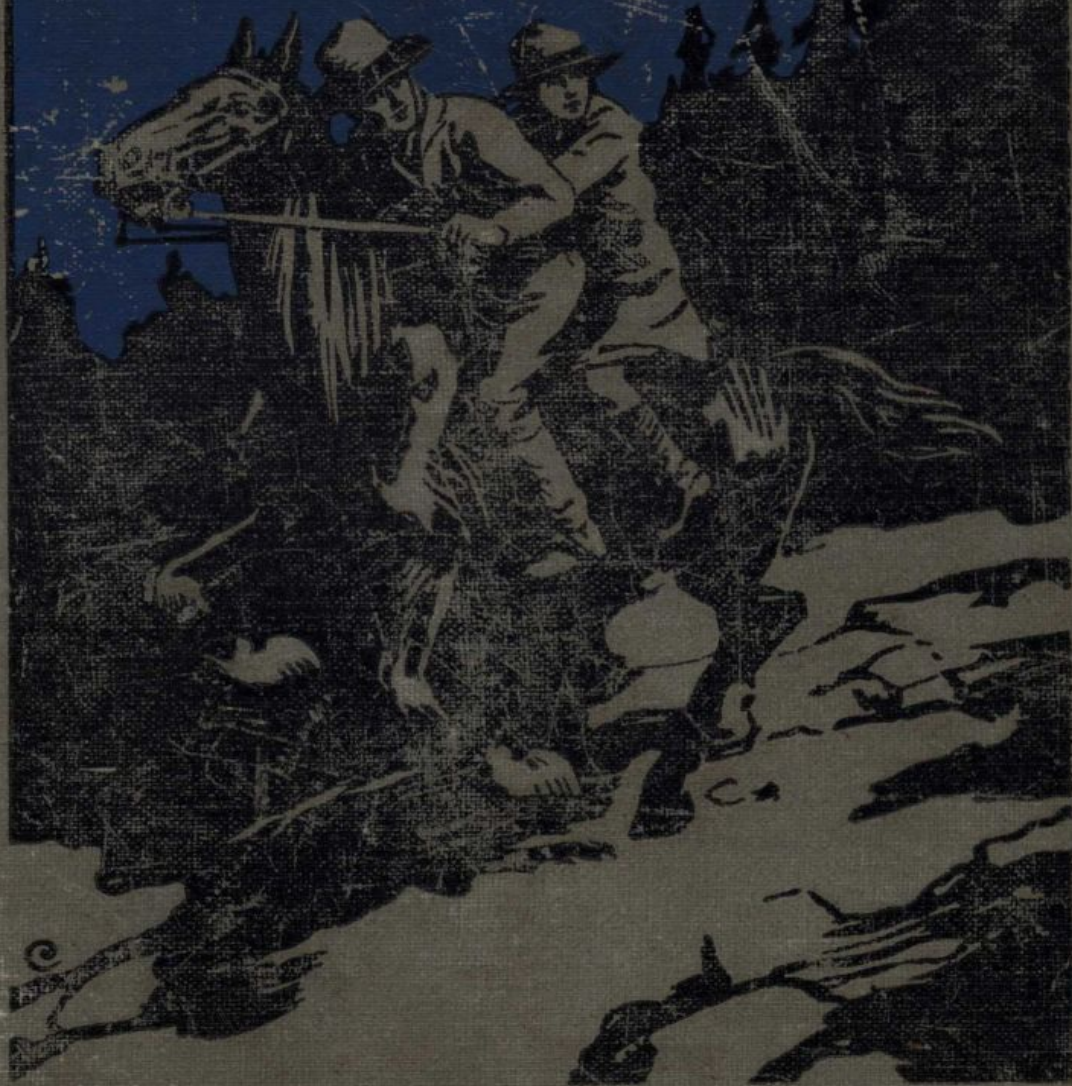


# TWO GIRLS IN THE WILD

*May Wynne*



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BY MAY WYNNE

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“Miss May Wynne has always tilted bravely at the theory that girls must read boys’ books because their own are so dull.”—**Manchester Guardian.**

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Two Girls in the Wild.  
Christmas at Holford.  
Mervyn, Jock, or Joe.  
Adventures of Two.  
Three Bears and Gwen.  
Phyllis in France.  
Stranded in Belgium.  
Comrades from Canada.  
A Cousin from Canada.  
Three’s Company.  
When Auntie Lil took Charge.  
Tony’s Chums.

---

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# TWO GIRLS IN THE WILD

BY  
MAY WYNNE

Author of "Christmas at Holford"  
"Mervyn, Jock or Joe"  
"Adventures of Two"  
&c.

*Illustrated by H. Coller*

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## CHAPTER I

### Not Wanted

“This must be Kelsie Grange,” said Pansy, “the driver said so. Perhaps the bell has gone wrong. We’d better explore.”

“There’s a window open round there,” suggested Pearl. “I could climb through and try to find someone.”

The idea tickled Pansy immensely.

“They’d sure take us for wild Indians as Captain Ewart on the ship said they would,” she replied. “Oh, what a grand collie!” And, forgetting the waiting cab outside the iron gates, with its pile of luggage, forgetting their fears of the unknown great-aunt whom they had come so far to live with, the two lassies bounded off across the lawn to introduce themselves to that perfectly darling collie dog. And I believe their eager comradeship would have won the day with Scotty had not an upper window in the low-roofed white house been flung open and a grey-haired woman leaned out.

“Go away, you naughty girls,” she shrieked. “How dare you run all over the flower-beds and lawn! I’ll have the police. You’re trespassing.”

Back came Pansy and Pearl, panting from their run. They were bonnie, sunburned lassies barely fifteen and sixteen years of age. Pansy, the elder, was brown-haired and grey-eyed. She wore her hair in a long plait and her fair skin was freckled. Pearl was fair, and though her two plaits of hair were meant to be neat, the little curls *would* fluff round her ears and over her brow; she had blue eyes and the sort of nose which tilts a wee bit up and says for its owner “I like fun”.

“We’ve come to live here,” called Pansy. “The cab’s outside the gate. We’re Pansy and Pearl Wydole. You’re sure Aunt Ann.”

“We couldn’t get into the house,” added Pearl; “the bell wouldn’t ring.”

“I never heard such a tale,” said the grey-haired woman. “You’d better come indoors and explain properly! But I’m not your Aunt Ann, and you’re not coming here to turn the place upside down.”

This sounded chilling, and both lassies were looking anxious as the door opened and a crinkled-faced old servant beckoned them in.

“I wonder if Dad knew it would be like this,” whispered Pearl. Pansy squeezed her sister’s hand hard, but did not reply. Somehow the inside of Kelsie Grange seemed suffocating.

In a very dreary room with very prim furniture the grey-haired woman awaited them.



“Of course there was the letter sent by your father. I remember it now,” she said, not even asking them to sit down. “My mother, Mrs. Dangeldie, was too ill to see it, and after her death I sent a message to America telling you not to come. You’ve no claim on me. Your father had no business to suggest that my mother should take you in.”

Her listeners’ eyes were growing round in dismay.

“Do you mean the Aunt Ann who used to be kind to our Mums is *dead*?” asked Pansy slowly.

The grey-haired woman nodded.

“She died at Christmas-time,” she replied. “I’m your cousin Janet. The Grange belongs to me now. I can’t be troubled with children like you. You must go back to America to your father.”

“Dad is dead,” said Pearl, “and our mother died years ago. The—the ranch is sold. We haven’t a home.”

“If you please, Miss Janet,” said the voice of the servant at the door, “Sandy wull be knowing if the boxes are to be carried to the house, and his fare paid?”

“I’ve got the money,” said Pansy, pulling out her purse; “but—but—what is going to happen?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” replied Janet Dangeldie icily. “I suppose you’ll have to stay here till something can be arranged. But you must clearly understand you are not going to live here altogether.”

“Oh!” said Pearl breathlessly, “that’s sure true. We’d—smothercate.”

Perhaps it was as well that Cousin Janet was giving orders to Grizel and did not hear.

So that is just how these two lassies from the Wild West of South California came to Scotland and Kelsie Grange.

“It’s an awful thing to know you’re not wanted,” said Pansy, as she knelt before a sturdy wooden box to do her brief unpacking. Pearl was looking out of the window. The room they were to share was very narrow and bare, but it had a glorious view of the moors.

“I wonder if there are horses here?” sighed Pearl, taking no notice of Pansy’s remark. “I’d love to saddle up and explore this prairie. It isn’t *called* prairie; do you remember Captain Ewart said it was moors? Well! I’d like to ride away over the moors and help some farmer round up his cattle.”

“They don’t round up here,” said Pansy. “Everything is different. Oh dear, I wonder if Aunt Ann was *any* nicer than Cousin Janet. But I’ll write this very night, I will, to Lizzie Quant at Lone View. Don’t you remember, Pearl, she said if we were fed up in the British Isles we were to come right back to them? I wonder if she meant it.”

Pearl shook her head.

“Sure not,” she said; “but do write. I wonder if it’s sour Cousin Janet makes me feel lonesome. But I won’t be glum. Even at Kelsie Grange there may be fun, Pansy. And if there is we shall find it.”

There was certainly not much fun to be got out of supper in the dark dining-room with Cousin Janet watching every morsel they ate.

“I suppose,” said Miss Dangeldie coldly, as she noticed the novel way her visitors placed their knives and forks, “they don’t teach table manners in the Wild West. But it’s usual to use your napkin, Pansy, and not your handkerchief.”

Pansy was really anxious to win approval. She had always been the one to “take care” of Pearl, and her feeling of responsibility reminded her that really and truly they *might* have to live all their lives with this prim relative. It was unlucky that at this moment the pepper got up her nose, and she promptly smothered the *atitcho* in her clean table napkin.

Cousin Janet grew pink with horror.

“Really,” she said, rising from her chair, “I might as well have been sitting at table with two bears! You will have to be taught decent behaviour at once. I shall see the lawyer your father mentioned in his letter, and no doubt a school will be found for you.”

Pansy and Pearl looked at each other.

“Lizzie Quant *said* you’d raise the school stunt,” said Pansy, “but sure we shouldn’t like it. If you don’t want us, we’ll hire out at a farm till we hear from California.”

Here was defiance. Cousin Janet stiffened, but she began to think too.

Charles Wydole, in sending his daughters home, would have made provision for them. She would not be out of pocket in keeping them, and Miss Dangeldie was much too careful of her neighbours’ opinion to allow these orphan cousins to be turned away from her door.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” she said tartly to Pansy. “Go to bed and behave as ladies should do. I daresay you’ll have to stay here, for a time at least. I shall see the lawyer before I make any promises.”

“And we,” added Pansy to Pearl as they climbed the stairs, “will write to Lizzie Quant. I’m aching already for the prairie.”

Pearl laughed.

“So am I,” she replied, “but I shall have fun first. I’ve discovered the kitchen, Pansy, and the cook is real young. I believe we’ll be chums with her. And I *do* want to explore the moor prairie.”

---

Pansy and Pearl were no sleepy heads. If they were not up and out with the dawn, they had managed to reach the gardens very soon after. And even if they *had* cried themselves to sleep last night, their spirits were gay as larks this

morning.

Over the lawn they raced, searching for Scotty. Hurrah! Pearl heard prisoner-whines first, and the collie greeted them as quite old friends.

Out on to the moors they climbed, laughing, singing. What a wild, up-and-down place this was. How black the fir trees looked. Pearl climbed one for fun and pelted Pansy with cones. Then they discovered a tarn deep in the hollow between high banks.

Dared they bathe?

“We needn’t undress,” suggested Pearl; “our things will soon dry. Take off your boots and stockings.”

It was too tempting, and the merry cries of their laughter echoed round the hills.

Oh, how hungry they were too!

“Our skirts do look rather draggly,” said Pansy. “Cousin Janet will be mad if we shed water over her chairs. Shall we light a fire and dry them?”

“We might ask that dandy little cook,” hinted Pearl. “I’m empty. She would give us cake before we starved.”

I think Jean, the rosy-faced cook, must have had rather a shock at sight of those very draggled figures appearing at the scullery door; but beaming smiles told her there had been no accident, and soon the visitors were perched *on* the kitchen table, munching cake, whilst their skirts were baked dry in the oven.

“You’ll like fun, Jean,” coaxed Pearl. “I know it, sure! Can’t we live with you in the kitchen? Don’t call us *Miss*. No one does in America. I’m Pearl, though Dad called me Paul Pry. We were sure more Peter and Paul than Pansy and Pearl. Shall we show you how to make flat pie?”

Jean giggled. She had never met young ladies like this. They made her laugh, and when Jean started to laugh she often couldn’t stop. If she *could* have stopped, she would have told those two that Grizel and her mistress would be horrified to see them prancing about the kitchen in blouses and grey knickers. Also, that to play “cooks” in the Grange kitchen would be accounted an unheard of liberty.

Pansy and Pearl had no idea of wrongdoing. Warmed and refreshed, they were all on the go for fresh occupation. Maybe, too, they wanted to show Jean that ranch girls could handle cookery as well as horses.

It was fun exploring for the flour-tub, fun to peel the apples, fun to roll out the paste, and still more fun when Andy, the garden boy, upset the coals over the kitchen floor in sheer amaze at sight of the strange cooks.

But, oh! it wasn’t fun at all—to Jean or Andy—when the kitchen door was flung open and in walked Grizel.

Grizel was house-parlourmaid at the Grange, and she matched Cousin Janet perfectly. No wonder Jean and Andy were afraid of them. Andy—the

coward—fled with a howl, leaving Pansy shovelling back the scattered coal. Pearl, however, who was just whisking a flat pie from the oven—no, *not* the one holding the skirts—offered it boldly for inspection.

“It’s called flat pie in America,” she explained.

Grizel’s little eyes nearly disappeared into her head.

“And it’s impudence, Miss, that we call it in Scotland,” said she in awful tones. “Jean, you’ll be hearing of this from the mistress. As for young Andy, it’s his father I’ll be talkin’ to. The verra idea! Spoiling the mistress’s food, wastin’ her flour, and *darin’* to walk about as bold as brass wi’ nothin’ but breeches to cover your legs.”

Jean looked frightened and began to tidy up; there were tears in her eyes and her hands shook. Pearl, on the contrary, seemed to be meditating throwing that flat pie at the scolder’s head. Pansy, having cleared up the coal, tried to pour oil on troubled waters. That was Pansy’s way, and you’ll know it was not her fault if she was not always successful.

“We got our skirts wet in the dandy pond,” she explained; “they’ll be dry now. And we’ll sure not waste the flat pie. It’s good.”

“More than I can say for you, Miss,” retorted Grizel. “The idea! *Skirts* in the oven which is made for the cooking of food. Me poor mistress! It’s worse than wild Indians, it is. You’ll not dare to have such goin’s on again in your kitchen, Jean, or you’ll have your notice.”

“It was not Jean’s fault,” began Pansy, whilst Pearl added to Grizel’s wrath by flinging her arm round Jean’s neck and kissing her. “Perhaps Cousin Janet will understand.”

Poor Pansy! She would have had sore lips kissing the blarney stone before she could have persuaded her indignant relative that they had done no harm.

“After all my goodness, too, in taking you in,” concluded Miss Dangelddie. “But I shall see the lawyer to-day, and something must be arranged before the house is torn down over my head.”

Pearl longed to retort, but Pansy’s warning glance checked her.

“I’ve written to Lizzie Quant,” Pansy whispered to her sister. “And—and we must wait. Till we hear, I guess we’d better stay outside the house as much as possible. I hope poor Jean don’t get into a row.”

Whether Jean got into a row or not the girls did not at once hear, for Cousin Janet strictly forbade them to put their noses inside the kitchen.

Luckily it was a fine day, and the girls found plenty to do wandering over the moors.

“There don’t seem many people living around,” said Pansy. “I wonder where the village is that we saw yesterday? We’ll ask the boy with red hair who upset the coal. He’ll tell us where to look for adventures. There are sure to be places to see—caves and castles and witches’ towers, like Dad used to tell

us of.”

It took quite a while to find their way back to the Grange, but the girls had been trained to this, and arrived—oh, lucky for them!—in time for boiled mutton.

Cousin Janet was going to see the lawyer in the afternoon, and Pansy got the idea she was figuring how much they were going to cost if they ate at all meals as they did at this one. Poor old Cousin Janet! The girl with her young life before her felt real pity for the narrow limits which had made the elder woman grow so mean and grasping.

“I’ll not be home for tea,” said Miss Dangel die, “but we’ll have meat tea at six.”

Pansy nodded.

“Sure, same as we did on the ranch,” she agreed; “the boys came in late after herding the cattle, and you guess it wouldn’t have been any use just filling them up with cake.”

To which remark Cousin Janet did not deign a reply.

The first thing to be done after dinner was to find Andy, but alas! the latter was away on an errand, and the girls spent the time fixing what they were pleased to call a camping ground amongst the fir trees in a hollow. They had never been girl guides, but the latter would have joyed in seeing how clever these prairie girls were in contriving a bivouac with branches and “scrub”, till quite a cosy nest was formed.

“We’ll get hammocks,” said Pearl, “and camp out, like we did in Silver Birch Clearing. And bathe *without* our clothes in the pool. If only Cousin Janet turned us out of doors we should have much nicer times.”

“Except when we got hungry,” laughed Pansy as they walked back to the Grange. It was a very excited Andy they found holding a dead, half-grown chick in his hand.

“It’s that ginger cat o’ Mr. Salford’s,” he cried angrily. “I saw her wi’ my own eyes, but they’ll no’ believe it. Wait till I catch her.”

“Is that her?” asked Pearl—whose grammar often needed blue pencilling—and she pointed to the grimmest of ginger cats perched in a chestnut tree.

Andy grew scarlet.

“If I could just catch her,” he groaned, “and tie the puir chick round her thievin’ neck.”

“It’s a rustler cat,” breathed Pearl delightedly. “Rustlers are outlaws, Andy; there are bands of them in California. P’raps you’ve heard of the James Boys. Well, they were rustlers. That cat can be one of the James Boys, and we’re the Mounted Police. Come right on.”

“Cousin Janet might——” began Pansy.

But wisdom was cast to the winds at sight of Pearl already half up the

chestnut tree—and Andy heading off that wicked ginger cat from the greenhouse wall.

## CHAPTER II

# Two Chums for Andy

“Whoop-ee!” squealed Pearl in delight. She had grabbed at Mrs. Ginger’s tail, but only got scratched for her pains. It was Pansy’s chance now, and with the thought of the murdered chick to encourage her she flung her sack.

Mrs. Ginger whirled about and was clear in a tick; but Andy was not to be beaten by two girls, even if the latter were the sportiest he had ever met.

Rushing to the attack, he drove the ginger one into a corner, and was valiantly defying scratches when Pearl came to the rescue with the scarf she wore in place of waist-belt.

“It’s quite a fair punishment,” she said, as Andy in triumph tied the forlorn little corpse round Mrs. Ginger’s neck. “I hope it will cure her. Scr—r—r—”

With a yaul of defiance the big cat fled, and Pearl, tearing headlong to speed her on her way, *very* nearly collided with a fat little old gentleman who was coming down the drive.

The old gentleman swerved, Pearl flopped, the cat vanished, but not before Mr. Salford had seen the chick tied round her neck.

“You wretched girl!” he cried, “you have been tormenting my poor Charmian. You heartless child. Who are you, and how dare you behave so abominably?”

Pearl laughed.

“Don’t worry,” she urged; “it’s your cat that’s been tormenting. She killed one of Cousin Janet’s chicks. We’ve been teaching her a lesson. Are you coming right along to the house?”

Mr. Salford, still boiling, replied he *was* coming along, to see Miss Dangeldie and request an explanation.

“You’ll have to wait,” said Pansy. “Cousin Janet’s out, but you can come and see the garden boy. He’ll put you wise about the cat.”

Mr. James Salford *nearly* choked, not with laughter, but wrath. But he came down to the house—and of course believed those wicked young women had been fibbing, since Cousin Janet had returned home during the cat-hunt and was feeling in just the right mood to sympathize with the cat owner.

In vain the girls pointed out that they had been the avengers of her own hapless chicken.

“If the chickens were out, it was entirely Andy’s fault,” said Miss Janet. “I blame him wholly for the accident, and you girls, mere strangers, had certainly no right to take matters into your own hands. You will apologize to Mr.

Salford at once.”

Pearl wrinkled her brow.

“Wouldn’t it sure be better to ask the cat’s pardon?” she asked. And Mr. Salford quite agreed with his neighbour in saying the speaker was an impudent chit.

“We don’t seem to fit a bit in Kelsie Grange,” said Pearl to her sister as they cuddled down in bed that night. “I feel like a bomb on the verge of exploding. We don’t *mean* to do mischief—but it comes, and then Cousin Janet scratches. Did she say anything to you this evening about our staying here?”

“Yes,” said Pansy, “she said our darling Dad must have been out of his mind, leaving things as he has, and trusting us as he has. She says he left it in his will we should choose whether we stay in England or not, and we were not to go to school. Cousin Janet washes her hands of us, though I *did* say we had been in a convent school at Los till a year ago.”

“I mean to be on best behaviour,” said Pearl, “till Lizzie Quant writes. Then, if we can’t go back to California, I—um—I shall burst.”

And she was quite half indignant that Pansy should laugh at her.

For the next week those girls jogged along about as well as square pegs *do* fit in round holes.

Their only friend was Andy. Jean *would* have been friends but dared not because of Grizel. Andy, however, managed to avoid old Gregory the gardener, and showed these amusing comrades some of the most explorable places round about.

“I like Monk’s Tower best,” said Pearl. “*One* evening, Pansy, we will come by moonlight and see the monk burying his treasure. What fun!”

Pansy brightened at this. She was pining for the West even more than Pearl, though she did her bravest best to try to settle down. Dad had said he would like them to come back to the Old Country if possible, and Pansy was intensely loyal to her dead father’s wishes. Still—he had not known about Aunt Ann.

Andy had promised to take them to Rallan Water, some five miles distance across the moors, one Saturday afternoon. There was no fishing near the Grange, and these restless girls were beginning to need some other occupation than exploring.

“Couldn’t we dig in the garden, or help one of the farmers?” begged Pansy. But Cousin Janet only pursed her lips.

“It would be a very great deal more to the point,” she retorted tartly, “if you were both to do some sewing—or knitting.”

Sewing! The very word gave Pearl chills down the back, but Pansy had more idea of the job. So there they both sat in Cousin Janet’s drab little



drawing-room stitching away, with groans galore from Pearl, who pricked herself, dropped her cotton, and lost her needle twenty times a minute.

"It's *no* use, Pansy," she said at last. "I never shall stitch. If I had to wait till I made my own clothes, I guess I should tar and feather myself. I like first aid, and I love cooking, but needles and cottons are some nightmare."

"There's Andy looking around," said Pansy cheerfully. "It's Saturday, and I expect his mother doesn't want him to go shopping after all. Perhaps he'll take us fishing; but we'd best climb out of the window or Grizel will stop us."

Andy greeted his chums in beaming silence. He was "verra Scotch", but his bump of adventurousness was well developed. Though too shy to ask questions of distant California and ranch life, he drank in every word the girls told him, and I am sure he believed they were real heroines.

The fish in Rallan Water were not rising to the occasion. Pansy was readiest to listen to Andy's plea that patience might change their luck, but Pearl took the first chance of being out of sight of her companions to lay down her rod to fish by itself. The restlessness was badly in Pearl's bones, and as she climbed back up the bank her blue eyes twinkled. In the field to the right were horses. Oh yes, she knew that. Pearl kept her eyes "skinned", as the old stockman on the ranch used to say. Leaving Pansy the persevering to coax the coyest of trout, Miss Pearl crept off. She had stalked many a deer along the rocky cañons of California, and had lassoed many a wild colt or skittish mustang on her father's ranch. Already she marked a defiant little bay horse which kicked up his heels over there.

And meantime Pansy, having landed her trout and feeling as proud as Wellington on the field of Waterloo, was calling Pearl and Andy to admire. Only Andy responded. He looked with the cold eyes of jealousy on that fish, then relently at the flushed face under its linen cap.

"It's a verra fine fish," said he, "but——"

Pansy did not wait for "buts".

"Where's Pearl?" she asked. "Pearl-o! Paul Pry! Pickles! Come and admire. Don't turn green on the way, though. A fish! A fish!"

No answer. Pansy was prompt in action. Leaving fish and rod on the bank, she raced along to where, behind drooping alders, she expected to find Pearl. It really gave her a shock to see Pearl's rod—a mere bean stick, mark you!—floating down stream.

Pansy gasped.

"Pearl!" she shrieked. "You've—not—fallen—in?" Even in that moment's panic she could not imagine Pearl drowning in silence. And a bellow from Andy should soon have set her mind at rest.

"She's yonder!" cried Andy, stuttering in his excitement. "She's up on Sir Oswald's bay colt—him that broke young Colin."

Pansy shaded her eyes with a sun-tanned hand, whilst, instead of echoing Andy's horror, she fell a-laughing. For what colt could break Pearl? Had she not been the dandiest little broncho-buster in California—and her horsemanship the pride of Pine Tree Ranch?

Away dashed Pansy towards the field where Pearl sat astride that impish colt—bare-back.

She had found a rope, somewhere, for Pearl was a maid with a purpose and had magiced Rufus to speaking terms. Even now the indignant bay was being lured by her sing-song coaxing.

"Hecks!" panted Andy, keeping astride with Pansy; "if it's no' Sir Oswald himsel'! There'll be trouble." And being a true son of Adam, Andy remembered the fish—the rods—and other trifles needing attention.

Pansy was not such a coward, and by the time she reached the gate Pearl was off her steed and was being talked to by its indignant owner.

"Ought I to sure say I'm sorry?" asked Pearl innocently when the great man paused for breath; "or to say the truth, which is that I enjoyed it fine?"

Poor Sir Oswald! He heard one of the grooms giggling in the background, and was further irritated by the appearance of Pansy, who looked like a ruffled hen in defence of a chick.

"If you're staying at the Grange," he said, "I shall make a point of calling on Miss Dangelddie and requesting her to keep you in order. It's a miracle the bay's knees are not cut—and your neck broken."

Pearl kissed the bay's nose.

"He's a darling," she purred. "Don't I wish he were mine! May I finish breaking him in for you?"

"No, you may *not*!" roared Sir Oswald in such stentorian tones that the bay jerked free of his captor and galloped to the other end of the field.

"We'd better be going home," urged Pansy. "Come, Pearl, it's no use trying to explain. I guess the people here don't understand horses same as we've learned to do."

She didn't mean to be rude, but just honestly pitied the ignorance of these Old Country people. But she left Sir Oswald on the verge of apoplexy.

Somehow, Pearl's escapade rather spoiled the day's sport. Andy had proved disappointing, and he had had no business to carry off the fish. Pansy could not help wondering, either, what effect Sir Oswald's complaint would have on the top of Mr. Salford's. They were not left long in doubt. Cousin Janet received her letter from the Court next morning, and the storm burst during breakfast.

"You've made it impossible for me to keep you a week longer," she said, "and I'm thankful to say I have found a home for you. Lawyer Trimburn's sister is willing to have you; you will go on Friday."

Pansy and Pearl listened in awe. They had had no idea how shameful their conduct had been till Cousin Janet painted it for them. Pansy had to bite her lips hard to keep back the tears, and Pearl, seeing this, subsided meekly. But oh, what sort of bogey was Lawyer Trimburn's sister?

"Let's forgive Andy and ask him," suggested Pearl. But though they did so they received no comfort.

"Kirstie Trimburn," said Andy, "is just an auld maid who lives by her lone in the town, wi' three cats and a parrot. There's nae garden to speak of, an' they say she's sae mean that she'll serve a kipper for the whole three meals o' a day."

"I'm not going *there*," said Pearl stormily. "Do you hear what he says, Pansy? We should be starved. Oh, *can't* we go home?"

"Pine Tree Ranch is sold," sighed Pansy, "but any day we might hear from Lizzie. Let's hope the letter will come to-morrow."

"Wednesday, Thursday, Friday," said Pearl. "I feel it'll be like prison. Let's run away—and ask the post office people to keep the letter when it comes. I like the post office girl; she sells the bramble drops."

Pansy did not reply. She felt immensely responsible and unhappy. Things were going from bad to worse. First Dad's death, then the finding Aunt Ann gone, the tragedy of not being wanted, and finally a fate as bad as prison.

"Cousin Janet does *not* like us," she agreed, "and Dad didn't send us to her. But I guess he'd make us stay—till we hear from Lizzie."

"Listen to me, Pansy Peter," said Pearl. "I a-m n-o-t going to a horrid old miser maid who counts the grains of porridge in a plate. You know I should only do something outrageous, so it is better to be wise first. I'm going to run away from Kelsie Grange and live out at Three Stacks Farm over the moors. I'm sure they'll take us."

"No," said Pansy, "no, Paul, we must stay."

"If I were a coyote of the prairie," hummed Pearl. "What say, Peter? Well, I'll have to go alone, that's all."

But she was peeping from under her lashes as she spoke, and knew she should be winning the day. Pearl was the more daring of the sisters. Maybe Dad had spoiled her a bit. Pansy was more of a sober-sides. But be sure if anyone were in a hole Pansy would be there.

Honestly, both girls would have been loyal to Cousin Janet had the latter held out one finger of friendship; but had she not instead shown them plainly they were nothing but a nuisance?

And so that night when Pansy woke up to see Pearl half dressed by the window she did not hesitate.

If Pearl *would* go, Pansy must go with her.

Having got her way, Pearl was sugar-sweet.

“Best of Peters!” she coaxed. “Of course, I never *would* have gone alone, so don’t look reproachful. To-morrow, poor Kirstie will have cooked her kipper of welcome in vain. We shall have some time at Three Stacks Farm. The farmer is real nice, and if we don’t find all the way there to-night we shall to-morrow. Cousin Janet will not trouble to look far.”

Pansy sighed.

“We’ll have to come back for our things when we hear from Lizzie,” said she, “and it won’t be nice.”

“Nicer than kill-joy Kirstie,” persisted Pearl. “Oh, don’t moors look fine by moonlight. Who believes in fairies?” And away she danced, skipping as wildly as any audacious Puck.

Andy had told the girls the chief tracks across the moors, and the two reached the Court woods without adventure. It was a glorious night and the moonlight bright as day.

“Do you remember Long Will’s ghost story?” began Pearl, but Pansy caught her arm.

“Look,” she whispered, “there are some men down there in the ditch. See—see—quite a bunch. They must be deer stealers—or—what is the word over here? It’s the same as *rustlers*.”

“Don’t remember,” said Pearl, “but we’ll sure scare them. They’ll have jumpy nerves, I reckon. Down, Pansy, against that tree there. Now Jean says all Scotsmen believe in ghosts.”

And Pansy only just had time to place herself in hiding behind that tree when to her horror a weird and plaintive wail, likest thing to the mourn of a wolf, filled the air.

It was Pearl’s “startler”, and its effect was instantaneous. The poachers—a well-known gang, long wanted by Sir Oswald and his friends—were on their feet at once, and six took to instant flight.

The remaining two also fled, but, unluckily for two *other* people, took the track past the alders.

Pansy, believing the men to have gone, peeped round the edge of her tree—coming face to face with Red Tam o’ the Glen, who with a snarl of rage leapt forward.

## CHAPTER III

### In Disgrace

Prisoners! And it hadn't even been possible to fight.

Red Tam had seized Pansy's wrists whilst his comrade grabbed at Pearl's. What would happen to them? Both men had game which they had laid against the tree trunk. Their fierce faces stared into those of the frightened girls whilst they poured out a volley of curses and inquiries in very broad Scottish dialect.

Both Pansy and Pearl felt their end had come. Wild tales of the rustlers of Skeleton Range vividly forced themselves on their memories.

And these must be a sort of rustler.

The poachers meantime were highly disgusted to find they had been deliberately scared from a good night's work by a couple of reckless lassies who seemed to be roaming the moors without the least intention of spying. Red Tam considered the chance of recalling the vanished comrades, and was in haste to be finished with his captives and return to sport.

"Hae ye a cord, Jamie?" he asked his one companion, and, with some skill, they tied both girls back against the half-rotted trunks of the little trees. Then, snatching up their guns, away they went—scared by other sounds from the woods, which told of searchers. They had intended to gag these Paul Prys, but had not time. At first neither of the prisoners felt like screaming. It would only be bringing back more enemies! So they stood quaking.

Pearl was the first to speak, and her tones were comical.

"I never thought Scotland had this sort of adventure," said she.

"No, neither did I," replied Pansy, "or I think I should have stayed in bed."

Pearl reflected.

"I don't know. Kirstie and half a kipper would be worse than tame rustlers. They were *almost* tame, weren't they?"

"I think they heard a whistle in the wood," said Pansy. "Shall we shout and say we are here?"

Pearl tilted back her fair head. She had recovered from her scare and rather enjoyed the situation. To be tied to an alder tree on a lonesome moor by moonlight would be fine—if she were safely released and made a heroine of shortly.

"Whoopee! Whoopee!" rang out the two young voices. It was the last sort of hail which Sir Oswald's head keeper, Clarkson, had expected to hear, but it brought him and two of his mates to the edge of the wood.

"Hy—ar!" called Pansy. "We—are—prisoners!"

It was just as well she cried out at once, for already one of Clarkson's companions had taken to his heels, believing he saw ghosts.

Clarkson and his companion, Duncan, came cautiously forward, suspecting a trap. They were out in force to-night against Red Tam and his confederates.

The astonishment of both men was great when they discovered two flesh and blood maidens corded to the old trees.

It was good to be free, but Pearl had a disappointment if she expected to be looked on as a heroine. Sam Clarkson happened to be courting Grizel at the Grange, and had heard all about the wild Americans. So he surveyed the heroines very glumly.

Pansy gave a breathless description of their adventure. Pearl interrupted.

"We scared the rustlers," she said; "they were raiding the wood. They had guns, too."

Clarkson glowered.

"I dinna ken about *rustlers*," said he, "but it's a fine bag we'd hae made o' the worst gang o' poachers in the place if it hadna been for you skeerin' them off."

Here was gratitude! Pearl tilted her nose in disdain, whilst Pansy drew back.

"We couldn't stop the men," she replied; "but anyhow we're glad you cut the rope. Come, Pearl."

But Clarkson knew his duty.

"It's no' the thing for young lassies to be roamin' the moors," he lectured. "Ye'll be comin' back to the Grange. It's verra sure ye come from wild parts to play tricks o' this kind."

"We are not going back to the Grange," protested Pearl, but she changed her mind when without warning Pansy reeled back against the alder tree. How white she looked! Pansy had never fainted in her life, but she was fairly near it now. The excitement, scare, and sense of responsibility had quite bowled her over, and she even consented to being given a "wee drap" from Clarkson's flask.

Ugh! Horrible! *The* most horrible stuff she had ever tasted, but it *did* take the woolly feeling away from her legs and help her to walk back that long, weary way to the Grange.

For Pearl, scared by her sister's illness, gave no more thought to running away. They would have to go back to Cousin Janet's and take the very next chance of escaping.

Dawn had broken before they came in sight of the Grange, and Mattie, the little help who came to scrub before going to school, was busy at the door-step. Poor Mattie had panic at sight of such a procession, and fled, hearthstone in hand, to search for Jean.

Both Jean and Grizel were soon on the scene, whilst from upstairs came the sound of Cousin Janet's opening door and shrill inquiries as to what was the matter.

The truants felt horribly small as Clarkson gave a graphic description of their escapade, which he did not make sound at all heroic. When the men had gone, Grizel went up to her mistress, whilst Jean and Mattie busied about to get hot tea and slices of cake for the tired girls.

Jean was a real sympathizer, but she did not help to raise her listeners' spirits as she gave graphic stories of the wicked ways of poachers.

"They might ha' murdered you and a', 'deed they might," she said. "And ye look more like a ghaist now, Miss Pansy. Ah, here's Grizel. I ken by her stumpin' she's in an ill mood."

Grizel was certainly not in a good temper. Her mistress had blamed her for not taking the keys of the various doors out of the locks as she was supposed to do, and Grizel had answered back. That meant Miss Dangeldie's displeasure would be shown for days, and Grizel meant to vent her spleen on the young leddies.

"Though leddies ye're *not*," said the woman, after scolding the limp disturbers of the household. "And who told you, Jean, to be givin' the mistress's new cake away out o' meal-time. Come awa', lassies. It's to your room I'll be seein' you, and out o' further mischief."

Pansy and Pearl were too tired to protest. They were sleepy as little cats, wet with night dews, stiff after tight cording, and distressed in mind. It hardly worried them to hear the key turned in the lock on the outside as they tumbled on to their beds.

It must have been hours later when they woke up, for the afternoon sun was peeping into the room, and on the table near stood a jug of water and half a loaf of dry bread.

Cousin Janet was *very* old-fashioned in her ideas of punishment. On the tray was a note, which Pansy read aloud whilst Pearl cut the bread.

"You naughty, ungrateful girls. My patience is at an end. You will remain locked in your room till Friday, when a conveyance will take you to Miss Trimburn's residence.

"JANET DANGELDIE."

"She's as mad as a wet hen, sure," said Pearl placidly; "but I'm glad we've got bread. It's good bread, too. What shall we do, Pansy? Take our bundles, climb down from the window—and escape?"

Pansy re-read the letter.

"She's sure an old cat," said she. "Yes, Pearl, I'm not going to stay here

two whole days. And she has no right to lock us up. We don't belong to her! Let us see if we could climb."

Pearl pushed open the casement.

"It isn't easy," said she; "but we *could*. And shall we go to Three Stacks Farm?"

"Yes—oh, look, Pearl! Listen! Sh—sh—sh. There's someone outside the door, pushing a letter in."

Down on her knees flopped Pansy. A thrilling whisper came through the key-hole. Jean was speaking.

"Missies! They don't ken the letter's here, but I ken ye've been looking for it, an' mebbe they wouldn't let ye have it. It's foreign!"

"*Dear Jean*, you're a treasure," said Pansy, kissing the door panel in her delight; "it's the Californian letter. You darling. And——"

"Andy'll be in the garden, Missies. If ye could let doon a bag, we'll fill it wi' scones and the like."

"Angel!" chuckled Pearl; "but the letter—oh, the letter!"

A scolding voice on the staircase told that the faithful Jean had been caught. But at this moment Pansy and Pearl were too excited to be thinking of Jean.

The letter—oh, the letter, which had come from home. Pansy tore the envelope all to bits before she could get it open, and Pearl's heart sank as she saw how brief was the scrawl.

It wasn't the sort of writing one could read all in a minute, and two heads were pressed close together as the sisters slowly deciphered the ill-formed letters.

"DEAR KIDS,

"Pete says yoo may com. I'm just delighted. Com right now. If we know wen, Wearing can meet yoo at the stashun. I'm no scholar, but my heart's in it sure when I say—com.

LIZZIE QUANT."

"Hurrah!" shouted Pearl, waving her arms like a whirlwind, "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah for Lone View Ranch! and as much riding as we want. Oh, Pansy, won't we just be the two best hired-girls in America? *Cow-girls*, may be. That's what I want. Hurrah! No Kirstie and kipper, no more flusters and scolding. We're free!"

Pansy sat and laughed. Pearl's capers fairly shook the room, and she was not at all surprised when the door was opened and Cousin Janet bounced in.

"How *dare* you try to break the ceiling in the sitting-room," she began; but to her amaze Pansy flung both arms about her neck.



"We can say good-bye to-morrow, Cousin Janet," she said, "so don't be angry any more. We're going back! We're going back! We're going back to sunny Cal. Oh, it's great! It's fine! But don't be angry, as we'll be going. Can't you—can't you say you ain't too sorry we came?"

Cousin Janet collapsed. Something in Pansy's appeal and the easy guess of what prompted it touched the narrow old maid's heart.

She had failed to welcome these orphan lassies who had come so trustingly to a home. Now they were going away—going back—because their home country had no welcome for them.

"I'm sure you could have been very happy here," she said. "And—and I've made all arrangements. Miss Trimburn is expecting you—and your passage will cost far more than can be afforded. There is money, but it is invested, and \_\_\_\_\_"

It was no use talking. She had said she wished those wild American girls had never come to Scotland. Now they were going.

Yes, in spite of Lawyer Trimburn's frowns and pursed lips, in spite of Cousin Janet's suggestion that they might try Miss Kirstie's for a month.

Pansy and Pearl were firm. They were going back. And—they went.

It was the most joyous going—so much more so than their coming. The only two people who really seemed to regret their leaving were Jean and Andy. Jean—without orders—made them a pile of real Scotch shortbread to eat on their journey, whilst Andy, having avoided Gregory's eye, was at the station to see them off.

Poor Andy, he looked quite sad, and brought out a clasp knife which he pressed into Pansy's hand.

"It's ma best," he explained shyly. "I'm sorry I havna one for the ither lassie. But you'll think o' me when ye're usin' it, an' if there's room for a handy boy on the ranch out there, Missie, I'd be *verra* glad to take the job." He sighed. "I'd gie the worrld," he burst out in conclusion, "to be goin' too."

Pansy patted his shoulder.

"And indeed, Andy," she promised, "we won't forget. I'll write."

And the promise—coming from Pansy—left Andy broadly smiling as he stood on the platform of the tiny station, waving his cap in farewell to the girls who had found that corner of bonnie Scotland so much too "smothercating".

But it was Pearl who, leaning from the window, waved her hand towards the wide stretching slopes.

"Good-bye, moor-prairie," she cried shrilly. "One day, perhaps, we'll come back to you—but never, no! never to Kelsie Grange. Hurrah for Lone View Ranch—and the Wild West!"

Pansy clasped her hands.

"I think—I really *do* think," said she, "Dad would have told us to go back.

Nobody wanted us in the Old Country, no one at all.”

“Excepting Andy,” said Pearl. “I guess one day he’ll be a fine sort of cowboy—and oh, I’m aching for a ride across the prairie. Just think, Pansy, what you would be feeling if we were on the way to Miss Kirstie—and her kippers?”

But Pansy had other things to think of.

## CHAPTER IV

### Welcomed West

“Say! you’ll sure be the girls for Lone View Ranch?”

Pansy and Pearl, standing rather dejectedly on the platform of the out-of-the-way little prairie station, heard the hail with joy.

A sun-tanned rancher had just driven a buckboard with team of sweating horses up to the station, and stood to wave to them.

“Yes,” cried Pearl, “that’s us. Oh, it’s good to see a buckboard again!”

The man, Phil Wearing, grinned at her. He was a stranger to the girls.

“So you’re no tenderfeet,” he said. “Good! It’ll be fine for the little missus to have you at the ranch. It’s Lone View all right for her at times when we’re rounding up. Shall I give a hand?”

He swung the boxes on to the conveyance, the girls scrambled up, and they were off.

“The Dodger won’t burn the wind at this pace,” he laughed, “but there’s no great jostle, though you’ll be hungry. Did you feed on the train?”

Pansy nodded. Both girls looked the picture of health after the sea trip, and the long train journey had not worried them at all.

Pearl was the bigger chatterbox; she wanted to know who had Pine Tree Farm, and all the gossip of this wild home-land.

Wearing was fairly new to the part, and had not much news.

“Nothing doing on the ranges since the spring,” he said. “Then we had a bit of a beanfeast with the rustlers. There’s a gang ’way up in the Skeleton Range under a captain they call Scarred Mike—a big, red-headed chap with Irish blood in him. He was at outs with the boss. Pete gave information to the Mounted Police, which helped to thin Scarred Mike’s bunch of half its number. But I reckon I oughtn’t to be talkin’ of rustlers to you nippers. It’s taboo at the ranch. The little missus doesn’t like them mentioned.”

“We won’t say a word,” promised Pansy, “and I’m sure we’re not frightened. We often used to hear about the rustlers, but they never came near the ranch. It’s no use to be thinking every jack rabbit is a wolf.”

Wearing laughed heartily.

“You’re sports,” he applauded. “The boys are all pleased you’re comin’ to Lone View. Of course you knew most of the old hands.”

Of course they did, and oh, how they loved the welcome those sun-blackened “boys” gave them, as Wearing brought his team to a standstill before a pleasant little ranch-house.

Lone View was the best name in the world for it, but even if it were *lone* it was not without beauty of situation.

A deep cañon lay to the left, silver spruce growing amongst the yellow rocks, whilst the rolling prairie, covered with purple sage, stretched away to the right. The foothills were not far distant, and beyond—much farther beyond than appeared likely—the grim heights of Skeleton Range.

Pansy and Pearl as children had possessed a deep awe of those rocky heights—the home of rustlers, rattlers, bears, and wolves—yet the tall crags and precipitous slopes, seen again after the few months' absence, seemed to take the shape of old friends.

Lizzie Quant came running out to greet her dear girls. She was a sun-dried little woman, of great pluck and indifferent health. Pete often talked of his anxiety to make enough to take his wife back to the town. The ranch-life did not suit her, and all her people were town bred. But she adored her big husband, and made a capital housewife.

“Some stew-maker” the boys called her, for their idea of meals centred round stew and clam pie.

Pete Quant was no less hearty than his wife in welcoming his old friend's girls. He had an idea “ ’way back in his noddle” to pack these newcomers and Lizzie off to Brendon during the trying winter. But he would not be talking of this for months.

Meantime, Lizzie had carried Pansy and Pearl off to the barest but sunniest of little bedrooms. They had so much to talk of and tell each other, though Pearl was peeping out towards the corrals and wondering if Pete still had the white mustang, Star, amongst his horses. Never was there such a girl for horses as Pearl, though to look at her you might have thought she was more cut out for sewing and flower gathering.

“See here, Lizzie,” urged Pansy, “we've come to be helps, real helps, not just to play around. You'll have to tell us what we can do.”

“Sure!” agreed Lizzie, “there are always jobs on a ranch, but I don't have to work so hard now I have Martha.” And she sighed. “Martha was Mrs. Peeke's treasure,” she added. “And she passed her on to me. She cooks and looks after the poultry, but I believe even Pete is afraid of her.”

This was a damper. Pansy and Pearl had dreamed dreams of being real “hired-girls” to Lizzie, but the bogey of the unknown Martha was disquieting.

They were introduced later, and found Lizzie's description no less than true. Martha was a regular raw-boned soldier of a woman, with one of those mouths which remind you of a rat-trap, but she seemed really fond of her little missus, and quite determined that no one should impose on her.

“She'd slave herself to death over those men,” said Martha, “and no one notice what she was doin' till she dropped.”

So Lizzie had to do as Martha told her, and the girls soon saw it was best for them to follow the same example if they wanted to fit well into the routine of the ranch.

“It’s much nicer to fix one’s own jobs,” Pearl confessed to Pansy, as the two girls stood pegging out the washing which the wind blew billowing from the line; “but Pete’s a dear old bear, and says I may ride Mustard whenever I like. I’d *like* to now.”

“I’d rather have my old Cherry-Bob,” laughed Pansy, who loved riding well enough, though not quite to the exclusion of all else; “but I’ll finish this job if you like to go for a scamper.”

Pearl shook her curly head.

“No, that’s bad. I don’t want to get into Martha’s black books. How she does hate Roddy Woflake, too!”

“I don’t think any of the boys like Roddy,” said Pansy slowly. “I wonder why. He’s a fine rider and a quick hand with the lasso. He’s civil, too.”

“Phil says there’s too much of the coyote about him,” replied Pearl. “He’s close as wax about himself, and never joins in with a game or a yarn. Phil says he can’t think why he doesn’t pack his turkey.”

Pansy laughed.

“What would Cousin Janet say to *that* expression?” she hinted. “I guess she thought American slang almost as bad as swearing. But it *is* catching—like measles. There, that’s done. Shall we go for that scamper, Paul?”

“Listen!” said Pearl sharply; “was that someone shouting?”

Pansy stood still. They heard nothing beyond the many ordinary sounds of outdoor nature at first; then sharp and clear from the direction of the cañon—a man’s voice calling.

“Someone wants help,” said Pansy. “We must run and see who it is. It’s strange, as Pete and the boys are out on the round up.”

Hurrying across the deserted corrals, the girls paused again close to the hitching-post. Could they be mistaken?

“Someone might have been riding over from Grey Squirrel Ranch and met with an accident,” suggested Pearl. “We’ll see first, and if it’s serious I’ll run back for Martha. Lizzie is sick this afternoon.”

They were practised climbers, and the precipitous sides of the cañon held no terrors for them. Hand over hand they went, dropping from ledge to ledge till they came to that wider ledge not far above the stream where a man lay huddled.

It was the lone hand, Roddy Woflake, whom Martha so cordially hated.

But it would have needed a bitter spirit to hate the man who lay sweating there, his lower limbs pinned down under a quantity of loosened earth and clay, whilst above him a tottering avalanche of the same threatened every

moment to fall and blot him out of existence.

Pansy especially felt warm pity leap in her breast. She had not honestly *liked* this man with his hatchet face and secret eyes, but she was sorry for him. Pansy always was sorry for the ugly, unpopular ones in life. She had a wonderfully tender heart, and she thought it mean of the boys to leave Roddy to play lone hand without attempting to chum. Pansy held the theory that everyone has a better side if you take the trouble to look for it.

And so she had made to this Roddy little friendly overtures which had been silently received. Now the eyes of the man and girl met.

“You’d better quit,” said Roddy. “I reckon there’s not a hand at Lone View would care to dig me out o’ this now.”

And he pointed to the yellow soil which slowly dribbled down upon the heap which covered him.

It was impossible not to see the danger threatening, and all the pretty colour left Pearl’s cheek, though she did not hesitate for a moment to follow Pansy, who was already stooping, and with strong young arms begin to sweep off the deadening weight of sandy soil.

Woflake did not speak again. He knew he ought to have urged those girls—little more than children—to quit that task. But every spoken word breaking a current of air might help to precipitate the fatal fall of soil from above. Silently the workers toiled on. Silently the man lay watching them. Beads of perspiration lay thick on all three brows, but the mass of soil covering the prisoner was loosening. With an effort Roddy moved his right leg. His breath began to come in gasps. He had believed his doom to be certain; now hope dawned. With straining eyes he watched now the toiling girls—now the swaying avalanche, which seemed to quiver like some monster bird of prey ready for the fatal swoop.

Neither Pansy nor Pearl looked up from their task. They knew too well the folly of unnerving themselves, and, brave lassies that they were, they had accepted the task of rescue—and stuck to it.

Yet, oh! the *ache* of their strained muscles, the stinging pain of scratched flesh, the background of unnamed horror.

With wordless prayers on their lips they kept to that work of channelling, whilst Roddy himself used every inch of his strength to struggle free. Then—the supreme moment—just a moment so tense, so full of destiny as to make the heart stand still before leaping with the wild throb of ecstasy.

Free! With a twist and a turn which brought the sweat streaming down his face, the man had rolled to his side and, with brave rescuers grabbing at hands and legs, succeeded in reaching the sanctuary of long, mush grass before the mass of yellow earth fell with woeful thud.

Oh, you *can’t* understand how that single thud echoed in the listeners’

hearts. For they knew what it might so easily have meant—the death sentence for them all.

Pansy and Pearl had dropped to the ground beside the prostrate cowboy. It was lucky they did so, for a cloud of choking dust was flung like a curtain across the lower ridges of the cañon.

For some minutes not one of the three spoke. Then Woflake sat up. He was ghastly under his tan, but those queer, green hazel eyes of his shone.

“I guess I’m tuckered out for a bit,” he said, “but I gotta say my say. I’m not much of a chap any road; mebbe I’m worse than I look. Mebbe you may live to be sorry you didn’t let that yellow stone flatten me out, but whichever way you look at it you kid-girls saved my life, an’ I guess there should be a chance comin’ along one day when we’ll ekale that score. You bet you’ll be able to count on me—*somehow*—for payin’ you back a debt. It was sorter grand—sure!”

He stared towards what was now a blocked entrance to one of those small caves to be found in the sides of many of the western cañons.

“Were you exploring?” asked Pearl, who rallied from the shock more quickly than her sister; “and was it a hole—a cave?”

From under his bushy fair lashes Roddy shot a keen glance at the speaker.

“Oo, aye,” he said carelessly, “it was a cave. I climbed down after a knife I had dropped. Some dear knife! I was going to find it,” he added, with a forced laugh. Then, half turning to Pansy, he made a still stranger request.

“Say!” he urged, a touch of command mingling with the plea; “I’ll be real glad if you girls don’t mention this show to any of the boys, or even to the missus. I was near paid out for playin’ ’possum an’ not takin’ my place with the others. But it’ll hit me in the raw to hear the fellows talkin’ around. It was some hell—under that cliff end—and the sooner I can cut it out the healthier it’ll be for me. So—if you could cut it out too, and not mention comin’ down the cañon, I’ll be grateful.”

“Sure!” said Pansy simply; “there’s no need for us to talk. Come, Pearl, we’ll fill our basket with berries and take them to Martha. We’ll not need to speak of you Roddy. That’s blank—if you wish it.”

His anxiety faded, but he did not seem quite at ease.

“You’re fine sports,” he said. “I wish I could thank you. But the words won’t come. Reckon I’d best cut it all out—till pay day’s here. Now, you’ll be goin’ round by Wild Fowl Marsh to get home?”

It was an odd suggestion, but seemed to have its purpose.

Woflake did not want to be associated with them in speaking of the outlived drama. But Pansy and Pearl were not tenderfeet, and Pansy, the deeper thinker, was wondering whether Martha had any grounds for her extravagant denunciation of this man.

Pearl was longing to be off—to breathe purer air—but Pansy had something to do first. Going up to Roddy Woflake, she held out her hand.

“Shake,” said she.

He looked at her—saw her straight, clean souled, honest, with the sympathy of a grown woman in her grey eyes. Then he deliberately put his hands behind his back.

“I’d rather wait,” said he, “till they are cleaner fists for you to grab. When they are—I’ll ask you to take one in yours an’ let me thank you for remindin’ me of something I’d forgotten, even though it is too late to change my spots. Now—you and the other kid’ll be quitting.”

Pansy’s lip trembled; she was disappointed, but pride kept back her tears. She had done her *very* best to help Roddy back to the place he seemed to have lost—as equal to *honest* men—but he refused. Pearl, who had stood by listening, showed plain indignation at the snub her sister had received.

“He’s worse than a bear,” she vowed. “And *I* agree with Phil. It seems mean to judge—so Phil said—but Roddy’s not a white man. P’raps he’s hiding from the police at Lone View. I wonder if the rustlers of Skeleton Range look like that?”

Pansy shuddered, as, pausing near a clump of larches at the head of the cañon, she looked below.

“I wonder if they do,” she said. “And I wonder what Roddy is trying to do now. He didn’t mean taking us into his confidence. He wanted us to go. What is he doing?”

Hidden as they were from sight of the man on the rocky ledge, they could watch his movements unobserved.

“It doesn’t help any to look at him,” said Pearl restlessly. “Let’s quit.”

She thought Roddy Woflake must be hard hit for a job to be trying, after such an experience, to find some hole or narrow way over the debris into the cave.

Sure, he must have left something behind him in the niche—but it did not mightily concern Pearl to know what that something was.

And Pansy? Well, Pansy could not help thinking it strange that, after what they had done, Roddy should take to avoiding them with the greatest care.

It seemed almost as if he were ashamed to have them speak to him.

It was a month later—and by this time our girls had found their own good niche on the ranch—when a dandy little man, who seemed to be wearing a sombrero for the first time and the rest of whose kit did not fit the hat, drove a single horse buggy up to the ranch-house. The animal was slathered, and the man himself looked fagged and worried.

Seeing Pearl, he hailed her.

“It’s the Missus I’m looking for,” he explained, “Liz Quant; I’m to drive



her back to Brendon. Her sister's sure sick and will likely be dead before we get back. Hollo for Liz, will you, Kid?"

Pearl flew off to find Pansy, who, she felt, was a better bad-news-breaker than herself, and together they went to find Lizzie, who was receiving a lecture from Martha on being too soft with the boys.

The news about her sister set the poor little woman in a regular flutter. It was Lucy's step-son who had driven over and who waited now.

"I can't wait for Pete to come in," said she to the girls, "but he'll understand. Lucy's my mother-sister. I don't know what I'll do if she dies. Maybe things aren't so bad; her husband always gets scared. Take care of Pete and the boys for me, and don't let Martha knock off all their hot meals. She's a bit ruffled over the question, but I guess Pansy can sweeten her."

And, hugging her girl chums, she ran out to the man in the buggy.

Pansy and Pearl felt real limp when Lizzie had gone. They had not quite realized what a centre of everything the plucky little woman was in the ranch-house. Big Pete was fairly lost without her. Perhaps that is what made him so irritable—and on the day after Lizzie's going the irritation came to a climax in a big row with Woflake. Pearl and her sister were just come down to the corrals to saddle up when they heard loud voices raised in anger, and there, close to one of the sheds, stood Pete Quant railing at Woflake. Both men were deadly pale, and as the girls stepped into the corral Pete raised his whip and struck the other man.

Woflake drew back, shielding his face with one arm, his other hand at his belt, but if he had meant to attempt a violent answer he changed his mind at sight of the girls, and swung on his heel with an ugly word muttered under his breath.

"You're a fool, Quant," Pansy heard him call back to the still angry ranch owner, "and you'll have to pay in full. That's my last word—but you'll hear from me again."

That started Pete shouting, but he too stopped as the girls ran up. Roddy Woflake never so much as looked at them, but Pete greeted them sourly.

"Why aren't you indoors with Martha?" he asked. "There's plenty of housework you can be doing. I can't have you down on the corrals at all times."

"We didn't know," replied Pansy, flushing, "but we can go back right now, though Martha could not give us a job."

Pete still frowned. Pearl the inquisitive wanted to know why.

"Is Roddy shirking?" she asked.

Quant frowned more blackly than ever.

"Roddy Woflake has quitted," he replied shortly. "I wish he had never come. He's no white man but a surly coyote. Wearing was right there, but I

kept him too long for sake of his riding. He's gone now—and we'll be the better for it.”

Pansy and Pearl did not reply. Standing by the corral gate, they could see the figure of the solitary rider, who was urging his grey horse to a gallop across the wide prairie with its magic flowers, its bloom of purple sage, its rolling valleys and slopes stretching away—away towards the grey round tops of the foothills, and beyond those again up the slopes of the grim Skeleton Range.

It was towards that range Roddy rode.

Pearl twined her arm through her sister's.

“Martha says,” she whispered, “that Roddy Woflake knew more of Scarred Mike's boys than an honest man should. Did that mean he was a rustler himself?”

## CHAPTER V

# The Coming of the Foe

Letters come rarely to such a ranch as Lone View, and Quant quite understood he must not be expecting Lizzie back till he saw her. It was a busy time of year, and the men were in the saddle most of the day, coming in sun-blackened and cheery for meals.

Martha had allowed the girls to help from time to time in the kitchen, but her moods were uncertain, and any failure in cooking on their part meant prompt dismissal from the premises.

Such a dismissal had sent two quite indignant young women off in search of their horses on one sunny afternoon when the ranch was practically deserted by all excepting its owner, Phil Wearing, and Ted Bleque, who were busy tending a sick animal and fixing a carpentering job.

“Hello!” cried Pearl, who was in advance of her sister; “the horses have gone. Say what can have happened to them?” She ran across to look towards a fenced field where the horses were sometimes turned out.

Empty! Both girls were utterly perplexed.

“I’m quite, quite sure none of the boys would have taken them,” said Pansy.

Pearl was more lively in her vexation and ready to blame anyone.

“*Someone* must have taken them,” she grumbled, “or set them to roam. I shouldn’t wonder if it were young Ned. He didn’t like my teasing him about being a tenderfoot.”

“Ned would not have been that mean,” retorted Pansy; “but the door of the shed was left open, and the horses may have slipped their halters. I hope they haven’t gone near the cañon. That’s where Lizzie lost her grey mare.”

“Pete said if anything went wrong with Mustard and Cherry-Bob he’d only give us a burro apiece,” said Pearl. “Fancy riding a burro—after Mustard!”

Her disgust was comical.

Pete had a number of burros, and very useful little beasts of burden they were, but by no means ornamental.

The girls had left the corral and walked briskly towards the cañon. The silver spruce showed daintily against yellow earth, and there were blue and white flowers, columbines of every shade, starring the ground.

Pearl stood at the head of the gorge and peered below.

“Say, Pansy,” she cried excitedly, “there are the horses, right down there; look, look! They’re tethered. Someone must have taken them down and hidden

them. It's young Ned, the rascal. Why, Mustard might have broken a leg getting down there."

"It's queer, but anyway, let us get down and bring them up. We'll go right back to Pete and tell him about it."

"I wouldn't get Ned into trouble," said Pearl, "but if he did it he deserves being shouted at."

Then the climb began. Evidently the person who had brought the horses down to the cañon had meant them at least to escape observation. They were tethered close to where a jutting rock made temporary shelter.

Neither of the animals seemed the least distressed, but they showed pleasure in greeting their young mistresses.

"Which path were they brought down?" reflected Pearl. "And which will be the best to lead them up? I rather wish we had asked Phil to come, but if Pete's got him busy he might not have liked it."

"We can lead them up the path over there quite easily," said Pansy. "But we'll take one at a time. Why, who's shooting?"

A second report answered her, followed by a wild shout.

Pearl clung to her sister.

"What is it?" she asked. "Not Indians?"

Pansy shook her head.

"No, no—it couldn't be. There aren't any Indians located in south California that I've heard of. But—Pearl, Pearl, I do believe it is rustlers!"

Again the report of a gun. A loud cry. Could it be Martha? Yells and shouts told of challenge and defiance, but the girls remembered with a shudder that practically all the bunch of boys belonging to Lone View were away on the round up. They would not be back till dark—and now only the first shadows crept down to the depths of the cañon.

"What shall we do?" asked Pearl, and, though she was white-lipped, she squared her shoulders with rare courage.

"We'd better leave the horses here," said Pansy, "and creep up to the top. We must find out first what is going on. We must help all we can, but it's no use adding to Pete's troubles. You see—if it is rustlers—we know *whom* they want. Oh, poor Lizzie! Poor Lizzie!"

"Pete'll be glad she's away," replied Pearl, shivering. "And Martha will batter any two rustlers with her fryin' pan. But we must see, Pansy. We must find out. And—oh! it could not have been the *rustlers* who got us out of the way by hiding Mustard and Cherry-Bob?"

"N-no," said Pansy, "but it *might* have been Roddy. I'm sure thinking it *might* have been Roddy. Now come, Pearl. We're thinking of Lizzie and all we owe her, not of ourselves. But we must be cute as jack-rabbits, for—for it wouldn't help anyone if we were taken by the rustlers!"

With ultra-caution the two girls began their return climb. It wasn't just a bold clamber up the precipitous path, but a clutching and crouching game, creeping from cover to cover. Wild vines hung down their mantle of foliage over the rocks and served as protecting curtain when fear checked those climbers.

Scarred Mike's band of outlaws was one of the very few left of the formidable gangs which at one time haunted California and every mountain range as far north as Canada—and beyond.

But Scarred Mike's reputation was ugly.

He defied the Mounted Police, and had once had the audacity to capture an inspector and give him the choice between death for himself or an order of release for five captured outlaws.

It made Pansy and Pearl cold to think such a villain might be within a stone's-throw. But they went on climbing.

The spruce and sage made a fair cover at the head of the cañon, and Pansy pulled her sister down low beside her just as a group of horsemen in the familiar "kit" beloved of rustlers burst out from behind some of the outbuildings and went galloping off, passing quite close to the cañon.

There were at least six of the rustlers, bearded desperadoes saving for a clean-shaven, red-haired giant whose big-thewed horse carried a double burden. Across the rustler's saddle lay a man, gagged and bound.

It was Pete Quant.

The hearts of the watchers seemed to stand still.

Pete Quant a prisoner in the hands of a man who boasted he never owed a grudge without paying it!

Away towards the grey line of foothills galloped the men, and behind them flames burst from the dandy ranch-house which had been the pride of its owner.

Pansy and Pearl had not moved. They might have been frozen stiff where they lay. But they dared not stir, for already they had seen figures of men moving about around the outbuildings. Half or more of the rustlers had remained behind to wreck the ranch, and just possibly wait for the return of the cattle drivers.

There was no sign of Quant's two companions, or of Martha!

Pearl thrilled as a cold finger touched her neck. Pansy was leaning over to attract her attention.

"I've seen Roddy," breathed Pansy. "I guess he did steal off with our horses to help us to get out of the way. He won't let his chums think of us—even if—they know we're here. If—we could reach—Mustard and Cherry-Bob—we could ride for Jalkin's Ranch and ask for help. Dick Jalkin is Pete's plum friend, and he knows every path of the foothills. They might take a short cut

and trap the rustlers before they reach their stronghold. Anyway, Dick and his boys will do their best, and some will sure come back here to help the boys who'll be riding home into a trap too."

Pearl did not reply, but she slid carefully down over the side of a yellow rock, dropping on to a narrow ledge whilst her practised eye searched for the next place of descent. Pansy kept just above her, covering her—in case of a Paul Pry rustler craning over the cañon above.

"The ranch will be burnt out," moaned Pearl, "and what will happen to Martha?"

Pansy shook her head.

"I'm sure she won't be afraid even of Scarred Mike," she replied. "And if she can't fight, she'll talk. I believe the rustlers will have to let her go free."

To try to "explain" the situation to Mustard and Cherry-Bob was hopeless. They wanted supper, and when free of the tether showed signs of being obstreperous.

Pearl laid her face against Mustard's forehead, crooning to the restive animal. She could "magic" any horse by her wiles, and in spite of his high spirit the horse was conquered. Again Pearl led the way after the girls had carefully bandaged the animals' hoofs with strips torn from their coats. Up, up, slipping, squeezing, panting—but persevering; "sticking to it by their eyelashes".

In leaving the cañon Pearl had chosen the path which zigzagged up to the level of the prairie farthest from the ranch. To do this they had first had to thread their way through the tangle of undergrowth about the bank of the stream. All this had taken time, and now, before they left the cañon in safety, evening shadows were deepening to darkness as the lonely lassies halted beside their sweating steeds and looked with wide eyes of distress towards the ranch which in a few weeks' time had become so cheerful a home.

The spruces and swelling of uneven ground sheltered them, and, at the same time, prevented their getting a clear view of the place. The outhouses still remained standing, but the snug little ranch-house must have been completely gutted. The fire, catching on to the wooden frame of the building, had evidently blazed furiously—and as furiously died. But masses of smoke, taking on strange colours in the after-glow of the evening, went billowing away over the prairie. Lone View Ranch was no more.

But what of the boys—and the cattle? The former would see the smoke and ride for home at top speed, only, may be, to fall into the trap laid for them by the rustlers left behind by Scarred Mike.

"We *may* meet some of them," said Pansy in a whisper; "they ought to have been back. But I think we should ride straight for Jalkin's Ranch and give the news. Dick will send to Henderson's place and they'll bring the police.

Come, Pearl. No one has seen us.”

Scrambling into their saddles, the girls gathered up the reins and set Mustard and Cherry-Bob at a canter.

Like ghost-steeds the sturdy little horses dashed out from amongst shrubs and clustered boulders about the mouth of the cañon, shaping their course as bidden by their riders’ guiding hands.

A shout echoed from the direction of the ranch and a gun was fired. Urging their steeds to a gallop, Pansy and Pearl rode away into the purple darkness. In the crisis they just went forward with the single purpose of escape, not so much as glancing back to see if they were followed. Yet sure they expected to hear the shouts of their pursuers. Some hitch must have stopped the chase. A locked shed—and mysteriously hidden key—which was found, after furious searching, replaced in the lock. But it was too late to saddle up the prisoned horses now. The two “unknown” denizens of Lone View Ranch had quitted the cañon cleverly enough and would be heading for the nearest ranch.

So, failing to find the key-juggler, and not too worried over the incident, the men returned to their drinking and gambling as they awaited the arrival of the “cow-punchers”. Only those who stood sentry paced along by the corral fence, lazily watching the last flicker of flames, or glancing across the shadow-filled prairie.

“Looks as if some of your pals had been given word of our visit, Roddy,” observed one suspiciously; “but, after all, Mike’s got his plum. Hardly worth waiting for a bunch of cow-punchers. If Silverton’s wise he’ll quit, or we’ll have some of the police buzzing around before morning.”

But Roddy Woflake was staring glumly in the direction of the cañon, and wondering whether two kid-girls would safely locate the nearest ranch.

He had had his revenge, had Woflake, but, remembering those girls—it tasted bad in his mouth.

## CHAPTER VI

### Amongst the Foothills

“I wonder if we’ve missed the track,” said Pearl. She tried to speak as if that track were not too important even if it had been missed.

Pansy reined up. It was hatefully dark. Even the stars did not help much. A mist, rising about three feet from the ground, gave the illusion that they rode over a becalmed ocean. A treacherous mist it was, spelling danger for riders.

“We have missed the track,” replied the elder girl. “We’ve reached the foothills, sure! See, Pearl, we ought to have borne all the time to the right. We’ve ridden away from Jalkin’s and Henderson’s, and, I guess, come miles too far. Cherry-Bob is clean done up.”

She dismounted as she spoke, busying herself with easing some straps on the animal’s harness and talking softly to it. Cherry-Bob was at the end of his tether—but he had not brought his young mistress to her destination.

“What’s to do?” asked Pearl. “We can’t stay here. You know what tales Lizzie had about some of the people of the foothills. We’ll have to find Dickie Jalkin or—or someone.”

“Sure!” agreed Pansy. “And there is a light ’way up there, Pearl. Shall we tether the horses and reconnoitre? It doesn’t do to ride into danger without creepin’ round the keyhole first.”

Pearl laughed softly.

“You’re some general, Pansy,” she applauded, “and you’re right. I can see the light, but I can’t locate it. May be a prospector’s shack. We’ll try our luck.”

Tired as they were, they showed no signs of flagging as they climbed the slope which led towards a rocky ledge, which revealed—as they approached—a hollow running back into a cave, and a ruined shack built to the right.

No doubt the diggings of some lone prospector.

The shack was unlighted, but round a smouldering fire at the entrance to the cave sat some four men.

Were these also rustlers? They were scarcely likely to be anything else, but evidently only loiterers from the gang they belonged to.

Dropping down behind a big rock, the girls listened, holding their breath in anxiety.

“I tell you,” one of the men was saying, “the Chief has his own goose to pluck. He has had his fancy stunt about kidnapping Pete Quant the rancher for ages. Just revenge, no more. Good enough, but not so much my line. Pete Quant may be a devil or saint; all that concerns me is if he is a rich one in



either capacity. Nothing doing, sons. So we'll play our own game, and toss as to whether or no we rejoin Scarred Mike—afterwards.”

So they *were* rustlers.

They *were* members of Mike's band.

Pansy gripped Pearl's hand hard. She understood what terrible danger they were in.

Those men would have but one word for them—*spies*. And for spies only one sentence—death!

To move away seemed more dangerous than to remain where they crouched. If the men—who must have horses near—rode across the foothills in any but a directly downward route they would escape unseen, and it seemed likely they would soon be on the move.

“You're sure Stretton and his boy have got the gold?” asked another of the men after a pause.

“Sure! *Nuggets*. They've been on the trail for months. The boy Gerry located the stuff in a stream up by Rattler's Hollow. Nuggets—plenty of them. They would have ridden 'way down to Los at once if it hadn't been that Hal Stretton wanted to go back for more. The lad had hidden what he couldn't carry. Then Hal was taken ill. He may be a sick man now. The sicker the better. We'll take the nuggets and the lad too. He can show us the Rattler's secret.”

The man's listeners laughed. This sounded good to them.

Gold! That—and adventure—were what they were out for, but in the meantime the fire and the food they had been eating made them drowsy.

“We'll be at Stretton's shack by cock-crow,” two of them protested, as a livelier comrade urged an immediate start. “It's not five minutes' scramble from here. No hurry, pards. Wait for daylight.”

“Where's the shack?” asked another.

“Down the slope in a hollow amongst the foothills,” said the first man. “Almond Tree Gap, they call it, but I guess it's Nugget Valley to us—and the sooner we get the stuff the better!”

But the lazy ones had the last word, and—silence fell on the ledge above.

Pansy very cautiously raised her head, just high enough to glimpse the sleeping group. The fire had burned low, and the rustlers, dog-tired and drugged by the spirits they had been drinking, lay in all attitudes around it. They would not waken easily.

On hands and knees the girls crawled out from their hiding-place. Yonder lay the path. It brought them into full view of the men on the ledge, but the rustlers did not stir. If only they dared locate the horses and set them free! but the risk was too great. Pearl caught Pansy's hand.

“Those others?” she whispered.

“Sure!” came back the answer, “we must find Almond Tree Gap first. Hal Stretton and his son will—help.”

Help or no help, these girls knew they must be carriers of the warning. Where nuggets were in question rustlers would not be squeamish, and the owners of the gold seemed no more than sick man and boy.

It was moon- as well as star-light now, showing not only the round grey tops of the foothills but the sterner heights of the Skeleton Range.

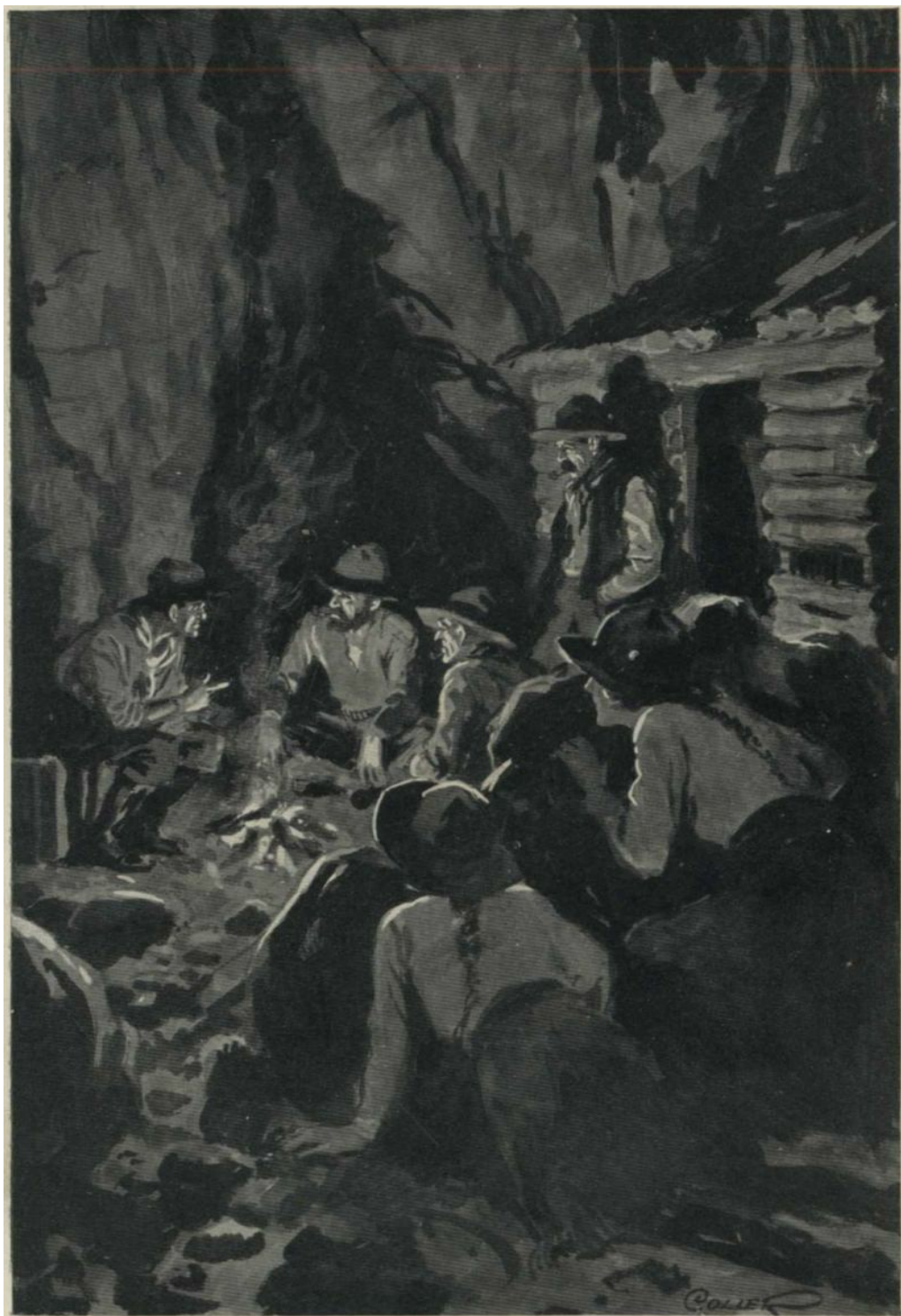
“Do you remember Wearing’s stories of Death Valley and the rattlers?” shuddered Pearl. “I hope th-there aren’t rattlers around here.”

“Sure no,” said her sister comfortingly. “I guess the rustlers are quite enough. This path leads down, but I don’t see any sign of a Gap. Shall we step more to the left, Pearl?”

They took a side path, though Pearl looked round anxiously.

“We mustn’t forget our own horses,” she said. “If they whinnied for us we should be caught.”

“There’s a breaking in the ground over there,” replied Pansy excitedly. “That may be the Gap. And it’s clear light to show us the way. Oh, Pearl! it’ll be real good to have *men* to help us. It—it’s so difficult to know what to do when we’re alone.”



## SO THEY WERE RUSTLERS

Pearl gave a soft little chuckle.

"I guess we've managed *real* well," she retorted, "but I hope the Strettons are nice; and you're right, Pansy. It is a Gap."

They were able to run now, stretching the stiffness out of their legs and reaching the side of the Gap, which proved not nearly so steep as the cañon near Lone View.

"There are the almond trees," said Pansy; "it's well named. What a dandy little shack, but oh, how lonesome. I wouldn't like to live down there."

"But they're only prospectors," retorted Pearl. "And now they've got the gold they'll be away. What a pity they didn't go before. It is a mean game, rustling. Some people may talk as if it's fine, but it's just stealing—and killing."

"There's a light," said Pansy. "Someone inside the shack has struck a match. They must have heard that piece of rock go rolling down. I—oh! it must be the right place."

They were within a stone's-throw now of the rough wooden shack, which had been knocked together by very amateur builders. The light which had showed in the unglazed window had gone out, but a voice reached the visitors from the same spot.

"Hands up—or I fire!"

It was a startling reception, and the girls, quite unaccustomed to such a greeting, failed to obey at once. The appearance of a sun-tanned face in the opening told them that one occupant of that shack was not only very wide awake but evidently not expecting friends. Leaning out, he held a revolver drawing a bead on the two figures which at first he had not clearly seen. But as with raised arms the girls stepped out from behind the almond trees, he gave a cry of dismay and all but dropped his weapon.

"*Girls!*" he gasped, and the next moment had flung open the rickety door.

The girls saw a tall, well-knit figure belonging to a lad of their own age. His suit was shabby leather, his head was bare, so that they could see the close-cropped brown hair and well-shaped face beneath. He wasn't a beauty-boy, but a clean-limbed good-looking lad, as tough as hard work and outdoor life could make him.

Pearl was the first to reply.

"You needn't shoot us," said she. "We're friends. The rustlers—I guess they're Scarred Mike's men—mean to have your nuggets. We heard them and we came to warn you, but they may be riding this way at dawn."

Gerry Stretton's jaw dropped. He stared in open dismay at the girl who so briefly told the bad news.

“Nuggets,” he stammered. “The rustlers got wind of the nuggets?”

“Sure!” said Pansy, “we heard them. They’ll come. They said your father was a sick man—and that some of the nuggets were in Rattler’s Hollow.”

Young Stretton passed his hand over his brow.

“Thank Heaven the dad’s on his way to Los,” he muttered. “They’ll not overtake him—and now——” He stepped forward, gripping the girls’ hands.

“I don’t know who you are,” said he, “but you’re sure the pluckiest cow-girls that ever came to Cal. Have you horses?”

They nodded, Pearl adding a still briefer story.

“We want to reach a station of the police,” added Pansy, “or else a ranch. We lost our way riding over the prairie. Are you alone here?”

He nodded.

“I was to follow my father to Los,” he said, “after going back to Rattler’s Hollow. Dad was a sick man, and, as luck chanced, two chums were taking the way to Los. So he joined them and I was to follow—with the rest of the nuggets. I meant startin’ for the Hollow at dawn.”

“We’ll be safer to quit the foothills and reach the nearest ranch first,” suggested Pansy. “It’s no use waiting to be caught by those men, and they know about Rattler’s Hollow.”

Gerry’s face darkened.

“They’re treacherous coyotes,” he muttered, “but you’re right. We’ll get back to your horses. I’ll fetch Fleetwing out now. There’s nothing in the shack but what those thieves are welcome to.”

“We ought to make haste,” urged Pansy. “Dawn will be breaking—and the men are riding.”

“An hour,” said Gerry, returning with his horse. “An hour’s start. It all depends if we locate your gees at once.”

Pearl was confident. They all had the bump of locality, and it was tolerably easy to follow a track amongst the foothills—very different from the mountain paths above.

Taking a lower slope of the hills, they came to the snug little hollow where Mustard and Cherry-Bob had been left.

The horses had gone.

“You’ve sure mistaken the place,” urged Gerry.

But both girls were positive.

“And here’s part of a broken thong,” added Pearl distressfully. “Oh, what *did* happen. They must have been frightened by some animal or sound and have broken away.”

“Or found by a passer-by,” added Gerry; “the people of the foothills are none too clean-handed. The horses have been likelier stolen.” He caressed his own horse’s neck. “The two of you had better get up on Fleetwing,” he said,

“and I’ll run alongside. Good exercise. And they’re honest folk at Beaver’s Ranch. We’ll make a trek there. If we can get a message through to the police, Inspector Ralland will only be too tickled to come on the track of any of Scarred Mike’s gang.”

There seemed to be nothing else doing.

“How far is it to Beaver’s Ranch?” asked Pearl, not without a hungry longing for breakfast.

Gerry wrinkled his face.

“Six—eight miles or more—hard to say, but part over the prairie. Whoa, chummy!”

Pearl laid her face boldly against the horse’s neck, whispering her secrets. She had to make love to this spiritry stranger who was resenting two girl-creatures for riders. And her coaxing won. Down the path stepped the sure-footed little horse, as gracefully as any lady, bearing a double burden. It was walking pace at first, then, as the slope of grey hill-side broadened out, the animal broke into a gentle canter.

Gerry was a fine runner; with shoulders back and head forward he raced without effort alongside the horse, which seemed quite to understand the new order of things.

Pearl’s spirits rose amazingly.

“Look!” she laughed, “the dawn!” And she pointed to where, eastwards, a grey dawn broke.

Pansy was looking back towards the higher slopes. They had barely reached the fringe of the prairie yet, and behind them, appearing behind a cluster of rocks, one, three, four, came the figures of horsemen galloping towards them.

“The rustlers,” breathed Gerry, who had looked back too, “and they’ve seen us.”

The girls glanced despairingly around.

No convenient cave, no gaping cañon, no thick woods stood ready to shelter them; only the bare sweep of the foothills, and to the left a deserted orchard with a burnt-out shack in the midst.

“No use,” said Gerry grimly, “but I’ve got my gun, and, after all, it’s I the brutes want. Ride ahead, chums; you’ve done your best to give me warning, and I bless you for it. Take old Fleetwing and ride for the prairie. You’ll locate—the ranch.”

It is an old saying that “he who hesitates is lost”. Pansy and Pearl hesitated now. It seemed too ghastly to leave this lone lad, robbed of his horse, to face men who might within the easy bounds of possibility kill him.

Scarred Mike had not earned his reputation for nothing, though, as a rule, he preferred plunder without too much fighting.

And before Fleetwing had received racing orders the rustlers had pounced.

Gerry realized the hopelessness of resistance, and did not put up a fight. For sake of the girls the capture had better be made without a struggle.

The men were evidently quite ready to use violence on provocation. They shouted, blustered, and showed their guns threateningly. But the order for "Hands up" being obeyed, they proceeded to dismount and make sure of their prisoners.

They had sized up the case and glared at the girls.

"So you thought yourselves some clever, eh?" asked one, as he tied Pansy's hands behind her. "Meant to share the swag with young cock-a-hoop. Well, you've ground your own axe. We learn folk the lesson of minding their own business, my dear, and so you young women will be payin' some visit to Wolf's Crag head-quarters. Sure, Grey Ann will find some use for you in the cookhouse."

"You curs!" shouted Gerry, "let the kid-girls go. *They've* not got nuggets. What use would they be to you in your den? Let them go, say, or you'll never learn the secret of Rattler's Hollow."

The man who seemed to captain the other three laughed.

"Well crowed, young cock," he applauded mockingly; "but if you don't want a sore head you'll keep your mouth shut, excepting when we're asking questions."

"That's so," agreed another of the rustlers; "but when you are asked you gotta answer. Where's your boss—and the nuggets?"

A slow grin overspread Stretton's face.

"Los Angeles," said he.

A volley of cursing answered him, but the men did not doubt the speaker's truth. They had found the shack in Almond Tree Gap deserted, and had feared both prospector and his son had cleared with the gold. They were shrewd enough to accept Stretton's news, however unwelcome it might be.

"You'll ride with us to Rattler's Hollow," said Slim Joe grimly. "My mates will take the kid-girls and report at head-quarters. They can give Scarred Mike an account of themselves. Mebbe it depends on you as to whether the nuggets you've located will buy their ransom. If you play the mule, it's sure they won't be rustling home in a hurry. Say, mates, take the girls up and give the Chief the yarn. They'll be hostages for the boy's behaviour—or worth ransom on their own. Get!"

And, swinging round his clever little horse, the rustler rode off, after seeing his lean-jawed comrade had mounted Gerry Stretton before him.

The latter was only a lad after all, but, as Pansy and Pearl watched him disappear round a bluff in charge of his jailers, they felt they had lost a protector when they most needed one.

The only ray of comfort seemed that they would be riding to the camp where Pete Quant lay prisoner.



## CHAPTER VII

### Wolf's Crag

It was no lone rustler's cabin to which these reckless outlaws brought the girls as prisoners. The eyrie of this Irish-American's gang was cunningly sequestered between two precipitous mountain cliffs, so that the camp lay well back towards the end of a deep gully which itself lay high up on a plateau of the irregular range of mountains known as Skeleton Mountains, and not far from the still more famous Death Valley.

These head-quarters of Scarred Mike's had never yet been located by the Mounted Police; indeed, it is to be questioned whether the latter would have visited such a den, which owed its name to a solitary crag rising sheer at the end of the gully.

Small shacks had been built in clusters close to the crag, and as the girls entered the valley they noticed the dark openings of more than one cave.

As the rustlers rode into the gully through a rock-piled entrance two men armed with guns peered out, giving a brief word of welcome. Within the gully all was peculiarly silent; only the thunder of some mountain cascade amongst the heights gave a monotonous background of sound to the hush of the valley.

The two rustlers dismounted quickly and helped the girls down from their saddles. A lank-haired, middle-aged woman had come out of the largest central hut and stood with arms a-kimbo watching them.

"Where's the boss?" asked one of the men curtly.

The woman raised a lean arm, pointing towards the crags.

"He's quit," she said tersely. "Gone to howl with his wolves up there. But he'll come back—sure!"

Her voice sounded grating and harsh, the echoes drifting down the valley, but her beady eyes watched the girls.

"Who are they?" she asked with a snarl. "We don't want any of their sort in the Wolf's nest. Let 'em ride back where they came from. Scarred Mike won't want them here."

"Pooh!" retorted Red Mark with a laugh. "You're jealous, Ann. The kid-girls may cook better than you. They'll be making us tasty dishes. We'll cheer them for that. Take them into the cookhouse, old she-bear, and make obedient cubs of 'em. We'll have Slim Joe back before Mike, and he'll have all the tale in order."

Cutting the girl's thongs, the speaker pushed them forward. At first Grey Ann took no notice, but railed on at the men.

“Don’t be so grouchy, Ann,” they told her carelessly as they strode off, leaving the woman facing the girls.

Pansy had caught hold of Pearl’s hand and stood a step in advance of her sister in an attitude of defence. The woman sneered.

“I’m no kid-beater,” she said. “You kin come into the cookhouse and have a feed. You’ll have to stay till the boss has seen you. Then, if he’s not a fool, he’ll let you quit. While you stay here you can help with the food or not, as you wish; but remember one thing *sure*; if I find you’re trying to bring harm to the boys, or sending word or messages to the police, I’ll show you how the old she-bear treats her enemies.”

Decidedly, Grey Ann was both grey and grim.

But she was the last person to whom to show defiance. Without answering at all, the captive girls followed her into the cookhouse. There were plenty of jobs for them—and, tired though they were, they made the best of them. Steady work did not, however, bring its reward. Grey Ann seemed to have determined to be their enemy rather than their friend.

“If you play the spy,” was her constant warning, “you’ll be sorry for yourselves. They will remember just what you’ve done—not what or who you are. And spies find short shrift in Wolf’s Crag Pass.”

“But we don’t wish to be spies,” replied Pansy fearlessly, “though when we see the man you call your chief we want to ask him where Pete Quant is. It’s Pete Quant who is our friend.”

A curious expression passed across Grey Ann’s face.

“Pete Quant,” she echoed. “Sure! Pete Quant. You’re fools both if you ask Scarred Mike about him. You might get more answer than you liked, too. Take my word—though I’m no friend to kid-girls like you. But don’t bring trouble on your heads by asking for the man whom Scarred Mike calls his enemy.”

This was plain speaking, but it didn’t help at all.

Pearl could not resist asking one question more.

“Is Pete here?” she whispered.

Again Grey Ann directed that keen gaze of hers on the speaker.

“No,” she answered. “He’s sure not. That’s all you’ll hear, so you can keep your breath cool. You won’t josh me into telling the chief’s secrets.”

And with a grunt of defiance she set to work on some job of cooking.

Pansy and Pearl would have given all they had to be allowed to sleep, curled up just anywhere. But alas! Grey Ann had no eyes for tired faces, and kept the unwelcome assistants hard at work till the men came in. Then, she roughly ordered them off. Scarred Mike had not returned to the camp, but amongst the lean, sun-scorched men of varying age, who with one or two exceptions looked most *unlike* the villains they may have been, the girls noticed a familiar face.

There, sure thing, was Roddy Woflake—the man whose life they had saved in Lone View cañon.

Pansy felt her face flushing in welcome. She had pitied Roddy when the boys shunned him, and pity gives a sort of fixed interest to its object. Even here—proved to be what they had always suspected—Roddy seemed to show in the light of a friend.

As the eyes of the girl and man met Pansy smiled her quick, shy little smile of comradeship, but the expression froze round her lips at sight of the scowl with which it was returned.

Mockery, contempt, hatred, twisted the ex-cowboy's features, and Pansy shrank back mortified and indignant as she heard Roddy make some scoffing remark to a companion.

Pearl had seen Roddy too, had seen his black look and Pansy's distress, and the younger girl's eyes flashed with anger.

So not only was Roddy a rustler—as Phil had always suspected—but he hadn't even a grain of common gratitude.

Pearl expressed her indignation in a grimace which set one of the younger rustlers grinning.

"Some spit-cat!" Pearl heard him say, and never had she so desired to smack any face as that boy's.

Grey Ann followed them out of the cookhouse. She meant to keep these girls under her thumb, sure! for Ann had reigned as the only woman belonging to the camp for years, and did not intend to share honours in her boys' affections with anyone.

"You'll stay here till Mike's home," she said, pointing to a tiny cabin back against the cliff-side. "Then he'll fix what's to be done with you. If you don't want to see the black fury in his face, don't mention you know Pete Quant."

The hut was bare enough, and Ann took care to lock the door on the outside. There was nothing to do but take the rest offered, though Pearl's wrath had helped her to forget sleepiness for a time.

"I could have twisted Roddy's scrag neck," she whispered. "How dared he! How dared he! And after he'd spoken of paying his debt! Say something, Pansy, say he is the biggest wretch ever made. An—ungrateful pig!"

Pansy's smile was rather tired.

"I'll wait," she replied; "it's not a sure thing that Roddy meant to be ungrateful—but only maybe he was afraid of letting his mates think he was our chum."

Pearl was not to be persuaded. Poor lassie! she was tired out and on the verge of tears. At such a moment Roddy Woflake made a useful scapegoat. But, oh! it was no use arguing with Pansy, and Pearl fell asleep to dream a queer tangle of a dream in which she and Gerry Stretton were riding across a

flame-lit prairie in pursuit of Woflake on her own dear Mustard.

As Woflake vanished into the heart of the fire he turned—and his face was the merry one of Andy, the garden boy in distant Scotland.

“Oh, the fire!” gasped Pearl, and sat up to find herself in the darkness of a tiny shack with someone’s hand pressed warningly against her mouth.

“Hush,” breathed Pansy, “hush. Someone is sawing a hole in the side of the shack over there. We’re locked in—and the key must have been taken by Grey Ann.”

Pearl shook her curly head as though to shake the nightmare dream out, and common sense in.

“Who is it?” she asked, and before Pansy could stop her had crawled across the floor in the direction of the sound.

“A-huh—there,” she breathed, “who is it?”

Her grasping fingers had found the hole, and she was stooping her head towards it.

As she bent her neck a queer thrill ran through her as a familiar voice replied:

“Wal, I reckon it’s a friend you want to kick.”

“Roddy!” gasped Pearl.

Pansy had reached her sister’s side. She, too, was listening, breathless. Maybe she knew the visitor was there for her sake.

“Roddy Woflake,” she echoed.

“Sure!” said the voice in a hoarse whisper. “Or for better title you can fix it out as the man who ought to hev been dead. A tough old black sheep baa’ing outside the fold. Right here now, will you trust me?”

Pearl, still confused by the unexpected, hesitated. It was Pansy who crouched forward.

“Yes, Roddy,” she replied. “We’ll trust you all through. Heaven send you don’t deceive us. It’s a big thing for us to do—do you understand?”

“Sure!” came the half-mocking reply. “A big thing for two white girls to trust the honour of a rogue—of a rustler who seemed to hev a short memory. But we’ve got to make quick talk of it; I’ll do my best, I swear, to get you out of this. Who’s the boy they’ve been talkin’ of?”

“Gerry Stretton,” said Pansy; “they were after his nuggets. That’s how they located us. Is he—in this place?”

“Slim Joe’s jus’ ridden in. He’s given ’em the slip, but they mean to be on his trail. The Chief’s not back yet. He’s away on a private job. They’re all joshing each other a bit. That gave me a chance. I must quit now, but I’ll come back. There’s one way—it may be the best, but you’ll have to strike a lone trail. Say, are you ready?”

“Sure!” said Pansy and Pearl. But no reply was vouchsafed to this.

And with such poor consolation as Roddy had given them they slept. Oh! how they slept. If ever you have been really tired in your lives you'll know what it was. It didn't matter a bit that they only had hard floor to lie on. Everything was a blank—a deep, utter darkness from which they were roused by the rough shaking of Grey Ann.

“The Chief's here,” said she. “You're to see him. No whining, and the closer you keep your mouths shut the better.”

Dazed by sleep, the girls stumbled out after their jailer. How ugly this place looked by daylight, with its yellow-grey walls, its gloom, its ruggedness. It was just a prison place and no more. A bunch of rustlers were leading their horses down the gully towards the entrance; two were leaning to talk over the backs of sturdy little burros. Others were smoking and idling about.

Pansy and Pearl looked for a glimpse of Roddy but could not see him. At the door of the cookhouse stood Scarred Mike and Slim Joe. The captain of the outlaws was not in any way the dashing hero of romance such as some folk figure rustler captains to be.

He looked what he was—a rogue and a desperado who had practised a ruthless trade so long that he did not understand pity. His boys obeyed him, but not one loved him as a leader who had their welfare at heart. He was the Chief merely because he was a master of men, and clever in his methods.

He stared critically at the girls.

“We don't figure to have kids like that at Wolf's Crag,” he said abruptly. “What fool trick was it of yours, Slim, to rope 'em in?”

Slim laughed.

“Useful,” he drawled. “The young snake Stretton was with them. They'd warned him. He's a cunning coyote, that lad, and gave us the slip—right under our noses—in the Rattler's Hollow, before we got the nuggets. But he won't go clear away leaving the girls. I know his sort. He'll be round after them.”

“Yes,” he retorted; “with Inspector Winlake and the police at his heels. You're a fool, Slim.”

He turned to the girls.

“Where d'you hail from?” he asked shortly.

Pansy coloured hotly. She remembered Grey Ann's warning, but a lie stuck in her throat.

“A prairie ranch, round Brendon way,” she replied.

Scarred Mike stared at her. He had noticed the little gesture of embarrassment.

“Brendon way,” he retorted. “You've had good horses and a long trail, then! What's stoppin' you from tellin' me the name o' that ranch? Out with it.”

“Our names are Pansy and Pearl Wydole,” stuck in Pearl, “and our dad owned Pine Tree Ranch.”

Scarred Mike ignored the interruption.

“Out with it!” he repeated fiercely, raising his whip.

“Lone View Ranch,” said Pansy, “is where we were located.”

Scarred Mike’s hand was lowered.

“Ah-huh,” he muttered; “then you are relations of Pete Quant, say?”

“No. Friends of Lizzie Quant. She an’ Pete gave us a home.”

Scarred Mike swung on his heel.

“You, Ann,” he shouted over his shoulder. “Keep these kid-girls close. We’ll have ’em at Wolf’s Crag *till I hear from Brendon*. That’s sure.”

And his ugly laugh told two of his listeners at least that the man who knew how to hate Pete Quant would not mind whom he made to suffer in taking full revenge.

But what had been Pete’s fate?

## CHAPTER VIII

### Roddy plays Square

Grey Ann was no better pleased than the girls at the Chief's sentence. She had hoped the prisoners would be sent off. Already she had heard words of pity—and admiration—spoken by the men. She didn't intend her boys to be interested in two kid-girls just because they were a bit forlorn. So, driving Pansy and Pearl into the cookhouse, she shut them in on their job of helping prepare the next meal for the men.

The girls were quick at such tasks, and the heavy sleep had refreshed them. They were hungry again, too.

"I wonder if Gerry has been caught and if he will come after us?" said Pearl. "He seemed nice. Oh, I do wish we were away from here. Do you know, Pansy, I once thought rustlers sounded nice. I guess I never will again."

"P'raps they're not all too bad," replied Pansy; "just madcap boys who got into a scrape an' didn't find a helping hand to pull them out. I'm real sorry for them."

"I believe you'd be sorry for *anything*," declared Pearl. "Almost for a rattler! I wouldn't. I'd like to fetch along the Mounted Police an' clean this old place right out. Listen! What's that?"

A regular uproar of laughter brought the potato-peelers to the tiny, unglazed window which looked out on to the gully.

A group of rustlers were gathered about a couple of burros, which were plunging wildly in the hope of throwing their half tipsy riders. The maddened animals were certainly performing the most audacious feats, and the men must have been tough old broncho-busters to stick on at all. When at last they were hurled somersaulting through the air, the peal of laughter which greeted their downfall sounded like that of mischievous school-lads rather than villains, and the girls were joining in the general mirth when Grey Ann came in.

A blow and a threat soon brought the captives back to their work, all the laughter gone from their eyes, whilst the fierce-faced woman threatened them with worse if they dared to be looking about after the men.

"I do wonder," whispered Pearl to Pansy, as she cuddled down that night in her sister's arms, "*when* we shall be let go—and where Pete Quant is. I don't believe Scarred Mike can be such a bad jailer as that Ann. She hates us."

"Listen!" said Pansy. "Someone is moving the boards at the back of the shack. Be very quiet, Pearl. It may be Roddy coming to help us."

Scrape! Scrape! Crick!

A draught of air blew in together with the gleam of an electric torch. A man crept on hands and knees through the back of the hut, which he seemed to have lifted out.

Roddy had been busy the last four and twenty hours; now he beckoned the excited girls.

“Not a word,” he breathed. “They’ll kill the lot of us if we’re found. I’ll take you out of the den, but you’ll have to find the lone trail. Will you come?”

“Sure!”

“The lad—Stretton—is on the look-out. I located him this afternoon when I was on sentry duty. He’ll be on the watch by Leaping Water Cascade. Keep your eyes skinned, kids, an’ your lips glued when we leave the shack. We’re not quittin’ Wolf’s Crag by the front door.”

To thank this unexpected rescuer was out of the question. The only way of showing gratitude was by prompt obedience. Even Pearl had forgotten first distrust.

Crouching like thieving coyotes, they crept out into the dark gully. So high were the cliff walls that the moonlight only stole down in broken shafts, barely reaching to the shadowed depths.

The rustlers’ cabins showed like huddled figures ranged about some witches’ den. Away down the grim valley the rocky entrance could be seen.

Rustler sentries would be guarding that. And how else could they escape? The girls looked up at the towering cliffs and their hearts sank. Expert climbers as they were they knew the task of scaling such heights as these to be far beyond them—or indeed any human being. Possibly a mountain goat might have done it.

But Roddy did not intend to attempt the impossible. Following, as he disappeared behind a bluff, the girls found him stooping at the dark entrance to a cave, the existence of which would have escaped the notice of nine out of ten who passed up the gully. This was accounted for by the fact that, as well as being screened by the bluff, it was further protected by a flat slab of rock which lay close against the side of the cliff; but Roddy had lowered this, showing the dark tunnel or cave in the apparently solid wall of rock.

Were they to enter this place with only Roddy Woflake—the rustler who must have played spy and betrayer to his boss, Pete Quant—for guide?

It was a decision which had to be made instantly—and this time it was Pansy who followed first on their guide’s heels.

“What is it?” asked Pearl, pressing close to her sister as they huddled together in the semi-darkness.

Pansy did not reply. She was asking herself the same question as she listened to the thunder of sound which had broken on their ears.

At first she was unable to connect it with the more easily recognized noise



of the waterfall which they had noticed sub-consciously during their stay in the rustler's camp.

Then, if they had been asked to stand still and listen intently, they could have said at once: "Oh, yes, there is a cataract amongst the mountains around."

Now, Pansy was gradually locating the fact that the cataract must be near—hidden amongst or even within the heart of clustering cliffs, if indeed it were not a fall in the course of a subterranean stream.

Boom! boom! came the savage roar, and to add to the alarm of the situation at that moment Roddy must have contrived by some mechanical agency to close the entrance in the cliff side so that the cave was plunged in complete darkness.

Too frightened to cry out, the girls stood, clinging to each other, trying in vain to pierce the inky gloom, listening with ears that feared the echo of every sound.

It seemed oh, so long, before Roddy's whisper reached them.

"We'll be rustling out of here, kids," said he; "but we must go sure. It's not likely you'll be finding the back way of Wolf's Crag takes you as easy as a New York elevator."

As he spoke he allowed the long ray of his electric torch to travel round the hollow in which they stood—for there was standing room and three or four feet to spare in the cave, which ran back in a passage sloping downwards.

"You've got pluck, you two," added the rustler quietly, "and you need it. But right here I give you my word for what you think it's worth. I'm playing the square game—and if Scarred Mike does locate us before we're clear, the three of us will pay the price."

Pansy flung out her hand.

"Shake, chum," she said simply.

And Roddy after a moment's hesitation took the small, brown fist in his.

Was it that he felt he had already done something towards making it cleaner?

Then, without waiting for further explanation, he led the way down the passage.

It would have been impossible to ask questions now even if the girls had wanted to do so, for the noise of the unseen cataract boomed like thunder. Louder! Louder! Why is it that noise inspires fear? In spite of their resolve to be the bravest of the brave, both Pansy and Pearl could feel their pulses leaping as if in response to those roaring waters. They must be very close now—and yet oddly enough the sound seemed to come from beneath—even far beneath them.

Scarred Mike's back door was a very queer place indeed, for Roddy had halted at what seemed to be the end of the passage.

Pansy, who followed immediately behind him, felt something damp against her face, like the spray from some far-flung wave. Roddy moved aside, and she saw by the torchlight the white sheet of spume rising above the level of the floor. Roddy had rolled back a rock and beckoned her.

The noise of the cataract was too fierce to attempt speech, but Pansy was seeing and understanding.

Some thirty feet below them a cascade of water could be seen pouring its tide of frothed wavelets down into the deeper waters of a river which, winding its way amongst the slopes of the Skeleton Range from a high-hidden bed, became in places subterranean. Out from the mass of rock leapt the semi-prisoned avalanche, foaming down to a black “witch’s cauldron”. Beyond—away—down some dim passage way—lighted from above where the close cliffs allowed glimpses of the sky to be seen—flowed the river.

The river—and the mountain-side—where maybe Gerry Stretton awaited them.

It would not be safety—but yet—still freedom.

But—how? . . .

Roddy was uncoiling a chain, slender but strong, which lay neatly coiled in place.

Here was the key to Scarred Mike’s back door. But it needed courage to place it in the lock.

If they could have spoken—or argued with any chance of being heard—the girls would have delayed, even though Roddy was taking things as a matter of course.

When a comrade says “I trust”, he ought to expect to be believed. Roddy did believe—and Pansy never forgot to be thankful that she did not fail him.

Taking a step forward, she allowed him to fasten the belt about her waist. The worst—oh! the very worst—was leaving Pearl to follow without being able to ask her if she minded.

But the fewer the words on some occasions the better—and Pansy was trying hard to smile as she allowed Roddy to help her over that ledge. The next moment she was swinging in mid-air, enveloped by the spray from the lashed waters.

It seemed to Pansy herself as if she were being lowered into the depths of the cataract itself. The foam and spray wrapped her round like a shroud, the intense cold of the water chilled her, her brain became numbed.

Lower, lower. And now all her thoughts centred on one object—*Pearl*.

For Pearl’s sake—she must go—through.

But what she was to do, save cling to the chain above her, she did not know.

Down—down—and now as though by miracle the circling, shrouding

waters were left behind. She could breathe, see, think. Below, quite close below, was a path—a real path running alongside a witch’s cauldron which bubbled and whirled. It was the most curious sensation—that of reaching terra firma. Was she really alive? Had she “arrived”? What was to happen?

It thrilled her to realize that Pearl was even now waiting in the upper cave to go through a similar experience. With shaking fingers she unhooked the belt and allowed the chain to swing back to its place above the waters.

Up—up—up—till it was out of sight.

Yes, out of sight—for the utter darkness of the cave had been exchanged for a grey twilight, so dim as to suggest some land of ghosts. But, in the light, those tossing waters and the mighty outline of cliff were visible.

Then Pansy’s attention concentrated, for she could see the slowly descending chain—the slim figure in its leather suit—the fair plaits tossed from side to side as the chain swayed.

It was a terrible minute of suspense for the watcher—a far more terrible experience than her own descent. With clasped hands and quivering lips she stood till Pearl dropped close beside her. Then her arms went out and round her younger sister in a passionate embrace.

Boom! boom! thundered the waters; the wet spray drenched the sisters as they stood, but neither of them heeded as they clung together, thanking Heaven for such a peril safely passed.

Before they had quite rallied from the ordeal, Roddy was beside them—Roddy, quite forgotten in those few seconds of rapture. But here he was, lean, alert, mysterious as ever. Here he was, the rustler who had played cowboy so that he might help betray his employer. That, at least, was how those who stood amongst the ruins of Lone View would be regarding him.

Speech was still impossible. Roddy led the way along the bank of that subterranean river which came pouring out from the mountain-side; for some distance the cliffs almost entirely closed in overhead, whilst the turbid swelling and whirling of the disturbed waters showed the impossibility of launching a boat.

Presently a rocky path led upwards amongst the crags, and here Roddy Woflake waited to help them. He did not speak. His queer eyes had a brightness in them which Pearl was at a loss to understand, but it seemed to Pansy as if this man, who seemed such a bunch of contradictions, was somehow glad of what he had done.

“What an awful place,” said Pearl suddenly.

They had scrambled up amongst a cluster of jagged crags and stood looking down upon the river below them. Around stretched the rugged heights of the Skeleton Range.

Give a dog a bad name and hang him!

That was true of these grim, grey mountains with their haunted passes, their bloodstained paths, the deep gullies where rustlers found a lair, the dens of bears, the haunt of wolves, and the sleeping-place of rattlers.

Pearl was right, though there were patches of beauty even here, where patches of flowers grew amongst the rocky ledges, trees clustered along the side of a ravine, and the yellow and purple of the wild sage carpeted lower slopes.

“Right up,” said Roddy, “we meet the river. It’s sure coming down to us.”

And he pointed to where, high above them, they could see the white sheet of waters falling over a precipice.

Pearl squeezed Pansy’s hand. There was a lonesomeness around, and the moonlight, which would soon be exchanged for dawn, showed white and ghostly on every object.

But Pansy held her chin high and followed close in the steps of their guide. He’d played the white man in rescuing them from that den of outlaws, and Scarred Mike had made Pansy afraid. He seemed so ruthless, so cruel, so hard.

Up, up, without a word of grumbling on the part of the girls, till they came to the foot of that cascade they had seen in the distance; and there, standing alert, in an attitude of listening, stood the figure of a lad in a shabby leather suit, his sombrero stuck at the back of his dark head, as his quick glance searched the emptiness of moonlit peaks.

It was Gerry.

And Gerry—though the newest of acquaintances—seemed to be the oldest of friends.

With a cry of joy the girls sprang forward. Gerry was round too in a flash, and came, more nimbly than any jack-rabbit, to greet them. Away blew his hat, but what cared he? Huzza! He was shaking hands vigorously with the two pluckiest kid-girls ever born.

Huzza! What a welcoming! What queer laughter which stuck in the lump in their throats! What jerked out questioning!

“I sure thought that rustler chap was joshing me,” declared Gerry. “I was stalking around, you bet, tryin’ to get your trail, when he pops out from behind a rock and——”

“Roddy came with us,” said Pansy; “he’s been a white man over this, Gerry. We’ve gotta thank him for what he’s done. It would cost him dear if the gang guessed it.”

Pearl had already run back along the path to call their guide, but she looked round in vain. Roddy had disappeared.

Pansy and Gerry joined the search, but it was useless. The rustler must have taken some secret path back amongst the crags after seeing the girls join their comrade.

Pansy was the most disappointed.

"I wanted to thank him," she said, "and ask if he wouldn't come right back with us and give up rustling. He—he's somehow not a bit like the others."

"Ugh!" shuddered Pearl. "Gerry, shake hands again and let me make sure you're real. It's like a big nightmare. Scarred Mike's some bogey, too. I b'lieve he'd scare any one stiff! It's an awful place, but Roddy brought us out—and now what are we going to do? Shall we ever find my dear Mustard, or Pansy's Cherry-Bob?"

Gerry looked grave. He realized more than Pearl that they were only, so to speak, clambering up the sides of the frying-pan and might find themselves in the fire at any moment.

He was sure that if the girls had been taken to the rustlers' stronghold and escaped from it the men would leave no stone unturned to get them back. They knew too much to be allowed to go free now.

"We'll have to reach the foothills," he said, "and try to borrow horses to take us to the nearest police station. Inspector Howlett will help us, and we must try to reach Los. My dad will be in a panic already, thinking I'm in trouble. He hated leaving me alone to locate the nuggets in Rattler's Hollow."

"Oh, yes," cried Pansy. "Rattler's Hollow. Did you take the rustlers there?" Gerry grimaced.

"They sure took me," he replied, "but my luck was in, and I got away before I'd shown the secret—and you can be sure those men were mad as wet hens. But it didn't help them any. They had to leave searching at last and ride for their head-quarters. I was too rattled about you to try and clear, so I followed their trail, and was pounced on by the man who must have brought you here. I didn't believe him. He sounded too good to be true—but there was nothing else to be done but trust him, so when he swore to bring you here I waited. He's piebald goods, that rustler, and showed a real white streak."

"And we've no horses?" sighed Pearl. She was still bothered over the fate of her beloved Mustard.

"They wouldn't be much use anyway," replied Gerry. "Even a burro would have all he could manage amongst these crags. We must get down to the foothills—and then plan out further."

"But," said Pansy, laying her hand on Gerry's arm and speaking very earnestly, "we can't do that. You forget, Gerry. We—we came to find Pete Quant, and it's a sure thing Scarred Mike has got him hid somewhere around. What can we do best to help Pete?"

Gerry hesitated.

"I wasn't goin' to tell you girls," he confessed frankly at last, "but I did hear that bunch of rustlers talking about Pete Quant. They didn't guess I was listening or that I knew anything about it, so they jawbated on. Seems their

boss had a big grouch against Pete and had sworn to ruin him, beggar him, finish him right in. So he burned his ranch and kidnapped the fellow. Now he's got him located in a place called Carrill's Leap. One of them was asking where it was, as it seems it's a quiet sort of prison spot where Scarred Mike keeps his 'most particulars'. I heard them telling their mate, and I guess I could locate the place, since it leads straight up along the course of the river. It's higher, of course, but not too far. I meant to see you two safe and then come back to give the prisoner a helping hand."

Pearl laughed.

"What a hope you have, sonny," she drawled in her teasing way; "but you can't plan that way with girls o' the Wild West. We'll all go, right now. Say, Pansy, that's so?"

Pansy nodded.

"Sure," she agreed.

And it actually never occurred to Gerry to argue.

"The men had a lot to say about their mate, Roddy Woflake," said he. "That sure would be the rustler who helped us, eh?"

"That's he," said Pearl. "We got him out from under a pile of sand in Lone View Cañon. He's grateful."

"He's that," nodded Gerry. "I heard a bit about Roddy. He'd fallen out with Scarred Mike over Quant. Mike had some black game in view. Talked of—well, I may as well tell you straight—talked of taking ransom and sending him home—*blind*. Roddy fought like a wild cat against that—but the quarrel was patched up. The chaps who had me down in the hollow were calculating as to whether Roddy meant to stand by the boss or cut away. I don't think they all liked him. Some of 'em called him Gentleman Roddy, or Roddy the Dandy, but others said he was great, and Mike has a hunch against him because he was jealous. That's how it stands."

"And I think," said Pansy slowly, "Roddy Woflake's more—white than piebald."

"And Scarred Mike," added Pearl, "is just blacker than ink. The brute! Oh dear, if only I had Mustard and you had your horses, you two—we'd soon have Pete free."

"I wonder," said Gerry.

But he spoke under his breath.

## CHAPTER IX

### Carrill's Leap

It wasn't just wishing which brought the three rescuers to those higher mountain slopes where, amongst deep precipices and grey ravines, lay hidden that special lair of the rustler captain.

Darkness overtook them on a difficult path, and before the moon rose their position was one of some danger.

"Plenty of rocks about," said Gerry, "but I guess I'd rather have a tree to roost in. Say, girls, we'd best locate ourselves here till the moon rises. Then we'll get along fine. The river lies to the left, so we can't miss our way, and from what Slim Joe said I guess there ain't two Carrill's Leaps around."

"What do you mean?" asked Pearl, cuddling against her sister as they crouched on the path which might have so many pitfalls ahead.

"It's some spot," was Gerry's retort, "but you'll see soon enough. What you'd best try now is to sleep."

Pearl mocked.

"What, standing up?" she asked.

Gerry flashed his torch over the path. It was about three feet wide, rocky and hard; above and below lay the broken line of the steep slope—more precipice than bank.

"I've slept standing before," he retorted, "but if you like to lie down I'll be on guard."

Pansy gave a little shiver.

"It wouldn't matter if a grizzly came along as to whether he ate us standing or lying," she remarked.

"And you've not got a gun, Gerry?" asked Pearl.

"Sure!" came the unexpected reply. "Your friend Roddy loaned me one. He said there were plenty of tools of that kind at head-quarters, and he owed you two the biggest-sized debt a man can owe. So there's one thing up to us. Now, are you goin' to lie down?"

"Wait," urged Pansy. "I want to know what that noise is first. It's queer. Not loud—but it frightened me. You—you don't think—Gerry——" Her voice died away into a whisper, and, in the tense silence which followed, all three heard the sound most dreaded by wanderers amongst the mountains hereabouts.

Not a loud sound, but so peculiar as, once heard, never to be forgotten—the monotonous rattle of the dreaded snake which infested the upper parts of

the lonely passes and crags, a rattlesnake sounding his death-warning as he glided unseen in the darkness along the rocky ledges below them!

The girls held their breath as they listened. Instinct told them of the awful danger which approached, but the surrounding darkness, the impossibility of exactly locating the dread sound, kept them helpless, weak, afraid.

Gerry spoke in a whisper which reached them, but at first could hardly be grasped by their full consciousness.

“A rattler! He won’t attack unless you irritate the old beggar. Don’t speak, *don’t move*, hold your breath ’most. He won’t touch you then. I’ll tell you—when safe.”

They didn’t answer, but every nerve in their bodies stiffened. Erect, rigid, they stood there, as a condemned man might stand to face a firing-party. But in this case the veil of darkness wrapped them round, and the silence—so impressive amongst mountain heights in this, the first hour of the night—only broken by the rattle, rattle, rattle, so unlike any other sound on earth.

The hardest adventurers have frozen stiff under the spell of that weird signal, so no wonder that the three young folk, flattened back against a precipitous bank, felt the bonds of death cold about them.

Yet so tense was the excitement created that there was no question of fainting.

They were—just frozen. And nearer, nearer, nearer, came the terrible foe.

*Was Gerry right?* That was the question in the minds of the girls. Was it true that if they moved neither muscle nor nerve the rattler would pass them by?

True, they had heard that snakes hastened away from human intruders, but there were so many exceptions: the death-adder of Australia, and the green marmosa of Africa, so ready to pursue even a mounted horseman! What *if* this particular rattler were equally aggressive?

In the ears of Pearl and Pansy thundered the sound of many waters. The wild pulsations of their hearts found echo in their brains, but they did not move. Pansy still held Pearl’s hand. The sense of protectorship was present with her. Pearl must be sheltered.

But, if the drumming in her head would only cease, she might be able to locate the fateful warning of the foe.

And then came a touch which the elder girl recognized with the quick grasp of her ready brain. Across her high boot—for the girls wore boots reaching to their knees—a queer, slithering something dragged its length.

Nine girls out of ten must have screamed or involuntarily withdrawn the foot as instinct bade. But, though a tingling horror convulsed the poor child from head to foot, she never moved—no sound broke from her dry lips, although she knew a rattlesnake was actually crawling across her foot.



Rattle, rattle, rattle!

Yes, she heard the sound again though her ears were dull; she heard the sound though a tempest raged in her head. But she no longer felt the dry warmth of that heavy body dragging over her foot.

Yes, *warm*. The idea of a snake's cold dampness was mistaken—though she was hardly aware of it. All she knew was that she had seen Death look out of the darkness.

“Pansy!”

It was long, long afterwards that Pearl's frightened whisper came to the half-swooning girl. By this time the grey light of a rising moon showed them the outline of the path and the huge rocks and clumps of undergrowth around.

Pearl, scared by her sister's cold handclasp and the ghastly pallor of her face, called her, bringing the faithful spirit of her mother-sister back to a present crisis.

Pansy fought desperately against loss of consciousness as she whispered a reassuring word. Then Gerry's figure loomed dark as he stepped from his niche.

“The old sinner's gone,” he said, “but he passed pretty close, I reckon, from the noise he made. Like a clock gone wrong in its strike, eh? And it must have passed up the path.”

Pansy rallied. The terrifying rattle was no longer heard, the ghastly danger had passed, but she had to moisten her dry lips with her tongue before she could speak.

“Sure!” she said, “he—the rattler—passed over my boot—but he didn't strike, thanks to your telling us what not to do.”

How Pearl cried out and clung to her sister!

“*Not* over your boot, Pansy?” she moaned; “not over your boot! And any second it might have struck.”

Gerry was peering through the gloom at his companions.

“It's no use sweating over what might have been,” said he crisply, “but Pansy played the gen-u-ine article in heroines. Say! I don't know even if I could have stood glued under that.”

“Don't talk of it, please don't talk of it,” pleaded Pansy. “I'm not a heroine, and I know I couldn't do it again. I'm *squiggling* now over the feel of it. I—I guess it would have been easier to let a grizzly lick my face.”

She spoke so quaintly that the others had to laugh, but Pearl pulled her sister's face down to hers for a kiss. I think she knew what had nerved Mother-Pansy for the ordeal.

And, as Gerry went on to explain, they were only at the beginning of adventures.

“It's getting lighter,” said he. “It'll be some moon to-night. Clear as day.

We ought to reach Carrill's Leap by the time it's at its full. After that we'll have your boss-chum Pete Quant to help us."

"He's no cleverer than you," retorted Pearl. "Likely he doesn't know anything about the range. He's stuck to his ranch. If only we had—burros." She had nearly said "horses", but guessed Gerry would have quashed her. Pearl had not much faith in "Shank's Mare", and she wanted to leave Skeleton Range in a hurry.

But the trail of the mountain stream led them by stiffer and more threatening paths, so that all their breath had to be saved to cool their porridge.

It was Gerry who, having left the girls to regain their wind after a more than usually stiff scramble, located the lair made famous by Scarred Mike's secrecy. Only boon companions knew of its existence, and Scarred Mike had been known for the famous saying that no enemy would ever leave Carrill's Leap and be able to find his way back. There was a cold significance about the words, but the three who stood on that rocky path, not far from where a mountain stream dashed noisily down over high boulders, could be solving riddles.

There lay Carrill's Leap sure enough, though there was no sign-post or front door to the place. It was Carrill's Leap simply because, as the rustler had remarked in describing it to his pal, "there could not be two of them".

Picture a precipitous path. Figure grey crags, huge bluffs, grim precipices, and the bold slopes of this forbidding range of mountains. Watch the moonlight, playing will-o'-the-wisp amongst the scrub, the aspens, and the short tufty sage. And then see the circle of a chasm, hundreds of feet deep. The circle of a chasm, mark you, and there, rising in a lone, squat-topped pinnacle, a huge fragment of crag, making a narrow islet in the centre of that terrific circle.

That was Carrill's Leap, but whether the unknown Carrill had leaped from the crag to the mountain path or from path to crag, the gazers did not know. All they saw was that island of rock with its peculiar formation which might have suggested a queer, wolfish lair, half rock-shelter, half cave, cut off from the hunters who came to the attack.

Behind those piled rocks a desperado could have held a whole troop of mounted police at bay.

"You don't say that anyone's ever jumped across *that*?" queried Pearl scornfully.

Gerry gave himself a shake.

"Sure," he retorted. "Carrill did. But I reckon he wore seven-league boots. I don't figure following his example."

"What are we to do?" asked Pansy, "as we can't jump."

Gerry did not reply, but, as if to warn them that faint hearts could not be

allowed to leave a quest so far successful, a cry rang echoing from the heart of the crag.

Pearl echoed the cry loudly.

“There’s a cave,” she gasped, “amongst those rocks. *And Pete Quant is inside.*”

Certainty of having found the one they had come in search of was a wonderful inspiration to those who had doubted.

Yes, Pete Quant—it couldn’t be anyone else, sure—was close by. Pete Quant, whose danger was so great. Why, only cowards or coyotes would have left him! But oh, why could they not be provided with wings to fly over that chasm? Nothing else would serve.

“How did he get there?” asked Pearl. “I reckon a rope ladder must have been hitched across to that rock. But—we haven’t a rope—we’ve nothing.”

Gerry was pacing round the chasm. But look as intently as he might he could find no possible way of getting across.

“I wonder if Lizzie would find a way?” said Pansy. “She’d never quit till she did.”

“She’d have had to quit,” retorted Pearl, “when Scarred Mike came.”

Gerry had rejoined them. As Pearl spoke he gave a stifled exclamation.

Pansy was round at once.

“You’ve thought of something?” she asked excitedly.

“Sure!” said Gerry, “but it’s flat news. I was thinking I would have to stay here till Scarred Mike came.”

The girls echoed his words in perplexity. Gerry interrupted.

“This is how I figure it, kids,” said he. “This sort of special private retreat of Scarred Mike’s isn’t known to the whole bunch of rustlers. Mike keeps it as his own cabin. Likely, half the gang couldn’t locate it, and the rest wouldn’t come without written invitation. Mike’s the sorta close chap to glue his own councils. He doesn’t tell the whole Skeleton Ranch he’s got a grouch against this Quant fellow, but when he’s grabbed him he brings him to his den. He’s got a job on—with money—and *a lot more*—in it. So, whilst Pete Quant is located in Carrill’s Leap, the chances are he’ll visit alone. That’ll be it—if it’s a private revenge. Say, shall we take the risk—the risk of waiting for the man who’d skin us alive if he copped us?”

“We must save Pete Quant—for Lizzie,” said Pansy—and her voice did not falter.

Pearl smiled.

“Sure,” was all she added.

## CHAPTER X

# Hands Up!

There were big boulders round Carrill's Leap—and those boulders cast shadows, great, shapeless shadows of themselves. The secrets of those crouched behind them were kept close.

Up the path came a man. The moonlight was still at its full, and the tall figure in its picturesque dress could be seen in every detail. Scarred Mike's sombrero was forced down over his red poll slouch-wise, and one great hand was thrust into his belt. He climbed with the easy leisure of a man who can afford to take his time, fearing no interruption.

No trace of footprints on the rocky path! No long shadow of a crouching form!

Scarred Mike stood at the edge of the chasm, and, with all the skill of a man accustomed to fling the lasso over the heads of cattle, tossed the slender length of a rope-ladder across, hitching it exactly to a spike-like rock.

To the rustler that perilous clamber to his lair was too familiar a road to excite anxiety, and yet to a man of his bulk the danger was considerable.

A slip—a plunge—and death was assured. Scarred Mike did not make such calculations. Stooping, he swung himself over the ledge.

Pansy and Pearl gave a gasp, and involuntarily their hands clenched. Without warning, Gerry had stepped out on to the path in full view both of Carrill's Leap and the man who swung almost half-way across the abyss.

Gerry did not seem flustered, though his face showed pale in the moonlight.

He raised his revolver and covered Scarred Mike.

"It's not bluff," said he, loud and clear enough for the man to hear. "My gun's loaded in every chamber, and I'll shoot you same way as I'd shoot a skunk in a hen-roost if you don't come right back on to this path."

Scarred Mike had all the nerve he needed, and he didn't drop. The rope-ladder, strong and narrow, did not sway. He hung there glaring, red-eyed, at the speaker, who had been joined on the path by two he knew.

Yes, by two he knew! So those kid-girls from Lone View Ranch, who had been so valuable a card in his hand, had broken all records and escaped from rustler head-quarters.

Scarred Mike saw the fact plainly enough before him, but how much he guessed about other facts I couldn't say.

The man was philosopher, though, as well as desperado, and he knew that

white-faced lad with purposeful eyes meant just what he said. So back he came—never grimmer, never madder, never more dangerous in his life. Back he came, and heavily he climbed on to the path. As he knelt there, grabbing at a root of grass as he steadied himself, Gerry spoke again.

“No,” he said. “Guess you’d better stay right there till we fix what we’re going to do. If you move I’ll fire. Sure!”

It was *too* sure for the rustler to dare disobey, but his expression grew uglier.

Pansy stepped forward. In her quiet way she was quick to take in a situation.

“You can’t tie him up, Gerry,” said she, “because you’ve got no rope, but we can use the ladder, when I come back.”

“Meaning?” queried Gerry—and his eyes gleamed.

Pansy raised her chin.

“I’m going across Carrill’s Leap to fetch Pete,” said she; “but I want a knife, ’cos he’ll sure be tied up.”

“There’s one in the right pocket of my coat,” said Gerry. “You’re fine, Pansy.”

Scarred Mike cursed. Maybe he was getting into details with himself over the escape of his prisoners.

Pearl crept to Pansy’s side. She had always been reckoned the more daring of the two, and she pleaded now.

“I’m lighter, Pansy. Let me go. It would be easier. Let me go. I daren’t watch you!”

Poor Pearl! Her lips were all of a quiver, there was big entreaty in her eyes. Pansy hesitated. She hated to deny Pearl, but she too couldn’t bear the thought of her darling taking such a risk.

True, Pearl was lighter, the better climber, as plucky as any lad of her age, but—

Pearl took the matter into her own hands.

Snatching at Gerry’s knife she thrust it into her pocket, and was down over the fateful ledge before her sister could stop her.

“Pearl!” gasped Pansy, in an agony, but she couldn’t say more without increasing the younger girl’s danger, for Pearl was already crawling across the chasm.

The sweat broke over Gerry’s brow. He was horribly tempted to remove his gaze for one second from Scarred Mike’s crouching figure, but he didn’t dare. He heard Pansy’s deep-drawn breath and knew the daring venture had been taken. Some girls these! He would be cheering them—later, and meantime Pearl was crawling cat-like over the abyss, and those on the path behind her could not even call out warnings or advice.

But Pearl herself was no tenderfoot. She knew the fatal danger of peering down through those rough, hempen strands to gauge the depths of the chasm. She had no eyes for jagged rocks or scrub hundreds of feet below. She kept her gaze riveted on the rope steps as she advanced.

Midway the ladder swayed, caught maybe by a mountain breeze. Pearl crouched like a little cat, drawn into a huddled figure, black against grey. Pansy was haunted for years by that picture. Every second she expected to see that beloved figure drop—as a stone drops to the bottom of a pond. Then the ladder steadied and Pearl crawled on. Pansy looked away towards the nearer tableau. Scarred Mike's was a sinister figure enough. He had never supposed a kid girl would undertake to raid his lair, and his face looked black in its threat, whilst curses choked in his throat. And opposite stood Gerry, straight as a fir sapling, his face as stern and fierce as that of a man, his eyes never wavering in their fixed stare, his right hand slightly raised holding the revolver.

For a second, Pansy's terror for Pearl was lost in admiration of this young champion threatening a man who cowed a whole gang of desperadoes.

Then, her pulses still racing, she looked back towards Carrill's Leap.

Thank Heaven! oh, thank Heaven, Pearl was across. Already she had caught the jagged edge of rock and was swinging up on to the crag itself. Turning, she looked back towards the path, but she only waved her hand to Pansy, afraid to distract Gerry's attention by calling out.

Pansy covered her face. She was unnerved for the moment, far more so than she would have been had she been perched amongst the rocks yonder beside her sister.

And still Gerry stood rigid, covering his foe.

Scarred Mike cursed again. The devil in him was red-hot, but he would not have been rustler captain if he hadn't been able to size up fellow men, and he knew this lad would shoot straight rather than risk his companions' lives.

Meantime, Pearl had climbed round the screening bluff of rock and now stood at the entrance to a rustler's lair.

It was barely a cave—more a shelter beneath protecting boulders—and there on a poor enough bed of dried grass lay Pete Quant.

Poor Pete! How Lizzie's loving heart would have ached to see him. Gaunt, unshorn, despairing, he crouched rather than lay. His hands were free, but he was else a close enough prisoner, for legs and body were fettered by chains to an iron post.

I couldn't describe the man's feelings when he saw Pearl standing there.

I guess he must have thought her an angel of deliverance, for the moonlight fell romantically enough on her fair curls and pretty face, but the workman-like leather suit and hat were not quite angelic garb, and Pearl was quick enough at proving her identity.

“Pete!” she gasped. “You poor Pete! What *would* Lizzie say? Oh, that brute!”

She was busy unfixing the chains. Luckily they were not locked, but fixed so that the hobbled prisoner could not reach the fastening. Now, as his bonds rattled down on to the rocky bed of the cave, Pete stood up.

“Is it a miracle, kid,” he stammered, “or a dream?”

She put both hands in his.

“It’s no dream at all, Pete Quant,” said she, “but the tale’s too long to put you wise now. Pansy and I and Gerry Stretton are here to help. But we’ve lost Mustard an’ Cherry-Bob, and Gerry’s got Scarred Mike covered by his gun. It’s only a step to getting you free, but it’s a real step. Now I reckon we’ve got to crawl back across the rope ladder and ask Gerry what to do next.”

Pete pressed those two brown little hands hard.

“You’re some heroine, kid,” said he, “and I reckon that step’s going to bring me home, sure thing! It’s going to settle things with that rustler brute too. But now, why, you’re Captain, Mister Paul, eh?”

She laughed, that sly little laugh which told how easily Pearl could magic adventure into fun. But it wasn’t quite fun to think of crawling back over Carrill’s Leap.

And would Pete be able to do it? She looked at him anxiously.

“Will you go across first?” she asked, “or shall I show you. You mustn’t look down or you’ll turn giddy, but it’s strong rope.”

Pete Quant wasn’t in a smiling mood, for he’d looked across and seen the man on the other side of Carrill’s Leap, but he couldn’t help smiling at this saucy young rescuer.

The idea of a fifteen-year-old telling *him* how to cross a chasm. But the smile became a look of real admiration as the sturdy rancher watched the slim little lass starting on her perilous climb. He could see Pansy watching too, and knew what he owed to *both* these young friends of Lizzie’s. They had real grit, these kids, the finest sort of grit. The boy yonder was unsampled goods as yet, but he seemed to be playing a bold game, keeping Scarred Mike under cover.

Scarred Mike! Pete Quant knew what it was both to fear and hate that name. No one would ever hear all the story of Pete’s imprisonment—for even now the rescued rancher dared not look back on it. But if he’d been asked to describe the rustler captain I shouldn’t like to put the words in print.

Pearl had reached terra firma without a slip, and had rushed for Pansy. It was due to them to act as girls do act on such occasions, and neither of these lassies at any rate was ashamed of hugging each other as if they’d been parted for a twelvemonth.

And Pete Quant had already reached the mountain path before that wild embrace was over.

Gerry still kept that gun of his in place.

“We want the rope,” he said to Quant. “We’ll better tie the fellow up before we quit.”

Pete looked grim.

“A bullet in him would be the safest fixing,” he retorted.

Scarred Mike laughed. He was no coward. But his laugh ought to have been a warning.

“Oh *no*,” said Pansy, white-lipped. “You can’t murder him. Do, do let us go away now. At least after you have tied Scarred Mike up.”

“There’s not going to be any murder,” said Gerry quietly. “And I reckon I’m the only one with a gun.”

Pete Quant said no more. He went back to the edge of the abyss and unfixed the rope-ladder.

Pearl had Gerry’s knife.

“We’ll fix him right and tight,” Gerry said, “and send Howlett and his police on the track. That nest of vagabonds has gotta be cleared out of the Skeleton Range this time.”

Again Scarred Mike laughed. He knew the sort of foes who were handling him and felt his life was safe. And Howlett and his police were far enough off to be treated with contempt.

It didn’t please him, though, to feel the stout cords round arms and legs. Pete knew how to truss up the man who had kept him prisoner, but Scarred Mike never winced; only his fierce eyes held a cruel glint in them as he looked up at Quant.

“We’re goin’ to cry quits one of these days, sonny,” he drawled.

“That’s as may be,” retorted Pete grimly, “but you can take my word for it, you and your rats are being driven out from Wolf’s Crag this time. We’ve put up with enough.”

Scarred Mike laughed. But he was not amused. He was thinking of how two kid-girls must have left Wolf’s Crag, and he put all this trouble to the door of a man who was *not* Pete Quant. There was going to be a reckoning with that other man too.

Gerry lowered his revolver with a sigh of relief. His arm ached badly.

“You’ll act captain of this show now, Pete Quant,” he said contentedly. “I’m booked for Los.”

Quant straightened himself. He couldn’t jump quite as far as the boy.

“It’s Lone View and Brendon for me,” he replied; “but Scarred Mike and Co. have to be booked first. It’ll be Los for them—if they reach that far.”

“I only want to *go*,” sighed Pansy. “Can’t we start right now?”

That helped to show them all the critical position they were in. Dawn might be four hours or less distant—four hours at most, and no later than dawn



the rustlers would be looking for their Chief.

“If we knew whether his boys guessed what he came here for it would be some easier,” said Quant. “It’s a deal in the dark, and we can’t afford to play a wrong card. Where the worst trouble lies is the want of horses. When we reach the lower slopes we shall be fair prey.”

And he stared at the man he had just been helping to gag and bind.

Scarred Mike was not only superfluous—but dangerous.

Gerry had nothing to say. Facts were bare as the rocks around. Here they were, a man, a lad, and two kid-girls, amongst the mountain heights, surrounded by a dozen perils and likely soon to be objects of pursuit by one of the most ruthless bands of rustlers ever haunting Skeleton Range.

It was what is called a “tight corner”.

Pearl climbed along a narrow ledge over-topping the path. She was the nimblest and sharpest-eared of the party. But she made sure before she brought back her news.

“There’s a man climbing up the river bank,” said she. “It’s one of Scarred Mike’s bunch—but I do b’lieve it’s Roddy Woflake.”

You should have seen Quant’s face. His hand went to his belt, and, finding that empty, he stooped, wrenching the revolver from Scarred Mike’s sash. They had forgotten to take that, though they had secured his other gun and knives.

Pansy stepped up to him.

“Roddy Woflake’s our friend,” said she.

Quant glowered at her.

“Friend!” he echoed. “Why, Woflake’s the sneakin’ skunk who put Scarred Mike on my trail. A rustler’s bad enough, but a rustler’s spy has to be shot at sight.”

“You’re not goin’ to shoot Roddy,” said Pansy, and her grey eyes flashed. “He may have been a rustler and a spy too—though I reckon Scarred Mike would have reached Lone View in the same way anyhow—but he saved us from the gang an’ risked his life bringing us out of Wolf’s Crag Gully. He found Gerry here an’ gave him a gun. He helped us all he knew. And I reckon you owe him your life same as we do.”

Pete Quant looked dogged. He was a man, not a kid-girl, and it wasn’t so easy for a man who had failed him to get under his skin again. But he realized Gerry and Pearl held by Pansy in what she said, and he owed these three so very plain a debt that he waived his grouch for the present.

And so they waited, listening to the nearing footsteps which came clambering over the rocks, whilst ’way amongst the more distant heights came the moan of a wolf, the barking of foxes, the shriek of some night bird.

Pansy put her arm round Pearl; both girls were trembling. The bravest of

the brave know the trouble of reaction, and the strain of a sleepless night crammed with adventure was telling on them.

Pete Quant stood square and glum, keeping his gaze averted from the man on the ground. Poor Pete! he didn't rightly know what to be at. He knew he couldn't kill Scarred Mike as he lay like that, just as well as he knew he could not fight him as an equal. Prisonment on Carrill's Leap had been enough to take the starch out of any man's backbone, and over and above all else Pete stood in need of a meal. And what chance was there of that?

A hungry man is most often a sour man, and so you must please forgive Pete Quant for looking sourly at the dandified figure of the rustler who stepped briskly round the bluff and came to an abrupt halt at sight of the startling enough picture before him.

It was Roddy Woflake sure enough—but what had he come back to Carrill's Leap for now?

## CHAPTER XI

### Escape

It was Pansy who greeted the newcomer first. She was half afraid of what Pete Quant might even now say or do, so stepped quickly in front of this man to whom she had twice offered her little hand in friendship.

“Did you know we’d come back to Carrill’s Leap, Roddy,” she cried. “Have you come to warn us?”

Then she paused, her heart beating wildly. There was a queer, grim look on Roddy’s lean features as he glanced round. Perhaps he hadn’t just expected that tableau.

But Pansy’s question and its speaker’s frank comradeship checked the man from a first impulse to swing on his heel and quit.

Squaring his shoulders he faced the girl who had done more by a deal than shovel sand off his legs in a brave rescue.

“I guess I found out where you were locating,” he replied; “and it’s time you were moving. The boys ain’t likely to be comin’ this way, but you can’t reckon sure. Anyway, as things have turned out you’re due for a hustle. But \_\_\_\_\_”

He hesitated. The faces of the man who stood by yonder rock and the one who lay on the ground warned him he wasn’t one of a family gathering.

With a sudden impulse he stepped alongside of Pansy—facing Pete Quant. As he did so Pearl and Gerry came and stood close to him, the four of them facing Pete, and the bound, gagged rustler captain lying to the right.

The moonlight would be fading soon—dawn would break before they were ready for a new day.

“Pete Quant,” said Roddy Woflake, “it’s up to you to curse me. I was one of Scarred Mike’s boys before I came to Lone View and I’d no love for cow-punchers. I knew Mike had a hunch against you and I was located at the ranch to keep him wise as to how things went. But—wal! I reckon I’ve changed my spots. I’m not figuring to tell you why, or to bleat out the whole long-winded yarn, but here are facts. You and these kids can’t get clear of this old grey range on your own. It isn’t enough to have the Chief trussed up. It wouldn’t be enough if you sent him West. The boys are a fierce lot. And there are plenty to play boss amongst them. Wal, you’re gettin’ stiff, listenin’ to the sermon. So I’ll close the chapter. It’s this way. These kid-girls are pards. The boy’s standing for chum too. They reckon for more than the fact that I’m one of the rustlers of Skeleton Range. And they happen to be right. So I’ve fixed to have

horses—three clippers they are, safely hidden up and tethered, waitin’ for riders. There’s food too, and a track the gees know. They’d make good, those horses, even if Scarred Mike were on your heels. I came this way on the track of my pards. I didn’t figure to find you this side of Carrill’s Leap, but you’re here. I didn’t figure to find the Chief here either, but I’ve still got my offer open. I’ll lead you four down to find the horses, and I’ll put you on your road. But you’ll have to trust me. I reckon I don’t mean to risk your plugging me in the back if by chance you get the wheeze that I’m playing traitor.”

“Horses,” cried Pearl joyously. “Oh, Roddy! And sure we all trust you.”

Pansy put her hand on her friend’s wrist, and he flushed up hotly, but he kept his gaze fixed on Pete Quant. Pete was not showing any acute signs of pleasure at his late cowboy’s offer.

Pete’s brain travelled slowly, and it was really hard for him once he had fixed an idea to unfix it.

He had cursed Roddy Woflake as a treacherous snake, and it was difficult to change that impression. And, but for one word in Roddy’s speech, Pete Quant would have fiercely refused to have anything to do with the man who had helped to effect his ruin.

Guess what that word was? Yes, I’ve no doubt you’re right first time! *Food*. Pete Quant was really hungry enough to gamble his life for a meal. And when a man’s as near starvation as that he can gloss over a fair number of unforgivable acts on the part of a man who frankly offers him a square meal.

And three eager young faces appealed in the same way as his own inner man.

Resentment died, though Pete had too much burro-nature to yield his whole opinion and cry friendship to one of whom he was still suspicious.

Instead of allowing his lean visage to expand into the broad smile of comradeship he reeled forward.

“I’m tuckered out, Roddy Woflake,” said he. “I’d accept a worse offer made by a worse man. When I’m filled up I may make a better speech of it, but now—I’d go down to the rustlers’ den of thieves to get a hunk of bread and meat.”

Roddy’s lips snapped. It wasn’t exactly the sort of speech he might have looked for, but he knew too much of the Lone View boss to be surprised. Pete Quant had often enough spoken of what his way with rustlers would be before he suspected having a rustler seated on his own benches.

Pansy repressed her indignation as well as she could, but Pearl tossed her head.

“I guess Lizzie will have better words for a brave man than those, Pete,” said she. “And don’t forget Roddy Woflake is our friend. He’s played the white man, and it’s up to other folk to forget he was ever less.”

Pete did not reply to this, but he looked awkward rather than ashamed. Naturally enough he did not like to snub the girl who had come across Carrill's Leap to free him, but it was not too pleasant to be odd man out with a bunch of youngsters who had dealt too softly with one outlaw and claimed friendship with another.

Roddy, however, was generous.

"Say, we'll be starting," said he. "Slim Joe will be asking questions at head-quarters, and if the Chief's not back Grey Ann will be rounding up the boys to go in search of him."

He took a couple of steps forward as he spoke and stood looking down at the rustler captain. Scarred Mike lay still, but his eyes glowed hatred back into those of his late comrade.

Roddy frowned, gnawing his under lip.

Pansy gave a shiver.

"The dawn will be breaking, Roddy," said she.

And Roddy lingered no longer. Two and two they made their way down the ledge-like path. Pete Quant came last—alone. He was weak and dispirited, ready to snarl at his own shadow. Like a mirage stretched out before his vision lay the supper table of Lone View Ranch, laden as Lizzie loved to see it. Cold pork, mutton, pies both meat and sweet, juicy apples, pudding, and cheese. It was enough to send a man raving to dwell on such thoughts and still feel a wolf gnawing round his empty stomach.

It was not so dark as when Gerry and the girls had climbed up amongst the crags, but the dim light, half dawn, half fading moonlight, was even more mysterious. A grey land of ghosts was this, and once Pearl believed the something she saw leap across the path must be supernatural.

"Did you see it?" she asked Gerry, who was beside her. "It—it didn't seem to touch the path."

Gerry chuckled.

"No," he agreed. "He's a fine jumper is the old grey mountain wolf. Listen to his moan to the moon. Some ache in his inside is what he's suffering from. I guess it's the first time I've ever been kinda sorry for an empty wolf."

Pearl tried to laugh.

"Let's think of all we'd like best for supper," she suggested. "It—it'll be nicer to talk of cream trifles than ghost wolves."

"Sure!" agreed Gerry, "but you'd best hook your arm into mine, kid, or you'll be tumbling over into the river. Some tired, you are, but you'll never own it."

"I won't be tired when I'm riding," said Pearl. "I hate climbing down these places. You never know whether you're goin' to fit a hole too neatly ever to be got out. Ugh!"

Gerry gave her a side glance and rubbed his chin. He knew it would not be too wise to suggest she would be feeling more like a heroine after twelve hours' sleep.

What a noise the river made! Such a mocking sort of noise, chanting like a human voice, "Go back! Go back!"

So busy were those climbers one and all that they did not notice the ghost light from the sky, so far above, shining on a crouched figure amongst those boulders. Yet there was a figure—a human figure—bunched there between two grey rocks. It was that of young Slinders, a raw recruit to head-quarters at Wolf's Crag, who had had more words of kindness from Grey Ann than any other tenderfoot rustler ever born. Young Slinders had been "licked good" by Roddy Woflake more than once, and he hated him. Also, the foolish lad wished to shine in the eyes of the gang, and of Grey Ann in particular.

But Slinders had a wholesome fear of Gentleman Roddy's way of showing a youngster how to mind his own business, so he had remained wedged in his hiding-place after tracking the elder rustler as far as there was cover to conceal him. Now, he watched with interest the rustler's return down the mountain path with that bunch of companions, and when they were out of sight, concealed by a big bluff, Slinders rose to his feet, waving a lean arm in mockery.

"A-huh, pard!" he chanted. "So that's how you serve chums! A-huh! I reckon I'll have some morning tale for Slim Joe—and Ann."

It was only his youth, his greenness, and his incapacity to absorb more than one idea at a time which kept Mark Slinders from climbing higher to see whether Gentleman Roddy had left any of his party behind him.

Dawn had broken, with slow reluctance which still left many of those mountain passes in shadow, before Roddy brought his companions to the place where horses awaited them.

It was a cunning spot of concealment, not to be suspected by those who passed beneath beetling twin crags to find within a narrow gorge one of those pleasant resting-places which Nature had decked in holiday mood. Here the dawn was yet only a half light, but it showed the cluster of choke cherries, the green patches of moss, the slender-stemmed columbines.

Pearl forgot her tiredness too as she ran forward to greet the horses, tethered yonder to a gnarled stump.

"The darlings!" she cried, giving ardent welcome to the white mustang which had had—if truth were told—more than one master of late, and, before then, had been the darling property of a young rancher out Winfalls way.

Such a graceful creature, white, with black points and one black stocking, which had given him the name of Magpie.

The creature accepted Pearl's overtures. No horse yet had withstood her

blandishments. She gave love freely and claimed the same in return, crooning away to the handsome animal as she told him of future days of comradeship.

All the horses were fine specimens, though Brown Mary was less to look at and maybe the sturdiest goer of the lot.

It was Brown Mary which Pansy chose to caress. Wasn't that Pansy's way. Anything less showy or likely to win admiration than others had her sympathy. And meantime the three men—if you will allow Gerry to claim the title of “man”—were busy with the saddle bags.

They didn't contain gold, those bags, but they held what Pete Quant liked seeing still better, and Gerry too found his appetite grow clamorous as he watched Roddy tossing out bread, meat, cheese, and a bottle of spirits.

Some meal! Oh, if you've never experienced the right sort of hunger, which might make you ready to gnaw at a lump of leather, you can't enter into the full joy of that meal. Bread, salt junk, and cheese doesn't sound a fairy feast, but then there was nothing fairy-like in the appetites of the men who sat down to it. And the girls were amazingly hungry too. It was breakfast-dinner-supper to them, and the keen nip in the morning air after a long night's walking and adventure sharpened their appetites. Pansy, bread and cheese in hand, would pause from time to time to look at Pete, and as she looked, the tenderest sort of little smile crept over the girl's face.

If only Lizzie could see him now, would she be crying or laughing, or both? There he sat, the sorriest figure of a man, big, shaggy, unshorn, his clothes torn and dirty, his cheeks sunken, his eyes aflame with starvation light as he thrust great wedges of bread and meat into his mouth.

What an indigestion he would be having! But it was no use to talk. There wasn't any sort of conversation carried on during that breakfast in Columbine Nook.

Pansy had finished first. Pearl had lingered over her last crust, whispering to Gerry about the horses. But it was Roddy who got up before the others and went towards Magpie.

Pansy had caught his glance and guessed their guide had something to say.

She too rose and stood by the man's side. He seemed nervous and anxious. As he fumbled with the horses' saddle she could see his hand trembled.

“Say, Roddy,” she asked, “what is it? You don't think we're going to leave you in the lurch? Even Pete's grown human after his meal. He'll know the right way to shake hands now.”

Woflake shook his head.

“It's not that, kid,” he jerked out; “though I'd give a whole hunch more than I can say to be away with you all and a clean sheet before me. But it's tough work all round. I know Scarred Mike. He's a problem I've studied, but I can't lose sight of a fact. When I joined his band I was all in, and Scarred Mike

played on the square with me. He saved my life once, too, from a treacherous dog of a Greek. He did a brave thing, and he wouldn't take a word of thanks for it—only cursed me if I mentioned gratitude. But—there are debts even a doggone rustler pays. So—I'll have to go back to Carrill's Leap."

Pansy paled.

"To Carrill's Leap?" she echoed. "But not to set Scarred Mike on our track?"

Roddy's slender hand caressed Magpie's ear.

"No," he said. "Sure! I'm going back for two jobs. One is to carry Scarred Mike back into some better hiding-place. I'll keep him tied up till evening; that means a matter of twelve hours for you. You oughta reach the foothills—or the nearest police location—before then. And so, when the long shadows begin to fall, I'll be cutting Scarred Mike's ropings an' sendin' him back to headquarters. Afterwards—" he shrugged his shoulders. "Afterwards, kid, it's a gamble, see!"

There were too many tears in her eyes for her to see much, but she held out her hand.

"Promise," she pleaded, "if you ride free from Wolf's Crag, to come on our trail. If we aren't at Lone View we'll be in Brendon. We're friends, Roddy. And your friends want you. I reckon you're not a rustler in the same way as others. It's a chance, Roddy. You'll come."

He laughed queerly.

"Sure," he agreed. "I won't be able to stay in Scarred Mike's company. He won't be grateful to me, you may bet on that. If he can shoot me at sight he will. So I'll be riding out and away from the Skeleton Range, kid, sure thing!"

"On our trail," she pleaded. "Promise, Roddy."

"A rustler's promise don't count," he said.

"Your promise does. Say, Roddy, you'll come."

He looked towards Pete Quant, who had concluded the best meal of his life.

"I'll ask him," he replied. "You can watch the result, kid."

Quant was on his feet as Woflake came up.

The two men faced each other.

"There's the horses, Quant," said Roddy. "The boy will have to share with one of the girls. Brown Mary'll have no objection. I've been telling Pansy that I've a business appointment elsewhere, so I must quit."

There was the briefest pause, then out came Pete Quant's great fist.

"Shake, lad," said he. "You played the skunk—and I cursed you, but seems to me that it's a low game not to 'low a man to make good if he chooses. You've made good at a heavy figure. Since being acquainted with your rustler Chief I can size that, an' though I don't know your present game I'll say this:



If ever you want a cowboy job again at Lone View or elsewhere—or if it suits your book to ride to Brendon where I’ll most likely be located now, I’ll see to it you get a billet. That’s my word.”

Roddy’s face lighted up.

“That’s great,” he said quietly. “I can say ‘thank you’ for that. It’s opened a road I’d like to take. You’re a man, Pete Quant. Will you be ridin’ straight for the prairie?”

Gerry Stretton had joined the two men. The girls stood apart.

Gerry’s cheeks were flushed.

“It’s a straight ride for the prairie,” said he, “but there’s gold hid up in Rattler’s Hollow. It wouldn’t lose us three hours of time.”

Pansy, hearing, crept closer.

“It’s a straight ride for the prairie,” she echoed, “and that’s best. Oh! we don’t want gold. We want to escape.”

But Pete scratched his head thoughtfully.

The word *nuggets* has fatal magic for a man who wants to settle down at ease with his wife and be sure of a snug home.

Nuggets! That would pay for an ugly adventure. It would be a raging pity to leave those nuggets to rattlers—or rustlers!

“We’ll reach the prairie—and Brendon—safe enough, Pansy girl,” said he, “but we’ll ride for the foothills by way of Rattler’s Hollow.”

## CHAPTER XII

### Rattler's Hollow

It was Gerry who took Pansy up behind him on Brown Mary. Nothing would satisfy Pearl but sole charge of Magpie, and the mustang seemed quite satisfied with the arrangement.

Gerry was half ashamed of himself. He knew that Pansy was wishing with all her heart that he had not mentioned the hidden nuggets in Rattler's Hollow, and he was not sure he ought to have done so with these kid-girls in their company. But Gerry had spoken on impulse, and Pete Quant had grabbed at the idea. You must not get any wrong idea of Pete. He was a fine sort of man in reality. A bit of a rough diamond, but sterling stuff. It was only that the nightmare of imprisonment in Carrill's Leap had thrown him out of his bearings for a bit, and his grim humour showed him on the contrary side.

The idea of nuggets was soothing. It meant payment for all his troubles. And payment has a mighty pleasant sound.

"You won't be real vexed with me, Pansy girl," pleaded Gerry, noticing his companion's silence.

Pansy gulped back her tears. Truthfully, she had not been thinking of Gerry. As long as she could she had watched Roddy Woflake as he clambered, nimble as a mountain goat, over the rocks. Now he had gone, and she saddened. It was a sort of going back to the tiger's den to let loose the tiger. But not for worlds would she have asked Roddy not to go. He was playing the game.

Pete had not asked questions as to Roddy's business appointment, though he guessed Pansy knew its nature; as they rode down the wider track leading across the range in the direction of Rattler's Hollow he began to make out their plans. Gerry's story had to be told first. The lad meant to make tracks for Los as soon as they reached the foothills.

"I'll be going round by our shack in Apple Tree Hollow first," said he, "for I figure that my dad may have come back if he could sit his horse, or else maybe he'll have sent a pard to find out what's keeping me. Then I'll take the road to Los."

"We'll be for Brendon," said Pete. "My wife will be eating her heart out. They'll have had to tell her, and she'll be crazed with trouble. We won't be sparing the horses once we reach the prairie. But I'll make it my business to see Winlake or Howlett of the Mounted Police and tell them to clean out that nest of rustlers, stock and stone. There'll be no peace for anyone till they're

wiped out.”

No one replied to this. Perhaps the programme seemed a bit too full of jobs which wanted instant attention.

And the nuggets came first.

One thing at a time, please! That’s good advice. Pete Quant and Co. wanted to bunch three or four things together; and, clever as their horses were, they had not got fancy wings.

Pansy shuddered as they entered the famous Hollow. She had often heard of the still more famous Death Valley with its terrible, fever-laden climate, its haunting rattlers, and its unexplored wealth which none lived to claim; and it seemed that this grey valley was first cousin to the other.

The horses were brought to a walking pace, and presently both Pete and Gerry dismounted. The slopes on each side of the Hollow were so high that they kept the valley in semi-darkness. The whole place was desolate, grey, mysterious. A stream flowed through it, and miniature cascades contributed their waters as they foamed over the rocks. All eyes were kept on the watch for rattlers. The danger here would be in stepping inadvertently on a coiled reptile as it slept on a rock. So horses and men picked their way gingerly as they advanced. The girls stooped low in the saddles to scan the broken ground.

“I once met a prospector from Death Valley,” said Pete, purposely talking, since the silence grew oppressive. “He was in the saloon which had been raised some half-mile from the old fever den, when a man came reelin’ in with a sack of nuggets on his back. He was a peg-legged chap, with a face like mahogany, and his tongue stuck right out—black. He’d got the fever and was at the last gasp, but the man who spun the yarn never forgot how the boys in the saloon got round him—not to sympathize or doctor him, but to learn the location of the nuggets. But poor peg-leg died there, not able to speak a word—and I guess it’s not known how many took the fever searchin’ around for what they ever after called the Peg-leg Mine—and never found.”

“It’s terrible,” shuddered Pansy; “it—it makes me *hate* money. I wish there weren’t such things as nuggets.”

“Magpie says he doesn’t reckon much on Rattler’s Hollow,” agreed Pearl as the mustang shied at a gnarled little bit of tree stump amongst the rocks. “Is your mine of nuggets far, Gerry?”

Gerry was getting worried. He could tell the girls were nervous, and his anxiety to locate quickly the hiding-place of the gold confused him. Those grey rocks looked remarkably alike; there were caves—not only one cave amongst the cliff-like banks. Those cascades might have been twins.

“It was sure *here*,” said Gerry, trying to be mighty positive about the business. “We marked the stone with a double notch. You can’t miss it.”

But they did miss it, or rather there were no notches.

The girls dismounted, for the ground was swampy hereabouts, and Pete's horse, a powerful grey, had got stuck once in the ooze, and the next plunge might have been disastrous. Tethering the animals as carefully as they could, they set off to make careful search; but Magpie grew restive and Pearl returned to take on herself the charge of the horses. The wind was rising, and as it skirled and screamed down the hollow the sound was not unlike that of wolves in full cry of their quarry.

Pearl perched on a rock, keeping a bright look-out whilst she caressed her favourites one by one. She was happy with her horses, but she didn't like this waiting time. She grew chilled and restive as the animals. How mad it was to risk being caught by all the bogies, two legged and four legged, of Skeleton Range just for the sake of gold.

Meantime, Pansy was amongst the searchers for that notched stone. Not that she was any keener than her sister for the nuggets, but it seemed that the sooner they were found the sooner they would be off. Twice they heard the warning rattle of the old grey snakes which infested the place, but by daylight these had the less terror for those who could avoid them. Once, Gerry marked the lean body of a wolf sneaking off amongst the brushwood. There were dens along the ridge from which such prowlers would come out at night.

"Here," said Gerry at last, and there was a cry of relief in his tones. "That's the rock we notched, an' the nuggets are hidden in a sack under the fifth rock to the right, close by the cascade."

Pansy looked back. Pearl was still guarding the horses and she waved to her. Hurrah! they would soon be leaving this hideous place now.

A wolf whimpered somewhere above them and the cry was echoed.

That might be a signal.

"All together," said Pete Quant. He was getting back to his stride now and the gold lust tingled in his veins.

Pansy came close. Such a squat, horrid rock. In the dim light of the hollow it might have been some grotesque dwarf they wanted to upset.

It was on the tip of her tongue to suggest there might be a nest of rattlers underneath. But she didn't say it. It never does to play the discourager. So Pansy leaned her weight against that hunch-backed rock and pushed.

All together. Sure! All together rolling over in a higgledy-piggledy bunch.

You never reckon to lie long on a swamp where a rattler may be stretched prisoned beneath you.

Gerry, being undermost and half in the stream, took a plunge and came up dripping. Pansy picked herself off Pete's legs and wiped muddied hands on the grass. Pete rose more slowly.

"Nuggets?" was all he said. He was in a fever lest all that effort had been vain.

Gerry had not waited to wring the water out of his clothes, but had climbed back to the place where the stone had been dislodged.

“They’re here,” he cried, “hy-ar. Just as we laid them down. Say, it’s too heavy a load for one. We better divide the nuggets roughly, but what can we carry them in?”

“Tear the sack,” said Pansy, “and stitch it into three. I’ve got a needle and thread in my case. It’s the only way.”

“Good!” applauded Gerry. “You’re a streak of genius, Pansy.” And he toppled out the contents of the sack.

It seemed impossible to Pansy that those muddy, uninteresting lumps could really be the precious things for which men risked their lives. But she didn’t want to study nuggets at the moment. Pete was getting impatient, but he had no suggestion to make. To fill their pockets with those unwieldy morsels was out of the question, and already Pansy’s quick fingers were making a job of her idea.

One, two, three. As soon as each was fixed it was set aside. The third was already half full when a cry from Pansy attracted the others’ attention. She had risen from her knees on the slab of rock where she had squatted and was looking towards the place where Pearl played sentry with the horses.

The place was deserted, but, as Pansy watched, she saw her sister rounding the corner which had hidden her. Pearl was up on Magpie and riding him between the other two horses. She seemed to be urging all three beasts to their greatest pace, but there was someone running beside Brown Mary—the figure of a man, reeling, swaying, but even at this distance plainly familiar.

“Look, look!” cried Pansy excitedly. “Can’t you see? It’s Roddy Woflake, and he can’t have gone back to Carrill’s Leap at all.”

Pete Quant stiffened.

“Meaning,” said he, “that the rustlers have located their captain and are on our track. But which side does Woflake b’long to? I guess I don’t mean to be kidded twice by a treacherous coyote.”

Pansy’s pulses drummed.

“How dare you say it,” she whispered, “when it’s sure thing that Roddy’s come back to warn us—and you know what that means.”

Gerry swung one of the small sacks of nuggets on to his back.

“Rustlers or no rustlers,” said he, “I’m goin’ to glue myself on to these ole nuggets, considering all the trouble they’ll likely be to us.”

But Pansy was running forward, splashing through pools and jumping from rock to rock to meet those who hurried towards them.

She was afraid—afraid!

And, thinking of Scarred Mike, she knew she had reason for her fear.

## CHAPTER XIII

### Tracked

Roddy's tale was soon told.

"Spied on," he panted, staring round the ring of anxious faces and glad to read no suspicion in any eyes confronting his. "That tenderfoot kid, Mark Slinders, tracked me to Carrill's Leap. If I'd found him at the game—but I didn't. He went back to Wolf's Crag head-quarters, but our luck was in. Slim Joe was drunk, and Grey Ann never heard his shouting—for an hour or more. I heard the story, as Slinders told it to Scarred Mike. When they did grab on to facts Grey Ann rounded up the boys and they got away to the Leap. Scarred Mike had twisted himself into knots and nearly fallen down a crevice in tryin' to rub out the rope, but he was comin' round when I reached the place.

"Lucky for me I was on the blind side of Hal Muggins. He didn't see me, though I could have pounced him easy if I'd wanted to. But it wasn't my game. I couldn't tucker out a whole bunch of rustlers, so I lay low till I heard Scarred Mike begin to bellow. Then I knew I had to quit. I—I haven't lost time, an' some of the boys will find their horses gone for a fancy trip, but Scarred Mike's a danger. Nuggets or no nuggets, you'll have to quit in a hurry. And this time——" He looked at Quant, and Quant looked at him.

"Sure!" said Pete. "You can have Grey Eagle to yourself, or take Pansy up on Brown Mary."

Roddy looked at Pansy.

"It's for the kid to say," he replied; "but you're the heavier weight, Quant."

"I'd rather ride Brown Mary," said Pansy. And she stepped to Roddy's side.

Gerry was busy. He had nuggets on the brain, so Pearl was telling him as she watched him sling two of those cute little sacks to balance across Magpie's back.

"Sorta John Gilpin," grinned Gerry. "Up with you, Pearl. You'll be surety for this gee's good behaviour. It's magic you use."

They laughed and joked, those two, even whilst they watched the head of the valley for the men who would be riding down it. For Mark Slinders' ears had been sharp enough to put the gang on the track.

Pete Quant was up on the grey. Gerry had loaded him with that third sack, and Pete was glad to have it. He wanted to feel the weight of nuggets against his knee to cheer him with the thought that they had not gambled on a chance for nothing.

“It’s the old shack in the foothills I’m leading for,” explained Gerry. “We’ll locate that first, then ride our own ways. It’s Los Angeles for me. And I reckon your grey will be burning the wind on his way to Howlett’s headquarters.”

“The police’ll have first hand information,” said Quant; “but if you talk of burning the wind, that’ll happen on the road to Brendon.”

They were mounted now—the bunch of them—and it was Gerry and Pearl who led the way down through the hollow to a gap with a queer nickname, which escapes my memory.

Pete had all he could manage in Grey Eagle, for the animal was restive as though it scented danger. Time had been slipping away since dawn broke ’way up amongst the heights of Skeleton Range, and though Pansy could scarcely believe her eyes it was evening shadows which crept down over a spot which was own twin to Death Valley.

Pansy and Roddy were mounted on Brown Mary. The mare knew Roddy and was willing enough to carry the double burden. Roddy rode forward cautiously. He guessed if Scarred Mike captained the pursuit he would not be riding them down as English fox hunters ride down Reynard in the open.

It was Roddy who sent Gerry back to Pete’s side and took the lead himself.

“See here, kid,” he called back presently over his shoulder to Pansy, “we may be ambushed lower down by Fox Point. It’s the short cut to the main track and we’re bound to take it. Mike’s no fool when he plays the coyote, and he’ll guess our road. You’d better be taken up by the boss, and leave me to ride first. It may be a red trail.”

“No, Roddy,” came the swift response. “I’m riding through this with you. Pete’s horse is weighted enough—and he’s got Lizzie praying for him at Brendon. I know—if you can—you’ll win through. I trust you.”

Roddy laughed—the queerest thing in laughs.

“We’ll be going then,” said he. “And I reckon Providence will take a hand when there’s danger to a kid like you. A kid—like you.”

They had left Rattler’s Hollow and were riding down such a slope as you or I would call break-neck. Behind them came the others, ready to play follow my leader. As Pete had said—the touch of the nuggets against his knee was a help.

Down, down. And didn’t those cute little horses teach a lesson to every member of their breed! Down, down, till they came to broader slopes covered by the purple sage and short grass in which blue and white flowers starred.

Evening had come. Sure! Evening had come, and it would have been hard to reckon when they would be seeing the foothills.

Gerry would have tried a tune. That was his way of relieving tension, but Pearl nipped the melody in the bud.

“It’s worse than a wolf moan,” she declared. “And I reckon there are wolves yonder.”

She pointed to where another valley showed wooded slopes. Wooded slopes and jagged rocks—altogether a more romantic ravine than the one they’d left behind, but I reckon there were as many rattlers and skulking wolves round Fox Point as in Rattler’s Hollow itself.

“Who cares for wolves?” scorned Gerry. “I’ve got my gun. Whoopee! Before dawn we’ll be located in Apple Tree Hollow. Unless some of the folk of the foothills have been visiting the shack, I’ll cook you a meal in some shape.”

“I wish we were there,” said Pearl. “Look at Pete! What’s he doing? And—and Roddy! What’s taken Roddy—and Pansy?”

Gerry gasped.

“Steady, kid,” he urged, but though he spoke to Pearl it was he himself who needed the warning, for—he had seen what was happening sure enough, before he turned Magpie’s head and urged the spirited little mustang to follow Pete Quant’s lead across the river.

For the rustlers had disclosed their ambush too soon—so it seemed—and had pounced on a shadow. The firing of Roddy’s gun had given the alarm just as his horse set foot in the wooded ravine. And the first echo had not died before the signal, if signal it were, brought the hidden men from their lairs.

Pearl, clinging to Gerry, had no clear idea as to what was happening. The twilight was drawing close—and the sides of the ravine rose dark and gloomy before them. She had a glimpse of men running along by their horses’ sides and leaping into their saddles. Men plunging into the river. Men firing, shouting, cursing; then the cold waters of the stream swept over legs and thighs and Magpie was swimming for his life against the current, following the sturdy grey which with its rider already clambered up the bank.

So confused were sounds, so loud the shouts and plungings, that both Gerry and Pearl were firmly persuaded that Roddy and his companions had led the way and were passing already amongst the shadows beyond the river bank.

But they were mistaken.

As they had neared Fox Point, a queer-shaped rock outside a dark ravine which was thickly wooded—Roddy Woflake’s conviction became a certainty. This was the very place for an ambush. Scarred Mike with a double grudge to pay would not leave the pass unwatched.

“Kid,” said the man, speaking hoarsely, “it’s in my bones that Scarred Mike will be waiting to pay his reckoning near by. Let me call Pete Quant, and you four watch from here to see if the road’s clear. If they trap us they shall not find the rat they’re looking for.”

But Pansy would not budge.



“We’ll share the danger, Roddy,” said she; “if there’s any for you it’ll be mine too. That’s the game as I see it. I reckon I’m not going to let you pay my debts.”

He did not reply. There was no time, for Brown Mary had reached Fox Point—and the ravine lay black beyond.

Roddy cocked an eye to see his companions well in the rear, then, with a word of warning to Pansy, struck spurs into his mare’s sides.

It wasn’t just the right treatment for a willing beast, and it hurt Roddy to do it almost more than it hurt the animal to bear it; but upon the latter those stabs of pain had the desired effect.

With a squeal of protest the mare reared, then, plunging down, she fairly let herself drive at the black track in front of her.

Pansy could not question. It was all she could do to clutch fast enough to her companion. Breathlessly she clung, pressed close against him.

They were under the natural arch now, and Brown Mary’s pace did not slacken. Away she tore amidst a perfect fusillade of bullets. Once, Pansy felt the animal stagger. She fancied Roddy reeled and cried out.

The rustlers must have been everywhere, but were they all at the heels of the mare, or had they separated in search of the others who had been seemingly swallowed by the black shadows?

Roddy was talking to his mare: “Co-om alo-ong. Whoopee—little mare, little mare. Coom alo-ong. Sa-a-a-a——”

Then jag! in went the spurs, and, between coaxing and bullying, Brown Mary fairly outdid herself.

Pansy still clutched. But to her it was sheer nightmare. The ravine was darker than Rattler’s Hollow, dark, dark. There were trees growing on the slopes. You could easily guess there were hiding-places too—many of them. But you can’t look for hiding-places when the black riders are on your track.

Still Roddy sang his plaint.

“Whoopee—little mare, coom alo-ong—co-om alo-ong. Sa, sa-a-a-eh!”

Then the ping, ping of a bullet, and a squeal almost human in its pain from Brown Mary.

Roddy ceased to chant. He knew just where that bullet had struck, and there was a queer, absurd sob in his throat for a beast which had borne him gallantly on a hard way. Brown Mary’s last gallop! but it was ill fortune which sent her death by a rustler’s bullet when she’d been born and bred to carry rustlers on their undertakings.

Pansy felt a strong arm girding her round, and the next instant Roddy was dragging her up over the broken ground to where, sheltered and secret, lay the cave he knew of.

Brown Mary had gone plunging on for a hundred yards or more, then she

fell—never to rise.

Yet still the sound of horse-hoofs beat in on Pansy's brain. Someone was following. Not the whole bunch of rustlers. *They* had separated, riding other ways, sure enough of their prey but momentarily on wrong scents. Only one man had stuck to Roddy's trail, the man who was dismounting already from his horse. Pansy did not look back. There didn't seem to be any need. She knew the man following was Scarred Mike. How cold she was! And yet Roddy's arm was a protection.

"Hy-ar!" drawled Roddy. He must have gone deaf, for he didn't seem aware that anyone followed their trail. He was not flustered, and where the light showed clearest he smiled down into Pansy's white face.

"You're fine," he said. "And I guess I was right about Providence."

They had reached a cave in the slope of the ravine. A narrow cave which was little more than a hollowed space behind a rock. Roddy gave Pansy a gentle push, and she staggered forward into this temporary hiding. As she fell on her knees, exhausted by the haste of that scramble, she heard the sharp report of a gun echoed by another. How close!

She seemed to have lost her strength, and though she tried to rise she could not do so. There are limits to even a plucky little heroine's endurance.

Would Scarred Mike be coming?

Then she heard a call. Not a loud call. Just the word "Kid", spoken in a kind of gasp.

Pansy felt her pulses leap, and her backbone stiffened. She knew she was wanted—badly.

Slipping from behind the rock she stepped out on to the slope. A man lay close to the cave. Someone else lay farther away, by the stream.

Pansy went and knelt by Roddy Woflake's side.

He looked up and smiled.

"Scarred Mike's dead," he said. "You needn't be afraid of him, kid. It was fair shooting. He—had me first."

"Roddy," cried the girl. "Roddy, you're not——"

He smiled again, rather wistfully.

"You needen look for the hole he's made in me," he murmured, "it's—not the sort a kid-girl need trouble about, for all the doctor chaps in 'Merica couldn't mend it. But I kinda had to call—an' say good-bye."

"Good-bye," moaned Pansy, and then—there was the look in Gentleman Roddy's eyes which told her she hadn't got to think of herself at all but only of him. She'd got to make good and give him the help he needed.

"Are you sure?" she asked, seeing the dark stain widening on his leather vest.

"Sure," he replied; "it'll be finished in half an hour—most. I'm sorry—but

I guess Providence has taken over the job good. There—are no more of Scarred Mike’s breed on the trail.”

“I’m thinking of you,” said the girl. “I want—to help.”

Into his queer eyes crept a light. He made a movement, and Pansy, guessing what he wanted, took his hand, bending close.

“Little pard,” said Roddy, and he spoke in jerks, with supreme effort; “little pard, you don’t know how you helped. It—it was when you—took my hand—and showed friendly—in those wise eyes of yours that—I vowed—to die—a white man.

“It’s too long a tale, but—’way in Scotland—years gone by—there was—my mother. She loved me sure. My father, he was hard—I ran away. It was fear of him—I came to Cal, and—for a time—I made good. I was going home—my mother wrote. She said Heaven—answered her prayers. Then—the money I’d made was taken from me—the whole bunch of it—to the last cent. A business swindle. I couldn’t pay—my passage. Next news, my mother’s death. A bitter letter from my father—said—my lies about homecoming hastened the end. He cursed me for a heartless waster.

“That finished. I wiped out—the old dream—and I joined Scarred Mike’s lot. For three years—more—I’ve ridden around. Then—I took the Lone View job. Mike made out I was the only one—to do it. And I was ready—and devilry. But you—but you—*and my mother*. I reckon—dead folk—remember. I reckon—dead folk—pray. It was my mother asked Providence—to send you along. You believed I could be a white man.

“Kid! If that’s—the colour I die—it is you I—owe it to. You—and the old mother—I guess I want to thank you—only——”

Pansy was sobbing, sobbing unrestrainedly; she couldn’t help it. Somehow she had seen the appeal in Gentleman Roddy’s eyes long ago. Somehow the instinct which is born in some even in childhood helped her, and oh, how glad she was!

It was long since Roddy had listened to a prayer, but he listened now, and, listening, did not hear the moan of the wolf, or the purling of the torrent. He lay still, his head in Pansy’s lap—listening to the simplest of sobbed out prayers.

A rustler? Yes! Just a dying rustler, but he didn’t seem afraid. He was smiling as he looked into the shadows around. Maybe he had whispered Amen. Maybe he had a little prayer to put up on his own account. Pansy, struggling for his sake with her emotion, did not hear. There seemed to be silence around.

Stooping, she laid her lips against Roddy’s forehead.

“God bless you,” she whispered. “An’ send your mother—to make it an easy road—home.”

Roddy smiled.

“Little pard,” he whispered. He hadn’t breath left to thank her, to tell her all his gratitude, his longing to have seen her safe. There was so much to say, but he had left it too late.

And Scarred Mike was dead. The kid was safe from him. That was good—but if it hadn’t been for the girl, he would not have fired that gun.

But he couldn’t explain this—or more. All he could repeat was “little pard”.

He felt tears wet on his brow. There was other moisture there too, but he could not wipe it away. He tried to smile—but—the chill of death numbed every effort—till—till—till all at once the chill was forgotten, the darkness had vanished—he saw only the radiance about a figure coming near.

With a frantic effort he tried to rise.

“Mother,” he cried—then fell back into Pansy’s arms.

It was truly sure that Roddy’s old mother had come to take her boy home—by the easy road.

## CHAPTER XIV

### The Deserted Shack

Alone! Pansy stood up, looking desperately around her. At her feet lay the dead man. She had kissed Roddy's brow and then gently laid him back amongst the rocks where he had fallen. Once she had looked towards the spot where Scarred Mike lay, but she dared not go too close. The rustler captain had not moved, and Roddy had said he was dead.

With an effort she managed to pile some pieces of rock about her dead friend's body, but that was her utmost. She could not have dragged him back to the cave. Yet it was to the cave she went herself, driven thither by the sinister sound to which she could not remain deaf. There were wolves in the valley. She heard one call to another, and the whimpering cry echoed by yet a third farther off.

Darkness crept down rapidly. As she crouched behind the rock she could not see even the little cairn she had raised over Roddy's body.

It made her heart ache to think of her rustler chum as dead. She had liked him well, been glad—maybe a little proud—of his devotion; glad and more than a little thankful to have been a help.

She thanked God now that she had shown Roddy Woflake the way back. He had died a white man, but she knew it was not she who had wrought the change. Only, she was glad to have been the tool.

And now Roddy had gone on the road Home. She was left alone here in a mountain cave, with night about her, and wolves howling their invitation to supper.

It didn't look as if Providence could have taken over the charge.

And where were the others? Above all, where was Pearl?

Strange for Pansy to have such supreme confidence that her sister should have escaped the rustlers!

Maybe to her all that was terrible in a rustler was concentrated in Scarred Mike. The others were not so vengeful. And Gerry's horse was one of the best.

She was sure—she prayed to be sure—Pearl and the other two were safe. But did they believe her to be safe too? Would they ride on to the rendezvous in the foothills expecting to find her and Roddy waiting for them?

Pansy shivered. It was a ghastly experience, to stand alone in this poor refuge, with two dead men lying near, and hidden four-footed foes padding down from the slopes about her in quest of a terrible feast.

Her fear centred on wolves, she almost forgot the possibility of sharing her

refuge with rattlers.

Not a match had she on her. It was impossible to kindle a light. She could do nothing—only wait for some grim fate to approach.

Complete darkness shrouded the whole scene. Complete darkness—and the knowledge that wolves were moving yonder amongst the rocks.

She had only one weapon of defence. Roddy's revolver. She had taken that with her back to the cave. She had discovered it to be loaded in every chamber save one.

At least she could make a short defence.

Leaning back against the rock wall she closed her eyes. Every nerve tingled, her heart beat slowly, heavily. She was cold, hungry, tired. But she did not sleep. Sleep, indeed! when those awful moans, the sharper whimpers, and the dreaded howl told that the wolves were busy. Not a whole pack. There was no hundred-tongued clamour, and, judging from the distance, it was the horse lower down the valley on which they feasted. But presently they would come up the slope.

Pansy clutched the revolver and knelt down behind the rock. The moon was rising. She had become aware of that by the fact of long white beams shining down amongst the trees and boulders.

Yes, in patches, she could see the rocky slope—the white flash of falling waters. Once, she fancied she saw something move, and in her fear she fired.

It was a hasty shot, not definitely aimed. A wasted bullet, so Pansy felt as she crouched lower. But the shot was being answered—not by howl of wolf or bark of fox, but by a human voice hailing someone down there in the lower valley.

A howl—a shout—a light flaring!

The wolves were on the run. The cowards!

But was not Pansy a coward too? The poor girl huddled closer under the rock, shivering in excitement and dread.

There was a rider down there. Who but one of the rustlers, returned to look for a wounded captain? The valley might be full of Scarred Mike's men—and there would be a reckoning to pay for the dead Chief.

But, hidden here, they might not suspect her presence. Cautiously she raised her head.

There was no sound of horse-hoofs, but down there—not two hundred yards distant—a fire blazed, a fire hastily kindled of dry wood. A man stood near the clear, red flame.

Pansy stood up. Her knees trembled, but she clung against the rock. She wanted to make sure that the flame-light was not deceiving her. Higher leapt the long tongues of fire curling round. He was a bold stoker, this lone hand.

But wolves were fleeing from the light. He flung another dry bush upon the

flame. As he did so he turned, facing the fire he had made.

Pansy never forgot that moment.

“Pete!” she shrieked, “Pete Quant! Pete! Pete!”

He heard her. It was the cry he had been listening for, and he gave an answering shout.

“Pansy girl. Where are you?”

Crushing her way through the narrow opening, she ran down the slope, stumbling, tripping, bruising herself, but heedless of such minor accidents in her frenzy of rejoicing.

Only now, when she saw Pete standing big and strong there by the firelight, did she realize how hopeless had been her case ten minutes earlier.

But it was Pete—Pete Quant—who, by a seeming miracle, stood there, with Grey Eagle tethered to a silver spruce close by.

He saw her as she came out into a patch of moonlight and, leaving his fire, strode towards her.

Pansy fairly fell into his arms.

“Pearl?” was her question; “is Pearl safe?”

“From the rustlers, sure!” he replied. “We rode to the right across the stream and gave them the slip. It wasn’t till later that we missed you. We thought you and Roddy had crossed the river in front of us. Pearl was near crazy when we found you were missing. We sized up that you must have ridden into the trap.

“Pearl wanted to ride back at once, but we persuaded her against it. There was a shack close by where we pulled up, a deserted old bunk half fallin’ to pieces. We left Pearl there, but Gerry was really on guard. He took the gees and beat around. She’d be mad if she knew, but we weren’t too sure of the rustlers. I waited till after the moon rose to enter the valley—then I came along. I had an idea you an’ Roddy would be hidin’ up. It was a gamble on that—for otherwise I knew the rustlers must have got you beat an’ carried you off.

“So I rode down hereabouts, and was wonderin’ what sorta hail to give when I heard your pistol-shot. That gave me an idea. Seemed likely you fired the gun, for a rustler wouldn’t be shootin’ a lone bullet into the dark without raisin’ some sorta shindy. So I got some of the dry scrub an’ lighted a fire. It burned easy too. Then—I heard your hail—an’ saw you comin’. Where’s Roddy? Has he turned snake again, an’ rustled off with his friends, leavin’ a kid——”

“Roddy Woflake died a white man,” said Pansy, in choked tones. “He died savin’ me from Scarred Mike. Mike lies dead over there by the stream, an’ Roddy’s dead too. He—he did just all a man could do—to clean the slate—and I guess someone else—has finished the job proper.”

Pete Quant raised his sombrero. He could respect a man who died like that,

even if his wool had been black in patches during lifetime.

“Poor kid,” he said compassionately. “You must be tuckered out. But you knew Roddy’s colour better than I did. I reckon we all owe him about as much as you do. I’m sorry I can’t shake hands on it with him. But Pearl will be ravin’ if we leave her much longer. Say! You’ll be ready to ride out of this?”

“Sure!” Pansy replied, and she didn’t tell Pete that she was soft enough to feel an ache at leaving Roddy’s lifeless body up there unburied. After all, Roddy’s mother had come for the real Roddy.

Grey Eagle was ready for a gallop, but there was no galloping till they were free of that black ravine.

Not a sign of a rustler was to be seen as they came out on to the slope. Below them lay the round grey tops of the foothills. Soon they would be on the road home.

Pete Quant never was a talker. Not a word did he say as they rode down the vale to where a tumble-down shack wedged in an opening between two hills told of a rustler’s solitary lair.

Pearl was standing beside Gerry, who had given up circling around and ridden straight back to cheer his distressed comrade. Pearl saw the double burden Grey Eagle bore, and shrieked aloud.

“Pansy! Pansy! Pansy!”

And Pansy, brave with the right sort of courage which thinks last of self, rallied all her failing strength as she slipped from the saddle and staggered up the path to greet her younger sister.

Pete Quant dismounted and stood leaning against his horse. He was leaning against the nuggets too, but this time the feel of them did not give him that sense of comfort he had experienced before.

It had been a grim business all through, but Lizzie at least would be glad the account with Scarred Mike was settled.

Meantime, those girls were greeting each other with all the rapture of those who had been afraid to look too closely at their own fears. But when Pearl began to ask questions her sister shook her head.

“Not just now, Pearl,” she pleaded. “Another day I’ll tell you the whole story of how Roddy saved me from the rustlers after drawing them off from you and Pete and Gerry; but now, let’s only think of getting right back, away from Skeleton Range, away from everything that reminds us of—of it all.”

She was at the end of her tether, and Pearl the practical summed the matter up.

“There’s food in our saddle-bag, Pete,” she called across to Quant, “and Gerry can light the fire. We’ll have to eat right here now, or Pansy’ll be sick before we reach the foothills.”

Pete Quant looked back over the broken track. He didn’t want to wait.



Even if Scarred Mike was dead, there was a whole bunch of rustlers riding around in the neighbourhood. But Pearl was insistent, and Pansy's wan face told its own tale.

Fear and grief had chilled the poor girl's blood, and her hands were like ice. It was a new rôle for Pearl to fuss round her elder sister, but she took to it amazingly well, finding still more pleasure in ordering Gerry about.

A warm drink and the food, which at first threatened to choke her, soon helped Pansy to rally her usual courage, and after all the delay was not an hour's length.

"I wish we were going straight to Brendon," said Pansy, and I think Pete echoed the words, but he had promised to fall in with Gerry's plans, and stuck to his word. Gerry was even less sure than Quant that the rustlers would not be looking for them.

The girls, at least, knew too much of the way into Wolf's Crag headquarters. And Slim Joe would likely be wishing to fill Scarred Mike's place.

So on they rode till breaking dawn had passed into day, and day in turn had faded towards dusk. They hadn't struck a straight trail, and must have ridden miles out of their way before Gerry spied the familiar landmarks round about Apple Tree Hollow.

"Dad will have come back—or sent," the lad declared. But he was wrong; the shack was empty—deserted. No one had been near since Gerry and the girls had left it. Tired out and disappointed, the party decided to remain at the shack that night. Gerry could promise a meal, and soon produced the necessary goods.

"It's some picnic," laughed Pearl, whose spirits were beginning to rise high. "I'll cut the rashers. Pansy, that fire will sure never burn."

"I'll see to the horses," said Pete; "they'll have to carry us on a long trail to-morrow, which sets me wondering. For if Gerry wants to ride for Los, how will Grey Eagle take the rest of the bunch to Brendon?"

"Listen," said Gerry. "There's someone riding down the path towards the orchard. I'd better be taking a view round."

He lifted his gun as he spoke and went towards the door, but Pearl checked him.

"It's not *one*," she cried, "it's a whole bunch. Slim Joe and the rustlers must have struck our trail."

It seemed likely enough, and Gerry blew out the light before opening the window to peer out.

Yes, there were horsemen riding down into the Hollow, a dozen or more, but they dismounted amongst the apple trees, coming forward in scout fashion. They had seen the light put out, and were curious to know where to locate those within.

Pansy and Pearl stood back against the stove. Pansy for one felt that if these *were* rustlers it was no longer any use to fight against fate. Her hands hung wearily. Pearl was less tired and more eager.

“I’ve not got a gun,” she called to Gerry, who was crouched by the window, leaving the doorway to Pete; “but I could bring along the chopper.”

“Steady,” said Gerry, “there’s Pete yelling—but he hasn’t fired. Perhaps the rustlers want to talk first—they——”

A gun exploded outside, and Pansy cried aloud. Her nerves were on edge. Pearl grabbed the wood chopper, and Gerry, looking back into the shadow-filled room, could have laughed aloud at the sight of so truculent a young woman.

“Steady!” he urged. “They are answerin’ Pete. He’s coming back inside. I hope it won’t be a trap——”

From the doorway came the sound of a hail and the rush of feet. Gerry fired into the air, and next moment heard Pete Quant bawling at him.

“Shut off your wind, you young idiot,” yelled Pete. “Don’t you see?—*it’s the police from Los!*”

The police from Los! That could mean only one thing.

“Dad!” shouted Gerry—and made a dash for the door at such a pace as to upset that most important man, Inspector Howlett of the Mounted Police, who grabbed at his assailant, bringing him atop of his own portly person.

It was Pete Quant who hauled Gerry to his feet and proceeded to raise the indignant inspector in a more polite manner. But Gerry’s apologies and the inspector’s abuse were cut short by a long, lean gentleman, well-bronzed, well-grizzled, and well-stamped as one of those patient individuals who spend half their years looking for something they can’t find, and then see picked up at first search by a younger generation.

“Gerry!” cried Hal Stretton. “My boy!”

And Gerry forgot that inspectors of Mounted Police had ever been invented. Later, when he realized he had an apology to make, he found the official fully restored to amiability by the rashers of Pearl—who was taking out a special diploma for bacon frying—and the news told by Pete Quant and Pansy concerning Scarred Mike’s end.

“That’s going to save us no end of trouble,” said Howlett. “The Irishman was the type of rustler we’ve nearly wiped out in South Cal. A dangerous man—and a brute. He was a real criminal, which is what four-fifths of the rustlers out West are not. We’ll have to round up Wolf’s Crag head-quarters, but I wouldn’t be surprised to find it empty before we get there. It’s good business too—and I reckon some mothers will bless us for keeping our eyes shut if their prodigal lads come home with their wisdom teeth cut.”

“Isn’t that nice,” said Pearl, “and I’m so glad *now* that we took Gerry’s

advice about—ow!”

The “ow!” was an exclamation full of indignant reproach as Gerry’s boot came quite sharply down on her toe.

“Sorry,” said Gerry, and then, in an undertone, as Pete Quant engaged the attention of the inspector, “Duffer!”

“Why?” asked Pearl. “Oh, you mean——”

And she placed her hand over her mouth. She hadn’t quite understood that a still tongue is best where nuggets are concerned, even when the listeners are members of the Mounted Police and sympathetic neighbours.

It was just as well that Inspector Howlett and his men were anxious to be off to Wolf’s Crag at once. They had taken notes from the girls’ description of Scarred Mike’s back door, and various other data. Pearl was the most regretful to bid her friends of the police good-bye.

“Send all the nice *young* rustlers home to their parents,” she called out, “and keep the old ones in Los Jail. But take care how you tackle Grey Ann. She’s some scratch cat.”

How the men laughed, but Pearl liked the way they “saluted” her and Pansy as they went past on their splendid horses. It was the proudest part of being looked on as heroines, and Pearl flushed to her eyes as she saluted back again.

Pansy had gone to the side of Inspector Howlett’s horse and stood looking up into the officer’s lined, stern face.

“You said you were going ’way down the ravine past Fox Point,” said she, “to identify Scarred Mike’s body—if—if possible. If you do, will you go higher up the slope in a line from the place I’ve explained to you—and bury—a friend of mine who lies near the cave? The man who shot Scarred Mike.”

And the inspector, who had girls of his own and thought of how he’d have felt if they had had an experience similar to that of these girls, promised very gently, very kindly.

“Thank you,” said Pansy—and went back alone into the shack.

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Lizzie Quant climbed wearily the stairs up to the sitting-room of her lodging.

She had remained in Brendon ever since Phil Wearing and Ted Bleque brought Martha to her after the attack of the rustlers on Lone View Ranch.

The news that her Pete and the two girl chums she had left only so short a time before were missing had nearly crazed her brain. But Martha had taken her in hand, and by the sheer force of her will had helped pull the poor little woman round. All the best in Martha’s masterful nature had come out in this time of trial, and Lizzie had clung to her closely.

Phil and the other boys had put the business in the hands of the Mounted

Police, and if it had not occurred to them to go to the rescue themselves it was because the police had told them pretty plainly that it needed experts to catch any of Scarred Mike's gang napping.

So Phil, Ted, and the rest had returned to Lone View and done their best to raise the half-burnt-out ranch house, keep things moving, and look after the stock.

Wearing himself had been out at Brendon only the day before to tell the little woman the police thought they had some clue.

A clue? It was so vague, yet so thrilling. What did a clue consist of? Oh, she would go mad with suspense.

"Missus!" called Martha, "you're wanted. Missus! you're wanted right now."

Lizzie dawdled. Martha's urgent summons probably meant the settling of a wrangle between her "guardian" and a vendor of fish or fruit.

"What is it, Martha?" she asked wearily; "has the meat——"

"Wal," giggled Martha, "you're wrong. It's not the meat, though it might lead to a *meetin'*, and so it's a message about the boss, Lizzie Quant, and the gal who brought it——"

Lizzie didn't wait for more. She could see Martha's grin running all over her face, she could also see that though Martha's arms were set akimbo her portly figure could not quite hide a slim slip of a thing in cowgirl kit behind.

With a pounce Lizzie was round Martha and had caught Pansy in her arms.

"Pansy! Pansy!" she screamed; "it's Pansy-girl, so sure Pearl's near; and where's my Pete? my Pete?"

She was holding partly to Pansy, partly to the kitchen-table, but it was clear she wanted more solid support. So—it was Pete himself who came round the corner—and I do believe we ought to follow Martha, Pansy, and Pearl right out of that kitchen without saying another word.

But Pearl has since been heard to tell Gerry Stretton that it was on this occasion she for the first and last time of asking saw Martha dance.

It was some sight!

And do you want to say good-bye to those girl chums, who "went back" to such a big adventure, right here when they reached safety?

I think myself I'd like to take one more peep at them—just one. It's at Lone View Ranch that we shall find them. And the evening is the one before a number of people we know are sailing for England.

Phil Wearing is taking over the ranch, and he and the boys mean to give Pete Quant and his wife a good send off. Pete has been generous over his nugget sharing. There never was anything mean or grasping about Pete, and there had been a royal sharing of fortunes at Lone View, for Pansy and Pearl insisted on making a pool of their shares with Pete. Wasn't there enough and to

spare for all? And the best of it was the sharing-in of Gerry and his father. The Strettons had come over from Los to the ranch, and it was fixed for them to sail in the same boat as their friends.

“Common danger, common fortune,” said Hal Stretton, and his words were cheered to the echo.

Pansy and Pearl already figured out a dozen plans with Gerry. The Quants were buying a place in Yorkshire—or Scotland. Pansy and Pearl were joining in with them for the present—with an eye to their own farming estate later. *Of course* Gerry and his Dad must locate themselves near by.

“We shall have cows, and pigs, and hens, and the loveliest gardens,” said Pansy. “And we’ve planned about one boy we shall have to help. His name is Andy, and he’s a dear.”

“Sure!” agreed Pearl. “And horses. Dozens of horses. One will be called Mustard, and another Cherry-Bob. Then there will be Magpie, and Pansy is calling hers Brown Mary. Isn’t it just glorious, Gerry? Ain’t you glad you met us when you did?”

Gerry grinned.

“Sure thing!” he agreed. “You were mascot-kids all the way through. If it hadn’t been for you, I’d never have got the nuggets. The rustlers would have got me instead.”

“If it hadn’t been for you we’d never have got ’way from Skeleton Range,” retorted Pearl. “But cheerio! Here we are, and we won’t ever forget to thank each other all through. I guess we oughtn’t to forget Roddy Woflake either, eh, Pansy?”

Pansy was standing with her hands clasped behind her head. Her grey eyes gazed wistfully towards the cañon. A jack-rabbit squatted listening, close to a silver spruce. Twilight was falling. Lone View Cañon held—memories.

“No, Pearl,” she replied softly; “we won’t forget Roddy Woflake—*ever*.”

And this time Pearl’s careless chatter hushed.

She had seen the tears in Pansy’s eyes, and knew they fell in tribute to a friend.

Phil Wearing was just leading a cheer, echoed by a baker’s dozen of the ranch boys.

“Hurrah for the kids who rounded up Scarred Mike,” shouted Phil. “Huzzah for the girls of Lone View Ranch! Huzzah!”

Gerry turned laughing to two suddenly embarrassed cowgirls.

“Huz-zah!” he yelled.

I wonder why Pansy and Pearl liked *that* huzzah best of all.

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Three of the four illustrations shown in the Illustrations table were missing in the copy used for this edition.

[The end of *Two Girls in the Wild* by May Wynne [Mabel Winifred Knowles]]