said 'leaderdemain' rather than 'legerdemain,' you did very well," Mrs. Simpson said.

"I'll remember next time," Cindy promised.

Alec chuckled. "Cindy's a 'witch girl' now," he remarked.

"Merciful heavens!" their mother gasped.

"Oh, it isn't that bad. Her magic just scared the daylights out of some man. I stood right next to him, and he was shaking in his boots."

"Who was it?" Pete Brent asked curiously.

Alec searched the crowd, which was now watching a juggler who had taken Cindy's place on the tailboard. He saw the short, swarthy man and pointed him out. Pete Brent shook his head soberly.

"No wonder he was scared."

"Who is he?" Mr. Simpson asked.

"Tom LaMott. He's part Indian, part Spanish, and part nobody knows what. He believes in devils, and it's easy to understand why Cindy's magic tricks seemed like devilry to him."

"Is he bad?" Mindy asked.

"I myself know of nothing very bad he's ever done, but according to the stories going around, he isn't good," Pete replied.

Mrs. Simpson said doubtfully, "Sometimes I wish we'd stayed in Missouri."

"This is no better and no worse than Missouri, Mrs. Simpson," Pete said respectfully.

"You said yourself that that man's a heathen."

"You will," Pete pointed out, "find them in Missouri, New York, or any other place you go."

"Say what you please, Pete, this is different from Missouri."

"Only because of the crowd gathered here. But ninety-five per cent of them are honest, hard-working, God-fearing people. They don't want a thing except a chance at some of the last good free land left in the country under control of the United States."

"How about the other five per cent?" Mrs. Simpson asked.

"Well," Pete said reluctantly, "I wouldn't want to cross that border without a gun."

"If you know you'll need a gun, then you must know of dangers," said Mrs. Simpson.

"Now, Ann," big Jed Simpson said easily, "there isn't a thing to worry about."

"I hope not."

"We have good stock, good equipment, and, thank God, we're all healthy and together again. There is no reason why we don't have a good chance," Mr. Simpson told her. "Looks as though the show's over," he added.

They drifted back toward their wagons, which were side by side. Pete's big draft horses and his four trim, fast ponies, tied to a picket line, shuffled about and munched fodder. A little distance away, the Simpsons' four wagon mules were in a rope corral. But Sunshine, the swift palomino mare with the white mane and tail, the horse Mr. Simpson would ride in the Land Run, was staked on her own picket rope away from the mules, and she was eating oats. Sunshine would have to travel very fast and far.

"Coming, twins?" their mother called.

"Can't we stay and talk with Mr. Brent for a little while?" Cindy asked.

"Don't get in the way."

"In the way!" Pete snorted. "My two sweet-hearts in the way! Why, Mrs. Simpson!"

"I'd like to stay too," Alec said.

"Good!" said Pete.

CHAPTER TWO

Pete's Story

Cindy always loved to visit Pete Brent, partly because she liked him, partly because she liked his horses, and partly because she liked Gramps and Granny Brent, his father and mother. Besides, Gramps knew the most wonderful stories, and Granny baked the most marvelous ginger cookies which she passed out with a very free hand. Cindy had looked forward to bringing Mindy to their wagon for a visit. Even though Gramps and Granny were asleep in the wagon and Mindy would not meet them until tomorrow, it was a lot of fun to be with Pete and to look at his horses.

"We'll have to be very quiet because Gramps and Granny Brent are sleeping now," Cindy whispered to her twin. "Let's go see the horses."

Two of Pete's four ponies were roan-colored, the third was sorrel, and the fourth was black and white. The two roans and the sorrel were very friendly and gentle, but the pinto trusted nobody and even tried to buck Pete off whenever Pete rode him.

Now the three gentle ponies and Pete's huge draft horses crowded as close together as they could and thrust their heads over the picket line, each horse trying to get as much attention as possible for himself. The pinto pulled as far back as his tie rope would let him go and snorted suspiciously. Though she had been on the point of warning her twin to be careful around the pinto, Cindy forgot to do so.

Alec, who had never wanted to be anything except a farmer, liked the heavy-footed draft horses best. Cindy and Mindy turned naturally to the fleet ponies. Suddenly the pinto snorted again, softly and gently this time, and came up to thrust a friendly muzzle at Mindy.

"Mindy!" exclaimed Cindy.

"What's the matter?" asked Mindy, who was happily stroking the pony's soft nose.

"That's Thunder, and he isn't supposed to like anyone!"

"He likes me," Mindy said. "Oh! Don't they remind you of birds?"

"Yes, they do! But Pete told me that, though they can start at a fast clip and keep it up long after a race horse would be winded, a race horse would beat any of them in a short sprint."

"I don't believe it," Mindy said. "I don't believe any other horse could even keep up with them."

"Except Daddy's Sunshine," Cindy said.

"Yes," Mindy agreed loyally, "Sunshine might."

Except for Thunder, who would let only Mindy touch him, they petted each pony in turn, stroked the draft horses, petted the ponies again, and Cindy asked Alec, "Wouldn't you just love to have one?"

"Sure would," Alec agreed, "but I'd rather have this work team. They could pull a plow for ten hours, then do it again the next day and the day after, and still come back for more."

"You have the team, and we'll take the ponies," Cindy said. "Let's go back and see Mr. Brent."

They stole back, remembering to be very quiet in order not to awaken Gramps and Granny, and sat on the wagon tongue. Pete lighted his pipe, and when the match flared it illumined his strong face. For the first time Cindy found herself thinking of it as a young face, even though Pete must be almost thirty. Cindy said eagerly, "Tell us about Oklahoma."

"There now, young lady," Pete's grin was felt rather than seen, "I've already told you at least six times."

"Please!" begged Cindy, who had an almost passionate interest in this new land that was to be her home. "Mindy hasn't heard the story."

"Do you want to hear it, honey?" Pete asked.

"I'd love to," Mindy said.

Pete sat down with his back against the wagon wheel, rested his head on his hands, puffed solemnly on his pipe, and after a moment said, "Shall we begin with the Indians?"

"Yes."

"Well, though there were some ancient peoples in Oklahoma, the first tribes which we ordinarily think of as Indians were the Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahoes, and such. They were all warlike and for the most part depended on hunting. There was very little of any kind of farming. But there were never so many of these tribes that Oklahoma was what you might call crowded. It was a vacant land."

The youngsters remained silent, waiting for Pete to go on. After a moment, he did.

"Oklahoma came to us with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. But in those days, to anyone east of the Mississippi, Oklahoma seemed as far away as the moon seems now. Few people imagined that it would ever be any good, and almost nobody wanted to go there. In fact, very few people even knew it existed."

"What's 'Oklahoma' mean, Mr. Brent?" Alec broke in.

"It's a Choctaw Indian word meaning 'red people.' Now there weren't so many white men west of the Mississippi, but there were a lot of them east of it. There were also a lot of Indians there. What happened is what usually happened when red men crowded white; the white men wanted the land."

"Wasn't that selfish?" Mindy asked.

"Depends on how you look at it, Cindy—or Mindy." Pete grinned. "I don't know which is who, because I can't see the catsup any more. But if you mean, was it selfish for white people to grab Indian lands, it certainly was. On the other hand, it might have been selfish for a few Indians to think they could stand forever in the path of so many white men. Still depending on how you look at it, and whether you're white or red, it was either 'the march of civilization,' or 'conquest.' Anyhow, the five 'civilized' tribes, the Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Seminoles, were told that if they'd give their eastern lands to white men, the territory later to be known as Oklahoma would be theirs forever. In the words of the treaty, they were to have it 'for as long as grass shall grow and waters run.' Moving these tribes took almost twenty years, from 1828 to 1846, and it wasn't a nice thing, because some of the uprooted Indians suffered terribly, but finally they were here."

Alec interrupted again. "If the land was given to the Indians, how can we take it?" he asked.

"I was coming to that, Alec. The 'civilized' tribes were different. They knew white men. They saw that white men had a better way of living, and so they copied it. They had their farms, their schools, their churches, their stores. They lived much as we do and even owned slaves. Then came the Civil War, and almost all of them lined up with the South. The government claimed that by this 'rebellion,' the tribes had violated their treaty rights. That began it. There were a lot of people west of the Mississippi by that time, and they wanted to know why they weren't allowed to have land that no longer belonged to the Indians anyway."

"Be sure to tell about the cattlemen," Cindy murmured.

"Sure thing. Great herds of cattle, gathered in Texas for delivery to Kansas railheads, were driven across the territory. At first the cattlemen asked only that their herds be allowed to graze while passing through. Then they wanted grazing land to fatten cattle, and one way or another they got a lot of it. So there was something else to fight about. If homesteaders could have no part of Oklahoma, why were wealthy cattlemen allowed to take so much of it? Then came the 'Boomers.'"

Alec smiled. Cindy clasped her hands excitedly.

"Somebody," Pete continued, "found out that part of Oklahoma, the section soon to be opened, had been given up by the Creeks and Seminoles at the end of the Civil War and had never been assigned to any other tribe. They became the 'unassigned lands,' and the boom was on. At first it was unimportant, because only a few people trickled in. Then, just

about ten years ago, a very great man, Captain David L. Payne, saw the possibilities in Oklahoma and he organized the Boomers. Captain Payne personally led several expeditions of colonists into the unassigned lands. Each time the soldiers forced them to leave."

"Is he here now?" Mindy asked.

"No," said Pete. "He died about five years ago, but Captain William Couch, and I'm sure he's on the border, took over. He made another attempt to establish a colony in 1885. When that colony was disbanded by soldiers, the Boomers decided that no one can fly in the face of the law. So they tried to have the unassigned lands legally declared open to homesteaders. There was plenty of opposition. Most of it came from the cattlemen who did not want to lose their free range, but the Indian tribes worked against it too. However, the Boomers won, and here we are."

"Were you a Boomer?" Mindy asked breathlessly.

"I was a Boomer," Pete said. "I've been in there three times, and three times I've been marched out by soldiers. But though the soldiers did hold Captain Payne and a few others prisoners for a while, about all they ever did to the rest was escort us back over the border. Because I know the country, I know where your dad and I can get ourselves two of the prettiest claims in Oklahoma if someone doesn't already have them."

"How can anyone already have them?" Alec questioned. "The border isn't supposed to be opened before high noon on the 22nd of April."

Pete sounded a little grim. "That's right, Alec, and nobody who crosses before that time is supposed to have legal title to any land he may stake. But a lot of people have gone in anyhow. They're hiding in the thickets and along the creek bottoms. They'll stake land, and some of them will get away with it. There aren't enough soldiers to find all of them and bring them back."

"What will you do if some of them are on the claims you and Dad want?" Cindy asked.

"Then there could be an argument," Pete said. "If we lose to somebody who crosses when he should, well and good. But we won't lose to anyone who has sneaked across before he should."

"Do you think there'll be trouble?" Alec sounded worried.

"I doubt it, Alec, but we must be ready if it comes."

Mindy knitted puzzled brows. "There is much I do not understand."

"If you have any questions," Pete said, "I'll try to answer them."

"Thank you, Mr. Brent. Please tell me how close we are to Oklahoma."

"We could almost throw a stone into it from this wagon," Pete said.

"Then why," Mindy asked, "can't the first people across simply stake the first claims they find?"

"They can do just that, and some of them will," Pete said. "But a great many people here on the border know where the best claims are. They're old-time Boomers, or they've been in before, or in some cases, a group of people have banded together to send a scout on ahead to find them a place. The really hot race will be for the best land."

"I see," said Mindy, "but you speak of claims. How are people to know where their claim ends and another begins?"

"All the homesteads have been surveyed and marked," Pete said. "They are, of course, a hundred and sixty acres each. Many of the town sites—they're three hundred and twenty acres—have been decided in advance too. But they haven't been measured into lots, and there's going to be trouble. People will stake anything, I believe, then find out they've located in a street, or on school property, or something like that."

"How will all these people get the things they need?" Mindy pursued.

"The railroad you came in on, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, runs through the territory. Freight wagons can take supplies from their depots."

"Will everyone get land?" Mindy questioned.

Pete said, "They can't, because there isn't that much. With just under two million acres being opened up, most of which will be 160-acre homesteads, that makes something less than fifteen thousand claims. At a rough guess, even if you include all the town lots, there are three times as many people lined up on the border as there are claims. Who's going to get the land?"

"The strong and fast," Cindy said.

"And the smart and lucky," Pete added. "That's pretty much the way it always has been and always will be. In the advance of progress, and this is progress, somebody usually gets left behind. No doubt, many of the people who are able to stake no claim will feel cheated. No doubt the Indians will think they've been cheated, when cities and towns spring up. Especially the Seminoles. They used to own this area—didn't actually give it up till a few months ago. But with farmers who know the right farming methods, that land will go a long way toward helping feed a hungry world. The Indians couldn't develop it the way the white men are going to do—there aren't enough of them."

Cindy gave herself over to dreams. Thousands of land-hungry people poised on the border awaiting the signal that would send them across! Wild riding! A mad scramble! Possibly danger. Certainly adventure. It was an entrancing picture that she conjured up for herself.

"I'd love to go along!" she said impulsively.

"Me too!" Alec seconded. "But Dad says I must stay here and look after mother and you twins until the claim is ready. I'll look after Gramps and Granny too, Mr. Brent."

Pete said gently, "Thanks a lot, Alec." He turned to Mindy, "How about you?"

"I'll wait," Mindy said quietly.

"You're right," said Pete. "Alec, you and Cindy, and I know it's Cindy now because Mindy's been asking most of the questions, mustn't feel badly. You're better off here. Oklahoma will be no place for youngsters, or old people, until the claims are staked and everything is straightened out."

"I'd still love to go!" Cindy said defiantly.

"Now forget it!" Pete laughed. "You can't go."

"Somebody else," Cindy was half in tears, "always has all the fun!"

"Oh, Cindy!" Pete was hurt because he had hurt her, and he wanted to make up for it. "I was hoping you'd do a very important job for me here. Can you ride?"

"Can she ride!" Alec answered for his sister. "The horse hasn't been born that can throw Cindy! Mindy's a good rider too."

"Good!" Pete said. "Now, of my two roan ponies, one is about as fast as the other. I'm going to saddle both and leave one here for you. As soon as your dad and I have gone, you take the one I leave, ride to the telegraph station, and send this message to John Brent, care of Dasher and Brent, 816 Fourth Street, New York City. Say: '*The Run is on. Pete gone. All is well.*' Will you do that?"

"If you want me to." Cindy suspected that Pete just wanted to give her something to do, but she felt a little better anyhow.

"I'd go," the conscientious Alec stared into the darkness, "but I'm not supposed to leave Mother. Why'd you ask Dad to ride with you, Mr. Brent?"

"Because I'd hoped to be able to pick at least one of my neighbors, and I picked the Simpsons."

"Children," their mother called softly. "Time for bed."

"See you tomorrow," Pete said as they rose to go. "And you mark my words. April 22, 1889, the day of this Oklahoma Run, will be a great day for the nation. Why, you three will see history made!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Sooners

In their own bed in the wagon, Cindy snuggled close against her twin sister. Cindy had never been on a train, but it sounded like a wonderful adventure, and she whispered, "Tell me about your train ride."

Mindy told her. She described the locomotive, the engineer leaning out of its window, and the sweating fireman who shoveled coal into its hungry vitals. She described each of the cars, and the people who had been in each. Mindy told of her seat in the day coach, of the people who sat in front of her, the people who sat behind her, and the people who sat across from her. She spoke of the conductor, the conductor's blue uniform, and the big brass buttons on his uniform. She described the way the car's wheels clicked on the rails, and how they seemed to sing a song. Mindy told of the depots, the various areas through which she had passed, and ended with a complete description of the box lunch Grandma Simpson had given her to take along.

Cindy sighed and pulled the covers up to her chin. Having Mindy tell of the ride was *nearly* as good as taking such a ride herself. There was a silence which Mindy broke:

"You looked so grand when you were putting on your magic show. And even though I know how you did it, I was scared when you 'killed' yourself. Often I wish I dared do the things you do."

"The things *I* do!" Cindy exclaimed. "Why, you're the only person in the world who's ever been able to pet Mr. Brent's Thunder pony!"

She spoke more loudly than she had intended, and their mother overheard. "Children," Mrs. Simpson called, "go to sleep now."

Mindy dropped into gentle slumber, but Cindy was far too excited to sleep. She thought of the train ride, and of how dearly she would love to take such a ride herself, but since there seemed to be no possibility of that, she began thinking of what lay about her and everything Pete Brent had said. It seemed to her that if she too could make the ride into Oklahoma, it would be even more wonderful than riding on a train. Maybe if she pleaded.... But the answer would be *no*.

Her father and mother began to talk in low voices, and though Cindy did not try to listen, she couldn't help hearing.

"I'm worried, Jed," her mother said. "I can't help thinking that something will go wrong."

"Now, Ann," Jed Simpson soothed, "you know very well that I can take care of myself."

"Yes, but—Oh, Jed! I always hated to see you wear a gun when you were marshal back in Lowville! But please wear it this time!"

Cindy became more alert. So her quiet father had been a gun-carrying law officer! She'd never known.

"Now don't you worry," she heard her father say, "I'll take the gun even though I don't expect to have any use for it."

"I'll be terrified if you don't!" Ann Simpson said. "I couldn't bear to think of you out there with no way to defend yourself! All those people!"

"They're good people, Ann. There's nothing to fear. You heard what Pete said."

"I heard him say that ninety-five per cent of them are good and he wouldn't care to cross the border without his gun! Oh, I do wish we'd stayed in Missouri!"

"In Missouri I was just a hired man," Mr. Simpson reminded her.

"But we always had enough, and we were happy. To give it up and take these awful risks!"

"Now, Ann," Cindy's father's voice became firm, "this is the Simpsons' chance, perhaps the only one we'll ever have, to rise in the world. There may be some small risk, but nobody ever gained anything without risking something. Think of the children, and of how much more we'll be able to give them if we have our own farm instead of depending on a hired

man's wages."

"But there aren't even any schools out there!"

"There will be," Jed Simpson said. "Schools will follow on the heels of the settlers. So will roads, towns, and even cities! And do you know who one schoolteacher might be?"

"Who?"

"Mrs. Jed Simpson."

"Jed!"

"I mean it, Ann. You're a college graduate. And stop thinking of Oklahoma as an empty wilderness. It may be that now, but within a week it'll be settled. And it will need more than farmers. We'll need doctors, carpenters, storekeepers, and above all, schoolteachers. Working together, with each contributing to the best of his ability, we'll build a new and mighty state!"

There was a short silence, and then Ann Simpson spoke again.

"Forgive me, Jed," she said. "Knowing you, I should have known that you would have no small plan. Yes, I see it too, and I will be a schoolteacher if we have to hold our first school in the open air. I won't promise not to worry, and I won't be happy until I'm with you again, and please take your gun!"

"I'll take it," Jed Simpson promised her.

Cindy dropped off to sleep and almost immediately fell into a happy dream. She was mounted on one of Pete's ponies. Free as a bird and swift as the wind, she skimmed over the enticing grasslands just across the border to help her father and Pete stake claims.

Cindy rolled over and cried out in her sleep. The man with cat's eyes had crept into her dream and made it a troubled one. She awakened shivering, and did not go back to sleep for nearly an hour. But when she did, there were no more dreams.

The next time she awakened, she smelled wood smoke and heard people moving about. Breakfast fires were being kindled at every camp and wagon. Cindy sat up in bed, and Mindy stirred beside her. Very softly, Cindy patted her sister's cheek.

"It's morning," she said.

"Oh-h! So it is!" Mindy stretched and sat up drowsily.

Mindy donned the dress she had worn last night, but Cindy reached into her own carpetbag for some underwear, blue jeans, and a shirt that Alec had worn when he was ten. The clothing just fitted her if she turned up the jeans' cuffs and rolled the shirt sleeves to her elbows. It was not quite a lady's garb, but it offered much more freedom than any clinging dress. Eyes wide with astonishment, Mindy stared at her sister.

"Cindy!" she exclaimed.

"I want to save my dresses," Cindy said.

"What will Mother say?"

"She doesn't care," said Cindy, who was not at all sure just what Mother would say. "I wore these all the way out here."

They slipped out the back flaps of the wagon to find their mother building a breakfast fire. She greeted the twins, smiled, and in her heart Cindy gave thanks for an understanding mother who, while wishing her daughters to be ladylike, knew why girls sometimes thought boys had all the fun. Their father was grooming Sunshine, and Alec was giving the mules their hay.

"Time you were up, sleepyheads!" Alec called cheerfully when he saw the twins.

Mindy smiled, Cindy made a face at her brother, and both turned to help their mother. Mindy, who had had no camp experience but had always helped in the kitchen, mixed pancake batter. Cindy cut slices from a side of bacon and arranged the tableware. Their mother put the big coffee pot over the fire and got out her griddle.

"I'll do the cooking if you want me to," Cindy offered.

"No, thank you, dear," her mother declined. "I'll feel better if I keep busy."

"Hello, neighbors."

Granny Brent had come out of her wagon and was about to start a breakfast fire. White-haired and wrinkled, but not stooped or stiff, Granny had spent much time in wagons and knew exactly how to do everything. She smiled in her wonderfully gentle fashion.

"Well, well! So the other twin has arrived! Do come here, child, and let me look at you!"

Mindy went trustingly over to become acquainted with Granny Brent. Cindy and Alec and their father waved gaily to the old lady, and Mrs. Simpson's face became less troubled. Granny and Gramps were living proof that people could dare to cross a new frontier and live. They'd come to Kansas many years ago, and this was to be their third homestead.

Mrs. Simpson pushed the sizzling bacon slices to one side, poured batter onto the hot griddle. As soon as they were cooked, she scooped the golden-brown pancakes into a covered dish that was near enough to the fire to stay warm. Finally she called:

"Breakfast!"

The family ate hungrily for, as the children's mother remarked, it did seem that life in the open air gave all of them the appetites of horses that had gone without hay for a week. As soon as everyone had finished, Mr. Simpson went over to plan with Pete Brent. Cindy got out the big dishpan and Mindy prepared to help her, but again Mrs. Simpson waved them aside.

"Leave the dish washing up to me," she said. "I must have something to do. You children run along, and Cindamine, please stay out of trouble."

"I will," Cindy promised.

"Let's take a walk," Alec suggested.

The three children walked south along the line of camps, marveling at the people who had gathered here.

Next to Pete Brent's wagon was a lean and fiercely bearded man who had no camp except a bed roll thrown on the ground. He had no possessions except the bed roll, a few cooking utensils, and a beautiful race horse that he was forever either grooming or exercising. He was grooming it when the children passed, and they hurried because the bearded man was an unfriendly person who seldom spoke to anyone.

Then came three camps, one behind the other. The first belonged to an old man with a sorry-looking mule and a small tent. A little to one side and about thirty feet away was a tent belonging to two young men who owned a smart buggy, or light wagon, drawn by two handsome horses. The young men seemed little interested in anything except having a good time. Directly behind them was another wagon occupied by a tired-looking man, an equally tired woman, and four lively children. Scrawled in black paint on the wagon's cover was:

FROZE OUT IN MINNYSOTA. FLOODED OUT IN ILLYNOIS. BURNT OUT IN NEBRASKY. GRASSHOPPERED OUT IN KANSAS. MAKE OUT IN OKLYHOMY.

For as far as the children could see in either direction were tents, wagons, bed rolls, and even a few caves dug into the earth. These camps were occupied by men, women, and children who, almost without exception, had two things in common. They were very poor people who had never been able to buy land of their own, and they had never given up the idea that to have some would be glorious. So these they shared: poverty and dreams. There were very few among them whose camps, rigs, teams, or dress indicated that they had any money to spare.

Directly across were a dozen tents wherein lived a detachment of the soldiers who were guarding the border. Formerly their job had been to look after the Indians, and to see that no Boomers were allowed to stay in Oklahoma. Now they were patrolling the border to see that nobody crossed before they should, and to evict any who did. Even as Cindy, Mindy, and Alec watched, eight of these soldiers in the command of a jovial-looking sergeant came in sight.

With them rode eight sullen-faced men. The sergeant called to the people who gathered to watch, "Make way there! These men crossed a little sooner than they should, and we caught them!"

The soldiers took their captives between the lines of watching people, most of whom were angry. Women glared at the prisoners. Men clenched their fists. Near Cindy, Mindy, and Alec, a middle-aged man started talking to a younger one.

"Sooner than they should, huh?" he growled. "Bet these 'Sooners' got most of the good claims already staked or are waitin' in there to stake 'em!"

"Sooners, huh?" the young man said. "Good name for 'em, pop. I'd sooner draw a bead on one of 'em than on a rattlesnake. Got no use for anyone who won't wait for the openin' gun an' take his chances with the rest."

The name spread among the assembled people, and there were more angry murmurings about the Sooners.

"Sergeant!" a man called. "Leave these Sooners with us! We'd like to talk with 'em."

"Now, now," the sergeant grinned. "I can't do that."

A little way from the crowd he stopped his prisoners, waved a piece of paper, and addressed the Sooners.

"Got your names here, boys, and I aim to spread 'em," he said. "Go back across if you think it's healthy. But I guess you know what people here think of Sooners."

The soldiers wheeled and rode back across the border. As soon as they were far enough away, the muttering people closed in. Putting spurs to their horses, the Sooners galloped away as fast as they could.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ready for the Run

A couple of days later, Alec sat near the Simpsons' wagon, watching his father exercise Sunshine. Controlling the beautiful mare entirely by the way he swayed his body and with a very light touch on the reins, Jed Simpson put Sunshine into a canter. Then he drew her back to a trot, and Alec sighed wistfully.

Tomorrow was April 22, the day of the great Run, and it was impossible not to share the excitement that mounted all along the border. Alec tried hard to calm down. He was not going to make the ride into Oklahoma, and he knew it. His father had asked him to stay with the wagon and take care of his mother and sisters. Duty was plain, and there could be no shirking. All the Simpsons had to work together for the good of all.

He must not, Alec told himself, even *wish* that he could make the ride. But because he couldn't help wishing, he felt a little guilty. His father brought Sunshine back, staked her on the picket rope, and began to rub her down.

"She's in shape," he called to his son. "She'll make it."

Alec said, "I'm sure she will."

"Come a little closer, will you, Alec?"

Alec went nearer, and his father lowered his voice. "I want to talk to you confidentially, son. You'll take good care of your mother and the twins?"

"Yes, Dad."

Mr. Simpson grinned nervously, and Alec sensed that he too had given way to the general excitement. His father spoke again, "I know I can depend on you."

"Yes, you can."

"Pete and I are going as light as possible, with only a little food," Mr. Simpson said. "The important thing is to get the claims staked. Nor do I want your mother out there until there is a good house ready for her. I want it to seem like home when she comes. But we'll need one wagon and some tools as soon as possible after the land is ours. If we take Pete's, his father and mother can move into ours until we send for that too. Now, after this crowd gets out of here, your mother and the twins will be all right, and I won't be afraid to leave them alone. Think you can bring Pete's wagon up when I send for you?"

"Oh, yes. I can handle the team."

"Good. Of course I'll send someone to show you the way. Now—What in tarnation is that sister of yours up to?"

Hands clasped around and chin resting on her knees, Cindy was looking intently at a big and battle-scarred old cat that had strayed into the camp. With his tail curled around his paws, the cat stared back at the girl. Presently he rose, walked over to her, and began to rub himself against her legs. Cindy stroked him and continued to watch closely. Jed Simpson chuckled.

"What does she find so interesting about that old cat?" he asked.

Alec grinned. "I think she's looking at its eyes," he replied.

"Why look at a cat's eyes?" Mr. Simpson demanded.

"Remember what Granny Bevers said about good luck following us if we would beware a man with cat's eyes? Cindy thought she saw such a man in camp."

Jed Simpson shook his head. "That girl gets the blamest ideas!"

Suddenly a big hound dog that had crept up behind a near-by wagon roared his challenge and rushed the cat. Without

hesitation, the cat jumped on Cindy's shoulders and turned to face his enemy. The dog charged angrily in, bowling Cindy over in the process. The cat snarled. There was a short, sharp fight on top of the prostrate youngster until, leaving the cat in full possession of the field, the dog ran howling away.

Alec and his father, who had started running forward the instant the cat leaped, arrived to find Cindy picking herself up and brushing herself off. Her eyes were shining, and an excited smile trembled on her lips.

"Oh boy!" she exclaimed. "What a fight!"

"Are you hurt?" her father asked anxiously.

"Me?" Cindy looked astonished that anyone should ask such a question. "Oh, no!"

"Doggone!" Alec burst out. "If you fell in a rain barrel you'd come out with your pockets full of cookies!"

"Of course," Cindy said sweetly.

The cat resumed rubbing against her legs, and Cindy looked fondly at it. Sure that she was not hurt, and far too excited to stay in one place for very long, Jed Simpson walked over to discuss with Pete Brent plans that they had already discussed a dozen times. Alec smirked at his sister.

"There's something I *will* believe," he declared.

"What?" Cindy asked.

"The cat has cat's eyes."

Cindy made a face. "Funny boy! That man's eyes were just like the cat's!"

"You're sure?" Alec asked.

"Very sure," Cindy said firmly. "I wish I could find him again."

"Seems he's 'being ware' of us. Guess your magic must have scared him away. Let's take a walk," Alec suggested.

"Let's get Mindy to go with us," Cindy said eagerly.

"Mindy's sewing," Alec said, and added smugly, "a proper pastime for a girl."

"I can sew too, smartypants," Cindy declared.

"Then why don't you?"

Cindy laughed. "I'd rather do almost anything else. Come on. Let's walk."

They strolled among the camps and wagons, and it seemed that every day brought more people who were determined to claim the free land in Oklahoma. A creaking wagon drawn by six oxen and commanded by a bearded man carrying an ox goad came in and stopped. The man smoothed his beard with his fingers.

"How far to Oklahoma?" he called to a man who was soaping a saddle.

"Hundred yards," the man said without looking up.

The ox driver stared across the border. He said, as though he had reason to doubt it, "So that's Oklahoma?"

"Yup," the other man continued industriously to soap his saddle, "an' you better not cross afore noon tomorra. They're kickin' more Sooners out every day."

Cindy shivered. "It's so exciting!" she exclaimed.

"Sure is!" Alec glowed.

It seemed that everyone had been bitten by an invisible bug which continued to bite and would permit no rest. Hands

clasped behind his back, the man who owned the race horse paced restlessly back and forth, almost as though someone had measured off a space and ordered him to walk in it forever. His cheeks were red and his eyes bright, almost feverish. He looked at the two children as they passed without even seeing them.

The family that hoped to "make out in Oklyhomy" were all busy, the man oiling harness, the woman and her oldest daughter piling boxes in the wagon, and the three smaller children getting in the way. The two lively young men were having a wrestling match. The old man was looking earnestly at his sorry-looking mule and saying over and over again, "Now, mule, we got to go. We got to go, mule."

"Where you got to go?" somebody called.

"Oklahoma," the old man said. "Now, mule, we got to go. We got to go, mule."

A reckless rider on a plunging horse rode through the camp. His horse, jumping suddenly sidewise, knocked over one of two water pails that were standing beside a tent. The owner of the pails, a fat man dressed only in red underwear, ran out of the tent and shook his fist.

"Come back and do that again!" he yelled.

"All right! I will!"

The reckless rider turned his horse, came back, knocked over the other water pail, then, laughing, rode off. The fat man raised his arms heavenwards and roared at the top of his voice. Then, shrugging, he picked up his pails and, still wearing only red underwear, went to get more water.

A bevy of youngsters were playing tag near by. "Join the game!" a freckle-faced boy about Alec's age called.

"Let's!" Cindy said eagerly.

"Play tag, when the border's opening tomorrow?" Alec questioned.

"Oh!" the freckle-face bristled. "So you're too good to play tag with us!"

He swaggered up to Alec, raised a threatening hand, and the battle was about to be joined when Cindy brought her shoe sharply down on the freckle-face's bare foot. He cried "Ooh!" and began to hop about on one foot. Seizing Alec's hand, Cindy ran like a deer.

She led him around a wagon, dodged around another, then ducked behind a tent. They stopped running and peered cautiously around the tent. Freckle-face and his friends were hunting determinedly for them. But they were hunting in the wrong direction.

"I could have licked him!" Alec glowered.

"But not him and all his friends," Cindy reminded her brother. "Besides, Mother doesn't want you fighting at all, and even Father would be angry if you fought on Sunday. We'd better get back to our own wagon, or we'll be late for church services."

For the first time, the hubbub quieted as people gathered to worship. The church was an open space among the camps and wagons, the pulpit a wagon box, and the preacher an unlettered farmer named John Taber. But his heart was sincere, and his beliefs were honest. Attempting no great oration, he spoke of brotherly love, of peace, and of helpful activities. He reminded all present that, regardless of how bitter or harsh their future struggles might seem, they would never be alone or deserted, for He who was above all would never forsake them. All along the 200-mile border, similar services were taking place.

For a while after religious services the people were calmer, but few could stay that way.

Jed Simpson started inspecting Sunshine's hoofs. Mindy and her mother resumed sewing. Mrs. Simpson's head was bent as though she wanted to hide the fear that lurked in her face. Cindy helped Pete Brent groom his ponies while Alec groomed the Simpsons' wagon mules. Only Granny and Gramps, sitting quietly side by side and finding in each other something much more interesting than others found in excited thoughts of free land, seemed calm and at ease.

All night long men shouted, now and again guns exploded, and usually somebody had his voice raised in song. Tomorrow was the day of glory. Tomorrow the border opened, and the few who might have slept could not because the rest were making so much noise.

Dawn was breaking when Cindy finally went to sleep. Dimly through the slumber that was enfolding her she heard an anguished "Has anybody seen a strayed mule?"

Somebody else yelled, "Here's your mule, Joe!"

CHAPTER FIVE

April 22, 1889

There had never been, Cindy thought when she awakened and peered through the partly open wagon flaps, a more beautiful day. The air was so clear that it seemed possible to look almost to the other end of the world. The sky was cloudless, and though the bright sun held a promise of heat to come with afternoon, a gentle little breeze made the morning pleasant and cool.

Cindy was astonished to find her bed empty and a little afraid because she heard nothing. Had she slept right through the great Run? Was everybody already in Oklahoma? She dressed hurriedly and leaped out of the wagon to find her family waiting and everyone else still present.

But the mood of the whole border had changed.

Yesterday it had been noisy, boisterous, excited. But yesterday all had been at loose ends, and this morning the crowd was like a tightly wound spring. When it finally let go, nothing would be able to stop it.

Mrs. Simpson started cooking bacon for Cindy, but she tried hard not to look at anybody at all. Sensing the changed mood, Cindy attempted to rid herself of it and could not.

"Why didn't you wake me, Mother?" she asked.

"There was no need, dear," her mother said. "With all the shouting and screaming last night, you had little enough sleep anyway."

"That's right," Mindy agreed. "I awakened several times, and you hadn't yet gone to sleep."

"Did you sleep?" Cindy asked her twin.

"Well, not very much, but more than you did."

"I slept," Alec boasted. "The last thing I remember, somebody wanted to know about a strayed mule, and somebody else said, 'Here's your mule, Joe!'"

"Then you didn't sleep much either," Cindy said. "Dawn was breaking when that happened!"

Alec said, "Aw, I don't need sleep."

"Sit down and eat your breakfast, dear," said Cindy's mother.

Cindy ate her bacon and biscuits, but though ordinarily she was hungry as a starving wolf, this morning she had no appetite. Alec, usually the friendliest of people, seemed cold and withdrawn, almost a stranger. The gentle Mindy stared into the fire. Her face drawn, Mrs. Simpson kept her own thoughts. Jed Simpson, who had been staring into Oklahoma, turned to put his family at ease.

"Come now!" he said heartily. "This isn't a funeral! Today's the day the Simpsons get their own farm!"

"Why, of course," said Mrs. Simpson. "We must look at the good side."

But, though Jed and Ann Simpson could almost always reassure their family and each other, this time both sounded very uncertain. Try as they would, neither could be relaxed and comfortable. Because they couldn't, they could not make their children feel that way either.

"I'll clean up," Mrs. Simpson said.

She began to work furiously, washing each plate until it shone and then polishing it until it gleamed. She was trying to find in hard work forgetfulness of the uncertainty that lay ahead, and to some small extent she succeeded. For the third time in ten minutes, Jed Simpson looked at his watch.

"What time is it?" Alec asked.

"Twenty past nine," his father said.

He went off to look at Sunshine, and even the horse seemed tense and taut, as though she also felt the vast importance of this day. She had eaten her oats, but instead of paying any attention to her hay she trampled it as she shuffled about. Her head was high and constantly turning. She looked all about the camp and now and again turned to stare at Oklahoma, as though somehow realizing what was over there and what it meant.

Across the border, a blue-uniformed soldier rode a brown horse on a measured beat, going to one end of his assigned beat and then turning to come back. Such soldiers were stationed at intervals, and within hearing distance of each other, along the entire border. Exactly at high noon some of them would blow bugles and some would shoot their revolvers or rifles into the air. This would signal the opening of the border, and the Run would be on.

Pete Brent came over with two white flags fastened to four-foot long slender sticks that were pointed at one end. In the center of each flag Granny had crocheted a gold star. Pete gave one of the flags to Jed Simpson.

Pete gave one of the flags to Jed Simpson

"Here you are. When we reach our claims, just ram it into the ground any place at all, and you've staked."

"Oh." Glad for something to do, Mr. Simpson held the flag high and waved it. He looked at it closely, as though it were some complicated thing that needed close attention and not just a simple banner. "Those are mighty fine flags, Pete."

"They're high enough, and nobody can miss a white flag," Pete said. "People will know our claims are staked."

"What do you do then?" asked Mindy.

"As I've told you, Mindy," Pete said, "the homesteads have already been surveyed and the corners marked. Some are marked by blazes on trees, but the ones we want have piles of rocks, and I know exactly where they are. After we've staked, we'll build the corners a little higher so nobody can miss them either."

They continued to talk, and even though they had already discussed everything they were talking about now, it comforted them to discuss it again. Ann Simpson raised her head, stole a long look at her husband, and turned away again. Her face was haggard and drawn.

"I'll help you, Mother," Cindy offered.

"I will too," Mindy said.

"No, thank you, children, I'll do it," Mrs. Simpson replied.

She had baked biscuits two days before, not because there was no time to bake fresh ones today but because Jed and Pete would carry these, and stale bread would not crush so easily. She put the biscuits carefully into a sack, tied the sack in the center, and put a slab of bacon and some beans in the other side.

Stale biscuits, bacon, and beans were all the food the two men would have until they sent for Pete's wagon. But the less weight Sunshine had to carry, the faster and farther she'd be able to run. With the biscuits on one side, and the bacon and beans on the other, the sack could be carried across Sunshine's saddle bow.

"Come over here, children."

It was a calm voice in a great storm, peace amid turmoil. Gramps and Granny Brent, practically the only human beings present who were not under strain and tension, were sitting serenely beside the Brent wagon. Cindy, Mindy, and Alec

went gladly to them.

"Be of good heart, children," Granny said calmly. "There is nothing to fear."

"Are you sure?" Alec asked worriedly.

"It is a great thing," Gramps was calm as Granny, "a wonderful and glorious sight. I am glad I have lived to see it. As long as human beings strive for that which is better, the human race can never be lost."

"But there's danger!" Mindy whispered.

"Aye," Granny remained unruffled, "and people were made to cope with danger. It is only when they shrink from that which they should face, that their souls shrink too."

"I remember when we went to Kansas," Gramps began.

He went on to speak of bitter storms, endless grasslands, crop failures, hostile Indians, unfriendly white men. Then he balanced his tale with stories of abundant crops, sunshine, plenty for all, dancing, and happiness. Sitting at the feet of these two, who had lived almost as long as people can live and seen almost as much as people can see, the children forgot their own fears and worries, and they almost forgot the passage of time.

"It's ten minutes past eleven!" somebody yelled.

Trying his best to look at ease, but making a poor job of it, Pete came to the wagon. He smiled at his parents and the youngsters.

"Guess I'll saddle the ponies," he said.

"Are you taking two, Pete?" Gramps asked.

"No. Just one. Cindy's riding the other roan to the telegraph office to let John know the Run is on."

"John's our other son," Granny said softly. "He wasn't born for the West, but he does very well in New York." She followed Pete with her eyes. "Pete is young, and he feels as the young do. That is good."

Pete came back with his two saddled ponies. "Which one do you want, Cindy?" he asked.

"You take the best one," Cindy said anxiously.

"There's no choice between 'em. Here," he handed the reins of one pony to Cindy, "you take Sparkle."

Granny came with a sack much like the one Ann Simpson had prepared for her husband, and Pete tied it to his saddle bow. He strapped the flag to one side, so that his legs would go over it. Then he embraced his parents.

"I'll send for you," he promised.

"We know," Granny said calmly.

"We'll be waiting," said Gramps.

Over at the Simpson wagon, Jed had saddled and packed Sunshine too. Pete tried hard not to make his smile a nervous one.

"Guess we might as well start from over there," he suggested.

"We'll go with you," Granny said. "Ann may want a woman around."

But if Ann Simpson was afraid, she gave no sign of it now. Her husband was going across the border into no one knew what danger, but he was going with a strong and steadfast heart. Tears might come later, but a smile would urge him on.

Cindy tied Sparkle to a wagon wheel and looked up and down the line of camps and wagons. There seemed to be twice as many people as there had been before, as though they had sprung from the ground. Everyone with a horse had it saddled, those with wagons had them ready, and there were still a great many who must run on foot. Cindy giggled.

There was one man with a high-wheeled bicycle which he evidently intended to ride into Oklahoma.

A desperate-looking man approached them and indicated Pete's two remaining ponies. "Those yours?" he asked hoarsely.

"That's right," Pete said.

"I'll give you fifty dollars to let me ride one today," the man said.

"No," said Pete. "I can't take the chance. Ponies will be hard to get for a long while."

The man turned appealingly to Jed Simpson. "Are those your mules?"

"Yes."

"I'll give you fifty dollars to let me ride one in the Run."

"I can't risk it," said Jed. "I'll need them to work my farm."

The man moaned softly and went on to offer the next person with a horse or mule fifty dollars to ride it in the Run.

"He'll get nothing," Pete said. "There isn't a saddle animal for sale or rent the length of the border. What time is it, Jed?"

"Five minutes to twelve. We'd better get ready."

Jed turned to kiss his wife, and he tried to be very calm. But his hands were trembling, and tears lurked in his eyes. He smiled at his children.

"Be good, and help your mother," he bade.

Then Pete and Jed swung into their saddles as a great hush descended on the border. All eyes were on the soldier who was to give the signal for this section. He had stopped riding back and forth and was waiting. His revolver was in his hand. As soon as the officer who was timing it ordered the soldier nearest him to do so, that soldier would give the signal. All the rest would pick it up and it would resound clear around the border.

But it was not the soldier who shot.

It was a man down the line. Cindy saw him very plainly, and he shot a full three minutes before high noon. But nothing could stop the assembled home seekers now. They surged forward, and almost instantly the Run formed a pattern. The lean, bearded man with the race horse shot ahead of all the rest.

"They're all Sooners now," Granny Brent said, chuckling. "Oklahoma, the Sooner State."

"Oh!" Ann Simpson gasped.

She had turned to look at the wagon, and now she was rooted in her tracks. Her face was white, her hands clasped to her cheeks. Forgotten in the excitement, Jed's gun hung on a peg.

Cindy leaped forward. She snatched the gun, jerked Sparkle's reins loose, mounted, and was away. Her mother's frantic "Cindy! Cindamine! Come back!" was drowned in the thunder of hoofs and the rattle of wagons.

CHAPTER SIX

Mindy

It seemed to Mindy, who did not even move, that somewhere she had seen all of this before. Cindy, always so quick to think and act, would naturally be the one to take her father's desperately needed gun to him. Alec, running toward the picket line to get Pete Brent's sorrel pony, would of course try to find Cindy and bring her back.

Then Mindy realized why it all seemed familiar. It was because, in such a situation, her brother and sister couldn't possibly have done anything else. But try as she would, Mindy could not even imagine herself doing anything so spirited and daring.

Alec bridled the sorrel pony, leaped on him bareback, and wheeled him past the Simpson wagon. "I'll find her, Mother!" he shouted as he sped toward the border.

Alec was gone, and Mindy saw a great crowd of running men with, here and there, a rider dashing among them. Occasionally, like a white sail in the distance, she saw the white cover of a wagon.

Mindy swallowed hard, and never before in her life had she felt such awful fear. Her father had gone into no one knew what danger. Cindy had followed him, and Alec had followed Cindy. Therefore, Cindy and Alec were in danger too. At the same time, though her heart was torn for her father, brother, and sister, Mindy knew that she must not give way to fear.

"That child certainly acts fast," said Granny Brent.

Mrs. Simpson said, "Cindamine was always headstrong."

"Maybe, but I'd call this quick thinking," Granny said. "Well, John won't get his message now. I do hope he doesn't worry."

And before she could stop herself, Mindy heard herself saying, "I'll take the message to the telegraph station."

Mrs. Simpson arched surprised brows. Mindy looked only briefly at her mother. She knew how Mrs. Simpson felt, because she herself felt the same way. But if she looked too long at her mother's face, the tears that were in her heart might leap into her eyes. That must not be.

"Do you think you can do it, Miranda?" her mother asked.

"I'm sure I can," said Mindy, who had to be sure because she dared be no other way. There was something to be done. Since those who normally would have done it were no longer here, those who were had to take over. Neither Mrs. Simpson nor Gramps or Granny could ride. That left only Mindy.

"There isn't any saddle," said Gramps.

"I'll ride bareback," Mindy said.

Gramps said, "Pete's horses aren't very fast."

"It's only two miles," Mindy pointed out.

"You'll be careful?" asked Mrs. Simpson, and Mindy knew that her mother was making a mighty effort to remain calm.

"I'll be very careful," Mindy promised.

"If you're going to ride," Mrs. Simpson said, "you had better put on some of Alec's outgrown clothes. You'll find some in Cindamine's carpetbag."

"Shall I write the message and the address to which it's going?" asked Gramps.

"No," said Mindy, who remembered every word. "I'm to send it to Mr. John Brent, care of Dasher and Brent, 816 Fourth

Street, New York City. I'm to say, '*The Run is on. Pete gone. All is well.*'"

"That's right," Gramps said. "Here is some money to pay for the telegram."

Mindy took the money and went into the Simpson wagon. She found underwear, blue jeans, and a shirt exactly like those Cindy was wearing. Mindy removed her own clothes and put them on, shivering a bit as she did so. It seemed perfectly fitting and natural for Cindy to wear such garb, but other girls wore dresses. However, without a side saddle, one could not ride very well while wearing a dress, and she must ride.

When Mindy stepped out of the wagon, it seemed that she had suddenly become as big as a house and that everyone was watching her. She breathed a sigh of relief because her mother, Granny, and Gramps were not in sight. As fast as she could, Mindy skipped over to Pete Brent's picket line.

She was a little puzzled. Cindy, who seemed to think it was something unusual, had told her she was the only person ever to pet Pete's Thunder pony, and Mindy did not understand what she had meant. Gramps had said that Pete's remaining horses, the big work team and Thunder, were not very fast. But if Thunder wasn't fast, his looks and the way he used his feet belied everything Mindy knew about horses.

Taking a bridle from Pete's harness rack, Mindy went to the picket line. The big work horses pricked their ears up and snorted softly. Thunder danced happily forward to meet her. Mindy looped the bridle reins around his neck to hold him, and she slipped his halter off. She put the bridle on, and Thunder took the bit willingly. Mindy grasped a handful of his mane and vaulted to his back.

Mindy vaulted to his back

Thunder danced gallantly, ran in a little circle just to show he could do it, then responded perfectly to the reins. Mindy guided him down the dirt road leading to the telegraph station. She knew the road, it was the one on which her father had brought her to the wagon.

For the first mile she held Thunder to a walk, and she did not look to either side. She still felt big as a house, and it seemed to her that everyone on the border must be looking and laughing at this girl who wore a boy's clothing and sat a horse astride. Then she began to feel more at ease.

Of course, dresses were the only proper garments for girls. But it was astonishing how much more freedom of movement a boy's clothing allowed, and nobody seemed to be laughing. Mindy began to steal glances at what lay about her.

Again, and in an unbelievably short time, the border had changed. There weren't nearly as many people as there had been, for most of the men had joined the Run into Oklahoma. Many wagons had gone, too. Most of the people left behind were women, children, and older people who were waiting for their men to stake claims and then send for them. They were all too deeply occupied with their own thoughts and troubles to give Mindy more than a passing glance.

She felt more and more at ease. Mindy touched Thunder with her heels.

The pony shot ahead, scarcely seeming to touch the earth as he did so. Mindy forgot that she was wearing a boy's clothing. For a while, so fast and wonderful was the ride, she almost forgot the dangers facing her father, Alec, and Cindy. Then she saw the depot in which the telegraph station was located and drew Thunder to a walk.

At least ten trains were moving slowly into Oklahoma. There were faces at every window of every car. Men clung to the platforms between the cars, and as many men as could find room there were sitting on the tops of the cars. Even as Mindy watched, a sack came sailing through an open window. A moment later, the man who had thrown his provisions out jumped through the same window and landed on his feet. But another face appeared at once. Plainly, there were as many people in each car as could possibly be squeezed into such a conveyance.

Mindy stopped Thunder at the little station. The agent in charge looked tired, but he smiled when he saw Mindy.

"Hello there, young lady," he said.

"Hello," said Mindy. "Gee! That's a lot of trains!"

"There were fifteen," the man said. "All of them made up at Arkansas City, up in Kansas. But they came the sixty miles through the Cherokee Strip to line up at the border just before noon."

"Where are all the people going?" Mindy inquired.

"Most of them are headed for Guthrie to stake city lots," the man said. "But some are jumping off to stake homesteads all the way between here and Guthrie. What can I do for you, young lady?"

Mindy gave the man her message, paid for it, and thanked him. Mounting Thunder, she rode at a swift clip back to the Simpsons' wagon. Looking very worried, her mother met her.

"Mindy!" Mrs. Simpson exclaimed. "Thank God! You're all right!"

"Why, of course, Mother," Mindy said.

"We thought you'd take a work horse!" Mrs. Simpson said. "The one you took is an outlaw!"

"Outlaw?" Mindy questioned. "Why, Thunder's the gentlest pony I ever saw!"

"Only with you then!" said Gramps. "Pete has all he can do to handle Thunder when he's saddled, and you rode him bareback! Nobody else in the world could have done that! You certainly have a way with horses!"

Mindy patted Thunder's neck. "He knew I'd never hurt him, so he wouldn't hurt me either." She looked around the camp, then asked the question she had hoped she'd not have to ask. "Didn't Cindy and Alec come back?"

"Not yet," said Mrs. Simpson.

"Don't you worry, Mother," Mindy said. "They'll come." But even as she spoke, she wished she could believe it herself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wild Ride

Nimble-footed as a deer, the roan pony Cindy rode responded instantly to the lightest touch of the reins. Cindy leaned forward in the saddle, giving all her attention to the task at hand and driven by just one thought. Her father must have his gun. Without it, he might run afoul of very grave danger.

She peered through the haze of dust that had been churned up by thousands of pounding feet ahead, and tried to see the pair she sought. They were nowhere in sight, and she hadn't the faintest idea in which direction they were going. But she must find them.

In the first few minutes, the Run was taking more definitely the only pattern it could have. The horsemen were surging ahead with, naturally, the best riders on the fastest mounts in the lead. Next came the wagons and carts, and last a horde of running people.

Cindy was among the people. She could not let the pony have his full speed because, if she did, she would knock somebody down. She wondered fleetingly where all the men had come from. There hadn't seemed to be nearly that many, but they were here now. Seeing an opening, she touched Sparkle with her heels, and he shot through the crowd.

For twenty yards she had clear riding, but ahead were more people. One, a burly man in a red shirt, heard hoofbeats behind him and looked over his shoulder. He turned, stopped, and when Sparkle came near he leaped at the pony's head.

"Give me that horse, boy!" he roared.

Cindy's heart caught in her throat, but Sparkle was true to his training. Frightened by the man's leap, he still obeyed the rein and swerved around him so closely that Cindy's leg brushed the man's shirt. As she rode on, she had time for a chuckle.

The burly man had thought she was a boy. Nobody expected to find a girl riding in this, the greatest and most exciting race in history. However, now that she had prevented one attempt to take her pony, she had confidence that she could foil others.

Riding expertly, she watched for open spaces through which she could guide Sparkle. Soon she drew ahead of most of the running men. Only the swiftest were in front of her now, and they were scattered. A lean man with a pack on his back was running desperately. Even as Cindy watched, he let his pack fall to the ground. Relieved of its weight, he ran a little faster, and when Cindy flashed past he yelled:

"Oklahoma! Yip-pee!"

Twenty yards farther on, a big man who was one of the leaders cast an anxious glance back over his shoulder. The man's face was sweat-streaked, and sweat-damp hair clung tightly to his head. He continued to run, peeling off his shirt as he did so, and when the shirt was in his hands he stopped running and threw it on the ground. Cindy knew he did so to mark this claim as his own.

"My claim!" he bellowed in a voice like a bull's. "My claim! Ever'body stay off my claim!"

When Cindy rode past he was still shouting. She risked a single backward glance to see the man who had staked his claim in a furious fist fight with the man who had thrown his pack away. Nobody stopped to watch the battle.

Cindy slackened the reins, touched Sparkle with her heels, and said softly to the pony, "Come on, Sparkle!"

He shot ahead like a coursing greyhound, and Cindy's heart began to sing. This was how she had felt when she had dreamed of riding into Oklahoma. Sparkle was not a horse but a bird, and at long last Cindy knew what it was to fly. She flew past the foremost of the running men and caught up with the slowest wagons. She drew abreast of the first, a heavy wagon pulled by four little horses.

His hair flying in the wind, a man stood on the seat with the reins in one hand and plying a whip with the other. He seemed in danger of falling off at any second. Nevertheless he leaned far forward, as though by simply pointing himself

at Oklahoma he could make the horses run faster. But they were already doing their best and had no more speed to offer. Cindy passed a man whose horse had fallen.

The horse, a nice-looking sorrel, was down in the hindquarters and up in the front. The man—and judging by his brightly checked suit and derby hat, he was a city man—was trying to make the horse get to his feet by pulling on the reins. But either the horse had been hurt by inexperienced riding and couldn't get up, or he was stubborn and wouldn't. Cindy rode on, at last understanding why Pete had refused to rent his ponies and her father his mules, even for the fabulous sum of fifty dollars. Far too many of the people riding in this great Run knew nothing about handling horses. Cindy drew up on the next wagon.

It was one she did not recognize, but the man driving it was a horseman. Instead of urging his beasts to their fullest speed, he was holding them in. Cindy applauded mentally. That man's horses might not be fresh, but they would be ready for one final spurt when many of the others were hopelessly exhausted. Cindy drew up on the next wagon.

She was pleased to see that it belonged to the family who had been "out" in so many places and must make out in Oklahoma. She hoped they'd get a claim, but as she passed, one of the horses began to stumble. Cindy choked back a sob. She could not stop and offer help because, above all, she must take the gun to her father.

Doing somewhat better than anyone except himself had thought he could, the man with the bicycle was ahead of all the wagons and pedaling furiously forward. Beside him, elbows flying like a bird's wings, and kicking both heels constantly into his mount's ribs, was the old man with the sorry-looking mule.

Only the very fast were ahead of her now. Sparkle, fleet-footed and long-winded, had the additional advantage of carrying probably the lightest rider in the Run. Far from faltering, he had reserves of speed and strength. Cindy held him in. She might need those reserves.

She began to worry. Where were her father and Pete Brent? The better to see, she rose in the stirrups. She saw scattered horsemen when she arose, but not the two she wanted. Cindy looked back at the onrushing crowd and for a moment wished she could go back. She dared not. Her father must have his gun.

The two men who appeared before her did so so unexpectedly that it was as though they had sprouted from the earth itself. Twenty feet apart, they stretched a rope between them. Almost certainly, they wanted to stop her and take Sparkle.

Cindy measured the shoulder-high rope with her eye as she rushed toward it. Coming near, she drew Sparkle up, and the roan pony cleared the rope with inches to spare.

"Stop, you!" one of the men roared.

No longer worried, Cindy flew on. While Sparkle was in the air, she had seen what she'd been unable to see before. There were very few horsemen ahead of her, but one of the horses had a tail that flashed pure white. It had to be Sunshine. Cindy let Sparkle run as fast as he could.

She mounted a little rise and discovered she had not made a mistake. Very plainly she saw her father and Pete. The only rider leading them was the lean man with the race horse, and he was in trouble. The horse had run a gallant race but had already given his best. Now he was faltering, and the lean man was beating him savagely with a quirt.

The horse stopped and stood with heaving sides and hanging head. The rider leaped off, threw his coat down, drew a gun, and turned to face Jed Simpson and Pete Brent. Cindy let Sparkle run until he was very near, then drew him to a walk. The thick grass muffled Sparkle's hoofbeats. Fully occupied with Jed and Pete, the man did not take his eyes from them.

"Go back!" Cindy heard him say. "Go back or I shoot! This is my claim! I staked it with my coat!"

"We don't want it," Pete said. "We're going farther on."

"I know your kind!" said the bearded man. "You're claim jumpers! Go back or I shoot!"

"Go back or I shoot!" he said

Cindy halted Sparkle. She drew her father's big revolver from its holster, steadied it across the saddle horn, and pointed it at the bearded man.

"You won't shoot anybody!" she said. "Drop your gun, or I'll shoot you!"

The bearded man looked startled. Then, very unwillingly, he let his gun fall. Mr. Simpson whirled.

"Cindy!" he gasped.

"You forgot your gun," Cindy called. "I brought it to you."

Pete slid his own gun from its holster and covered the bearded man.

"You can give your father his gun, Cindy," he said grimly. "This yahoo won't move."

"Oh, good!" Cindy breathed. "I don't know how to shoot anyhow."

She rode up to her father, handed him his gun, and Mr. Simpson buckled it about his waist. Pete Brent spoke sternly to the bearded man. "We don't want your claim, but if you feel like fighting, pick up your gun and go to it!"

"I thought you was claim jumpers!" the man said tremulously. "I rode a long an' hard piece to get me some land in Oklahoma."

"So did a lot of other people, and many of them will ride for nothing. Be careful who you're pulling a gun on after this!"

"I'm sorry," the bearded man said humbly.

"Cindy!" her father said. "You *can't* be here!"

"But I am here," Cindy pointed out.

"I'll have to take you back."

"If you do," Pete warned, "somebody else will stake your claim."

"Let me stay!" Cindy pleaded. "Let me stay, Dad! I won't be in the way, and maybe I can help!"

Her father said uncertainly, "It's no place for a girl."

"Please!" Cindy begged.

"It looks," Pete grinned, "as though we're three homesteaders instead of two."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Alec

Alec never acted without first planning, and the action he took depended on whatever his plan called for. Right now, he decided, he'd have to move swiftly if he hoped to catch Cindy before she was out of sight. He bridled Pete's sorrel pony, whose name was Carrots, and leaped astride him. Then he shouted his intentions to his mother and whirled Carrots toward Oklahoma.

At once, though it had taken less than a minute to reach and bridle the pony, he knew that he was too late. He'd noticed the running men and depended upon them to delay Cindy. But he had not counted on his sister's skill as a rider. Cindy was nowhere to be seen.

Immediately Alec formed another plan. As soon as he did so, he put it into effect. Riding cautiously so as to hit none of the running men, he crossed the border into Oklahoma. After he'd passed most of the men, he let Carrots canter and drew farther ahead. Safely in advance of the crowd, Alec slowed his mount.

It would be exciting to fly over the grasslands as fast as Carrots could run. But it would not be sensible, and it would not help find Cindy. The situation, in Alec's opinion, called for clear thinking.

He knew that Pete Brent had in mind definite claims to which he was taking Mr. Simpson. But Alec hadn't the faintest idea how to find those claims. However, there was certain logic which could not fail to guide him correctly.

North lay the Cherokee Strip, in which no lands were open, so surely Pete would not go north. It stood to reason that, knowing of claims he wanted to stake, Pete would have camped as near to them as possible. However, it did not necessarily follow that the claims lay due south. Pete might travel southeast or southwest. But since time was so important, he would not go very far to the east or west.

Alec decided that, if he rode an estimated quarter of a mile east, then turned Carrots and rode the same distance west, and kept working south, he would be sure to find Cindy. And find her he would if it took him six months and he had to cover all of Oklahoma.

He did not hurry, for the time for hurrying was past. Carrots might have a very long trip ahead of him, and it was well to save his strength. Letting the pony choose his own pace, Alec tried to see everything.

He passed a wagon with a broken wheel. There were no horses or mules hitched to it and nobody around. Evidently, when the wagon broke down, whoever owned it had cut his team loose and ridden on into Oklahoma. Alec guided Carrots around a homesteader who had marked his claim with a huge white sheet. The homesteader was looking frantically for the corners.

Most of Oklahoma seemed to be very good land. But Alec had a farmer's eye, and he was glad his father had gone on. In a year of abundant rainfall, any fertile land would grow good crops. In a year of drought, water would be necessary. Alec hoped his father would find a claim near a stream.

As soon as he had traveled what he thought was a sufficient distance, Alec turned Carrots and started in the other direction. Carrots flicked his ears forward and snorted softly. Alec looked with interest at a little grove of trees that rose above the grass. He swung Carrots toward them. As soon as he was near, he heard two men arguing.

One, stripped to the waist and sweating, had been digging in a huge hole. Over the hole, Alec understood, he would build a dugout to serve as a dwelling place until he could erect a house. The other man, mounted on a sweating horse, must have started from the border and ridden in the Run.

"You got out here and dug that big a hole since noon?" asked the man who was astride the horse.

"You dug that big a hole since noon?" asked the man on the horse

"Yup," said the other man.

"You couldn't have!" the horseman flared. "You're a Sooner!"

"Prove it," the other said.

"I'll do better than that!" the horseman exclaimed. "I'll bring soldiers and let them see what you've done! If they think you're a Sooner, then you're out and this is my claim!"

The horseman wheeled and rode back toward the border to find soldiers. The man who had been digging the hole looked worriedly after him.

Wanting no part of this or any other trouble, Alec rode on. But he saw why the disputed claim was valuable, for the trees surrounded a sparkling water hole. In a dry year, when wells might fail, whoever owned such a water hole could easily have every neighbor at his mercy.

All about were men who had staked claims, and they were busy hunting the corners or building up those they had found. One white-haired man had a little mountain of rock and was feverishly making it higher. Alec formed his own opinions. Some of the people who had staked here thought that all they had to do to be well settled was to claim a homestead. They knew nothing of better lands farther on. Others, who did know, had been unable to keep up with the Run. Instead of getting what they wanted, they were taking what they could get. There were some choice claims, such as the one with the water hole.

"Boy! Hey, boy!"

Alec stopped Carrots. He waited for a lanky, excited man who was shaking his fist and talking to himself.

"Do you know what I aim to do, boy?" the man called.

"No," said Alec.

"Goin' to law," the man said. "Goin' to law soon's I can find me a lawyer. Claim jumpers run me off my claim!"

Still shaking his fist and talking to himself, the man walked on. Alec slacked Carrots' reins. He shivered. Gramps had said that the settlement of Oklahoma was a fine and wonderful thing, and it was. But it had already given rise to quarrels. Alec rode on. He wondered what other ways would be used to settle the question when two or more people staked a claim. Already he had seen a man who intended to challenge a Sooner, and another who was going to court. Alec thought that some of the arguments might not be settled for months, or even years.

He reined Carrots toward someone he knew. It was the old man with the sorry-looking mule, which now stood with drooping head and switching tail. The old man looked up.

"Hello, boy," he said happily.

"Hello," Alec replied.

The old man said proudly, "Got me a claim."

"I'm glad," said Alec. "Have you seen my sister?"

"Sister?" the old man asked. Then, "Oh! That purty leetle gal what used 'ter walk with ye on the border? Nope. Haven't seen hide nor hair of her."

"Thanks," said Alec.

His hopes dashed, but without even a thought of giving up, Alec rode grimly on. It would be nice to find someone who had seen and recognized Cindy, and who could tell him the direction in which she had gone. But even if nobody could tell him about his sister, Alec would find her. It was his job.

Alec saw a man with a cocked rifle in his hands. He was pointing the weapon at the mid-section of another man, and both were still as statues. Then the threatened man turned angrily and started walking away. The man with the rifle called, "Next time, I pull the trigger! I'll shoot you or any other claim jumper!"

Farther on Alec found a big man and a lean one with linked arms. Each man had two black eyes. Both were spattered with blood. Their shirts were in ribbons, and bruised flesh showed through. They were the same men Cindy had passed; the lean one had thrown his pack away and challenged the big one for his claim.

The lean man said admiringly, "Nothin' like a little fight to clear the air, Jud boy!"

"Nothin' like a little fight to clear the air, Jud boy!"

"Sure ain't, Al boy!" the big man said. "Sure glad we met!"

"Me too!" the lean man said. "You'n me, we'll make this the best darn' farm in Oklahoma, Jud boy!"

"Al boy, you're sure 'nough right!" the big man said.

Carrots broke into a trot, and Alec let him go. He hadn't the least idea of where he would sleep tonight or what he would eat, but he was not going back to the wagon without finding Cindy. His mother would worry if he did not return. But she would worry just as much if Cindy stayed lost. Working southward, Alec swung back and forth.

Evening shadows were long when he saw someone else he knew. It was the bearded man with the race horse. Alec rode straight toward him. The bearded man was always unfriendly. But if he had news of Cindy, Alec must have it. However, now that he had his land and no longer had to worry about getting some, the man was not unfriendly any more.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," Alec replied. "Have you seen my sister?"

"Sure have!" the bearded man said cheerfully. "She caught up with your dad an' the man from the wagon next to yours right here on my claim. She was ridin' a roan pony, an' so was t'other man. Your dad had his palomino mare. They said they was goin' on."

"You're sure?" Alec inquired.

"Dead sure. Saw 'em with my own eyes," the bearded man said.

"Thanks," said Alec.

Even as he spoke, he was turning Carrots and galloping full speed back to the Simpson wagon. When he reached it, not taking time to dismount, he shouted his happy news from the pony's back. "It's all right, Mother! Cindy's with Dad!"

CHAPTER NINE

The Claims

The sun was still high when Cindy, her father, and Pete Brent reached the claims Pete had in mind. True to the promise of early morning, the day had become hot. Walking their horses, they stopped on a grassy knoll.

"There they are!" Pete said proudly, "and we're first!"

Cindy gasped with pleasure, for the land to which Pete had led them was surely the most beautiful in the world. It was level, surrounded by knolls and hillocks much like the one upon which they stood, and grass that would be shoulder-high to a horse was already almost knee-high. A wide stream curled through it, and there was a fine grove of oak trees in new leaf.

"It looks great!" Mr. Simpson exclaimed.

Her father's voice had a spirit and glow that Cindy had never noticed before, but she knew why it was there. A true farmer, Jed Simpson knew fine land when he saw it.

"It's the greatest!" Pete said. "And the market will be ready when our crops are." He pointed. "Two miles over there, half a section, or three hundred and twenty acres, have been reserved for a town site. They're going to call it Plains City. Two miles over there," he pointed in a different direction, "is the railroad. The oak grove will be half on your claim and half on mine."

"Well," Mr. Simpson grinned, "let's go down and stake."

They rode down the knoll, and the men took their coats off. Cindy removed her jacket, for she was perspiring, and dropped it in the grass.

"Don't forget where it is," her father warned.

"I won't, Dad," Cindy promised.

They rode until Pete halted them.

"Stick your flag in right here, Jed," he told Cindy's father.

"Here?" Mr. Simpson questioned.

"This is it."

Mr. Simpson dismounted, and holding the tired Sunshine's reins, he took the flag from his saddle and rammed the pointed end of the stick into the ground.

"I christen thee Simpsonia," he said solemnly.

"Good enough." Pete couldn't lose his grin. "Now I'll stake."

In spite of the long run, Pete's pony still had enough spirit to canter. Pete rode him through the oak grove and thrust his flag into the center of the claim he wanted. Cindy dismounted and petted Sparkle. She had thought that claiming the homesteads would be the most exciting part of all, but she was just as happy that it wasn't. There'd been enough excitement for one day.

Still grinning broadly, Pete came riding back.

"It's our land now," he said. "Let's care for the horses, and I'll show you where the corners are."

They rode to the oak grove, stripped their mounts, rubbed them down, and Pete and Jed staked their horses on picket ropes. Cindy had no rope, but Sparkle showed no wish to leave his friends, and all three horses started happily to crop the rich grass.

"Now I'll show you—" Pete began.

"Hey!" Cindy shouted.

They had left the sacks of food with their other gear. Cindy looked around just in time to see a little black bear with a sack of food in his mouth running through the oak grove and into the tall grass. Jed drew his revolver, but before he could shoot the little bear had disappeared. Jed sheathed his gun.

"Doggone! There goes half our grub!" he exclaimed.

"And with three of us to eat what's left," Pete mourned, "we're likely to be on short rations. I'd better take care of the other sack."

He returned to the grove, pulled down a supple oak branch, tied the remaining sack to it, and let the branch spring upward. Coming back, Pete shrugged. The lost food was a serious matter, but there was no use complaining.

"Our claims adjoin down by the creek," Pete said, "and each of us has enough creek frontage so that we'll never lack for water. Come on."

He led them to the creek and showed them a neat cairn, or pile, of rocks that the government surveyors had placed there. Some of the rocks had tumbled down, but they were quickly replaced and the cairn built higher. Cindy looked at the creek.

The water had eaten into the opposite bank to form a pool about ten feet long, six feet wide and twenty inches deep. But the entrance was no more than about two feet wide by eight inches deep. Lurking in the center of the pool were at least fifteen big fish that had swum out of the creek to hunt minnows.

"Your next corner," said Pete, "is down here."

He led them to another pile of rocks, and they built that up. Then he took them to the rest of the boundary markers that defined these claims. They were so busy building up the cairns that Cindy was astonished to find themselves surrounded.

There had been no one else in sight when they arrived. Now, wherever Cindy looked, she saw picketed horses or mules and busy men. The white tops of two covered wagons glowed in the descending sun. At least two of those who had put their faith in wagons had made it this far.

Mr. Simpson, who had been carrying a big boulder to the last corner, added it to the cairn and straightened. He looked around.

Mr. Simpson added a big boulder to the cairn

"Seems as though we have neighbors, Pete," he remarked.

"It was bound to be," Pete said. "This is some of the best land in Oklahoma, and we Boomers have known of it for a long while. Bet most of the people around us are Boomers."

"What do we do now?" Jed asked.

Pete, still grinning, yawned. "Let's make camp."

They went back to the oak grove. Jed broke brittle branches from a tree that had fallen and died, and Pete built a fire. He opened the sack of food, cut strips of bacon, and inserted a stick of green wood into the hollow handle of a frying pan. The wood lengthened the handle, so that Pete was able to hold the frying pan over the fire without burning his hand. He cooked the bacon, and when it was done he laid all the slices at one side of the frying pan and scooped a generous

portion of already-cooked beans in beside them. Mr. Simpson brought three slabs of clean bark, and Pete divided the food into three equal portions.

They were hungry, for they had worked hard, and since there were no spoons or forks they had to eat with their fingers. It was, Cindy thought, a delightful way to dine, and she had never known that bacon, warmed-over beans, and stale biscuits could taste so good. After she'd eaten her portion she was still hungry, but she purposely avoided looking at the nearly empty sack. The food had been intended for one person, not three, and there was just enough left for a skimpy breakfast.

"I'm full," said Mr. Simpson, throwing his slab of bark into the fire.

"I am, too," Pete said. "How about, you, Cindy?"

"Um-um-yummy." Cindy did not want to tell a lie.

The grazing horses raised their heads and stared hard toward something which only they knew was coming. Pete and Jed got to their feet, and their hands hovered very near their holstered guns. A moment later two horsemen appeared on top of a hillock and started toward them. Pete grinned reassuringly. "It's all right. I know them. They're Cal and Sim Macklin."

The horsemen came near, and one of the riders shouted, "Hi! You old Boomer!"

"Who are you calling 'Boomer'?" Pete shouted back. "And who 'boomed' any harder than you two?"

"Can we have some wood for a fire?"

"Sure thing," Pete said. "These are Jed and Cindy Simpson. They're with me."

"Glad to know you," Sim Macklin said cordially, and Cal added his greeting.

The two men cared for their horses and came into the oak grove. Cindy liked them immediately, for they seemed to be a special kind of men. They were quiet, but they were self-assured and gave the impression that they could take care of themselves anywhere.

"Had anything to eat?" Pete asked.

Cal Macklin grinned. "We sort of came away without a grubstake."

"I'll fix you something right away."

Pete started cooking the rest of the bacon and beans, took the remaining biscuits from the sack, and Cindy groaned inwardly. They'd have no breakfast at all now, but they couldn't deny hungry people.

"Get your claims?" Pete asked.

"I got one next section over," said Cal. "Sim's looking for a town lot."

Cal took a little coil of wire from his pocket, bent an end that had been sticking him, and put the coil back.

"How are things in Plains City?" asked Pete.

"Wild," said Sim. "Six claimers for every lot. They've staked the streets and everything else. I'll wait until it quiets down and buy me a lot. Meanwhile I'm hanging out with Cal. I'm going back for his wagon tomorrow."

"Would you mind," Mr. Simpson spoke up, "stopping by our wagon and asking my son to come up too?"

"I'll be glad to. Where's your wagon?"

"Right next to mine," said Pete, "on the border a half mile north of Sycamore Crossing."

"I'll find it," Sim promised. "Anything special you want?"

"You can tell Alec to bring the tools, and I'd like an extra team of mules. Tell my wife that Cindy's safe and we can use some food."

"Sure," said Sim.

Before dark, five more Boomers had come to the grove. Three of them had nothing to eat, but the other two divided their food. Every claim, they said, was staked. Oklahoma had been almost settled in half a day. There was no doubt that Sooners had much choice land, and there were many arguments and claim jumping. Because they had known exactly where to go, the Boomers had many of the finest homesteads.

The Boomers were still, Cindy felt, a special breed. It was hard to imagine them jumping any claims, but just as hard to imagine anyone jumping theirs. Cindy yawned.

"Tired, honey?" her father asked.

"Sort of."

"Guess we could all use some sleep."

Cindy slept with her head on Sparkle's saddle and the saddle blanket over her. She did not awaken until the sun was rising. The Boomers who'd camped with them had already gone their separate ways, but Jed and Pete still slept. Lacking tools, they could do no work. But if they left their claims, somebody might jump them.

Going to the creek, Cindy drank as much water as she could hold and told herself she wasn't hungry. Rising, she saw a wagon coming over a hillock. It contained the family who had to "make out" in Oklahoma.

Pete and Jed joined Cindy, and the wagon drew to a stop beside them. The man and woman were on the seat, and the woman looked very worried. The man seemed more tired than ever, and evidently the children were asleep in the wagon.

"Howdy," the man said.

"Hi," said Jed and Pete together.

"How far," the man asked, "do you have to go into Oklyhomy to find land that ain't staked?"

"I'm afraid," said Pete, "that you're too late."

"You mean," and the man seemed to grow more tired and the woman more worried with each passing second, "it's all took up?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"I started good," the man said hoarsely, "but a horse played out. Time I'd rested him, it was midnight. I started right out again."

"I'm sorry," said Pete.

"This your claim?" the man asked Jed.

"That's right."

"And that one's yours?"

"Yes, it is," said Pete.

"Whose is that'n over yonder?"

Cindy, her father, and Pete Brent looked at each other. There were homesteaders on every claim except the one where a youngster had thrown her jacket down. Boomers had honored this sign of ownership.

"That's yours!" Cindy cried. "Go stake it!"

CHAPTER TEN

Hungry

Pete, Jed, and Cindy sat together at the edge of the oak grove. Arms clasped around his knees, Pete stared at the horizon. Mr. Simpson used a piece of broken stick to dig interestedly into the rich soil of this new land, and Cindy gazed hungrily at the wagon.

"They seem," she said hopefully, "like such nice people."

"I'm sure they are," her father said.

"And they must have just loads of things in that big wagon."

"They must have," said Mr. Simpson.

"So if I went over there and sort of—"

"Cindy!" her father roared. "Food is given, not asked for!"

"I wasn't going to ask for any."

"No. You were just going to hint around until they gave you some."

"Dang it, Jed," Pete broke in, "we didn't really give 'em a chance to offer us any."

"So we didn't."

"If all *three* of us go over," Cindy suggested, "they'll have a chance."

Mr. Simpson said reluctantly, "We might find out."

Side by side, they walked over to where the newcomers were setting up on the claim accidentally staked by Cindy. The man, who had built a fire with wood carried in from his wagon, did not look tired any more. He looked refreshed and ten years younger. Far from seeming worried, the woman now bloomed like a girl. The four children's eyes were big as saucers. It was a completely happy family.

Something that couldn't possibly happen to them had happened. They owned their own farm. The man came to meet the approaching trio.

"I was so flustered that I plumb forgot to be civil," he said. "I'm Silas Wentworth." He shook hands with Jed and Pete and bowed to Cindy. "Young lady, we'll never forget you."

"It was just luck," Cindy murmured.

"Come meet the family," said Silas Wentworth. "This is my Missus, Jean, and these," he indicated the children in their turn, "are Sally, Silas, Sylvia, and Serena. Say hello, children."

"Hello," Sally, about eight, said bashfully. The younger children giggled.

"Had breakfast?" Silas Wentworth questioned.

"Well, now—" Mr. Simpson began.

"We ain't got a great store of diffe'nt things," Silas Wentworth seemed a little embarrassed. "Truth is, we're down to beans. But they's lots of them."

"Then why'd you tell uth, Pa," Silas, Jr., lisped, "that we'd have to make out with light mealth till you can get thome?"

"We've had breakfast," Mr. Simpson said firmly.

"Yes, we have," Pete seconded.

"Uh-huh," said Cindy.

"Silas!" said his father, who had turned red as a glass of crabapple jelly. He looked apologetically at his guests. "Truth is, we are a mite short. But I've got money, seven whole dollars, an' there must be a town where a body can buy vittles an' maybe get work too."

"Plains City is two miles east," Pete directed. "There'll be a grocery there soon if one hasn't set up already."

"I'll ride there tomorra," Silas Wentworth declared. "I'll go the minute I can leave my family. But a body who can ask more than his quarter section of land like this," he looked happily about his farm, "sure is hard to please."

"What we really came for," Mr. Simpson spoke up, "is to see if we can borrow a couple of spades."

"Sure thing an' welcome," Silas Wentworth said. He brought a couple of good spades from his wagon. "Anything else the Wentworths got, you can have."

"Thanks," said Pete, "but these are all we need right now."

They started back. Pete Brent and Mr. Simpson each carried a spade. Cindy carried her thoughts, which centered about the hard biscuits she had eaten last night. If she had one of them right now, just one, she knew she'd never ask for anything else. Her father touched her shoulder softly.

"Sorry, honey."

"That's all right," Cindy said stoutly.

"You don't take food from babies, do you?" her father asked.

"Of course not!" said Cindy.

"I knew it would be like this at first," Mr. Simpson said. "I'm, I'm—"

"Yes?" Cindy questioned.

"I'm glad you came," her father said firmly, though Cindy had a feeling that he had been about to say he was sorry she'd come. "Maybe I can turn up something. If I can't, Alec will be here with the wagon tomorrow, and he's sure to bring some food."

"I'll live," said Cindy.

Choosing a knoll near the creek, Mr. Simpson sank his spade. Then he sank it again, and again, and when he had cut a good-sized sod, he laid it aside. Cindy knew what he was doing, for Pete had told her how many Oklahomans would build their first houses. They'd dig into the ground, saving all the sod they cut out. Then they'd make a cellar as wide and deep as they thought necessary. The dirt sides would be shored with sticks, stones, anything they could find, and the house would extend above ground too. The sides and roof might be all sod, but since they owned the oak grove, Pete and her father would have wood if they cared to use it.

It was not, of course, the good house that every Oklahoman would have shortly after the homesteads began to pay in the form of crops to be grown and sold. But it would be snug and warm, and Cindy looked forward to living in such a place.

She watched her father for some time, and the harder Mr. Simpson worked, the happier he seemed. He was digging in his own rich soil, and hunger was a small price to pay for such a privilege. But Cindy, growing hungrier by the minute, could think of nothing except food. She wandered away, watched Sparkle crop grass, and wished mightily that she were a horse. She'd eat until her stomach burst.

But she wasn't a horse and she could think of no practical way to make herself into one. Cindy went to their last night's camp, and when her eye was attracted by something bright among the foliage, she picked up the coil of fine wire that Cal Macklin thought he was putting into his pocket last night. Instead, he must have dropped it. Cindy slipped the coil into her own pocket.

Kicking idly among last year's withered leaves, she uncovered a brown-shelled acorn. She picked it up, cracked it with

her teeth, and immediately puckered her lips. Cindy spat the acorn out. It was better to be hungry than to feel as though she had a mouth full of flannel.

She returned to the camp, looked at the skillet and knife Pete had used, and conjured up fond memories of the glorious feast they'd enjoyed last night. Suddenly inspired by the thought that more water might help, she returned to the creek, and chance alone brought her opposite the pool on the far bank.

The big fish were still there, lying sluggishly in the bottom of the pool until such time as they fared forth to catch more minnows. Near them was a pile of driftwood, and Cindy's fertile mind produced a wonderful idea.

Looking all around, she saw nobody. It followed, therefore, that nobody could see her; the creek had four-foot banks, and grass grew on top of those. Stripping to her underwear, Cindy took her clothing in her arms and waded into the creek. The water was cold at first, and she shrank from it. But it felt warmer after a second, and she began to enjoy it.

As she waded, she located a chunk of log among the driftwood. And as soon as she was in shallow water on the other side of the creek, she acted swiftly. Throwing her clothes down on the bank, she picked up the log and dropped it across the narrow entrance to the pool.

Seeing her, the big fish swam frantically toward the creek. But they couldn't pass the log, and they did not like to stay in such shallow water. They swam back into the pool, dashed here and there, and finally came to rest almost where they had been before. Cindy proceeded with the next part of her plan.

She took the coil of wire from her jeans, picked up a long, dead branch, and tied the wire to its end. In the other end of the wire she made a sliding loop. Careful to ruffle the water no more than was necessary, she let her loop sink.

The first fish she touched on the nose, and that sent all of them into another panic. But they all came back again, and on Cindy's second try, the loop settled nicely over a fish. Cindy jerked the pole, tightened the loop, and yanked out a wriggling bass. One was not enough; she thought she herself could eat all fifteen of the big fish if only she had them—but after she caught one more, hunger triumphed.

Carrying the two fish and her clothes, she waded back across the creek, dressed, and went to camp. She knew what to do. She'd cleaned fish before, and there was still grease in the frying pan. Forty-five minutes later she called:

"Father!"

"Yes?" Mr. Simpson answered.

"Mr. Brent!" Cindy called.

"What do you want, Cindy?"

"Come on! Dinner's ready!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alec Comes

In the middle of the following afternoon Alec appeared on a hillock. He was driving Pete's horses and wagon with two of his father's mules hitched on behind, and following Sim Macklin, who drove his brother's wagon.

Without benefit of saddle or bridle, Cindy leaped on Sparkle. Guiding the roan pony with her knees, holding herself on by wrapping one hand in his mane, she raced to meet her brother. She waved to Sim and drew in beside Alec.

"Hi!" she called happily.

"Hi." Alec grinned.

"Was Mother worried?"

"About you?" Alec sniffed. "Huh! She was hoping you'd stay lost!"

"Alec!" Cindy begged. "Please tell me!"

"Well," Alec said, "she was a mite worried. But I found out the day you left that you were with Dad. Mother isn't worried any longer."

"How is Mindy?" Cindy pursued.

"Ha! You know what that crazy girl did? When you weren't there to take Mr. Brent's message, she took it. But she didn't know Thunder's an outlaw, so she rode him bareback. Can you imagine that?"

Cindy asked anxiously, "Was she hurt?"

"With Mindy, Thunder's gentle as a kitten," Alec assured her. He grinned again. "She wore some of my old jeans and a shirt for the ride, and now she wears them all the time."

Cindy got to the next important detail. "Did you bring food?" she asked eagerly.

"Yup."

"What kind?"

"Potatoes," Alec said.

"Wonderful!"

"Biscuits," said Alec.

"Gorgeous!" squealed Cindy.

"Beans," Alec said.

"Marvelous!"

"And bacon," Alec finished.

"Heavenly!" Cindy smacked her lips.

Alec looked at her sharply. "What's the matter with you, sis?"

"Matter!" Cindy said indignantly. "Do you know what we've been living on? Fish! Any more and I'll grow fins!"

"I like fish," Alec said.

"You can have 'em!" Cindy sighed. "I'll trade you my share for your portion of potatoes, biscuits, bacon, and beans! Um-m! I can hardly wait to start cooking! Did Mother send any dishes?"

"Think she'd expect us to cook without 'em?" Alec's eyes roved around the homestead. "Say! This looks like something!"

"It is something. Dad and I picked it."

"Huh," Alec sniffed. "Bet you had a lot to do with it."

"Nothing could have been done without me," Cindy said smugly.

"I'll switch off to Cal's place," Sim Macklin broke in, grinning.

"Thank you, Mr. Macklin," Cindy said. "I'll steer my brother home, and do come see us."

"I will," Sim promised.

He swung his wagon away. Cindy guided Alec in and slid off Sparkle. The roan pony tossed his head, kicked his heels, and went trotting off to join Sunshine and Pete's other pony. Jed Simpson came to the wagon, and beyond the oak grove Pete had left his work and was coming. Mr. Simpson smiled at his son.

"Hello, Alec!"

"Hi there, Dad!"

"How are your mother and sister?"

"Right as can be," Alec said. "Gramps and Granny have moved in with them, and Mother hopes you'll send for her soon."

"I'll do it as soon as things are ready," Mr. Simpson agreed.

"It better not be too long," Alec said. "Mother says she's coming anyhow, and Gramps knows the way."

"Hm-m," Mr. Simpson stroked his chin. "What did you bring?"

"Your plow, Mr. Brent's, spades, mattocks, saws, axes, nails." Alec listed the tools and supplies he had brought, and finished, "and Mother's dishes and stove along with plenty to eat."

Cindy said blissfully, "I'll fix a meal right away!"

"It's too early for supper," Alec protested.

"You," Jed Simpson told his son, "have not been living on unsalted fish for nearly two days. I suppose you brought harnesses for the mules?"

"Oh, sure. I didn't forget."

"Then the first thing we must do is plow a couple of furrows clear around this homestead. Afterwards we'll plant a vegetable garden."

"I'll plow the furrows!" Alec said eagerly. "Just show me where you want 'em!"

While their father showed Alec the corners, Cindy started preparing a meal. She couldn't fix any beans. They would have taken three hours, which was easily two and a half hours too long, but she bent over the skillet to sniff the aroma of frying bacon and lifted the top from the kettle a dozen times just to watch the potatoes bubbling.

While Mr. Simpson showed Alec the boundaries of their homestead, Pete unloaded both plows, unhitched the horses from the wagon and hitched them to his plow, and started plowing.

"Don't go too far," Cindy advised. "Dinner will be ready soon."

"I'll be ready too," Pete promised. "But there's about a month's work to be done, and it looks as though we'll have to do all of it this week."

Alec and Mr. Simpson came back, hitched the mules, and Alec started plowing furrows. Cindy tried the potatoes with a fork, discovered that they were soft clear through, and drained them. She added another small handful of salt to that

which she had put in when the potatoes started cooking. Until she'd had to do without salt, she'd never known how much she could miss it or how important it was. When everything was ready, she called her father and Pete.

When everything was ready, she called her father and Pete

Letting his horses stand, Pete came trotting. Jed left his work on the house and came too. Alec, who hadn't missed any meals and was far too excited to eat anyhow, continued to plow. Cindy gave the men their portions and took her own. Too anxious to get back to work to have time for talking, the men ate hurriedly and silently. They took smaller second portions and handed their plates back to Cindy.

"Here you are, cook," Pete grinned.

"Would you like some more?" Cindy asked.

"If I eat any more, I'll bust."

"Will you plan supper for after dark?" her father asked. "We shouldn't waste any daylight. I want your mother and sister out here as soon as possible."

"And I want my father and mother," Pete said. "I know they're anxious to come, too."

"The important thing," said Mr. Simpson, "is to get the houses finished and vegetable gardens in. We'll have all summer to build barns for our stock and plow wheat land."

"We'll have to record our claims," Pete reminded him.

"That's true, but we can ride into Plains City and do that in a day." Mr. Simpson's eyes rested on Alec. "I hate to see that boy doing a man's work, but for a little while he must. There's so much to do and so few to do it."

"I'll help," Cindy offered.

Her father shook his head. "I don't believe in girls or women doing heavy field work, Cindy. You just see that our meals are ready."

Jed went back to work on the house. Pete continued plowing furrows around his own homestead, and Cindy spent the remainder of the afternoon cooking a big pot of beans. It was very nice to keep house for her father, Pete, and Alec. But it was also very boring. Cindy was glad when night fell and they came in from their work. After he'd eaten enough biscuits and beans to stuff a small horse, and washed it down with cold water, she looked hopefully at Alec. It would be fine to have a game, any kind of game, but Alec had worked very hard and now he nodded very sleepily. Cindy could not ask him to romp with her.

They slept in the wagon, which was much better and more comfortable than just sleeping on the ground. But Mr. Simpson was up and had the breakfast fire started before dawn. They had finished breakfast and were ready to go back to work by the time it was light enough to see.

"Just a cold snack at noon, Cindy," her father said. "We mustn't stop long enough for a hot meal."

"Yes, Daddy," said Cindy.

She washed the dishes and thought of the endless hours ahead. Mightily she wished she had someone to play with, but the only other youngsters around were boys like Alec who had to help their fathers, or children like the Wentworths', and what almost grown-up girl wanted to play with babies? The hardest work of all, Cindy found, was having nothing to do.

Finally a happy idea occurred to her, and she went to where her father was working on the house. Mr. Simpson stopped

his work.

"Would it be all right," Cindy asked, "if I fixed your lunches and left them in the wagon?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'd like to ride Sparkle to some places I haven't seen."

"Go right ahead, honey. I expect this must be pretty tiresome for you. Just be careful."

"I will," Cindy promised, "and I'll be back in time to make supper."

She prepared a cold lunch, then saddled and bridled Sparkle and rode toward a distant hill that rose to the west. Having done very little except eat grass, Sparkle was anxious for action too, and he set off at a fast canter. Everywhere were men who waved at Cindy as she passed, but they were too busy to stop and talk.

Then, after about two hours, there were no more people. Nearing the hill, the country became rough and broken. There were upthrust seams of rock, boulders, stones, and instead of rich grass, only brush and small trees. Nobody had staked this land, because it was too poor for good farming.

Cindy liked it, and it was fun to be alone. She'd had a secret hope of finding hostile Indians in Oklahoma and battling them, and she had been more than a little disappointed when told there weren't any. But she could imagine there were Indians here.

Reaching the top, Cindy found her path blocked by little evergreens whose branches were so thickly intertwined that Sparkle couldn't get through. It was dark beneath the trees, and mysterious, and far too interesting to pass by.

Tying Sparkle to a tree, Cindy got down on her hands and knees and crawled into the evergreens. A bunch of wild turkeys ran before her, squirrels flicked their tails, and a woodpecker hammered noisily. Cindy quivered with delight, for she had hoped to find just such a place.

Ten minutes after entering the evergreens, Cindy came to an arroyo, or canyon. About thirty feet deep, its walls were solid rock. Though they were steep, they were not too steep to descend or climb. The arroyo was perhaps forty feet from rim to rim, and on the far side was a roomy cave into which Cindy could see clearly. Water dripped into the cave, whose walls must have formed a natural sounding board, for Cindy could hear every drop as it fell.

She smiled happily. This was a marvelous discovery, and even though there were no hostile Indians, she and Alec could have a fine game of Indians in the cave. She must bring Alec here as soon as possible, but of course, some of the work would have to be caught up first. Cindy rode back to her father's homestead.

After several days, though the work was not done, it was quite far along. The house, with a tiny bedroom for Cindy and Mindy, a cubbyhole for Alec, a bedroom for their parents, and a large room that would serve as both kitchen and living quarters, was finished. The stove was set up and Mr. Simpson had even built shelves and cup-boards. Pete's house was ready too.

Cindy had spent hours on her knees, planting corn, melons, onions, everything that could be eaten and would grow. Alec and his father had planted a sizable potato patch. For the first time, Pete, Alec, and Mr. Simpson had quit work before darkness forced them to stop. Alec had wandered away somewhere, but Pete and Mr. Simpson were waiting for their supper.

"We can go into Plains City and record tomorrow," Mr. Simpson said happily. "The next day we can bring the other wagon and our folks up! I'll certainly be glad to see them!"

"I will, too," Pete said.

"Can Alec and I go with you?" Cindy asked.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," her father said. He jumped suddenly. "What the blazes is that?"

The hideous, wailing noise, when it arose, made the hair on the back of Cindy's neck prickle. It was a mournful sound, as though a condemned spirit had escaped and was wandering about to cry its torment. Pete's and Mr. Simpson's hands went

to their guns.

A moment later, dangling something on a string, Alec appeared in the oak grove. When he swung the thing around his head, the noise sounded again.

"Alec!" his father gasped. "What the dickens!"

"Did I scare you?" Alec grinned.

"What in tarnation is that thing?" his father demanded.

"A bull-roarer," said Alec. "Gramps showed me how to make it."

He showed them an oak stick whose ends were whittled to thin blades that slanted in different directions. When he whirled it around his head, the thin blades made the unearthly noise.

"Shall I show you how it works?" Alec asked.

"Put your toy away," Cindy said loftily. "*We're* going to Plains City tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Plains City

Pete and Jed were asleep in the wagon. Completely enchanted by the night, Alec and Cindy sat outside.

A big round moon hung so low in the sky that it seemed to roll like a wagon wheel right across the tops of the hillocks. There couldn't possibly be such a moon anywhere except in Oklahoma. It shed so much light that Cindy thought she could count every hair on the picketed horses and mules. She could see the grass plainly, and had she had a book, she would have been able to read it.

But, though it was almost as light as day, it was wholly different. The moon's was a ghost light, and it was easy to imagine that witches and elves were abroad in it. Cindy shivered and hugged her knees.

"Do you know what I'd do if we weren't going to Plains City tomorrow?" she asked Alec.

"What would you do?"

"I'd go on a ghost hunt!" Cindy exclaimed.

"It would be fun," Alec agreed, "but we are going, and we'd better get some sleep."

"I couldn't possibly sleep!"

But she slept the instant she drew the blanket around her, and when she woke the sun was shining and Pete was cooking breakfast. Plains City was only two miles away, it would take just a short time to record the claims, and there was no need to get up before daylight. Cindy jumped out of the wagon, and Alec grinned at her.

"Thought you couldn't sleep?"

"Pooh!" Cindy made a face at her brother. "How do you know I did?"

"Maybe that was someone else snoring?"

"I *don't* snore!"

"Better get some breakfast into you," Pete said.

Everyone else had finished breakfast. While Cindy ate, Pete and Jed staked the work horses and mules in fresh grass and saddled Sunshine and the roan ponies. Alec started washing the dishes, and as soon as she was finished, Cindy handed him her plate.

"Hey!" he protested. "You might at least wash your own!"

"I have to pack a lunch."

"Not today," said her father, who had come back and overheard. "Everyone's been working hard, and everyone deserves a rest. We'll eat in a restaurant."

When everything was ready, Pete mounted his roan pony and Jed swung up on Sunshine. After an argument, which Cindy won, about who was going to sit the saddle and hold the reins, Alec and Cindy rode double on Sparkle. The mules and horses had also worked hard, and they needed a rest.

They rode at a walk across the grasslands. Everywhere, in what only a short time ago had been such a lonely place, were sod houses and gardens. Not all the homesteads had men on them, but nearly all had grazing horses, mules, or oxen, and there were a few cattle. Then they mounted a hillock, looked down on Plains City, and halted in astonishment.

"Ooh!" squealed Cindy.

Alec said, "Gosh!"

"Beats all!" Jed Simpson exclaimed.

"Sure does!" Pete seconded.

Instead of a town or village, they looked down upon a city. True, for the most part it was a city of tents. But there were some wooden buildings, well-planned streets, streams of wagons going in and coming out, and more people than any of them had ever before seen in one place. The sounds were those of hammering, sawing, shouting, creaking, everything that could possibly be connected with a city in the making.

A little overwhelmed because they'd expected a baby and found a giant, they rode slowly into the city. A man on a running mule careened crazily among the wagons, and a man driving a four-horse span hitched to a heavy wagon spoke to him in terms that are never heard in polite company.

"Cover your ears, Cindy," Alec ordered.

"I didn't hear a thing," Cindy said sweetly.

Her eyes were big and growing bigger. A wagon piled high with lumber picked up at the railroad swerved to where some men were working frantically on a wooden building. Two of the workers, Cindy saw, were the carefree young men who had camped close to the Simpson wagon on the border and had taken little interest in anything except fun. They'd probably thought that getting land in Oklahoma was a huge joke too, and as a result they hadn't got any. Cindy supposed that most of the people who had no claims would either go back home or work for someone else.

Next to the building was a tent with "Poast Ofise" written on it in red paint. At least two hundred people who hoped to get mail stood in a long line outside it. Next was another tent with a sign, "J. C. Summers, Wholesale and Retail Grocer," and next to that a wooden building whose sign proclaimed that it belonged to Caldwell and Hunter, dry-goods merchants.

Everybody, including those who stood in various lines, for there was much pushing and shoving, seemed in a great hurry.

"What are they all doing?" Alec inquired.

"They are," his father said happily, "building Plains City." He called to a man standing beside a building, "Where's the livery stable?"

"Straight down!" The man waved his hand down the street.

"We'll leave our horses and walk around awhile," Mr. Simpson said. "It's worth seeing."

The livery stable, when they finally reached it, was merely a series of posts with ropes stretched between them. There were so many horses, mules, and ponies already tied to the ropes that there couldn't possibly be room for more. But just as they rode up, four horsemen rode away.

"Any room?" Mr. Simpson asked the lank, tobacco-chewing man in charge of the livery.

"Yup."

"How much?"

"Fifty cents a head."

"That include hay and water?"

"Yup."

"I looked from the top of a knoll," said Mr. Simpson. "I thought that town sites could be no more than three hundred and twenty acres. Plains City seems almost three times that."

"Plains City," the livery man said, "is igzactly three hun'ert an' twenty acres."

Mr. Simpson grinned. "Who do you think you're fooling?"

"Nobody," the livery man said. He waved a hand southward. "Down thar is South Plains City, an' that's igzactly three

hun'ert and twenty acres too." In turn, the man waved his hand toward where East, West, and North Plains City were locating or would be located.

"That land should have been homesteaded," said Mr. Simpson.

"'Twas," the man said.

"Then how did you get it?"

"Most of them as staked was glad enough to sell," the man said. "City lots is wuth money. Them as wouldn't sell we reasoned with. They could sell at a fair price, or they could be tarred an' feathered an' rid' out on a rail."

"I see," said Mr. Simpson.

The man led their mounts away, and they set off on foot to view the wonders of Plains City. There was a big tent with "Plains City Hotel" written across it and a wooden frame with a canvas roof that was evidently Brown's Restaurant. There were all kinds of stores. A man sat on a wooden box behind another box bearing the sign, "J. C. Donnelly, Lawyer."

"Need any law work done?" he asked when Jed, Pete, and the youngsters passed.

"Need any law work done?" he asked

"Nope," said Mr. Simpson.

"I'm good at land titles."

"Nope," Mr. Simpson said again.

Another man stood behind a wooden counter upon which rested three walnut shells. "Triple your money," he chanted. "Pick the shell with the pea under it and triple your money." He lifted the center shell to reveal a green pea. "If you'd picked that one, friend, you'd have tripled your money."

"What's that?" Cindy asked.

"A game fools play," her father told her. "He holds the pea in his hand and cheats people."

"That isn't very nice!" Cindy exclaimed.

A wagon drawn by two small horses and piled high with prairie chickens, a wild game bird that is good to eat, lurched down the street. The driver called, "Fresh-shot prairie chickens for sale cheap!" Pete and Jed looked at the wagon with interest.

"Where'd you get them?" Mr. Simpson called.

"Shot 'em on the prairie, an' now I'm sellin' 'em. A body has to turn a penny somehow."

"It's something to think about," Pete remarked.

"It sure is," said Mr. Simpson. "If we run short of money, we can go hunting."

"I'd like that!" Alec declared.

Cindy shuddered. "I couldn't bear to kill them!"

"Aw," Alec scoffed. "That's just like a girl!"

They passed doctors', dentists', and more lawyers' offices. They saw a tent in which the *Plains City Enterprise* had already been printed for a week. They marveled at stores and shops, and after a while they became tired.

"Let's eat," Mr. Simpson suggested.

"Good idea," Pete seconded.

"Wonderful!" Cindy said.

They walked back to Brown's Restaurant, seated themselves on a rough, wooden bench at a long, wooden table, and a waiter in a clean white apron came.

"What'll it be, folks?"

"What do you have?" Mr. Simpson asked.

"Venison steak, potatoes, and coffee."

"That's what we'll have."

Cindy shivered suddenly. It was exciting to eat in a real restaurant, and venison steak would be a welcome change from what they'd been eating. Why should she feel so strangely uneasy?

"Do you feel anything?" she whispered to Alec.

"Hungry," Alec said.

"Oh! I don't mean that!"

"By gosh, Pete!" Their father sounded very happy. "We've come a long way in a short time! This afternoon we'll record. Tomorrow I'll bring Ann up."

"I'll bet," said Pete, "that it'll be wonderful to have your wife with you."

"I can hardly wait!"

Cindy, who still felt uneasy, turned suddenly to see three men rising from a table behind them. Two, who looked like rogues, she had never seen before. The third, unmistakably, was Tom LaMott. Cindy nudged Alec in the ribs.

"Look!"

"What?" Alec asked.

"The man with cat's eyes! And he heard every word we said!"

"What of it?"

"I don't like it!" Cindy exclaimed.

"Cindy! For heavens' sake! He has a right to be here!"

"I still don't like it!"

"Maybe you don't like your dinner, either," said Alec, "but here it is."

They did full justice to the venison steaks, potatoes with brown gravy, and mugs of hot coffee. Jed paid the bill, and they left.

"Now to record!" Jed said cheerfully. "Then we can go home!"

"Sure thing!" Pete agreed.

They made their way toward the American flag that rose over a small land office, and stopped in their tracks.

There had been many people waiting to get into the post office and some of the stores, but they were as nothing compared to the throng here. They were nearly all men, with here and there a woman or girl. A soldier appeared in the doorway, called a number, and a man left the crowd to go into the land office. Beside the doorway stood another soldier by a sign: "Get Your Numbers Here."

"What's it all about?" Jed asked the man standing next to him.

"You must get a number," the man said, "then wait your turn."

They went to the soldier, who gave Pete number 828 and Jed 829.

"Can we get in soon?" Pete asked.

"You must wait until your number's called," said the soldier.

"How long will it take?" Pete inquired.

The soldier said, "It's been averaging two weeks."

"Two weeks!" Pete exclaimed. "We might as well go back to our claims!"

"If your number's called sooner, and you aren't here, you have to start all over again."

"Oh, my gosh!"

All the happiness had gone out of the day, and sadness had entered in. While Cindy and Alec watched nervously, their father and Pete talked in low tones. When they finished, they called the youngsters to them.

"It'll mean two more weeks without your mother," Mr. Simpson said unhappily, "but there seems to be no way out of it. The claims must be recorded and the sooner the better. Can you two make out all right on the homestead?"

"Sure," Cindy said.

"We can," said Alec.

"Then go back and take the horses with you. No sense boarding them if we don't have to. We'll walk, and we'll be there as soon as possible."

Cindy looked around to discover one of the men who had been with Tom LaMott standing very near. Again, he must have overheard everything.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Man with Cat's Eyes

Unless she kept her wits about her, Cindy told herself, this whole day might very well be lost. A little wisp of black smoke curled up from the skillet in which she was cooking bacon. Alec, standing beside her, shouted, "Hey! It's burning!"

Hastily Cindy slid a fork under the burning bacon and flipped it over. Alec said, in true big-brother style, "You've burned it and we have no food to waste."

"It's only burned a little," Cindy said.

"A little is too much. We may have to get along with what's here until Dad and Mr. Brent come back from Plains City."

Cindy said, "Now, as I told you, Alec, the cave—"

"And as I've told you at least fifteen times," Alec broke in, "there's work to be done."

"Father didn't say so," Cindy reminded her brother.

"Father doesn't have to tell me every move to make," said Alec. "Don't you know we have a farm to build up?"

"Of course I know," Cindy said. "But do we have to spend every single second building it?"

"We do until it's ready. Right now we need a corral for the mules and Sunshine. I'm going to start cutting fence posts."

"But it will take such a very little while to reach the cave."

"How long?" Alec demanded.

"Oh," Cindy said lightly, "somewhat more than fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes there, fifteen back. I can do a lot of work in half an hour."

Cindy gave Alec his biscuits and bacon and lost herself in thought. Ever since yesterday afternoon, when the two youngsters had returned to the homestead, she had been scheming to get Alec out to the cave for a game of Indians. Alec was equally determined to stay home and work. Cindy set her jaw. The faint-hearted never got what they wanted. She fired another round.

"You know, Alec, I think it's a genuine Indian cave."

"Really? Gosh now!" Alec stifled his flash of interest. "No, sis. The work comes first."

"Why, of course it does," said Cindy, who knew very well that she had finally succeeded in putting at least a small dent in his armor. Alec would not be able to stop thinking about a genuine Indian cave. "And if you're finished with breakfast, you'd better get at it."

Carrying a double-bitted axe, a maul, a buck-saw, and three iron wedges, Alec went into the oak grove. As she washed the dishes, Cindy heard him chopping. There was indeed, she told herself, work to be done, and work was a noble thing. Reverend Thomas, back in Missouri, had always said that labor was blessed in the sight of the Lord. But Cindy was sure in her own heart that the Lord might look with understanding upon those who yearned to explore caves too.

Alec went into the oak grove

Cindy bided her time. In his own way, Alec was stubborn as any mule. His mind had to be changed in much the same manner as a mule's. Cindy thought of the five big fish still trapped in the pool.

Alec liked fish. Today, as a special treat, she had intended to catch one and cook it for him. It would still be a good idea, Cindy thought, if it were changed a bit. There came the scrape of Alec's saw as he began cutting a tree into fencepost lengths.

Cindy wandered down to the creek, and now she didn't have to worry nearly as much about being seen. Almost all the men were in Plains City awaiting a chance to record their claims. Cindy stripped to her underwear, waded across, snared another fish, and took it back to camp. Alec came in for a drink of water, and he used a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his face.

"Getting warm," he said.

"We mustn't mind," said Cindy. "After all, we do have a farm to build up. If you've had enough water, you'd better get right back to work."

Cindy cooked the fish and nothing else for midday dinner, and she purposely did not put any salt on it. She called Alec, who took one bite and made a face.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Fish," said Cindy, "and I'm so ashamed because I burned the bacon this morning. We do have nothing to waste, and I thought that fish cooked the way Daddy and Mr. Brent and I ate it would sort of make up for the bacon I nearly spoiled."

"That's right," Alec said, but he did not say it enthusiastically. "Uh, just happens I'm not hungry."

He ate only half his fish and threw the other half in the fire.

"If you're finished, hadn't you better get back to work?" Cindy questioned. "There's no time to waste, either."

"Uh," said Alec, "guess I'd better."

There came the thudding of Alec's maul as he drove the iron wedges into a section of tree and began to split it into fence posts. Cindy walked down the steps into their dugout, banged a pan up and down two or three times to make Alec think she was working, and lay down on her bed. She didn't know how long Alec would work, but he should be in any minute. However, he held out longer than she thought he could, and it was past midafternoon when he finally came. Hearing him, Cindy leaped up, grabbed the broom, and was sweeping furiously when he appeared. Cindy managed to look surprised.

"Alec! Why have you left your work?"

"I've been pretty selfish, sis." He also sounded pretty tired. "It isn't right to keep you here all the time. Let's go look at your cave."

"Oh, no!" Cindy protested. "There's so much to be done and only us to do it!"

"Now, Cindy, Dad wouldn't like it if I let you overwork."

"Do you really think we should go?" Cindy questioned.

"I'm sure of it," Alec said. "Come on."

Cindy allowed herself to be persuaded. She saddled Sparkle, Alec took Sunshine, and they started out. After forty-five minutes Alec said, "Thought you said the cave was fifteen minutes' ride?"

"I never did!" Cindy exclaimed. "I told you it was somewhat more than fifteen minutes!"

"We're wasting a lot of time." Alec worried.

But after another fifteen minutes he forgot about all the work that had to be done and gave himself entirely to this adventure. He liked the rough and broken land, was enchanted with the hill, and fascinated by the little trees. He shivered, and because the place was dark and mysterious he whispered instead of talking out loud.

He liked the rough and broken land

"Where's the cave?" he asked.

"Through the trees," Cindy whispered back, "but we'll have to tie our ponies and crawl."

Cindy leading, Alec following, they crawled among the closely spaced trees toward the arroyo. Just before they came to it, they crossed a little clear space beyond which was a fringe of trees. Cindy crawled through the fringe and flattened herself on the ground. Very plainly, because the cave was a sounding board, she heard a voice she had heard before.

"I no like," said Tom LaMott. "I no like to fool weeth weetch girl."

"I tell you she's no witch girl, Tom," a second voice said. "She was just doing some simple tricks."

"I see her keel herself."

"She did not kill herself. That was another trick."

Cindy and Alec crawled just far enough forward so they could see. Sitting side by side in the cave were Tom LaMott and one of the two men Cindy had seen with him in Plains City.

"You sure she no keel herself?" Tom LaMott demanded.

"Look, you—"

"No say 'look, you' at me!" LaMott growled.

"I didn't mean it, Tom. I'm sorry. Now, we heard Simpson say he was going to record in the afternoon and bring his wife up the next day. We both know that he won't be able to record before ten days or two weeks, and he sent the kids back. Why, it's like stealing milk from a baby!"

"You sure she no weetch girl?"

"I'm sure. Now, we've sent Bum to grab her and bring her here, and Bum may have her by this time. You and Bum keep her here. Tomorrow I'll ride into Plains City and manage to let Simpson and Brent know that, unless they turn their claims over to us, they'll never see the girl again. It's as simple as that."

"Unless they turn their claims over to us, they'll never see the girl again."

"Why no get boy, too?"

"We don't need 'em both, and I'm sure Bum will know how to handle that kid if he gets fresh."

"S'pose Bum bring wrong girl?"

"He won't. He had a good enough look at her in Plains City so he'll know her again."

Cindy and Alec slipped back to their tethered ponies. Alec was pale and shaken.

"Gosh, sis!" he breathed. "Am I ever glad we left! They intend to kidnap you!"

"We must let Dad and Mr. Brent know right away!" Cindy whispered. "Let's ride past the claim just to make sure everything's all right before we go into Plains City."

"Suppose we meet this 'Bum'?" Alec objected.

"We'll run away from him. He won't have any horse able to catch Sparkle and Sunshine."

The sun went down and the moon rose, big, round, and shiny. The children rode in the moonlight, keeping their ponies at a walk or trot. When and if they met Bum, they'd have to ride fast enough.

When they reached the homestead, the mules, Pete's pony, and Pete's big horses raised their heads to look. But so did two other mules and two ponies that hadn't been there before. There was a second wagon and the house's window was aglow.

Cindy and Alec looked questioningly at each other. Then, leaving their ponies rein-haltered, they bounded down the steps into the house.

"Mother!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Spirits Walk

Mrs. Simpson and Granny Brent sat side by side on chairs that they must have brought with them. Both looked pale, but the children's mother smiled and held out her arms.

"Hello, children!"

Cindy and Alec rushed forward, and hugged and were hugged, and kissed and were kissed by their mother. Cindy asked anxiously, "Where's Mindy?"

"I wish I knew," and Cindy and Alec discovered why their mother and Granny Brent were pale. "She's lost. She went for a walk two hours ago, shortly after we arrived, and she simply hasn't returned."

Cindy and Alec looked at each other. But, though both had the same thoughts, to voice them would really worry their mother. Granny tried to be very calm.

"Mindy must have got herself turned around and just didn't know how to find her way back," she said. "Gramps and all the other men we could find around are hunting for her, and I'm sure they'll find her."

"Of course they will," said Mrs. Simpson, but she sounded as though she were trying to convince herself.

Alec said, "Dad and Mr. Brent are in Plains City waiting their turn to record, Mother. They may be gone for almost two weeks more."

"I knew there was some good reason why your father did not come to get us," his mother replied. "But I just couldn't stay away from my family any longer. I'm here and I'd be so happy if only Mindy weren't lost."

Cindy said gently, "Mother, exactly how was Mindy dressed?"

"Her blue jeans," Mrs. Simpson said. "Her red-checked shirt, her brown shoes, and her hair caught at the back of her neck."

"Did she have a hair ribbon?" Cindy asked.

"No," said Mrs. Simpson, "though goodness knows she should have had one. I'll be glad when you girls dress like girls again instead of running around in boys' clothes. Why do you wish to know how Miranda was dressed, Cindamine?"

"Alec and I are going to look for her." Cindy tried very hard not to sound excited. "If I know exactly how she's dressed, I'll spot her more easily."

"No," her mother said firmly. "One lost child is enough. You and Alec stay right here."

"But, Mother, we won't get lost," Cindy assured her. "We've been here long enough to know this country pretty well. Why, we're almost sure to find Mindy."

"That's right, Ann," said Granny. "Young eyes often see what older ones pass by. The child speaks sensibly."

"Sure, Mom," said Alec. "We'll find Mindy and bring her back."

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Simpson asked worriedly.

"I know so," Alec said, "and nothing will happen to us. The moon's 'most as bright as day. Everything will be all right."

"Well, you're level-headed, Alec," his mother said. "If you can watch Cindamine, you may go."

"I won't be a second," Cindy called.

She scooted into her room and put on a red-checked shirt and brown shoes. Since she already wore blue jeans, and her hair was already caught at the back of her neck, she had nothing else to do. She danced up to her mother and kissed her,

and before Mrs. Simpson could change her mind, Cindy grabbed Alec's hand.

"Be careful, children," their mother called, "and don't stay too long."

Alone in the moonlight, Cindy faced Alec.

"Bum thought Mindy was me and kidnaped her!"

"That's right," Alec agreed.

Cindy said, "They don't know about us being twins!"

"It looks that way."

"Get your bull-roarer, Alec."

"Do you have an idea?" her brother asked.

"Yes," said Cindy. "If there were any men with guns, I'd take them with us. But all the men who aren't in Plains City waiting to record are off hunting Mindy, and there's no time to lose. Get your bull-roarer."

Alec got his bull-roarer from the wagon. Cindy sprang on Sparkle. Alec mounted Sunshine, and they raced away. With the ponies running so fast, it took less than an hour to reach the little trees and tie their mounts. Cindy turned to her brother.

"When I raise my hand, start your bull-roarer!" she said.

Alec said, "Count on it."

They wriggled back through the trees, bumping trunks here and there because, though it was almost as bright as day in the open country, it was black night among the trees. But the blackness had its advantages. The little opening they had crossed earlier in the day, where Alec would have room to swing his bull-roarer, was moon-sprayed and easy to find. Cindy whispered to Alec, "Stay right here until I raise my hand. Then give us as much noise as you can."

"Sure thing," Alec whispered back.

Cindy crawled through the final fringe of trees, looked down on the cave, and saw three men in it now. They were cooking around a small fire. Back of them, standing all by herself, was Mindy.

"Better eat something, girl," called the man who had been with Tom LaMott.

"Eat it yourself, you big baboon!" Mindy said fiercely.

Cindy gasped. The gentle Mindy, in a situation as terrifying as this, should be wilted and nearly hysterical. But instead she sounded fighting mad.

"Mind your tongue, girl!" the man said threateningly.

"When my father gets through with you," Mindy flared, "*you* won't have any tongue to mind!"

The man rose angrily, strode over to Mindy, and raised his hand to slap her face. But before he could, Mindy kicked him smartly in the shin. The man said, "Ow-w!" bent over to rub his shin, and Mindy kicked him in the other one. The man straightened to advance grimly.

"Leave her 'lone!"

"I'll teach the little spitfire," the man started angrily.

"Leave her 'lone!" Tom LaMott repeated.

The man said, "She's no witch girl, Tom!"

"She may be weetch. You don' know for sure."

Cindy raised her hand. Alec went into action. The bull-roarer gave out with a moaning "Owoo-ooo-ooo!"

The startled men leaped up and peered into the moon-sprayed arroyo. Cindy rose to her feet and cupped a hand on each side of her mouth. She tuned her voice to the bull-roarer.

"I'm-m-m-m the spir-r-r-i-i-t!" she sobbed. "Gi-i-i-v-ve me my bod-d-d-y-y!"

All three men saw her at the same instant.

In the cave, Mindy heard and understood at once. She began to dance.

"Come, spirit!" she cried. "Come and get me! Come, spirit!"

"She here! She there too!" Tom LaMott yelled. "Weetch girl sure! Aaaaa-hhhh!"

With a shriek of mortal terror, Tom LaMott raced out of the cave and started scrambling up the far side of the arroyo. The other two men were only a split second behind him, and if there were horses waiting on the far side, there was no sound of galloping hoofs. Probably, after a fright such as this, horses were much too slow. Mindy came to the mouth of the cave and called, "Hi there!"

"H-h-hi," Cindy gasped.

Weak and trembling, she sank down and buried her face in her hands. Then Alec was beside her, and Alec's strong arm was comforting her.

"We're here, Mindy," Alec called. "Come right across and up."

"I'm coming."

Three minutes later she climbed out of the arroyo, sat down beside her twin, and hugged Cindy tightly.

"I wasn't afraid!" she said happily. "I *like* being a tomboy!"

"G-g-gosh!" Cindy shivered.

"What's the matter, Cindy darling?"

"I was just th-thinking that, from now on, I'll never be anything but a l-l-lady."

"Let's rest awhile," said Alec, wise beyond his years. "Then we'll go back."

They rested, but their rest was broken by Mindy's "Ee-eee!"

"What's the matter?" Cindy asked hurriedly.

"Look!" Mindy pointed.

A big brown beetle was crawling up her shirt, Cindy plucked it off and threw it away.

"It was nothing," she assured Mindy. "Just a beetle."

"Shall we start back now?" Alec asked.

"I think we'd better," Cindy and Mindy said in the same voice. Mindy added, to Cindy, "May I sit in the saddle and hold the reins?"

"Why, of course," Cindy said.

Mindy climbed into the saddle and took Sparkle's reins. Cindy climbed on behind and put two loving arms around her twin's waist. "We're ready," Cindy called.

"Let's go," said Alec.

He grinned as he followed his sisters. He did not realize exactly what had taken place. But it seemed to Alec that, from

now on, each of his sisters would be a pleasing mixture of lady and tomboy.

Considering everything, Alec decided, the Simpsons just couldn't have done better.

About the Author

Jim Kjelgaard was born in New York City but spent his childhood and youth in the Pennsylvania mountains. There he learned to hunt, fish, and handle dogs. He still likes to hunt and has done so in most parts of the United States and Canada, though he has exchanged his rifles and shotguns for cameras. After graduating from high school, he spent two years at Syracuse University Extension. Since then he has held a variety of jobs ranging all the way from trapper to factory superintendent, and has been writing professionally for twenty years. Of some twenty-seven successful books, all but one are for young people—particularly for a sixteen-year-old daughter who, according to Mr. Kjelgaard, is a lot smarter than her daddy.

About the Artist

Chris Kenyon was born and brought up in Phoenix, Arizona. While in high school, he won many art awards, including seven first prizes in the National Scholastic Art Contest. In 1950 he went to the Art Center School in Los Angeles, California. The Korean War interrupted his work there, but he returned after spending two years in the Army and in the Far East. His work appeared in *Stars and Stripes* while he was in the service. The great outdoors is Mr. Kenyon's first love, and he has made numerous pack trips into the Southwest and Mexico. He spent two years with the U. S. Forest Service in Montana, and a year with the Arizona Fish and Game Commission.

About the Historical Consultant

Savoie Lottinville was born in Hagerman, Idaho, and now lives in Norman, Oklahoma. He graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1929 and went to Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. When he returned to the United States in 1932 he became a reporter on the *Oklahoma City Times*. The following year he became an editor for the University of Oklahoma Press and later its director. His lifelong study of history has resulted in many articles and papers written for leading journals and reviews. He is married and has two daughters.

[The end of *We Were There at the Oklahoma Land Rush* by Jim Kjelgaard]