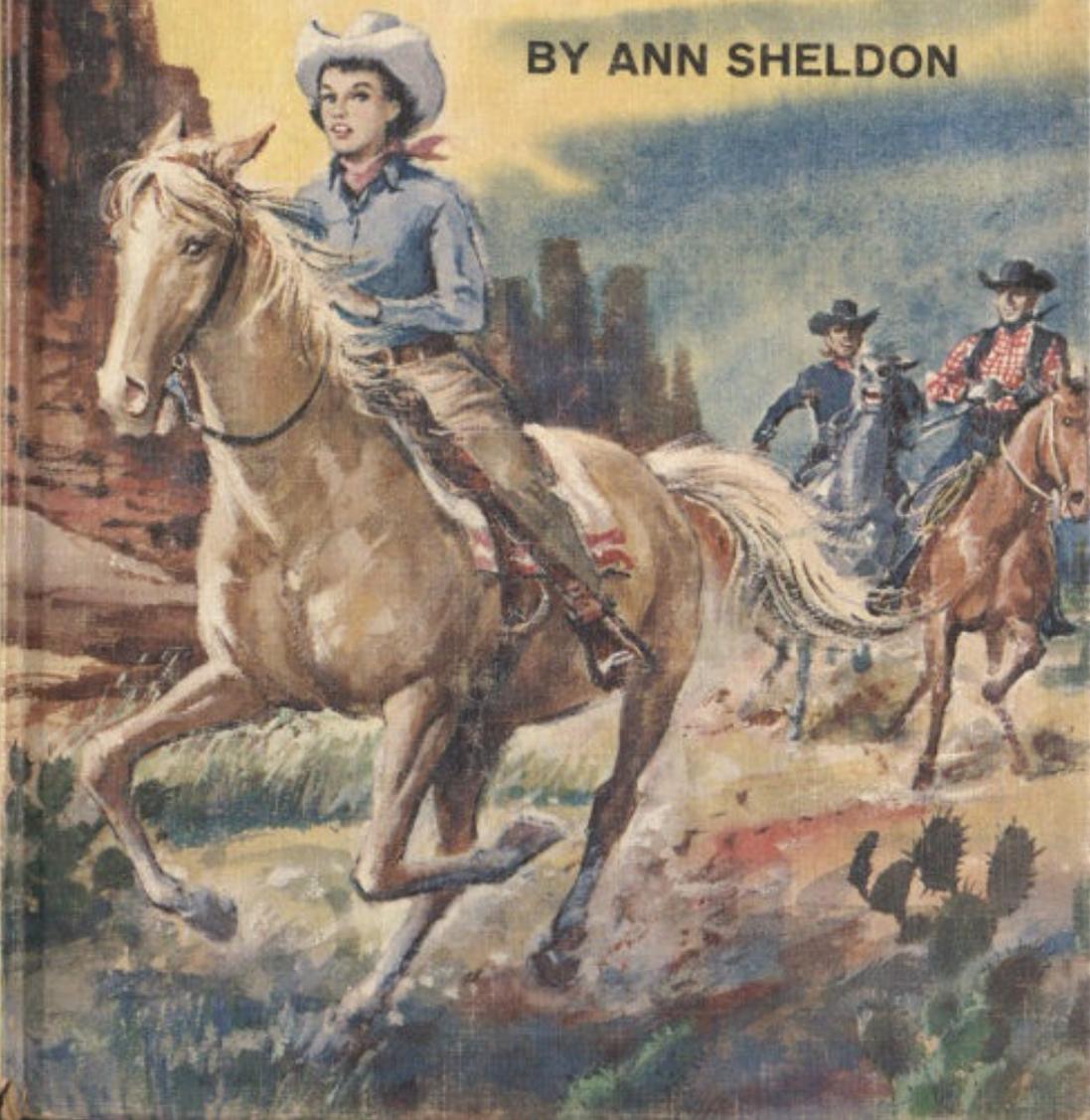


Linda Craig

\$1.25

AND THE CLUE ON THE DESERT TRAIL

BY ANN SHELDON



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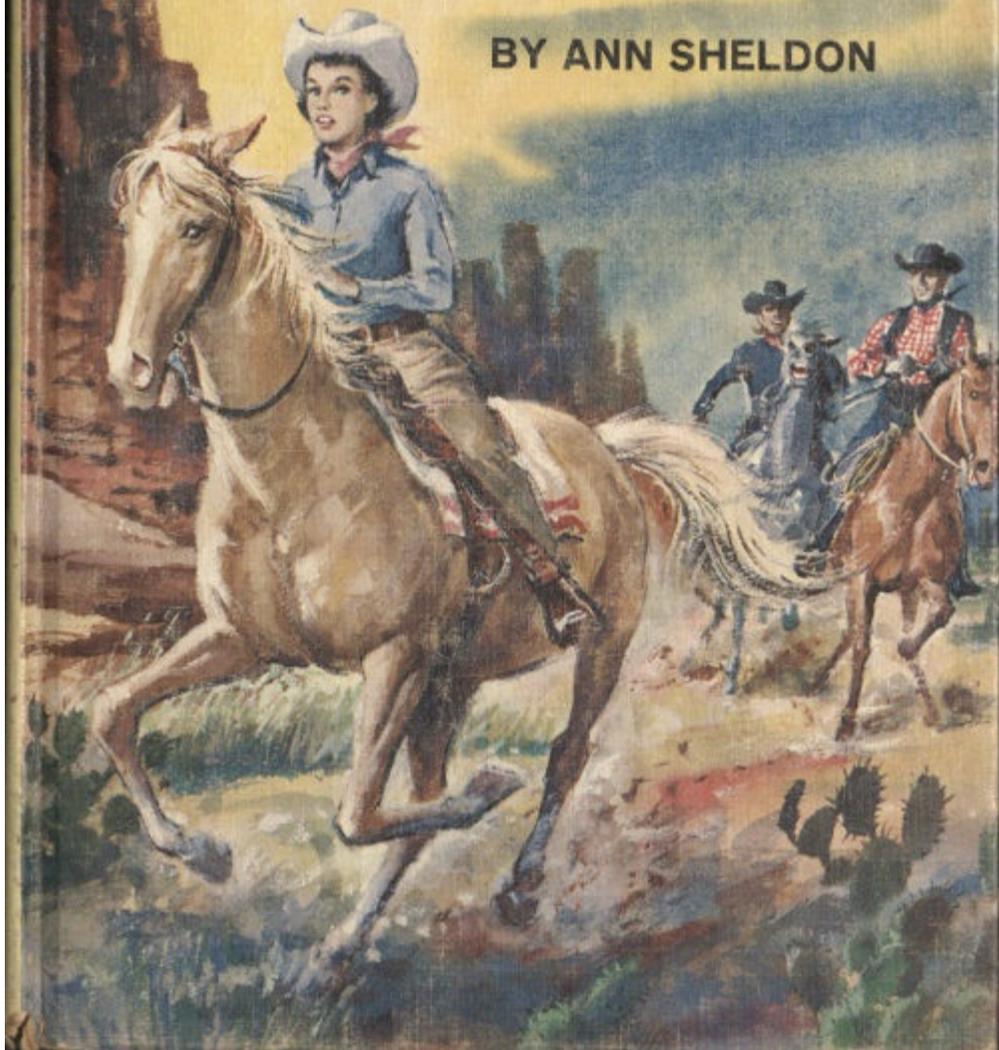
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and the Clue on the
Desert Trail

Ann Sheldon

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
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Linda Craig and the Clue on the Desert Trail

I

“Trail Class Ride In!”

“What a romantic old market place!” exclaimed Linda Craig, her brown eyes sparking with excitement.

The pretty, dark-haired girl and her friend, honey-blond Kathy Hamilton, threaded their way through crowded Olvera Street, the oldest in Los Angeles. A jumble of voices mingled with guitar music, while the aroma of chili spiced the morning air.

The two slim sixteen-year-old girls, on a visit from ranch country, had been looking over the colorful shops of Mexican wares. Now they paused at a pottery booth displaying rows of small clay animals.

“Look!” Linda cried out in delight. “Horses!”

“Leave it to you to find horses,” Kathy said with an affectionate grin. Her eyes roamed over the street while her companion chose one of the ceramic pieces to buy.

As Linda paid the man, Kathy suddenly clutched her friend’s arm. “We’re being watched,” she said softly.

Linda smiled. “Should we be flattered?”

“Not by him,” Kathy murmured. “I don’t like his looks.”

Linda whirled and gazed straight at the staring man. He was small and swarthy-faced and had hard, calculating eyes.

“He—he may be a pickpocket,” Kathy whispered, as the stranger, knowing the girls had spotted him, ducked his head and sidled away.

“We’d better hug our purses,” Linda advised. “And let’s have lunch before we meet Bob and Larry at the horse show.”

As the two girls walked up the street, they were a striking pair. Kathy, whose skin was tanned to a soft apricot glow, wore a yellow knit suit. Linda, in a pink skirt and sweater which set off her glossy black hair and creamy-textured skin, had inherited her beauty from her Spanish forebears.

Her great-great-grandmother Rosalinda had come to the New World as a bride from Spain. Linda, like her mother and grandmother, had been named for this first Rosalinda.

The girls paused a moment to breathe in the flower and spice scents from the candlemakers’ shop and again to listen to the lively strains of a Mexican orchestra strumming in the *La Golondrina* restaurant.

11

Linda and Kathy came to an open-air Spanish snack bar and seated themselves at a small table. They ordered enchiladas and hot chocolate. While they waited, Linda took the statuette from its bag and placed it on the table.

“I wanted this one because it looks just like Chica d’Oro,” she

said, referring to her own beautiful palomino.

There was a deep bond of love and understanding between the filly and Linda, who spent a great deal of time on horseback. Kathy had a paint horse named Patches and liked to ride with her friends, but there her interest in horses ended.

The girls had come into Los Angeles the day before for the big Wranglers' Show at the Western Stockyards. Linda was entered in the Trail Class event.

“Speaking of Chica,” Kathy said, “what time is your performance?”

“I have to be in costume and ready to ride at one o'clock,” Linda answered.

Kathy glanced at her watch. “You have just one hour.” Her gray eyes lighted warmly. “I just know you and Chica will win the trophy.”

“Cross your fingers,” Linda cautioned. Then her excitement bubbled through. “Wouldn't that be wonderful, though? We'd better hurry,” she added. “The boys will worry if we're late.”

12

Linda's eighteen-year-old brother Bob and his friend Larry Spencer had driven to Los Angeles with the girls, who had spent the night at the home of Kathy's married sister, Helen Brewster. Since it was customary for men participants in the show to sleep at the stockyards, the boys had stabled their mounts and put down their bedrolls in the horse trailer they had brought.

Hoping to pick up some prize money, Bob had brought along Speedy, the best cutting horse on his grandparents' ranch, where he and Linda had lived since the death of their parents a few months before. The Craigs had been in various foreign countries where Major Craig, of the Air Force, had been stationed. As a result, Linda and Bob spoke several languages fluently and felt very much at home among the Spanish-speaking people of California.

While Kathy finished her hot chocolate, Linda paid the bill. Then she picked up the clay horse to return it to the bag. Linda noticed that carved on the underside was an arrowhead with a short, curved shaft.

“What an odd mark!” she commented. “I wonder what it means?”

Kathy took the figurine. “Maybe it’s just a trade-mark,” she suggested, standing the clay horse on the table.

13

“Perhaps,” Linda agreed.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the small swarthy-faced man who had stared at the girls before. He suddenly darted to the table, snatched the statuette, and sped off through the throng of tourists.

“Stop!” cried Linda, jumping up to take after him. Kathy followed.

Dodging around people, Linda caught up with the man and grabbed his arm. The clay horse flew from his fingers and shattered on the tile pavement. Instantly the stranger jerked

free and fled.

Linda stared in dismay at the fragments. Quickly she stooped and picked up the horse's head, which was still in one piece, and dropped it into her purse.

“Well for goodness' sake!” Kathy exclaimed indignantly. “If that man wanted the horse so much, why didn't he buy it himself?”

“He probably didn't have as much as two nickels,” Linda replied. “Come on, I'm going back to buy another horse statuette.”

The girls returned to the ceramic booth and quickly looked over the rows of figurines. “There isn't another like it,” said Linda. “The one I had was unglazed.”

14

Kathy bobbed her head. “Yes, all the rest are shiny.”

Linda was disappointed. Sighing, she said, “Well, we'd better go.”

They caught a cab at the end of the street. As they rode along, Linda mused, “Since it was the only horse of its kind, maybe it was a special one.”

“What do you mean?” Kathy asked.

“That strange little arrowhead on the bottom may have been a sign to somebody,” Linda replied.

“Who?” Kathy asked. “And what does it mean?”

Linda smiled wryly. “Those are questions we’ll never know the answers to, I guess.”

In fifteen minutes the girls reached the Western Stockyards with their long exhibition building, big arena and grandstand, extensive stock corrals, and rows of barns. The horses being used in the show were stabled closest to the arena, so Linda had their cab driver take them inside the grounds to Barn Number Two.

There the Rancho del Sol station wagon and trailer were parked in front of Speedy’s and Chica’s stalls. The palomino nickered joyously at sight of Linda, and the girl ran over to give the filly a hug. 15

When Linda had been visiting at Indian Charlie’s in desert country several weeks before, she had seen the beautiful horse, which had been foaled there. It became hers and she had named the palomino Chica d’Oro, Spanish for Golden Girl. The filly’s native intelligence and response to Linda’s tireless training were already causing her to be an outstanding entry in the horse-show rings.

Speedy’s stall was empty, so the girls knew that the stake classes were being run off. Bob must be there now.

“Kathy, you’d better run into the arena and let your sister and Larry know we’re here,” Linda said.

“Sure you don’t need any help?”

“No thanks, I have everything organized, and I can manage better alone.”

“Okay then,” Kathy replied. She kissed Linda on the cheek. “Good luck! We’ll be rooting for you.” She hurried off toward the grandstand section reserved for families and friends of the participants.

Linda threw her purse on the front seat of the car and locked the door. Then she unlocked the dressing room in the horse trailer and slipped on a long denim smock. Next she brought Chica over to the trailer and fastened her tie rope to the metal loop on the side, planning to brush her. 16

The palomino was so clean she needed little brushing. Linda put a carved-leather Western saddle and bridle on the pony, instead of the beautiful silver equipment she used for the Parade Class in a formal horse show or parade riding.

“I’ll leave the saddle cinch loose, baby,” she told the filly, “until I’m ready to mount. You’ll be more comfortable.”

As she turned away from Chica, Linda stopped short. A swarthy face was peering at her around a parked car. The next instant it was gone.

“That man again!” Linda thought. With a surge of anger she started after him, determined to find out what he was up to. But she was stopped by the blare of the loud speaker. “Trail Class—stand!”

Quickly Linda turned back to the horse trailer and stepped into the dressing room. Bob had picked up her badge and left it there for her. As she pinned the seven on the back of her shirt, Linda was relieved that she did not have to work first. But she would have been happier if her number 17

had been three. Chica was inclined to become nervous if she had to stand too long before showing.

Quickly Linda put on her sage-green gabardine riding suit, white boots, and white-felt hat. She looked beautifully trim and attractive.

As the young rider stepped from the trailer, she saw Larry Spencer running toward her from the arena. He was a tall, sun-bronzed eighteen-year-old.

“Hold it!” he called out. “Stand right there by Chica’s head.” He stopped a short distance from her, took a small camera from his pocket, and snapped the girl’s picture.

Suddenly Linda saw the mysterious, swarthy fellow behind him. “That man!” she exclaimed. “He’s been following us.” Bright flags of anger flamed on her cheekbones. “I’m going after him and find out why.”

She turned, stepped into a stirrup, and swung up into the saddle. It slipped down over Chica’s side. Instantly Larry leaped, slid to the ground under Linda, and caught her as she fell. Chica crowhopped, and whinnied frenziedly.

“Quiet, Chica!” Larry commanded. “Stand!”

The well-trained horse did so, but stood quivering and looking around at the young people with panic in her soft brown eyes. Larry untangled Linda’s foot from the stirrup, and stood her up.

“Thank you,” she said, and added with a shaky laugh, “I

forgot to tighten Chica's saddle cinch."

"Lucky I was here," Larry replied, his brown eyes showing concern.

As he resaddled Chica, Linda gently ran her hand down the mare's neck. "It's all right now, baby," she said quietly. "Easy now. Easy." The palomino began to settle down.

In a few minutes Larry had the saddle securely in place.

"I'm going after that man," Linda declared as she mounted.

But again she was interrupted. The loud speaker blared, "Trail Class ride in!"

II

A Determined Thief

Linda looked in dismay at Larry.

“Forget that snooper for now,” he told her. “If he comes back, we’ll go after him.”

From the arena came the music of a Western band and vocalists. Chica tossed her mane and sidled in excitement. Her young owner laughed and tingled with anticipation.

As Larry walked with Linda and Chica toward the arena, he saw Bob coming out on Speedy. Linda’s brother rode with the easy grace of a lifelong ranch hand. Visitors to Rancho del Sol were often surprised to learn that when summer was over he switched to engineering studies at college.

“How did you do?” Linda asked eagerly, as he approached.

Bob pushed back his hat, revealing tousled, sandy hair, a hint of his paternal Scottish ancestry. “I picked up fourth-place money,” he replied with a laugh. His clear brown eyes glinted humorously. “Speedy got a little rattled by the crowds.” He gave the horse an affectionate pat on the neck. “He’s just a country boy, you know.”

“I watched you work,” Larry said. “You had tough competition. I’d say you did all right. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Bob replied. “I’ll take care of Speedy and get back in the grandstand to watch you, Linda.”

“Wish me luck,” his sister called, as he rode off.

“You’ll do all right,” said Larry, and left her to return to Kathy and her sister in the grandstand.

Linda lined up with the rest of the contestants at the end of the arena. It was an open class for sixteen years of age or over, and contained six women and five men, all experienced show participants.

Linda looked over the course and drew in her breath. It was the most difficult lot of Trail Class obstacles that she had ever seen.

There were tires for the horses to walk through, railroad ties to step between, and a bridge to cross which had high, thickly leafed branches nailed to the sides. After that came a right angle of spaced rails to back through, a gate to go through, and a mailbox where the rider was to dismount while ground-hitching the horse. At the end lay a calfhide to walk over, and a trailer to lead into.

21

The horse of the first contestant, a middle-aged man, refused to go over the calfhide for so long that he was ordered around it. The second horse grabbed a mouthful of leaves off the bridge, which was a fault. Another broke its ground hitch at the mailbox. Two others went around the course all right, but

took a long time opening and closing the gate. Number Six clicked the railroad ties with its hoofs.

Linda picked up a good tip from careful watching. The contestants, she thought, had brought their horses to the obstacles too quickly.

When her name and number were called, Linda collected Chica firmly, held her a moment before the tires, and then gave her an easy rein. The filly picked her dainty hoofs up high, and went through the tires without touching them. Applause followed.

As obstacle after obstacle confronted Chica, she made her way faultlessly through the course. The spectators expressed their recognition of Linda's expert horsemanship by thunderous clapping.

The last four contestants, with the exception of one whose horse refused to walk into the strange trailer, managed to get around the course without faults, but Linda thought that they had not given very smooth performances.

22

Finally all the contestants were ordered to ride in and line up. Linda's heart thumped as she waited to hear the results. With a surge of pleasure the girl from Rancho del Sol heard Number Seven called as the first-place trophy winner.

"Oh, bless you, Chica!" she murmured softly.

The presentation was made by Hal Crawford, the rugged, handsome Western star of screen and television. He and Linda held the trophy while pictures were taken. Then Crawford

shook the girl's hand and congratulated her. Linda was thrilled, but she managed to say, "Thank you," in a clear and steady voice.

The trophy was a magnificent, two-foot mahogany standard rising from a golden half dome and topped by a golden saddle horse. On the front of it was an engraved gold plate and on each corner of the base was a golden horse.

"It's beautiful!" she said excitedly.

When Linda reached the arena exit, she was met by Bob, Larry, Kathy, and Helen Brewster. She dismounted happily amid their congratulations and was kissed by everyone. She handed the big trophy to Bob to carry, and they all went back to the trailer. 23

There Linda dismounted and gazed at the trophy while stroking Chica's silken mane. "Thank you, baby," she told her, "for such a wonderful performance!"

The palomino nickered softly, her brown eyes gleaming.

Kathy asked with a laugh, "Linda, how could you keep from swooning off your horse when Hal Crawford shook your hand?"

"It was pretty thrilling, all right," Linda admitted with a grin.

As she turned to lead Chica to her stall, Linda glanced into the front seat of the station wagon. She gave a sharp cry. "My purse! It's been opened by some thief."

The others hurried over to look at the contents of the opened bag, strewn across the car seat.

“This vent window was forced open!” Larry pointed out.
“Then someone reached in and unlocked the door.”

“The clay horse head is gone!” Linda cried out. “The thief must be that man who stole the figurine in the first place!”

“What is this all about?” Bob asked.

“Yes, please tell us,” Helen Brewster said, looking worried.

24

Quickly Linda and Kathy related their adventure in Olvera Street. Linda added that the same man had been lurking around the trailer before she went into the arena.

“That horse must contain something pretty important,” Bob declared. “Maybe contraband.”

“I’d better go back to the shop and find out everything I can about where the statuette came from,” Linda said.

Bob agreed. “Meantime, I’ll rub Chica down and feed both horses. But hurry,” he cautioned her. “Remember, we have to drive back to Rancho del Sol tonight, and be ready to leave there again at dawn.”

“So early!” Helen Brewster exclaimed. “Where are you going?”

“Out on the Mojave Trail,” Linda replied. “Grandfather has

ordered twenty-five head of Black Angus cattle from the Scotsward Ranch across the desert from us.”

Bob spoke up. “We thought it would be fun to bring them back over the old Indian trail instead of going to the expense of trucking them the long way around on the highway.”

“It sounds like a real adventure!” Kathy’s sister declared. “As soon as you’re ready, Linda,” she added, “I’ll drive you girls to Olvera Street and then go on home. You don’t mind taking a cab back here?”

25

“Of course not,” Kathy assured her.

Linda hastily changed to her pink skirt and sweater. In a short time she and Kathy were back in the old market place. The crowds had thinned, so the man who ran the ceramics booth was not very busy.

Linda described the broken horse to him and said she would like to purchase another just like it. “Do you have one in stock?” she asked.

The proprietor slowly shook his head. “Why no, miss. It’s a funny thing about that horse. A fellow ordered it especially from the same pottery in Mexico where I buy my things. He was going to collect it here, but he never showed up.” The man shrugged. “So I put it out for sale.”

“Could you tell me the name of the man and where I could find him?” Linda asked.

“His name is Rico,” the shop owner answered readily. “But

where he lives, I don't know. He said he was a traveling salesman, and because he had no permanent address, wanted to have the horse sent here."

"If he comes in now, what will you tell him?" Kathy asked.

"That I do not hold goods forever," replied the shopkeeper brusquely. "He should have paid for it beforehand, then I would have laid it away for him."

26

"I'd like another horse just like that one," Linda informed him. "If one comes in from Mexico, would you send it to me? I'll pay you for it now. Will you give me a receipt, please?"

"Sure, I'll do that for you," the owner said. "But that kind of statuette isn't likely to come in unless it is specially ordered. I'll have to wait until the pottery salesman calls to do that. It may be quite a while."

Linda wrote her name and address on a paper for the man and gave him the money. The girls hailed a cab and returned immediately to the Western Stockyards. They found the boys eating frankfurters and drinking Cokes.

"What did you find out?" Bob asked eagerly.

Linda told them about the Mr. Rico who was to have picked up the clay horse at the shop, but had failed to do so.

"Maybe Rico was the name of the fellow who snatched the horse in Olvera Street and was lurking around here," Larry suggested, "just waiting for a chance to steal the head."

“I’m certainly sorry to have lost it,” Linda said,
“especially if there was a mystery connected with it.”

“Just the same,” Kathy declared, “this means he’ll let us alone, and I’m glad to be rid of him. Ugh! He had an awful face!”

Bob remarked soberly, “Linda, I think you and Kathy had better go to the police and report this whole affair. Meanwhile Larry and I can pick up the supplies I promised Bronco I’d bring back.” Bronco was Grandfather Mallory’s nickname.

Linda and Kathy taxied to police headquarters. When they informed the desk sergeant that they had information about possible contraband, they were ushered into a small council room. Immediately they were joined by a plain-clothes man who introduced himself as Detective Carson.

Linda carefully told him all that had happened from the time she purchased the clay horse to the interview with the shop owner about Mr. Rico.

“We’ll question the proprietor,” the detective said, “but he may be only the innocent middleman. Rico is the one who knows the answers.”

“Do you think he is a smuggler?” Kathy asked.

“It sounds as if that horse’s head contained contraband of some sort,” Detective Carson replied. He gave Linda a piece of paper. “I want you to draw the symbol that was on the bottom of the statuette.”

Linda sketched the sign of the arrowhead with the short, curved shaft.

The plain-clothes man studied it for a few moments before he spoke. “Since the suspect who followed you got the horse’s head, it isn’t likely he will be seen again at the ceramic booth, but we’ll stake out a man near by anyhow. And if you do receive another clay horse with this arrowhead symbol on it, notify us immediately.”

“I’ll do that,” Linda promised. Detective Carson thanked the girls for their report and they left.

When Linda and Kathy arrived at the stockyards, the boys had not yet returned. The girls strolled over to the chuck wagon at the entrance to the arena to buy hot dogs and soda. They brought them back to eat inside the dressing room of the trailer and as they ate, they talked about the mystery of the clay horse.

“I’m glad the police have taken over,” Kathy concluded with relief, “and that we’re out of it.”

A few minutes later the girls heard a scraping noise near the door. Linda flung it open and looked out, Kathy behind her. A man was running away from the trailer! He was not the swarthy stranger—he was taller.

29

“I wonder what he wanted?” Linda said.

“Look there!” Kathy exclaimed, pointing to a piece of paper thrust under the door handle.

Linda pulled it out and unfolded the sheet.

The scrawled message said, “*Beware. Stay away from C. Sello.*”

Beneath the word *Sello* was sketched an arrowhead with a short, curved shaft.

III

Mysterious Poison

“The arrowhead! It’s the same sign that was stamped on the clay horse!” Kathy whispered in dismay.

Linda nodded soberly. “C. Sello,” she said. “Who could that be?”

“Maybe it’s Mr. Rico, using another name,” Kathy suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Linda replied. “The man who left this note and ran off was larger than the one who followed us.”

“Anyway we don’t know for sure that the man who stole the horse’s head is Mr. Rico,” Kathy reminded her friend.

“That’s true,” Linda agreed with a sigh. “There’s a lot we don’t know.”

“Sello,” Kathy murmured with a puckered forehead.

“That’s a Spanish word,” said Linda. “*Sello* means a seal or a stamp, but the initial C before the word *Sello* puzzles me. That seems to indicate it’s somebody’s name.”

“Whatever it is, I surely intend to beware,” Kathy declared.

“If I see that arrow sign again, I’m going to run the other way.”

“We’d better turn this note over to Detective Carson right away,” Linda said. “But I hate to leave Chica d’Oro and Speedy unprotected.”

“Oh, the boys should be back before long,” Kathy said. “I think your horses will be quite safe in their stalls. After all, there are guards on duty.”

“I guess you’re right, Kathy.”

After leaving a note for Bob and Larry telling what had happened, the girls hurried to the street, hailed a cab, and taxied to the police station. In a short time they were again closeted with Detective Carson. Linda gave him the note and related what had happened.

When she had concluded, the detective looked very serious. “It might be advisable for you to return to your homes as quickly as possible,” he said.

“Are we in danger?” Kathy asked.

“Perhaps,” the plain-clothes man replied. “Since we don’t know what this mysterious warning means, you must take no chances.”

“We’re leaving tonight as soon as we get the horses loaded,” Linda told him.

“Good.”

As the girls were leaving headquarters, Linda paused in the lobby and said, “I would still like to know if C. Sello is really a name.”

“Let’s look it up in the phone books,” Kathy suggested.

Several telephone booths stood against a wall. Beside them was a long counter holding all of the directories for the different parts of the big city.

The girls hurried over to consult them. They found only three Sellos listed. One was a Franklin Sello, a doctor in a suburb; one a Karl Sello, whose address was in the wholesale district; and another was listed as Sello, palmist, with an address on a side street not far from the police station.

First Linda called Dr. Sello. She asked him if he knew a C. Sello. The physician informed her that he had no relatives with that initial and knew of no one else by that name.

Next she called Karl Sello, hoping he might still be there, although it was past closing time. Linda found him at his desk.

“You want something special?” asked Karl Sello with a guttural accent.

“I would like some special information,” Linda replied. “Would you please tell me if you ever have spelled your first name, Karl, with a C?”

“Ho, not me, not ever,” Karl Sello said with a laugh. “I was born with that K, and I’ll die with it.” When Linda asked if he

knew of a C. Sello, he said he did not. She thanked him and hung up.

“Well, now for the palmist,” Kathy said with a sigh.

“Why don’t we pay that one a visit?” Linda suggested. “He’s only a few blocks from here.”

Kathy agreed, but when they reached the area five minutes later, she lost her nerve. The two girls had turned down a street of old, shabby, frame dwellings. The number they were looking for was on one of the dingier buildings. Beside the front door was a row of mailboxes with the names above them.

“Here it is!” Linda exclaimed. “C. Sello, palmist! We’ve found C. Sello!”

“Let’s get away from here,” Kathy begged uneasily. “Remember that warning message.”

“Now that we’ve found the name,” Linda said firmly, “we ought to investigate. After all, this may not be the C. Sello mentioned in the note.”

Linda entered the dimly lighted hallway with Kathy close behind her. They climbed three flights of stairs to a door that also had a sign, *C. Sello, palmist*, with *Enter* under the name.

As Linda cautiously opened the door, a bell tinkled. The two girls stepped into a tiny room with a table and two chairs. The only light came from a dirty skylight.

Kathy grimaced silently at the stale smell of cabbage she detected. “I don’t like this,” she whispered.

They heard a chair being moved in the next room, and from behind the red drapery hanging at the doorway came an old woman. Her straggly white hair was banded by a strip of folded red cotton cloth. She wore red felt bedroom slippers, a faded flowered cotton dress, and a black crocheted shawl which she clutched together in front of her with bony fingers.

She welcomed her callers with a toothless smile and said in a raspy voice, “Good day to you. I see you have come to Carmelita to learn your future.”

“Are you C. Sello?” Linda asked.

“That I am, child,” replied the crone hoarsely. “Carmelita, the famous.” She seated herself in one of the chairs. “Sit right down there now, and cross my palm with a dollar.”

Linda hesitated a moment, then sat down, paid her dollar, and laid out her palm. “Do you see any strange sign in it?” she asked. “Like an arrowhead, maybe?”

35

The old woman looked at her belligerently. “You let Carmelita tell what she sees with her own eyes.” The woman peered along the lines of Linda’s hand, and then brightened a little, exclaiming, “I see—it is here—you will meet a wanderer, a vagabond who will lead you into some dark mystery.”

Carmelita beamed into Linda’s face, pleased at her divination, and then went on, “Aha, there is a dark-haired man.” Her

voice became ominous. “Look out for him, young lady! Beware!”

Kathy let out a little squeak at that word, and then clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Just tell me this,” Linda asked. “Why did you have a man leave a note on our horse-trailer door warning us to stay away from you? What does the arrowhead sign mean?”

The old woman’s confusion and blankness were too genuine to doubt.

“I know nothing of what you are saying,” she replied. “As for me, I haven’t been farther away from this street than the corner grocery for ten years.”

“Thank you,” said Linda, standing up. She and Kathy walked to the door.

36

“B-but—the other young lady,” pleaded Carmelita plaintively. “I have good things to tell to you!”

“Some other time, perhaps,” Kathy told her, and they left.

Down on the street Linda sighed. “We certainly drew a blank on that C. Sello clue.”

Kathy nodded and glanced at her watch. “It’s almost eight o’clock,” she exclaimed. “We’d better hurry. The boys may be worrying about us.”

“They’re probably worrying about their dinner,” Linda

returned with a grin. “Those hot dogs they had were only a snack.”

The girls had to walk back to the main street before they were able to catch a cab to the stockyards. When their taxi reached Barn Number Two, the girls found that Bob and Larry had just arrived. They were taking the supplies they had bought out of their station wagon. Speedy’s brown head tossed over the half door of his stall with pleasure at the familiar faces, and he gave a joyous whinny.

“Where’s Chica d’Oro?” cried Linda, running to the filly’s stall. Kathy followed. “Oh, dear, she’s lying down,” Linda said with sudden concern, “but not sleeping. Her eyes are open!”

“Bob! Larry!” Kathy called urgently.

37

As the boys hurried over, Linda quickly slipped back the latch and dropped to her knees beside the horse. “Chica, Chica,” she cried softly, “what has happened to you?” Linda stroked the filly’s neck.

Chica weakly turned her head, then dropped it back again to the straw.

“She’s sick,” Linda said breathlessly. “Someone get a vet, quick!”

“I’ll call one!” Bob offered, hastening away.

“Let’s try to get Chica on her feet,” Linda said. “We must keep her blood circulating.”

Together the two girls and Larry attempted to get Chica up, but she refused to respond.

Suddenly Kathy picked up something near the filly's head. "It's a lump of sugar," she announced. "I thought you never gave Chica sweets."

"I don't," replied Linda. "I always give her pieces of carrot or bread for treats."

"Let me see that," Larry said. He peered at the sugar closely and sniffed. "This has been poisoned!"

"Oh no!" Linda cried. Her eyes filled with tears. "Who would do this to you, baby?" she whispered.

Larry knelt and put a comforting arm across Linda's shoulder. "The vet will fix her up, I'm sure," he said encouragingly.

38

"At least she didn't eat all the sugar," said Kathy comfortingly.

"Do you think that Sello gang did this?" Linda asked.

"Maybe," Larry replied. "But I think somebody tried to give Chica the sugar before the show to knock her out of competition. It was probably still damp with poison and bitter, so she spit it out. Later, when it dried, she must have picked up a bit in her stall and eaten it."

Bob had gone on a run to the arena office to phone. The show was over and nearly everyone had gone. But fortunately the

veterinarian who had been retained by the Wranglers was still there, having coffee and chatting with a couple of men.

“We have a very sick horse over in Barn Two,” Bob broke in.

Doctor Saunders tossed his half-filled paper cup into a refuse barrel and said, “Come on, let’s go!”

He and Bob jumped into his fully equipped car and shot over to the barn at high speed.

Linda jumped up as the veterinarian and Bob hurried in.

“Save her!” she begged the doctor. “Do everything possible to save Chica d’Oro!”

Larry handed Doctor Saunders the sugar cube. “We found this in the stall. I think it contains poison.”

39

The veterinarian gave the cube a quick, close inspection.

“That’s it, all right,” he snapped. “Good to know this. It will save time.”

He hastily prepared a long needle and gave Chica a shot for toxicity. Then he prepared another and administered it to her for a stimulant. Next he mixed an antibiotic drench and forced a quantity down the filly’s throat. For about an hour the doctor worked over the palomino while the four young people watched anxiously. Finally Chica began to give an occasional grunt.

“She’s starting to respond,” Bob said to Linda.

“Well, I’ve done all that I can for your horse,” Doctor

Saunders finally remarked. "Twenty minutes' delay and she would have been gone."

"She'll be all right now?" Linda asked shakily.

"She should be," replied the veterinarian. From a jar he shook out a half-dozen pills the size of a quarter and gave them to Linda. "Give her one of these in an hour and one every hour thereafter," he ordered.

He also handed Linda a pill gun, a long contraption to reach to the back of the horse's mouth, so she might shoot the pill far enough in for the animal to swallow it. "Let her be quiet for another hour," he said, "and then get her to her feet and keep her walking. Someone will have to stay with her all night."

40

"I'll do it," Linda declared.

"We'll take turns at that," Bob told his sister.

"I'll stop by early in the morning," the doctor told them and drove off.

"I'll go call the ranch and tell Bronco what has happened so he and Dona won't be looking for us tonight," Bob said. Dona was the name he and Linda had called their grandmother since early childhood.

While he was gone, Larry and Kathy went across the street to a lunch stand and brought back a belated dinner of hot roast-beef sandwiches and milk for all of them.

“That was a close call for your horse,” Larry remarked to Linda, “but she looks pretty good now.”

In about two hours the four friends managed to get Chica on her feet and begin walking her easily in a circle outside the stall. The boys cleaned out the empty stall next door, put down fresh hay, and brought in their sleeping bags. Linda and Kathy slept there while the boys stayed with Chica. The girls took second watch while Bob and Larry slept. By 6 A.M. Chica was bright and chipper, but the four young people were exhausted!

Doctor Saunders came by and picked up his pill gun. As Bob paid him, Linda thanked the veterinarian earnestly for saving Chica.

41

“Good care helped,” the doctor replied with a smile, and left.

The young people went over to the lunch stand for breakfast. Then they loaded the horses and gear and headed for Rancho del Sol.

Bob turned on the car radio to keep himself alert. In a little while the news broadcast came on. A daring bank robbery had been successfully pulled off in West Los Angeles, and the bandits were believed to be fleeing on Route 99. Roadblocks were being set up.

“That’s this highway!” Linda exclaimed.

“You don’t suppose they’ll want to hijack a couple of horses to head for the hills on, do you?” Kathy asked drowsily. Her tired companions did not answer.

Bob automatically glanced into the rearview mirror. A blue convertible was speeding straight toward them. Faster and faster it came. Could it be the robbers' car?

“Hang on!” Bob cried to his companions and swerved sharply, as the convertible careened up close behind them.

IV

The Rescue

Jolted by the sudden motion, Linda and Kathy saw a speeding convertible with several occupants zoom past. It shot to the edge of the highway and was suddenly braked, while the driver tried to swing into a turn. The car rocked badly for a few seconds, then went over the steep embankment.

“Oh!” cried Linda in horror.

Immediately Bob pulled to the side of the road and stopped. The four jumped out and looked over the edge of the bank into a meadow.

The convertible had turned upside down, pinning its occupants beneath it, with the exception of one girl who had been thrown clear. She lay without moving, a slim, dark-haired figure in yellow slacks and poncho top.

“How dreadful!” murmured Kathy, feeling faint at the sight. “How can we help?”

“First we must get that car off those people!” said Linda. “Oh, I hope it won’t catch on fire. Bob, maybe we could use the horses and our ropes to lift the car.”

“Yes!” Bob agreed. Quickly he took a couple of lariats from the station wagon and handed one to Larry. “We’ll tie these ropes to our car and slide down them. Then Kathy, you untie the lariats and throw them to us.”

“I’ll get the horses,” Linda offered, hurrying to the trailer. “Bob, look at that poor girl when you reach the wreck.”

As Linda led the animals out, her brother called up, “She’s alive. Just blacked out.”

At this moment a sheriff’s car drove up and stopped a distance ahead, where the embankment tapered off. Two deputies ran into the meadow.

Kathy looked relieved. “I’m glad they’re here,” she said, untying the lariats. She threw them down to Bob, then joined Linda.

At a place where the bank sloped gently the two girls took Speedy and Chica down, and ran with the horses toward the wreck.

When they reached it, Bob, Larry and the two deputies were attempting to force open the jammed car doors, but neither one would budge. The convertible had bedded deep in the soft earth.

“No use,” declared one officer. “We can’t right it.”

44

“Help!” came a cry from inside.

“We’ll have you free in a minute,” Linda called, thankful that

at least one passenger was alive.

Bob picked up the lariats and tossed one to Linda. With deft hands sister and brother fashioned harnesses of them. As Linda placed hers around Chica's shoulders, Larry fastened the end of the rope to the far front wheel of the convertible. Bob quickly harnessed Speedy and did the same to the rear wheel.

"Linda," Bob ordered, "you and Kathy take the horses hard ahead when I give the signal, and we four men will lift up at the same time." He ran around the car, and was joined by Larry and the deputies. "Go!" he commanded.

Linda and Kathy held the horses' halters. "Come!" ordered Linda, abruptly jumping ahead.

Both horses leaped to follow, straining on the ropes with all their strength. In a few moments the car was righted.

Linda freed the ropes, and the girls moved the horses away from the car. The deputies, Bob, and Larry immediately started to free the passengers, then carried them to the shade of an oak. There were a small red-haired girl, who was crying, and two brown-haired boys of about seventeen. One was unconscious. The blue eyes of the other were filled with fright and pain.

45

One of the officers remarked, "I radioed for an ambulance. It will be here soon."

Linda and Kathy tied the horses to an adjoining oak and ran over to see what aid they could administer. At once Linda

dropped to her knees beside the unconscious boy, and sought his pulse. “It’s a little weak, but regular,” she said.

The girl who had been thrown clear suddenly sat up and looked about as if dazed. The grassy, spongy meadow had prevented her from being badly injured. She grasped her face in her hands as if to shut out the whole scene.

Kathy went to her and gently wiped the grime off the girl’s face with clean tissues from a little case she carried in her pocket. “Everyone will be all right,” she said.

“I’m relieved to hear that,” the accident victim said simply. “That other girl is Shirley. I’m Mary—Mary Sutton.” Kathy assisted her over to the others.

“Thanks, you people, for stopping to help us,” the blue-eyed boy said with effort. “I must’ve been crazy to drive like that.”

“Don’t try to talk any more now,” admonished Linda. “The ambulance will be here any moment.”

46

“I’ve always loved horses,” said Mary quietly, “but never had much chance to be around them. I’ll remember yours as the most beautiful I’ve ever seen. May I pet them?”

“Of course,” Linda said with a smile.

Mary limped over to Chica d’Oro and Speedy, and stroked the neck of each. Then she pulled thick bunches of succulent green grass and fed them to the horses. Eagerly the animals extended their muzzles for more.

“They’ll never forget you,” said Linda, who had followed Mary over.

Just then Chica spotted the gay, flowered handkerchief in Mary’s poncho pocket and snatched it out with her lips, waving it up and down.

“Oh, you wonderful creature!” Mary said warmly. “So you want my hanky? I’ll gladly give it to you.” The linen square was perfumed with a spicy scent.

Mary took the handkerchief from Chica’s lips and knotted it to the horse’s mane. The filly nickered softly.

“Oh, I wish I could learn to ride,” Mary said with a sigh.

Linda liked the girl. “If you’ll come to our ranch sometime, I’ll be glad to teach you to ride,” she offered. “We live at Rancho del Sol.”

47

“Oh, I’d love that,” Mary exclaimed, “and I know where your ranch is.”

Larry had joined them. “You two girls look almost like twins,” he said. “The same size, same black hair and brown eyes.”

After the ambulance had arrived and gone off with the accident victims, Linda, Kathy and the boys took the horses back to the trailer. In another half hour they were on their way home again. When the station wagon pulled into Rancho del Sol, Mr. and Mrs. Mallory stood by the corral, anxiously awaiting their granddaughter’s and grandson’s arrival. Rango,

the large coyote-shepherd ranch dog, barked a greeting.

Bronco Mallory swept off his felt hat and strode over to the station wagon. He was a robust man, over six feet tall, with a shock of iron-gray hair and keen blue eyes.

“Glad you all made it safely,” he said.

His wife, a slender, olive-skinned woman, and the owner through inheritance of the ranch, was a few years younger than Bronco. She wore her long, black hair high in a braided crown. Though there was an air of proud reserve about Rosalinda Mallory, her deep brown eyes were warm and full of concern as she greeted Linda, Bob, and their friends.

“I have been alarmed about you,” she said.

48

“We’re all right, Dona,” Linda assured her quickly. “And Chica d’Oro’s fine.”

As Rango leaped about, showing off, Cactus Mac, the bandy-legged foreman in his middle fifties, came out of the corral. Immediately he unloaded Chica and gave her a quick inspection.

“As fit as ever,” he announced with a grin. “And how’d you folks come out in the show?”

Linda smiled and proudly showed her trophy.

“Um, that thar’s pretty fancy,” Mac said.

Linda and Bob chatted gaily as they all walked toward the

attractive, sprawling, Spanish ranch house. Large trees shaded the building and bright-colored flowers grew in profusion near its white stucco walls.

Luisa, the genial, plump Mexican ranch cook, had a hearty pork-pie lunch waiting, so they all went in to the table and did the rest of their talking as they ate.

After the four friends had told all the events of the past week in detail, Bronco pushed back his chair and cleared his throat. “Well now, I’ve had some rather bad news from the Scotsward Ranch,” he announced. “There has been an outbreak of anthrax among cattle near there. We’ll have to get those Black Angus away from Scotsward at once. That means you young folks must leave early in the morning.” He looked at them solicitously. “Think you’re up to it after all you’ve been through?”

49

“You bet!” exclaimed Bob.

“Of course,” Linda said, smiling.

“I’m raring to go,” Larry declared with a grin. “But I promised Dad I’d help him finish a saddle for delivery tomorrow.” Mr. Spencer had a leather goods and saddlery shop in Lockwood. Larry went on, “I’ll meet you the next day at the Ghost Town crossroads. I can take a short cut.”

“That’s okay,” Linda said, “but we might not get there until the third day out.”

“I’ll take my bedroll and some grub on the back of my saddle, and just camp until you arrive,” replied Larry good-naturedly.

“We want you to come along too, Kathy,” Bob said.

“Oh, I’d love to go, if I wouldn’t be in the way,” she replied with glowing eyes.

“You’ll catch on,” Bob said, grinning.

“And pep Bob up,” Larry teased.

Bob ignored the gibe and said, “Right now we have to get you and Kathy home. I’ll drive Kathy. You ride Gypsy and use her for the trip, Larry. Kathy’s dad can bring her and Patches over here at 5 A.M.”

50

The Hamiltons lived on the main road next to the Highway House, which they owned. It contained a fine restaurant, a souvenir store, and a shop where Mr. Hamilton, a lapidary, cut, polished, and sold semiprecious stones.

After Larry left and Bob had driven off with Kathy, Linda went out to check Chica d’Oro. She took Mary Sutton’s bright handkerchief off the filly’s mane and held it before her.

“Here is your present from Mary,” she said with a laugh.

Chica bobbed her nose against it, sniffing the strong, spicy fragrance. Linda tied the linen square in a corner of the pony’s stall, then returned to the house and went to her room.

A pile of mail lay on her bedside table. She began opening it. There were letters from friends in Mexico and Honolulu, advertisements for riding clothes and equipment, and an official-looking long green envelope.

It contained a cordial invitation to ride in the Cherry Blossom Fiesta the following weekend at San Carita, south of Los Angeles. The blossoms would be beautiful, Linda thought, and the pretty little Spanish town would be gaily decorated.

The young rider was excited. “What fun it would be!” she thought.

51

From talk Linda had heard around the horse shows, she knew that only the best entries were invited to participate in the big parade.

“I’m flattered!” she told herself.

There would also be a pit barbecue after the parade on Saturday. This would be followed by a big bonfire and sing that night in the walnut camping grove.

On Sunday a six-hour trail ride was arranged through the lush cattle-ranch country, with lunch at a cow camp beside the stream that wound its way along the trail.

Linda took the invitation to show her grandmother. She found Mrs. Mallory in the big beam-ceilinged living room. “Dona, isn’t this exciting?” she cried.

“What an interesting and fine time you could have,” her grandmother said. “But will you be back from the cattle drive in time to go?”

Linda shook her head soberly. “I’m afraid not.”

Bronco had entered the room in time to hear most of the talk.

“I’ll take you and Chica d’Oro down there, if you would rather go to the fiesta than on the Mojave Trail ride.”

“Oh, but I wouldn’t,” Linda declared without hesitation. “I’ve never been on a cattle drive.” Bronco smiled his appreciation.

52

A little later, right after Bob returned, a long distance call came for Linda from Los Angeles. It was from the owner of the little ceramic shop in Olvera Street.

The man spoke crisply and Linda thought she detected a note of anger in his voice.

“Without my ordering it, another one of those yellow clay horses—like your broken one—came in yesterday afternoon. I mailed it right out to you. But,” he drew in a hard breath, “late last night, after the shop was closed, someone broke in and smashed the heads off every one of my pottery horses. If you know who did it, you’d better tell quick!” he growled.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Linda gasped. “How dreadful! You must get in touch with Detective Carson at the police station at once, and tell him about it. He may know who did it.”

Immediately the shop owner hung up, perhaps to follow her instructions. Linda repeated the startling news to Bob, Dona, and Bronco.

“Why do you suppose all those beautiful little horses were smashed?” she asked, bewildered.

53

V

Midnight Intruder

“Such evil work sounds as if some vicious person had a grudge against the pottery-shop owner,” Dona said.

Bob frowned. “There may be even more to it than that.”

“Suppose the man who stole the head of my statuette found it didn’t contain what he was looking for,” Linda said thoughtfully. “He might have smashed every other clay horse trying to find it.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Bronco agreed.

Linda’s eyes widened with excitement. “The second yellow horse that’s being mailed here might hold what he’s after!”

“But you won’t be here to receive it,” Bob said.

“I shall send it to you at Scotsward Ranch,” Dona offered.

“Do that,” said Bronco, “just as soon as it arrives. Someone may have found out about the figurine being sent here and come after it!”

“One of that Sello gang, you mean?” said Linda with a little

shiver.

Dona looked at the girl a moment, then said firmly, “We have talked enough about this unpleasant mystery. You three must pack for your trip tomorrow. But first I want to tell Linda and Bob about some strange signs to watch for on the trail.”

“What kind of signs?” Linda asked curiously.

“Rock writings,” her grandmother replied. “Religious symbols of the Mojave Indian tribes which once inhabited the desert.”

“Picture writing!” exclaimed Linda. “How fascinating!”

“You will also see the three crosses of Cortez,” Dona continued. “There are two crosses the same size with a taller one between them. Where you see that sign, you will know that Hernando Cortez and his men passed that way four hundred years ago.”

Meanwhile Bronco had been thumbing through a shelf on historical magazines. Now he pulled one out. “Here’s what I was looking for. It’s a recent article on the disappearance of a valuable collection of Cortez relics owned by a well-known historian in Mexico City.”

Bob scanned the illustrations. “They’d be hard to dispose of,” he commented.

55

“Maybe the thief intends to demand money for the relics before he’ll return them,” Linda suggested.

“That’s a good guess,” said Bronco. “Your Mexican statuettes brought the article to my mind. I suppose you young folks know the story of how this Cortez, for the glory of Spain, landed in Mexico with his soldiers and burned, pillaged, and tortured the Indians until he conquered them and made the country a colony of Spain.”

“Yes,” said Linda. “And he took all their gold to use in buildings both there and in Spain.”

“Not all of it.” Bronco smiled. “As soon as the Indians caught on to the scheme, they began to hide their precious possessions.”

“Good for them!” Linda said vehemently. “I just can’t stand people who help themselves to others’ property!”

Dona smiled and gave her granddaughter an affectionate pat on the shoulders. “Keep your high ideals always,” she said in her low, musical voice.

The little group talked about the stolen relics for a few minutes, then Linda and Bob hurried away to get their packs and gear together. Linda brought out a little camera to put in her saddlebags, and Bob added a small transistor radio to his supplies.

56

Cactus Mac had laid out the sleeping bags to air, and was busy with the pack saddles and equipment. He raised a hand in greeting and went on with his work. His big buckskin, named Buck, was already in the barn corral. Bob and Linda went to the pasture to bring in Rocket and three pack horses.

In the kitchen Luisa was busy getting food ready for the trip. Groceries were piled on the table. When Bob came through with another load for his saddlebag, he grimaced at the stack of small cans of green beans and tomatoes. “Those again!” he cried out, and clutched his stomach as if he had dreadful indigestion.

“They are good for you!” Luisa retorted firmly. “Makes healthy!” Bob grinned and went out the door.

During the preparations Rango sat on his haunches close by the corral, bushy tail thumping and every nerve and muscle tensed with eagerness to go along. Only his brown eyes showed he was resigned to staying home.

“Hey, Rango!” Bob said suddenly. “Don’t look so hangdog. You’re going along!”

Rango observed Bob for a split moment of incredulity, and then leaped into the air in a wild flurry of yellowish-tan hair.

57

“What happened to him?” asked Cactus Mac.

“He just found out he can go along,” Linda replied with a laugh.

She had finished her work and now hurried over to Chica d’Oro’s private stall and large paddock. “Do you feel like starting out on the trail, baby?” she asked.

From across the paddock the palomino whinnied a greeting, did a coltish circle and buck at the pleasure of seeing Linda,

and then loped up to her.

Linda patted the filly's neck and scratched her gently behind the ears. "How about earning your supper tonight by learning how to bow? You must start some time."

Chica tossed her mane in readiness for whatever was coming. Her young owner went to the tackroom for a length of soft cotton rope and a handful of rolled oats, which she put in her pocket.

"Now we're ready," she said.

Linda tied the rope loosely around Chica's left front pastern. The horse nosed it curiously.

"You'll soon know what that's all about," Linda said with a laugh.

She took a handful of oats from her pocket and let the filly smell it. Just as Chica d'Oro reached for the oats, Linda moved her hand down a little, and then a little farther, before giving the horse the treat.

58

Linda took out more oats and this time moved her hand down and back between Chica's forelegs, at the same time gently lifting the horse's left foot with the cotton rope. This caused the pony to ease down on her knee. When she did, Linda gave her the oats.

"Good work, baby!" her young trainer said.

Chica d'Oro soon learned to move her head down and back.

Then Linda stopped, aware that too long a training session can do more harm than good. She knew it would take a lot of time and patience to teach the horse to bow on cue.

As Linda gave the filly her ration of evening hay, she thought, “I’ll stow the cotton rope in my saddlebag so I can work with Chica on the trip.”

Once having started to teach the horse a trick, it was not wise, she knew, to stop working until the animal had learned to perform perfectly.

Mindful that she would have to be up before dawn, Linda went to bed early. In the middle of the night the family was startled out of deep sleep by Rango’s fierce barking. Linda went to her window and in the white moonlight saw the dog leap at a man. The intruder broke loose, however, and sped away.

59

Linda quickly donned robe and slippers and joined Bronco and Bob, who had rushed outside. Mr. Mallory held a piece of dark-blue, coarse cloth that Rango had torn from the intruder’s clothes.

“Good boy,” praised Bob, patting him rewardingly. Rango thumped his massive tail and held his head as if balancing a halo.

“Who do you suppose that fellow was, and what did he want?” Linda asked, perplexed.

Bronco cleared his throat to disguise his concern. “Just a wanderer, probably,” he said. “Looking for a soft sleep in the

hay. Everyone to bed.” But he made a point of bringing the scrap of material into the house, saying he would turn it over to the sheriff.

With the first rays of the rising sun, Kathy’s father drove in with his daughter and Patches. Mr. Hamilton kissed Kathy good-bye and wished her a good trip. She waved until the car and trailer disappeared.

Then Kathy immediately went about saddling her horse. She fastened on the roomy, cavalry-type saddlebags, packed with her personal needs and canteen. Mr. Hamilton had laid her sleeping bag alongside the Craigs’, to be loaded onto a pack horse.

60

A few minutes later Linda, Bob, and Cactus Mac came hurrying out the kitchen door. They had not been able to get past Luisa until all had eaten a hearty breakfast.

“Hi, Kathy!” called Linda and Bob, and Mac said, “Mornin’, ma’am.”

Quickly they saddled up their own mounts and arranged the baggage on the pack horses. Cactus Mac inspected each diamond hitch on the packs, and found them perfect.

“One of these days I’m going to lose my job running this ranch to one of you young whippersnappers,” he drawled wryly.

“You never will,” protested Linda fondly.

Rango, who had expended his excitement the previous night,

stood by in important quietude.

“Come here, you, Rango,” called Cactus Mac. Instantly Rango trotted alertly over to the foreman. “Everybody does his job on this here trip,” Mac stated firmly. “Yours’ll be to guard the horses and gear. *Guard horses!* Understand?”

Rango’s eyes gleamed with intelligence and he gave a short, affirmative bark.

“Get your collar,” Linda ordered.

Rango darted into the barn, stood on his hind-legs, took his collar with the attached license tag off a nail with his teeth, and brought it out to her.

61

Linda put it on him. “Now you’re ready to go,” she told him. Rango happily licked her hand.

Soon the riders were mounted. Dona and Bronco waved and wished them luck. Bob raised his hand, called out, “Scotsward, ho!” and led off with Rango leaping along at his side, followed by Linda and Kathy. The three pack horses were on a line behind Buck, and brought up the rear.

After an hour’s riding the little group had left the green trees and square fields of the ranch country behind, and the desert unrolled far ahead like beige carpeting.

Cactus Mac, who knew his way about the Mojave with his eyes closed, pulled ahead now. He crossed the southeast strip of the sandy waste, and headed into a rugged gorge with towering rock walls.

“They call this here place Jawbone Canyon,” he called out. “It’ll lead direct to the old Mojave Trail between the Calico Mountains and the Mojave River.”

As they rode, Linda and Kathy noticed that the crooked, spiny-armed Joshua trees were in bloom as well as the small hedgehog cactus. Each short, prickly stalk wore a huge silky yellow blossom. 62

“Oh, here’s an odd beauty I’d like to get a closer look at!” Linda exclaimed. She came to a halt near a pale-green, fluffy-looking bush.

“Keep well back from that thar pest!” warned Cactus Mac. “It’s a teddy-bear cholla, one o’ the worst o’ the jumpers. They throw thar spines right into your flesh if you get too near.”

“You’ve changed my mind about getting closer,” Linda said with a grin.

Suddenly Kathy cried in alarm, “Ooh, I think the heat must be getting me! Those rocks are walking!”

Linda followed her gaze and asked, “Cactus Mac, what’s happening? It certainly *does* look as if those rocks are moving across the sand.”

The foreman and Bob had a good laugh. Then Cactus Mac drawled, “Those are just three old desert tortoises takin’ the week off to cross the road.”

“Okay, have your laugh. Call me a desert tenderfoot,” Linda

retorted.

At noon the riders stopped for a picnic lunch at the Chuckwalla well. Nearby Linda and Kathy discovered hard disks of earth ringed by rocks.

“What are these, Bob?” Kathy asked. “You seem to know all the answers.”

63

Bob confessed that he did not know and appealed to their guide.

“Those,” Cactus Mac explained, “are Indian house rings. Ancient Indian tepees stood thar.”

“Very clever way of making their houses stay in place,” Bob remarked.

A short time later the travelers were in the saddle again.

Late that afternoon they reached Cuddleback Canyon, where Cactus Mac called a halt for the night. Flash floods had washed out huge caverns.

“These are known as shelter caves,” he said. “We’ll be snug inside. Besides, the Cuddleback well is the last water hole for some distance.”

The horses were unsaddled, rubbed down, hobbled, grained, and then left to graze on runty desert floor growth, which they seemed to find palatable.

Bob built a fire. Linda and Kathy got out the food they needed

from one of the packs and cooked supper. Soon afterward they were all glad to crawl into their sleeping bags in the quiet, roomy cave.

Always a light sleeper, Linda suddenly awakened with the impression that she had heard the tinkling of a bell. Then, some distance away, she heard a sharp bark from Rango, followed by a soft whinnying of Chica d'Oro.

64

Hastily pulling on her boots, Linda wondered what had caused the palomino to shuffle off so far away from the other horses. She was glad Rango was doing his guard duty and had gone with her.

Outside Linda looked around anxiously. Then she heard Rango bark and, though the night was moonless, Linda thought she spotted Chica and the dog some distance away. They stood beside a pile of huge boulders beneath a bluff.

Linda ran to them. As she drew close, the astonished girl saw a dark figure behind a rock. Rango growled.

65

VI

The Name Is Vagabond

Linda stood silent, her heart pounding hard. Who was the person behind the rock? Should she demand that he come out?

Rango barked furiously, but to Linda's amazement, Chica d'Oro nickered softly and stepped toward the dark shadow beyond the boulder.

"Wait, baby!" Linda cautioned, and caught hold of her pony's mane.

She listened tensely, but no sound came from behind the rock. Rango continued to growl and bark. It seemed like ages before Bob and Cactus Mac came running up.

"What is it?" Bob asked. "What's the matter with Rango?"

"Something there," Linda whispered, pointing toward the boulder.

Cactus Mac shone his flashlight beam in that direction.

"Oh!" Linda cried in surprise. "Why, it's only a burro!"

Rango went yip-yipping around the rock.

“What’s the poor little thing doing ’way out here alone?” Linda wanted to know. She went to it and Chica d’Oro followed her. The palomino touched her nose gently to the burro’s and nickered.

“What’s wrong with the burro? Why is it hiding here?” Bob asked.

The little gray animal was pressing up against the boulder, holding its neck and jaw immobile across it.

“He’s wearin’ a bell,” Cactus Mac said, “and he’s pressin’ it against the rock to keep it from jinglin’ so he won’t be found.”

“A stray!” Bob exclaimed. “Do you suppose he ran off from a pack train?”

Cactus Mac was running his flashlight over the burro and now said, “Look thar, on his rump!”

The others bent their heads closer and saw the words *Follow Sign* and an outlined arrowhead in a fresh, raw brand.

“What a cruel thing to do!” exclaimed Linda.

“Looks as if this here little fellow was intended to be used as a messenger of some sort,” Cactus Mac remarked soberly.

“And he wants no part of it,” declared Bob.

“The poor burro’s eyes are full of hurt and reproach,” Linda noted.

“That’s a fact,” Cactus Mac agreed. “This here jack is feelin’ very mistreated. He’d drop where he stands from thirst and hunger rather’n let that thar bell jingle again, announcin’ his whereabouts to the person who branded him.”

“What kind of person would do such a thing?” Linda asked indignantly.

“Could be an old-timer of sorts,” replied Cactus Mac. “In the pioneer days this method o’ brandin’ some animal to bring help was occasionally used by a lone cowboy or prospector in trouble. I recall a story told around the ranches when I was a young fiddlefoot signin’ on for only a season o’ ridin’ at a time,” he reminisced.

“In the early days thar was a mighty good cowhand by the name o’ Buzz workin’ on a big ranch near the Owl Creek Mountains in Wyoming. One day he disappeared, and no one ever did see hide nor hair o’ him again. Then two years later a wild cow was flushed out o’ the brush with the scrawled brand on her hip: *Indians 5-17-1872 Buzz.*”

“How sad!” said Linda. “Do you suppose this is an SOS message?”

“Whatever it is,” said Bob, “we’d better try to figure this brand message out. Someone might need help.”

68

“First I’m going to get this little fellow out of his trouble,” said Linda, reaching for the buckle of the bell strap.

All this time Chica d’Oro had been standing with her neck across the burro’s.

“Sure looks as if Chica intends to claim this here burro for her own pet,” Cactus Mac remarked, grinning.

“She did find him,” said Linda. “Chica must have heard the bell when I did, and came out to find him. She probably sensed he was in trouble.”

Linda took the bell off the burro’s neck and held the clapper to keep it from tinkling. She turned to her pony. “Do you think you can persuade your little friend to trot back to the cave with us? Come on!” She walked off with Cactus Mac and Bob.

The palomino started to follow, then gently nudged the burro on the neck and nickered quietly. When Chica d’Oro started off again, the burro trotted close to the filly’s side.

“There’s an animal who recognizes a friend when he’s been found by one,” Bob said with a laugh.

Kathy stood at the entrance to the cave. “What happened?” she asked anxiously. Then noting the burro, she exclaimed, “Oh, I see! Something new has been added.”

69

“Looks like it,” Cactus Mac said. “If Chica d’Oro wants to keep the little fellow.”

“Whose is it? Where did it come from?” Kathy asked.

“He’s just a vagabond,” Bob told her.

“Vagabond,” Linda repeated. “Let’s name him that!”

“Linda!” Kathy exclaimed. “That Madame Sello, the palmist, predicted you’d meet a vagabond.”

Bob laughed. In a high, girlish-sounding voice he said, “Goodness me, I was looking for a man and all I get is a burro!” Kathy threw him a dark look.

Linda was gazing closely at the mark on the burro’s hip. “It’s an arrowhead,” she said thoughtfully, “but not like the one that the Sello gang uses.”

“You kids are moonstruck,” muttered Cactus Mac. “Right now I’m goin’ back to sleep.”

“We’d better go too,” said Linda. “But first I want to do something about that raw brand on Vagabond.”

She got a tube of insect-bite ointment from her first-aid kit, and applied a thick layer over the brand marks. Then she scooped up some of the loose, tannish-gray earth, just the color of the burro, and patted it on top of the ointment. It made the writing completely indistinguishable.

70

Bob brought Vagabond a bucket of water and a small pan of grain. After the burro had drunk thirstily and ravenously licked up the grain, he waved his long ears back and forth and brayed in high glee.

“I certainly hope that if anybody’s out hunting him, he didn’t hear that!” Kathy said with a laugh.

Linda led Chica d’Oro over to the other horses at the side of the cave. They were standing with locked joints, contentedly

snoozing. They roused at the return of the filly with the burro close at her side, but paid them little heed. They had all been on trail trips with pack burros, so Vagabond was no novelty to them.

Rango, now feeling that he had discharged his guard chore in good manner, curled up on a horse blanket beside the gear and went to sleep.

The next morning when the horses were given their grain, one of the pack animals nosed into Vagabond's ration. With a shrill whinny, Chica d'Oro butted the moocher away, and stood between it and Vagabond until the burro had eaten his last oat.

"I'll sure feel sorry for anyone who tries to mistreat that little guy from now on," Bob declared.

71

After a quick breakfast, Cactus Mac gave the order for the riders to mount.

"Remember to watch along the trail for that arrow sign," Linda said.

When they had been riding for a while, Bob came upon big mud disks with rims about a foot or two high. Here and there they were frosted with sparkling crystals.

"What are they?" Kathy asked.

"Salt saucers," Cactus Mac answered.

"The salt crystals look like hoarfrost!" Linda exclaimed. She

took out her little camera. “I want a picture of those.”

“There’s lots o’ funny sights in this here desert,” Cactus Mac told the others as they rode on. “Later you’ll be seein’ haystacks.”

“In the desert?” Kathy asked incredulously.

“Yes’m. Rows and rows o’ small eroded mounds o’ marsh mud. Back in 1880 the Chinese coolies what came here molded up the mud with shovels so the borax they were after would leach out.”

“Salt saucers and haystacks!” Kathy exclaimed with a laugh.

“But no arrowheads,” Linda reminded her.

They sat in the shade for a long noon hour against Pumpkin Butte, whose deep-orange soil explained its name. The slopes bristled with colorful, weird stone formations.

72

“I’ve heard of this place,” said Bob. “It’s a mecca for rockhounds, and the water trough is maintained by the county in a niche at the base of the butte.”

While the riders waited for cooler traveling, Linda brought out the cotton rope and gave Chica another lesson in bowing. Vagabond watched the beginning of this training with evident disfavor, not sure whether or not the horse was being mistreated.

Realizing that Chica d’Oro enjoyed it and was winning

Linda's praise, the burro stood spraddle-legged, watching intently. Then he started imitating the palomino, putting his head up and down. He finally ended by going down on both knees and falling over.

"Good try!" cried Linda.

Then, while everyone laughed, she gave Vagabond and Chica each a handful of treat.

"I can tell you one thing," Linda said, putting away the training rope. "If we do meet Vagabond's owner, we're going to have to buy the burro for Chica d'Oro."

Kathy giggled. "A sort of horse pen pal?" Then she curled up for a siesta.

73

Linda, Bob, and Cactus Mac climbed to the top of the butte to get a good view of their surroundings. Arid desert was all they could see.

"I hope there's a water hole ahead," Bob said worriedly.

"None out thar," drawled Rancho del Sol's foreman, "but we'll have water all right where we're beddin' down."

"Where will that be?" Bob asked.

"At old Hungry Homer's deserted ranch," replied Cactus Mac. "We'll head that way by skirtin' around those dunes to the right yonder."

Linda had been turning about, gazing down at the desert floor.

Suddenly she exclaimed, “Look at those rocks!”

The two men squinted in the direction Linda was pointing. Then Mac said, “They look like they been put thar in the shape of an arrowhead.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Linda excitedly. “Let’s have a closer look at them.”

The three descended the slope and walked out toward the formation of rocks.

“Everything’s always farther off in this here desert than it seems to be,” Cactus Mac grumbled as they plodded along.

When they reached the arrowhead formation, Bob led the way around it. The riders carefully checked for any clue to explain its presence there.

74

“On the ground, one wouldn’t notice the formation,” said Bob. “We’d have missed it if we hadn’t seen it from above.”

“That’s why I think it means something,” said Linda, who had been examining an area a short distance away. “Come over here!”

“Did you find a clue?” Bob asked.

“Hoofprints,” his sister replied. “In the direction the arrowhead is pointing.”

Bob gazed at them. “Three horses and a burro,” he concluded.

Eagerly the group followed the prints a short distance. Then the hoofmarks dipped into a rocky arroyo and disappeared.

“Maybe they belong to the riders who sent out Vagabond,” Bob suggested.

“It’s a possibility,” replied Cactus Mac. “The riders might have been rockhounds or hunters, and all three got hurt and had to send out their pack burro.”

“How fresh are these prints?” Linda asked, wondering whether she should explore further.

“They could be two or three days old,” Mac answered. “Guess we’d better be gettin’ back.”

When they reached Kathy, Linda told her about the discovery. “How amazing!” Kathy said. “But you didn’t find out whether those riders were good or bad people. Well, if they’re dangerous, I’m glad you didn’t find them!”

75

Rango was stretched out full length on a spot of damp sand beside the watering trough.

“Hey there, Rango!” exclaimed Cactus Mac. “Why weren’t you along, scouting with us on the hot desert? We may have needed your help.”

Rango cast a baleful eye at the foreman without moving a hair.

“You told him his job was to guard the horses, remember?” Linda reminded Mac with an impish smile.

The rancher grinned sheepishly. “That’s right. And trust that bone burier to remember it when he has to make his own choice o’ lyin’ in a cool spot o’ shade or paddin’ it out on the hot desert.”

They saddled up and rode off again around the primrose-sprinkled dunes. Ahead, as far as they could see, the ground was carpeted with lemon-yellow desert dandelions.

In the late afternoon they arrived at the vast forest of Joshua trees in the midst of which was Hungry Homer’s abandoned ranch. It consisted of a shack with the windows broken out and a tumble-down shed. A rusty plow stood to one side, and an old flat-bed wagon on the other.

76

Under a Joshua tree was a weathered board marker with dim printing on it that read: *Here lies Hungry Homer who never liked to work. He never got enough to eat.*

“Some epitaph!” Bob laughed.

There was a good well on the place with a pump handle and wooden bucket. The ropes on the bucket were fairly new, and Linda remarked about this.

“That’s ’cause the government takes care o’ this watering place for desert adventurers,” Mac explained.

The horses were attended to first, with Bob vigorously pumping water for them.

Linda stood looking at the spike-limbed Joshua trees with the clumps of creamy blooms at the ends. “These are the weirdest

trees I've ever seen," she remarked.

"This here is the only place in the world you'll see 'em," Cactus Mac told her. "They're native to the Mojave Desert."

"How did they get their name?" Linda asked.

"I know," put in Kathy. "It was given to them by the Mormons during their westward journey because it seemed to them that the branches pointed to the promised land."

77

"Of course," said Linda. "It was Joshua who led the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan."

Vagabond knew about the value of the Joshua trees. He was busy going from one to another, devouring the juicy clumps of blooms that he could reach.

Suddenly Bob whistled and called the others over to the tree where he was standing. "Here is another sign," he said, pointing to the ground. Little rocks had been arranged to form a small arrowhead. "And there's a footprint," he added. "The arrowhead is pointing in the same direction as the other one," Cactus Mac noted.

Linda said, "The footprint looks sort of slurred, as if the person's leg was dragging."

"Someone could be hurt all right," said Kathy.

"I certainly wish we could find whoever it is and help him," said Linda with concern.

“All we can do is keep watching for the signs,” Bob told her.

“No use worrying now,” declared Cactus Mac. “It’s time to swing the skillet!”

A fire was built and supper prepared. After the meal was over, the young people sat by the fire, singing and watching the moon rise over the Joshua trees.

78

“Let’s take a stroll,” Linda suggested. As the three young people wandered off a little way, they came to a rocky grotto and stepped inside.

“I’ve found another symbol!” Kathy called out excitedly, pointing to the moonlighted marking.

79

VII

Crash on Stage

The Craigs whirled to see the symbol Kathy had discovered. Carved in the rock near the entrance to the grotto was the sign of Hernando Cortez—the three crosses.

“To think,” Kathy said, “that Cortez himself may have stood on this very spot! It gives me the shivers.”

“I wonder,” said Linda, “if he was hiding here with his soldiers. At that time California was part of Mexico.”

“If it wasn’t Cortez, I’ll bet it was one of his generals,” Bob added. On the way back to the cabin, he said, “I suppose Larry is sacked down over in Ghost Town.”

Kathy shuddered. “I surely wouldn’t want to be there all alone.”

“He’ll probably have a ball with the ghosts,” Bob laughed.

In a little while the travelers inched into their sleeping bags. Chica d’Oro and Vagabond stood so close together as they slept that in the shadows they appeared as one figure.

In the morning Linda took a couple of snapshots of the grotto.

Then as soon as they were on the trail again, she asked Cactus Mac, “About what time should we reach Ghost Town?”

“Midmorning, I’d say.”

A couple of hours later the foreman led the procession up a small butte.

“What’s the reason for this?” Bob asked.

“Never ride into an unlikely place without lookin’ it over first, son,” Cactus Mac replied soberly. He dismounted and took out binoculars from one of his saddlebags.

Linda and the others went for theirs. For a few minutes everyone silently strained eyes at the few ramshackle remains of buildings far in the hazy distance.

Finally Linda said, “It gives me a funny feeling to think that a lot of people once lived in Ghost Town, and now nobody does.”

“Ten thousand of ’em,” said Cactus Mac. “But that’s the way it goes with a gold strike. Folks flock where ’tis and leave when the veins run out. Then thar’s no other way left to make a livin’ so the town dies. Yes’m, at one time a lot o’ gay elegance was takin’ place over thar.”

Kathy was moving her glasses about. “I don’t see any sign of Larry,” she said.

81

“He’s likely shaded up beside a building,” Cactus Mac told her.

Suddenly Linda exclaimed, “Look to the far side of town!”

As they gazed, two riders left the town and began to climb the hill on the far side.

“Maybe someone does live there now,” said Kathy.

“I doubt it,” Bob said. “Probably they’re just passers-through like us.”

In a moment the two men had disappeared in a northeasterly direction, and Cactus Mac said, “Let’s get along!”

It was almost two hours before the group arrived in the sandy main street of Ghost Town.

“It’s deserted, all right,” said Kathy in awe. They called Larry’s name, but there was no answer.

“He isn’t here,” stated Linda flatly. “Perhaps he was one of the two we saw riding out.”

“But who was with him?” Kathy asked.

“Could have been a companion from home who had just come this far with Larry for the ride,” Bob said. “Maybe he got tired of waiting.”

“Larry would have waited,” Linda declared, “unless—unless he had been forced to ride out.”

“Now, Sis, don’t worry about him,” Bob said. “Larry can take care of himself.” But Linda detected concern in her

brother's tone.

“We'll tie our horses back o' this buildin' in that wide spot o' shade,” Cactus Mac told the others, “and scout around on foot. But be careful about goin' inside the buildin's. They could tumble down on you. Besides, they'll be full o' rats' nests.”

Rango was given a pan of water. Then he stretched out in the shade by the horses.

The group started walking through the dilapidated town to see what they could find.

At the end of Main Street, Bob stopped. “Here are the tracks of the two riders,” he said.

Cactus Mac scrutinized them carefully. “I don't believe any o' those belong to Gypsy, the horse you lent Larry,” he concluded. “Her hoofs are slightly smaller.”

“Then where is Larry?” persisted Linda.

“Something could have hindered him from coming,” Bob replied.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Linda mumbled, disappointed.

The four ambled about the ruins until they came to the far end of town.

“Here are a lot of tracks together!” exclaimed Linda.

There were plain prints of three horses leaving town toward the west. Beside them were tracks of only two of the same horses returning. Cactus Mac declared they were the same animals which had recently gone northeast.

“That third rider!” Linda exclaimed. “Could he have been Larry? Did he meet with foul play?”

“What do you think, Cactus?” asked Bob. “Could one of those three horses have been Gypsy?”

Cactus Mac shook his head. “Nope, not Gypsy,” he declared.

“You aren’t saying that just to make me feel better, are you?” Linda asked tensely.

“Honey,” drawled Cactus Mac, “if one o’ those sets o’ tracks belonged to Gypsy, you think I’d be standin’ here jawin’? I’d be in the saddle and after her!” Linda smiled her thanks.

Close to the hoofprints were the ashes of a cook fire. Toeing around it, Linda uncovered a crumpled piece of paper that had not burned.

She smoothed it out, then announced excitedly, “I’ve found something!”

The others crowded around to look at a crude map of the ghost-town area.

“And here’s an arrowhead like the brand on the burro and the rock formations!” Linda cried. “They point northeast!”

“That’s the way the two riders we saw were going,” Kathy said.

“The state highway is about twenty miles in that direction,” Cactus Mac remarked.

“Somebody could have been waiting there for those two riders with a horse trailer,” Linda suggested.

“The main question,” said Kathy, “is, where’s Larry?”

“Might be that he hasn’t got here yet,” Cactus Mac suggested.

“We’ll leave him a note if he’s not here by the time we move on,” Bob said.

“I’ll write it on an old board with a black grease pencil I have in my sketching kit,” said Linda. “Then weather or animals can’t destroy it.”

“I’d like to poke around the inside of these old buildings some before we go,” Bob said. “How about you, Cactus?”

“I’ll go along on that,” said the foreman. “But I suggest the young ladies wait here at the Royal Hotel.” He grinned and pointed across the street to the tottering structure with its weathered, peeling sign.

When the men had gone off, Linda said to Kathy, “I can’t just sit here. I think I’ll bring Chica d’Oro over to practice her bow. Do you think you could keep Vagabond back with the other horses? He distracts Chica too much.”

“I’ll tie up Vagabond,” Kathy replied, “and give him a good currying down. He sure needs one and it will make him feel better.”

Chica d’Oro, working alone with Linda, went through her bowing routine much more smoothly than before.

“We’re ready now for the next step, baby,” Linda told her pony as she mounted.

But Chica was hesitant to go down on one knee with Linda on her back. She would, however, pick up her foot on cue.

“You’re doing beautifully,” Linda praised her, “but it’s going to take a lot of practice.”

As the rider dismounted, Kathy rejoined her. “I left Vagabond tied up, feasting on a weed,” she said. “Ooo, this is a spooky place to be alone in.”

The girls sat together on one of the steps of the Royal Hotel, wondering what could have happened to Larry. They came up with no new guesses. Before long, Cactus Mac and Bob returned.

“We’d better ride on till evening,” said the foreman.
“Thar’s a stock-waterin’ tank a few miles farther along.
We can sack thar.”

86

With Linda leading Chica, they walked back to the building where the horses and Rango had been left.

“Where’s Vagabond?” asked Bob, looking around.

“Tied over there,” answered Kathy, then cried, “Oh, my goodness, he *was* tied over there!”

Now only a short piece of rope greeted their eyes.

Linda examined the end of it. “The little rascal chewed himself free,” she said. “I’ll bet he wanted to find Chica d’Oro.”

“Sure, that’s it,” said Bob. “Come on, let’s round him up.” But the search revealed no Vagabond.

It was Linda who noted the door of the opera house swinging half open on one hinge. “That wasn’t open when we came here,” she declared.

The searchers peered into the tumble-down theater. At the end, on the stage, stood Vagabond.

At sight of Linda and the others, the burro gave a series of high-pitched brays. The onlookers laughed.

“What a fancy tenor!” Kathy exclaimed.

Then Vagabond added to his act by giving a couple of gay bucks, a jarring routine that the rickety old stage could not bear. With a splintering crash the burro disappeared from sight!

Kathy gave a horrified scream and started to rush in, but Bob held her back. “Step very easy, everyone,” he admonished, “or we’re likely to bring this whole building down on us.”

“I’m goin’ for ropes,” said Cactus Mac, turning back to the gear lot.

The others gingerly made their way to the stage and carefully peered into the black chasm beneath. They were just able to see Vagabond trying to shake himself free from some crossed boards.

“Easy, little fellow,” Linda called down. “We’ll get you out in a minute.”

Vagabond gave a weak “yawp” in response.

“He sounds more scared than hurt,” Bob commented.

“Oh, I hope so,” said Linda.

When Cactus Mac returned, he had ropes, a horse blanket, and his flashlight. “You get down into this here hole with me,” he said to Bob.

He handed the flashlight to Linda to keep a beam on them, and dropped his trappings below. Then he and Bob lowered themselves into the opening. They made a sling of the blanket, then pulled the ropes underneath Vagabond and threw the rope ends up to the girls.

88

Cactus Mac called to them, “Get down in front o’ the stage and tighten up as hard on the ropes as you can when we lift.”

Bob and the foreman raised Vagabond up and the girls pulled back on the ropes until the little burro was rolled on his side topstage. Linda and Kathy hauled him as carefully as possible

to the edge of the platform. Bob and Cactus Mac helped to lift him down to the floor.

“Now you’re all right,” Linda told him soothingly, although she noticed that both of Vagabond’s front legs were badly skinned.

At Cactus Mac’s shouted instructions, Linda threw back a rope. Holding the end of it, both girls braced themselves against the stage as first Bob, then Cactus Mac clambered up out of the hole.

“Hm,” said Cactus Mac, seeing the burro’s injuries. “By the time we get this here nuisance doctored up, it’ll be too late to hit the trail today. We may as well plan on makin’ camp in Ghost Town for the night.”

“While there’s still some daylight,” said Bob, “I’d like to follow the tracks of those three riders who left town at the far end. Maybe we can discover where they were headed.”

89

“I’m for that,” Cactus Mac agreed.

“I’ll take care of Vagabond,” Kathy offered. “I’m the best bandager-upper ever graduated from three different first-aid classes.”

“All right,” said Linda. “While you’re doctoring him, I’ll put a few Rancho del Sol brand marks around town for Larry’s benefit. In case he should ride in after we’ve left, he’ll know we’ve been here and follow us. Then I’ll bring Chica around in front of the opera house for another bowing lesson.”

Linda hurried away to get the filly and also the black grease pencil from her sketching kit. She ground-hitched Chica d'Oro with her tie rope at the Royal Hotel, and went on to sketch a half-dozen sun brands in noticeable spots about town.

She had just returned to the hotel porch when a couple of riders came down the street from the northeast. One of the horses was limping badly.

They stopped in surprise before Linda. The men were in dusty clothes and had a day's stubble on their faces.

"Look who's here!" exclaimed one raspily. "A doll!"

Linda's spine tingled with apprehension.

"Say, girl, did you see a lone rider with a burro around these parts?" asked the other.

90

"No, I haven't," she replied, hoping desperately that Vagabond would not choose this moment in which to bray.

"Now there's a nice piece of horseflesh," remarked the other man, running gleaming eyes over Chica d'Oro.

"Looks sound as a dollar," said his companion.

"And me with a lame horse." His friend laughed. "I'll just make a switch." He started to dismount.

"Oh no you won't!" Linda cried.

She raced to Chica d'Oro. Snatching up the loose tie rope,

Linda leaped on the filly's back and rode away furiously.

VIII

Landslide!

Glancing back, Linda saw the two riders in hot pursuit as she raced out of town. The lame horse was no threat, but the other one was gaining on her!

Linda strained her eyes for sight of Cactus Mac and Bob, but did not see them, and she was riding too fast to pick up their trail.

Suddenly, as Linda glanced back rapidly, she saw that the man on the fast horse had a lariat in his hand. He was going to try to rope her!

Linda urged the palomino toward a rugged rise of mammoth boulders. The man sent the loop snaking out and Linda veered sharply to the side. The rope missed her.

As her pursuer gathered in his rope, she gained a little distance and turned left around the boulders. It was fast growing dark, but the fleeing girl was able to see an arroyo ahead. Quickly she put Chica down the steep bank on her rump and slipped off her.

The men, believing that she had continued round the

boulder hump, went on that way. Linda pressed close against the bank of the gully. Then she heard the ruffians circling back. They stopped not far from her.

One said, “No use trying to find the good horse in these rocks tonight. That gal slipped through our fingers.”

The raspy voice of the other barked, “Bad luck! I’m likely to be put afoot any minute with this horse. And if we don’t catch that guy soon, the boss’ll make trouble.” Then the men rode off.

Linda sighed in relief and asked herself, “Who’s the person they’re trying to catch? Could it be Larry? But why would they be after him?”

She mounted Chica d’Oro again and the filly scrambled up the embankment. Not far off Linda recognized Bob and Cactus Mac returning on Rocket and Buck. She hurried to join them.

“What brought you out here alone in the dark?” Bob asked with sharp concern.

She told them what had happened.

“Horse thieves!” growled Cactus Mac. “I’d like to get my hands on ’em!”

“They sound like a couple of pretty rough characters,” said Bob. “I hope Kathy is all right.”

They found her seated by a campfire with Rango on his

haunches beside her. A pot of vegetable soup was heating.

“Linda Craig, where have you been?” she demanded. “I’ve been so worried.”

“I didn’t leave you on purpose,” her chum said. “Wait until you hear about my adventure.” Kathy listened in amazement.

Bob asked Kathy with a twinkle in his eye, “Were you scared, being here alone?”

Kathy gave a little laugh. “I wasn’t a bit scared with Rango beside me.” She put one arm affectionately around the huge dog. “He’s my protector.”

As soon as the horses had been rubbed down and fed, Linda and her friends had their own supper of soup, cheese, crackers, and canned pineapple. As usual, Bob turned on his transistor radio for a bit of outside news and a couple of good tunes. Then the tired travelers tucked themselves into their sleeping bags.

Before the group left in the morning, Linda wrote a message with her grease pencil on the Royal Hotel. Under the sun brand she wrote, Larry: On to Scotsward. Follow del Sol riders.

“I hope he shows up soon,” Linda murmured.

A couple of hours later she and the others rode through Yucca Pass into a canyon of ancient cliff dwellings. They stopped to stare up at the even lines of holes in the canyon side which had been the homes of Indians long before.

“My goodness!” exclaimed Kathy. “It sure would be bad if you took too big a step out of your front door!”

“It was too bad for any o’ their enemies who got close,” said Cactus Mac. “The cliff dwellers routed ’em good and proper by throwin’ down rocks and spears onto ’em.”

“I’d like to look into a few of those cave homes,” said Linda. “We might pick up some relics for keepsakes.”

“How do we get up there without wings?” Kathy asked.

“Off to the side yonder thar’s a steep, narrow path,” Cactus Mac informed her. He grinned. “You climb by diggin’ in with your toes.”

“Let’s try it!” Linda urged.

They tethered the horses to mesquite bushes and began the slippery ascent. Linda and Kathy caught hold of the chaparral growing at the side for support, but Bob, followed by Cactus Mac, attempted the toe-digging method.

Halfway to the top, Bob shoved his toe under a ridge and pulled up a taut, buried rope. Instantly he saw that it was fastened to a large boulder high above them. He had loosened the rock, which came rumbling down at terrific speed.

95

“Look out!” Bob yelled, as a landslide of loose earth and boulders followed.

It was too late! The climbers were carried along, sliding on their heels. There were a few moments of fright before they

landed at the bottom, fortunately with only slight bruises.

The noise of tumbling earth and rocks had thrown the horses into a panic. With frightened whinnies they had snapped the brittle mesquite branches and bolted from the avalanche. Rango, barking, leaped after them and caught hold of Buck's dragging reins, bringing him to a halt.

Linda, Bob, and Cactus Mac ran after the other horses and whistled. At the familiar sound the animals slowed, turned, and trotted back. Vagabond, next to Chica d'Oro, contributed a few weak brays. Cactus Mac took Buck's reins from Rango's mouth and patted the dog warmly.

Suddenly Bob exclaimed, "Where's Kathy?" She was nowhere in sight.

For an instant the others stared in horrified shock at the great pile of earth and stones that had fallen. They threw their horses' reins down in a ground hitch and ran back to the slide. On the way Linda called to the dog. "Rango, find Kathy! Get Kathy!"

96

Rango began sniffing around, while the others dug frantically in the loose earth with sticks and hands. The rubble caved in as fast as they scooped it out.

Suddenly the dog gave a series of small yelps and pawed rapidly in the earth. Linda, Bob, and Cactus Mac ran to his aid and soon uncovered the missing girl.

"Kathy, Kathy!" Linda gasped, wiping the dust gently from her friend's face with a handkerchief.

Kathy's eyes opened. She blinked and then sat up, asking shakily, "What happened to us?"

"Not to us," Bob replied. "Just you, Kathy. You got caught under the landslide."

"Rango found you," said Linda.

The shepherd dog waved his tail and licked Kathy's face. This brought the girl out of her dazed state. She laughed. "Hey, cut it out! Thanks for finding me, Rango. But you don't have to keep on kissing me."

Linda pulled Rango back. "Can you stand up?" Bob asked Kathy, as he helped the girl to her feet.

"I'm all right," she assured him. Then she rubbed the back of her head. "A real goose egg! I guess my head must have hit a rock."

97

Bob frowned. "Someone set that devilish trap! All of us might have been buried or badly injured."

"Maybe the person's living up in those caves," Linda suggested, "and doesn't want visitors."

"And maybe not," said Cactus Mac. "That trap might have been set years ago. The rope looked old."

"Let's scout around up there anyway," Linda proposed.

The two men were willing, but Kathy said, "Not me. Rango and I will stay here with the horses in the shade of that brush."

As the others clambered back up the cliff, they found that the landslide had provided them with steppingstones.

Halfway up, Linda stopped the men, saying in a low voice, “Look at that end cave. There are a couple of empty food cans outside the entrance.”

“Hm!” Cactus Mac muttered. “I’ll lead the way. Can’t take a chance on your bein’ hurt.”

They climbed to a ledge which ran in front of the openings. Cautiously, and in single file, the searchers made their way along it to the end cave. They gazed inside. To their astonishment they beheld a shaggy-haired old man in ragged clothing. He stood trembling.

98

“Go ’way!” he said raucously. “Most folks get scared and go ’way,” the recluse went on. “What d’you want with Johnny Lee? I got nothing. I got no food till I go out and find me somethin’.”

Linda and the men did not reply right away. Any anger they had felt against a malicious character began to ebb at the sight of the emaciated old fellow.

But finally Bob said, “You could have killed us with that rope device of yours.”

“Not kill. Just scare,” insisted the hermit. “It keeps away the rockhounds who keep comin’ around these days pokin’ holes in everythin’. And the others too.”

“What others?” Linda asked quickly.

“Aw, there was a fellow here past Sunday,” the hermit told her. “He was lookin’ in the old rock grindin’ holes where the squaws made flour out of their corn.”

“Was he searching for a relic or did he have something he was trying to hide?” Bob asked.

“Can’t say,” replied the old man. “He sneaked up here without settin’ off the rockslide, but I made sure to start one when he went down. That scared him off for good. Hurt him too. He went limpin’ off to his horse and pack burro. Yep, he had a pack burro with him—looked just like yours.” The recluse chuckled slyly. “I peeked down at you before.”

99

The three exchanged significant glances.

Then Johnny Lee’s expression became truculent. He asked, “What do you want here?”

“We were curious to see what these caves look like inside,” Linda replied kindly, “and thought maybe we could pick up a relic or two.”

“Ain’t nothin’ in ’em,” said the hermit glumly. “You git, and let me be in peace.”

“Sure,” Bob said. “We’ll leave. But first could you tell us which direction the man with the burro took?”

“He headed for Black Canyon,” answered Johnny Lee readily enough, eager to get rid of his unwelcome guests.

“That’s on our way,” Linda thought.

The hermit went on, “The Black Canyon walls is covered with old Injun pictures and writin’s. Mebbe you’ll find relics there.”

“I’m glad to know that,” Linda said with a smile, and added gently, “We’ll leave you some food down below.”

The man’s toothless jaw dropped open in unbelieving surprise and his eyes grew moist. The three thanked him for the information and began the difficult descent.

100

As soon as they reached the canyon floor, Linda said, “We must find that man who came with the burro. He may be seriously injured.”

“Vagabond probably belongs to him,” Bob surmised.

“Might be he’s the one who sent this here burro for help,” Cactus Mac offered.

While Bob told Kathy what had happened, Linda made up a pack of bacon, crackers, beans, and tomatoes and left it in the shade of the mesquite.

Soon the riders were on the trail again and heading for Black Canyon, hoping to locate the mysterious man with the burro. A sandy plain stretched ahead. Presently Bob and the girls exclaimed in amazement at the sight before them. In the distance a white, tile-roofed mansion loomed imposingly, with green fields all about it and a sparkling lake in front.

“Whose magnificent estate is that?” Linda asked in awe.

Cactus Mac's eyes twinkled. "Sorry, friends. That thar estate just ain't thar. It's only a reflection."

"A mirage!" Linda exclaimed.

"I never saw anything look so real!" Kathy declared.

101

Suddenly Rocket bolted headlong toward it. Had he seen the mirage too and, being meadow-raised, had had enough of desert-floor dry fodder?

Bob pulled back on the reins to hold in his mount, but realized immediately that it was no use. Rocket had taken the bit in his teeth and was intent on what lay ahead.

"He'll run himself to death!" Bob thought desperately. "I must stop him!"

102

IX

The Desert Figure

As Rocket tore across the desert toward the mirage, Bob grimly noted the heavy growth of rabbit brush underfoot. If the horse tripped on it, he could crash down with Bob under him.

“There’s no way out,” he thought. “I’ll have to stick with him!”

Suddenly a big jack rabbit leaped from behind a bush directly in front of Rocket, who shied sharply to the side. Instantly Bob took advantage of the horse’s fright to yank the bit back into the bay’s mouth. He pivoted Rocket, then brought him to a standstill. The horse was lathered and quivering, and his eyes were wild.

Bob dismounted and said evenly, “It’s okay, Rocket. I don’t blame you. Those mirages are mighty deceiving. But from now on you let the boss guide you to green pastures.”

His calm voice and manner settled the horse. Although Rocket still breathed heavily, he stopped quivering and stood spent with his head dropped.

Bob broke off a piece of brush and scraped away some of the lather. Then he mounted and returned to the others at a slow walk.

“How did you ever get him stopped?” Linda asked, her face strained.

“One spry jack rabbit,” Bob told his sister with a grin.

“And one rider who knows how to handle a horse,” declared Kathy stanchly.

Cactus Mac sat back with a pleased expression on his face and nodded. “Fine control, Bob.”

They rode on and at last entered the avenue of volcanic rock known as Black Canyon. There was no sign of anyone at the spot.

The visitors gazed at the jumbled black stones lining the cliff walls and garnished with prehistoric Indian writings and picture carvings.

“This is fantastic!” Linda exclaimed.

The riders dismounted and examined the engraved sketches of turtles, snakes, and other animals, as well as human figures. Also depicted were the sun, the moon, and ancient weapons. The writings were of many designs.

“These are all ceremonial symbols,” Kathy informed them. She had picked up some archaeological knowledge from assisting her father in his lapidary business.

“Think of the talent and labor it took to carve these figures,” said Linda. “Why would such an able race of people die out?”

“Wal now,” drawled Cactus Mac, “the Survey Association of California has been workin’ for years to unravel that thar riddle.”

“I’m going to sketch some of these symbols,” Linda declared. She leaned close to the rocks to look at the carvings, moving her hand across one.

Suddenly Bob exclaimed, “Watch out, Linda!” and gave her a push. Then he cried in pain, and snatched back his own hand.

Kathy gave a little shriek. “A scorpion!”

They all saw the straw-colored, crablike creature scuttle away. The narrow, barbed tail was jointed, and the scorpion had flipped it over its back with whiplike action to inflict a painful sting on the side of Bob’s hand.

Cactus Mac said tersely, “It’s not the deadly species. That sort has a longer, narrower stinger and two black stripes down its back.”

“I’ll bet your hand hurts just the same, Bob,” said Linda, and quickly brought out the first-aid kit. Cactus Mac took it from her, saying, “Make a pot of strong coffee for your brother.”

Kathy hurried off to build a little fire of twigs in a small circle of rocks in the shade provided by the canyon wall, and Linda put on the coffee-pot.

Cactus Mac got Bob settled. Then he took the small surgical scalpel from the kit and made a crosscut on the swelling, inflamed spot. He let the wound bleed for a few moments, swabbed off the blood, and poured ammonia into the opening.

Bob jumped. “Your cure is worse than the sting!” he declared.

Cactus Mac only nodded and stuck a large bandage over the discolored spot. When the coffee was ready, Linda brought the pot to Bob with a cup.

“Drink as much of that stimulant fast as you can,” Cactus Mac ordered. To the girls he said, “We’d best stay around for a day, so Bob can keep kind o’ quiet out o’ the sun. Lucky thar’s water here.”

They had all noted the well just inside the entrance to the canyon. On it was a bronze plate stating that the well had been donated by the Sage Archaeological Society.

“What about the scorpions?” Kathy asked uncertainly.

“Just watch out for ’em,” the foreman cautioned.

“They’re shy little critters and hide away in the crevices of the rocks in the daytime. They come out at night. But they won’t bother *you* if you don’t bother *them*. Linda and Bob must have upset that thar little fellow in his hid-eout.”

106

“How about our having lunch now, even if it is early?” Linda asked. “Then we’ll have a long afternoon to poke around the canyon.”

Cactus Mac grinned. “The excitement’s made me hungry. I’ll

fix up the horses over by the well while you gals rassel up a bite of chow.”

Kathy made sandwiches of canned lunch meat and pumpernickel bread, well wrapped in foil to keep fresh. Linda opened cans. “Same old tomatoes,” she told Bob cheerily, “but I’m fixing them this time with sugar and vinegar.”

With a wry grin Bob turned on his radio, and the girls hummed along with the musical numbers being played as they prepared lunch. Suddenly the program was interrupted by a news commentator.

“Word had just been received,” he announced, “that a girl has been kidnaped from Rancho del Sol in the San Quinto Valley. She is Mary Sutton.”

“Oh my goodness!” Linda exclaimed, as everyone froze and listened.

The commentator continued, “The young woman was calling at the ranch and was standing by the corral. Mrs. Rosalinda Mallory, the owner, was just coming from the house, when a man and woman boldly entered the ranch, pulled the young girl into their car, and drove away with her.

107

“Mary Sutton was an acquaintance of the Mallorys’ absent granddaughter, Linda Craig. The two girls look very much alike. The sheriff believes that it was Linda the couple intended to kidnap.”

“He’s right,” Linda said. “It must be the Sello gang.” Her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, poor Mary!”

“Take it easy, Sis,” Bob admonished. “The gang must know by now that they have the wrong girl. They’ve probably let her go.”

“I hope so!” Linda exclaimed. “Keep the radio turned on so we’ll know what’s happening.”

“But if they have released her,” Kathy added in a worried voice, “they’ll come after Linda again.”

The four sat listening to the music and waiting for further news. They ate without enthusiasm. After a while Bob lay back and fell asleep.

“Best thing for him,” remarked Cactus Mac. “That thar scorpion poison can make a man mighty sick.” The foreman got to his feet. “Think I’ll take a stroll up the canyon. I always like to know the lay o’ the land ’fore I settle down in a place for the night.”

108

As he disappeared around the bend, Linda rose and spoke softly to Kathy. “I’m going to climb up to the top of the canyon wall to see if there’s any sign of Larry. Do you want to come?”

Kathy nodded assent. The two girls quietly stepped away, got their binoculars and began the climb. When they reached the top of the cliff, both of them put the glasses to their eyes and scanned the desert.

“Somebody’s out there leading a horse!” Linda exclaimed.

They gazed hard at the slow-moving figure in the distance.

“He looks like Larry,” Kathy said excitedly.

“He does,” Linda agreed, “and I think he’s in trouble.”

As they peered anxiously the boy stumbled, fell and lay motionless.

“Come on!” Linda exclaimed. “We must go after him!”

Quickly the girls descended to the canyon. Bob was still asleep. Linda cast an anxious look at her brother’s flushed face and decided not to wake him. Swiftly and quietly she and Kathy saddled up and rode out. 109

They headed straight for the person who had fallen in the desert. When they reached the unconscious figure, Linda cried, “It is Larry!”

The girls dismounted and knelt beside him. While Linda held up his head and put her canteen to his lips, Kathy wet her handkerchief and bathed his face. After a few minutes he revived, and his rescuers helped him sit up.

“Don’t try to talk,” Linda said.

“I’m okay now,” he replied weakly, and insisted upon struggling to his feet.

Together Linda and Kathy aided him to mount Chica d’Oro. Then Linda swung into the saddle in front of him and they returned to camp, with Kathy leading Gypsy. As they rode in, Cactus Mac came back from his walk and Bob awoke.

“Larry!” they both cried, and Bob added with a grin, “You an invalid too?”

Kathy brought water from the well for him and Gypsy, while Linda quickly made him some lunch. While he ate, Larry told them his story.

“Gypsy caught a front shoe in a buried root and we had a bad fall. The top was loose on my canteen, I guess, because all the water spilled out. Then I saw that Gypsy had pulled off a chunk of hoof wall along with the shoe, so I didn’t think I should ride her.” He sighed. “It was a pretty long walk without water.” 110

“Lucky thing the girls spotted you,” Bob said soberly. “I certainly was in no shape to help.” He told Larry about the scorpion bite.

“Bad luck,” said Larry, shaking his head. Suddenly he noticed Vagabond. “Where did you get the burro?” he asked in surprise.

“That’s Chica’s pal.” Kathy giggled, and related the finding of the little animal and the mystery of the arrows.

Meanwhile Cactus Mac had been examining Gypsy’s hoof. “Not too bad,” he declared. “The break can be filled with a little wood dough. I’ll put a new shoe on cold and she’ll be ready to go.”

“That’s good news,” Larry said in relief.

“But we have some bad news,” Linda announced seriously.

She told him about the kidnaping at Rancho del Sol.

When she had finished, Larry nodded and said, “You’re the one they were after, I’m sure. It’s because of that yellow clay horse from Olvera Street. Somebody wants it and will stop at nothing to get it.”

“You sound positive,” said Linda.

“Let me tell you why,” Larry replied. “As soon as the package arrived at the ranch, your grandmother took it into town to mail to you at Scotsward. On the way she noticed a dark sedan following her. When Mrs. Mallory reached the post office, a woman entered right after her, bumped against her, and tried to snatch the package away.”

111

“The postmaster saw what was happening and dashed out to help your grandmother. The woman ran out, got in the car, and drove away. Later the mailman told your grandmother the same sedan had followed him out to Old Sol at the time he delivered the package.”

“Did Dona mail it?” Linda asked.

“Yes,” said Larry. “It’s on the way to Scotsward now.”

“There certainly must be something of great value in that statuette,” remarked Bob.

“Diamonds, maybe,” suggested Kathy, “being smuggled in from Mexico.”

“Did the woman see where the parcel was addressed?” Linda

asked with a worried frown.

“Mrs. Mallory said that she could have,” Larry replied soberly.

“Then we must hurry on to Scotsward right away,” declared Bob, “and pick up the parcel before someone else does.”

“Oh, no!” protested Linda. “We can’t ride until you feel better.”

112

“I’m all right now,” Bob replied. “The pain has nearly gone out of my arm.”

“Package or no package,” declared Cactus Mac sternly, “you don’t ride till dawn tomorrow.” That ended the argument.

Linda turned to Larry. “We had about given you up. Did you get a late start?”

“Dad had some extra harness-repair work come in, so I stayed to help him,” Larry explained. “I was too late to meet you at Ghost Town, of course, but I read your signs and the note. You know,” he continued thoughtfully, “I saw some odd tracks on the way here. They belonged to a burro and a horse with a broken shoe. After a while, the burro’s prints went off in another direction, and the horse’s continued straight ahead. Maybe that burro was Vagabond!”

“Very likely,” Cactus Mac agreed.

Linda was thinking hard. “The horse with the broken shoe could belong to the man who was hurt by the rockslide,” she

said.

Seeing Larry's questioning look, she told him of their adventure at the cliff dwellings.

"Wow!" he said. "You had a ball."

As the afternoon wore on into evening, the campers listened to the hourly news bulletins. They reported no contact had been made with the abductors of Mary Sutton. By the time the Craigs and their friends crawled into the sleeping bags, there still was no word. 113

"Then they haven't let her go," Linda said, deeply worried.

"They will," Bob insisted.

At dawn the group listened again as they ate breakfast. Still no word. When the riders started off, Linda rode some distance ahead. She veered from one side of the canyon to the other, observing the strange petroglyphs on the walls.

Presently Cactus Mac took the lead and Linda dropped to the end of the line. About midmorning she noted horse tracks. "One of his shoes was broken!" she thought excitedly and followed the prints until they disappeared into a high, heavy growth of brush.

Cautiously Linda parted the branches and rode through. Before her was a huge pile of rocks. Chica d'Oro nickered uneasily. Linda dismounted and peered around the edge of the boulders. Tied to one of the rocks was a dusty, weary saddle horse.

As Linda stared at the animal, wondering where his rider was, she heard a deep groan.

X

Traveler in Trouble

Swiftly Linda led Chica out of the brush and signaled for her companions to hurry over. As soon as the riders came up, they too heard the groans.

“What is it?” Kathy asked.

“I don’t know,” Linda said.

“It could be a trap,” said Cactus Mac. “Stay back!”

They all dismounted, and with the men in the lead went around the pile of boulders. In a brush-shaded depression beside the cliff lay an old man. The boot had been pulled off his right foot, and his pants leg was torn above the knee. His leg was discolored and swollen.

“Broke,” guessed Cactus Mac.

The man opened his eyes a slit. “I heard horses coming. Hoped you’d find me.”

“What’s your name, fellow?” Cactus Mac asked him.

“Amos Trippe,” the other replied. “And my leg’s

broke.” He fingered some sticks at his side. “Aimed to tie it up in a splint, but—but—” his voice dwindled—“I couldn’t make it.”

“We found a burro with an arrow branded on it,” Linda told him. “Was he yours?”

The old man nodded. “So you found the no-good, measly lil beast!”

“We also found the rock arrow signs on the desert,” Bob said. “Where do they point to?”

“Don’t know nothing about them,” rasped the old man. “After I got hurt in a rockslide, I sent the jack right out, hopin’ somebody would follow him and help me.”

Linda said in an aside to Bob, “Chica d’Oro found Vagabond on Saturday, but according to the story that hermit told us, Amos Trippe didn’t break his leg until Sunday.”

“That’s right,” said Bob. “Trippe could be lying.”

“He may be the man those two ruffians who chased me out of Ghost Town were trying to find,” Linda suggested. Playing her hunch, she returned to the old man. “How did you happen to get separated from your companions?” she asked, giving him a drink of water from her canteen.

He slid her a suspicious look, then replied in a surly tone, “I got no companions. I been riding alone.”

Bob and Linda exchanged unbelieving looks.

“What’re we gabbing about?” fretted Amos Trippe. “Ain’t you going to fix up my leg so’s I can git out of here?” He attempted to sit up and fainted from the pain.

Just then Rango, who had been doing some sniffing around a spot on the cliff, gave a series of sharp little barks. Linda and Kathy ran to investigate.

“What is it, Rango?” Kathy asked. “I don’t see a single thing.”

“Here, this is it!” Linda exclaimed, pointing to the body of a freshly killed rabbit nearby. “Some of the blood must have dribbled on the rocks there.”

Kathy sighed. “Poor old man! He must have tried to fix that rabbit to eat.”

Linda hurled it far away out of Rango’s reach, in case it was contaminated. The two girls went back to the others, but the dog still sniffed and pawed about the rocks. “Come on away from there, Rango,” Linda called.

The animal protested with a few whines, but did as he was ordered.

“What do we do now?” asked Kathy.

“Tie up Amos’s leg the best we can with sticks and you girls’ scarves,” said Cactus Mac.

117

“We’ll have to improvise some sort of a litter in order to carry Trippe out of here,” said Bob.

“A travois would be best,” Cactus Mac advised.

“We’ll need two poles,” Bob said.

“And a tarp to stretch across them,” Larry put in. “I’ll get mine.” He hurried away to the horses and was back in a few minutes with the piece of tarpaulin.

“This kind of litter was once used by Indians, wasn’t it?” Kathy asked.

“Yes’m,” the foreman replied. “And it’s still done the same way. You hitch one end to a horse and the other end drags the ground.”

While he and the boys got to work on the contraption, Linda and Kathy carefully bound up Amos Trippe’s leg. Then they poured some canteen water into the crown of a hat for the old man’s horse and gave him a little grain.

When the travois was finished, Cactus Mac and the boys transferred the injured man onto it, and carried him out to the horses. Buck hauled the travois, while Bob managed the pack string. Larry brought along Amos’s horse. The group rode steadily, eager to get to the Scotsward Ranch as soon as possible. They stopped only a couple of times to try reviving Amos Trippe with a little water, but he remained unconscious. Linda got out crackers and dry figs for the rest to munch on.

118

Bob kept his radio turned on. The Mary Sutton kidnaping was mentioned in every news broadcast, but there were no new developments.

“The kidnapers must know by now that they have the wrong girl,” said Kathy. “Why won’t they let her go?”

“Because Mary could describe them to the police,” Linda replied.

“We’re certainly going to keep our eyes on you, Linda,” said Larry. “Since they still don’t have the yellow clay horse, they may try again to snatch you and demand the statuette as ransom.”

“Just let them try that!” said Bob vehemently.

The riders arrived at the Scotsward Ranch shortly after one o’clock. Lean, wiry Fred Scott and big, rawboned, hearty Mrs. Scott were waiting outside the rambling ranch house to meet them. The couple had been watching for the group and had seen them ride in.

Mrs. Scott barely exchanged greetings, as she eyed the old man on the travois. “Who is that, and what’s the matter with him?” she asked in a deep voice.

“A lone desert traveler,” said Linda. “His leg is broken. He’s been unconscious all morning.”

119

Mrs. Scott waved her hand toward the far wing of the house. “Put him in the first bedroom off the portico,” she commanded the men. “You can move the redwood table from the patio into the room and lay the poor man on it, while I go call the doctor.” She sailed into the house.

A genial-looking, white-haired lady with pink cheeks had

come out. “I’m Angie, chief cook and bottle washer here,” she said, smiling. “When did you folks last eat?”

“We had breakfast at dawn,” Kathy replied readily. She was hungry.

“Oh, my!” Angie exclaimed. “I’ll set a lunch right out.”

“We don’t want to be a bother,” Linda said. “I’d love to help you fix it, if you ever let anyone in your kitchen.”

“Young lady, you are sweet,” Angie replied beaming. “You can come into my kitchen any time you want and fix anything your heart desires.”

“I’ll go peek in on Amos,” Kathy offered.

“You girls take any room in that far wing you like,” Angie said. “I expect you want to freshen up right off.”

They thanked her, then Linda asked if any mail or packages had come for her.

120

“No, I don’t think so,” Angie replied.

Meanwhile Amos Trippe had been carried inside. In a few minutes Cactus Mac, Bob, and Larry came back and followed Fred Scott to the barns with the horses. Linda and Kathy chose a plain but clean, neat room. They washed, combed their hair, and then went to look at Amos Trippe.

“Nothing we can do here,” said Kathy, “but I’ll be glad to baby-sit. How about your helping Angie and hurrying up that

lunch? I'm absolutely famished."

Angie had an enormous pan of sliced ham sizzling on the stove and a bowl of foamy, beaten eggs waiting to be scrambled. She was putting big fluffy pan rolls into the oven to heat. "Would you like to make a salad?" Angie asked.

"Be glad to," Linda answered. After a few days of their trail diet she yearned for fresh greens.

"Pick what you want out of the icebox," Angie said. "Dressings are here." She waved her hand toward a shelf.

Linda had never seen such a huge and abundantly stocked refrigerator. She cut up a large head of crisp lettuce, cucumbers, and scallions, and from the variety of dressing bottles chose an Italian one, flavored with a sharp cheese.

121

The five hungry trail riders sat down informally at the round table in one end of the big kitchen. They had just finished eating when the doctor arrived.

"Amos is semiconscious now," Kathy told him. "He was groaning when Mrs. Scott changed places with me a few minutes ago."

As soon as the doctor had examined the old man, he came to the kitchen and asked, "Can any of you assist me with the anesthetic?"

"I will," Kathy volunteered. As she followed the physician, Angie hurried away to phone a cousin who was a practical

nurse to come and take care of Amos Trippe.

While Kathy stayed with him, the Scotts called Linda, Bob, and Cactus Mac out on the portico. “I have bad news for you folks about the cattle,” Fred Scott announced. “The inspectors won’t let you move any Black Angus out at this time. Anthrax has broken out.”

“Oh no!” Linda said. “Bronco told us about an epidemic near here, but we hoped it hadn’t reached your ranch.”

“How about your cattle?” Bob asked.

“Got a clean bill of health on them after yesterday’s inspection,” the ranch owner told him. “But the inspectors are quarantining them here for a spell until the vets are sure no infection is going to show up among them.”

122

“How bad is the area?” Cactus Mac asked.

“Real bad in some sections,” Scott replied. “They’re trying to keep it from spreading.”

“Suppose you folks stay on for a few days anyhow,” insisted Mrs. Scott, “and get a good rest. The pond is real nice to swim in, and maybe you’d enjoy riding some of the quarter horses.”

“Thank you,” Linda said. “I’d love to—especially your Little Red. I guess he’s the most famous quarter horse stud in Southern California.” She arose. “I’d better phone Rancho del Sol and give Dona and Bronco the news.”

Linda went to the living room and put her call through to the

Mallory ranch. After telling her grandmother about the anthrax infection, Linda asked anxiously, “Is there any news of Mary?”

Dona sadly told her there was none, except that the sheriff’s deputies had found the abandoned green kidnap car several miles south of Los Angeles. “I feel so sorry for that unfortunate girl.”

Meanwhile Bob had asked the Scotts when the postman would arrive. He had kept his eyes on the R.F.D. mailbox at the end of the long driveway, hoping the package containing the clay horse would be delivered.

123

“Around four o’clock,” said Mrs. Scott. “He should be coming along any minute now.”

Just as Linda hung up, Bob called from the portico, “Here comes the postman!”

Together the Craigs raced down the driveway. The man had already put a package in the box. Before Linda and Bob reached it, a compact car holding two men shot from behind a clump of trees at the roadside. The driver stopped, reached out, and took the package from the box. Then the car sped away.

“Thieves!” Bob exclaimed.

He chased after them, with Linda at his heels, trying to pick up the license number. They were unable to do so and returned to the house crestfallen.

“That was probably my package!” Linda said dolefully.

“If it wasn’t, those two men are in for a surprise,” Bob remarked. “In any case we’d better notify the sheriff.”

“Here comes the postman again,” Linda said. “This is his last stop. He must have gone up the road to turn around. Maybe he’ll remember something about the package.”

At Bob’s signal he stopped. “Could you tell us,” Linda asked, “if that package you put in the mailbox was from Rancho del Sol?”

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“Why yes, it was,” the man replied. “It’s a pretty name. That’s why I recall it.” Then he looked at the Craigs, bewildered. “You haven’t taken it out yet?”

“It’s been stolen!” Linda said, and explained the circumstances.

“The police should be notified,” the postman declared. “That’s a federal offense.”

“We know,” Bob replied. “I’ll do it right away.”

He and Linda went back to the house, where he called the sheriff’s office. Bob reported the theft and gave a description of the car.

“We’ll have the men picked up,” promised the deputy who had answered, “and notify you.”

Linda was so quiet during an outdoor barbecue supper which

followed that Fred Scott, hoping to cheer her up, asked, “How would you like to take a look at my horses?”

“I’d like to ride one,” Linda replied, trying to mask her deep disappointment at the loss of the horse statuette.

The wiry little man grinned mischievously. “Say,” he said, “we have a couple that always race nose to nose. How would you and your brother like to take them around the ring, and see if you can bring one in a winner?”

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“Great!” Bob exclaimed, and Linda smiled in anticipation.

A few minutes later Fred Scott snapped on the floodlights around the race track, and he and Cactus Mac went to get the horses.

The others gathered at the rail to watch, including Angie, who hustled up to Linda and whispered, “I’m rooting for you. If you win, I’ll make you a chocolate cake.”

“That’s my favorite!” Linda exclaimed. “I’ll do my best.”

The horses were brought out. Brother and sister swung into their saddles and at the signal spurred around the ring. Linda thrilled to the speed of her horse, but although she rode her best, she and Bob pulled their mounts up to the finish line nose and nose.

“What a pair!” Bob exclaimed admiringly.

The riders gave the horses a breather, then took them around again. Once more they thundered across the line nose to nose.

As Linda stood to one side resting her horse, Angie called up, “You’ve just got to win that chocolate cake!”

Suddenly Linda’s eyes sparkled and she smothered a grin as she thought of a way to please Angie. Reaching over the rail, she broke off a leafy branch of pungent silver sage.

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As the race started again, Linda held the branch to her side. When the horses pounded into the home stretch, she leaned far along her mount’s neck and extended the sage branch straight ahead. It was an irresistible morsel. The quarter horse stretched his muzzle for it. And won the race—by a nose!

Bob gave a cry of protest, then grinned wryly as the spectators laughed, whistled, and clapped. “Please forgive me, Bob,” said Linda.

Suddenly over the noise they heard Vagabond braying. Everyone turned quickly toward the corral to see what was upsetting the burro. They caught sight of two men skulking away from the ranch house. The Scotsward men chased after them, but they disappeared into the dusk.

Meanwhile Linda and the others had hastened back to the house to see what the intruders had been doing there. They gasped in amazement.

All the guest rooms, including the one which Amos Trippe occupied, had been ransacked!

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XI

Smoked Out

When Linda and Kathy entered Amos Trippe's room, the old man began to stir and mutter.

Kathy placed her hand on his brow. "He's feverish," she said, as the others crowded in.

"Thank goodness he wasn't harmed," said Linda.

"Just look at this room!" Mrs. Scott exclaimed. "I wonder if those ruffians found what they were looking for?"

"What I want to know is where Rango has been keepin' himself all this time," Cactus Mac said in disgust.

A couple of sharp, high barks came from under the bed and the big dog's head emerged.

"Why, you scoundrel," Cactus Mac berated him, "hidin' like that from those snoopers! The jack's a better watchdog than you are." A growl came from Rango.

Linda stooped down. "He has something under his paw. Come on out, Rango, and show us what it is," she urged.

Rango picked up the object in his teeth and wriggled out on his stomach. He waved his plume of a tail and looked about with glowing eyes.

Linda took a jacket button from his jaws. "This is from the clothes of one of those men!" she exclaimed.

Kathy smiled. "I guess it was Rango who ran the intruders off," she said. "And they left a clue behind."

"He surely protected Amos from them," Bob put in.

Cactus Mac regarded Rango with a sheepish grin. "Well, old fellow," he said, "I apologize." He gave the dog an affectionate thump. "You're all right."

Rango sat down on his haunches, draped his long tongue out of one side of his mouth, and assumed the silly, pleased expression he always did when praised.

With a laugh, Linda hugged him close. "You certainly *are* all right," she murmured.

"Well," declared Mrs. Scott abruptly, "it's no use standing here. I'm going to check the rest of the house to see if anything was taken."

As she left the room with Angie and Cactus Mac, Amos Trippe began to thrash about and blurt out incoherent words. One was "arrow." Linda, Kathy, and Bob remained to listen.

"I think he's hiding something valuable," Bob said, "but

what?”

“And did those two men find it?” Kathy added.

“It’s all connected somehow with the brand on Vagabond,” Linda surmised. “Why else did he lie to us about when he branded the burro?”

“Listen,” said Kathy quickly, “he’s talking plainer now.”

Linda leaned closer to the old man. Amos was muttering, “Rabbit—blood—sand—mortar—rabbit.” He regained consciousness and moaned with pain.

“We won’t learn any more now,” Bob said. “He knows we’re here.”

Just then a pleasant voice spoke from the door behind them. “You young folks run along now. I’ll take over.” They turned to see a heavy, plain-faced woman with gray hair. “I’m Angie’s Cousin Mattie,” she said smiling. “The nurse.”

The young people left, feeling certain that the old man was in good hands. While Bob went to look for Larry, who had joined the chase after the intruders, Linda and Kathy walked toward the corral.

“What do you make of Amos’s words?” Kathy asked.

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“Not much right now,” Linda replied. “Amos did kill a rabbit and there was blood on the rocks.”

They found Cactus Mac making a late check of the horses and

repeated to him what Amos Trippe had blurted out.

“Probably just some event in that thar old-timer’s life,” the foreman answered. “Those old desert rats have to rely on anything at hand in case of emergency. With water so scarce, likely he had to mix sand with rabbit blood at one time to make a mortar to repair something.”

Linda and Kathy exchanged significant glances and walked on toward the house.

“Rango was sniffing and pawing at the rocks near where Amos killed the rabbit,” Linda reminded her friend. “Maybe the old man made a mortar with rabbit’s blood and sealed something of value into the cliff face there.”

“It must be the very thing those men were searching for tonight,” Kathy suggested. “We ought to tell the others and all ride out to look for it.”

Linda said it might be nothing but a wild-goose chase and they would be laughed at. “Suppose you and I slip away early in the morning and investigate.”

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“Alone?” Kathy asked. Then she added, “All right, if we take Rango.”

The two girls were up the next morning at five and went to the barn to feed Chica d’Oro and Patches. Then they saddled the horses. Just before they left, Linda put Vagabond in a stall kept for stallions, where he could neither crawl out nor jump over the door.

“Sorry,” she said, patting his head, “but you’d only be a nuisance tagging along this morning.”

Linda and Kathy rode out quietly. Rango, having been roused from his bed in the hay and fed, trotted along beside the palomino with an important air.

The filly kept turning her head and whinnying. She seemed unhappy at being taken and her little friend, Vagabond, left behind.

“Quiet baby, quiet!” Linda remonstrated in a hushed but firm voice. “This is a secret mission.” She ran a soothing hand down the palomino’s neck. “And it’s time you learned that you can’t always have Vagabond with you.”

She gave an authoritative flip with the reins and pressed her knees against the horse’s sides. As always, Chica d’Oro, wanting to please Linda, settled down now to an easy gait with her attention on the trail ahead. About nine o’clock the girls arrived at the spot where they had found Amos.

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Linda pointed to the rocks, commanding, “Rango, rabbit!”

The dog bounded off, sniffing, as the girls dismounted. Suddenly Rango gave a couple of yelps and started pawing at the spot. Linda and Kathy ran to him and saw a couple of large rocks mortared tight into a niche.

Excitedly they found sharp-pointed sticks and began digging out the mortar. Because it was not a hard-set substance, the girls soon were able to pull the rocks away from the niche.

For a moment they both stared speechless at the cache. Before them lay two stuffed canvas moneybags with the name of a Los Angeles bank stenciled on them.

“The bank robbers’ loot!” Linda cried.

“I never would have suspected Amos Trippe of holding up a bank,” Kathy declared. “He just doesn’t seem the type.”

“Maybe he didn’t do the actual robbing,” Linda mused. “But he certainly must belong to the gang. Otherwise how could he have gotten these two bags of money?”

“I guess only Amos can explain that,” replied Kathy.

Just then Chica d’Oro bent her ears forward and whinnied. Rango bristled, barking furiously.

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Linda and Kathy spun about and saw two riders rounding the big boulders. The men spotted the girls and bore down rapidly on them.

Linda snatched up the moneybags and tossed one to Kathy. “Quick!” she exclaimed. “Ride up into these rocks!”

Hastily the girls mounted, with Rango at their heels, and zigzagged up through the craggy rocks, which kept them out of sight of their pursuers. Suddenly Linda pulled up sharply and pointed to a high, narrow passage between the rocks.

“A cave maybe!” she exclaimed. “Come on!”

They rode single file through the narrow opening into a dark

rock chamber. As they pulled up, there was the clatter of hoofs outside and a hoarse voice shouted:

“Come out of there or we’ll be in to get you!” The girls froze, hearts pounding.

“All right,” barked a second voice. “We know you’re in there!” Rango growled deep in his throat. A moment later the girls heard footsteps approaching the cave. As a dark figure appeared in the narrow, sunlit opening, Rango snarled and leaped for it. The man fell back with a cry.

“Good boy!” exclaimed Linda softly. Rango growled and guarded the opening.

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After a few tense moments the hoarse voice called again, “Make it snappy or we’ll smoke you out!”

Kathy turned a panicky look on Linda. “We’ll suffocate in a few minutes if they try that.”

Linda whispered rapidly, “Put the sacks of money in Chica’s saddlebags, and we’ll turn her loose. She’ll head for Scotsward and Vagabond.”

Quickly Kathy transferred the loot, while Linda tied the reins around the saddle horn. They softly called Rango away from the entrance. Then Linda commanded. “Go! Find Vagabond!” and gave the palomino a sharp slap on the rump.

The horse bolted from the cave and galloped away. The men let out surprised, angry cries.

Instantly Patches jerked her reins free from Kathy's hand and lunged after Chica d'Oro. But the men outside caught her.

"Now we're afoot," Linda whispered, dismayed.

Both girls turned pale as they heard chaparral being broken down and heaped at the cave entrance. Rango backed off and began sniffing his way to the rear of the small chamber. He disappeared around a crag.

"Let's follow Rango," Linda said.

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Hastily the girls went after the dog and caught sight of a streak of light in the distance.

"It's a chimney through the rocks," Linda whispered in relief. "Rango smelled the fresh air. I hope the chimney's big enough for us to wriggle up."

With Linda's help, Kathy climbed into the chimney and pulled herself out on top of the roof of the cave. Linda boosted Rango up. Kathy caught hold of him and hauled the dog up. Finally Linda pushed and scrambled her way out.

"Whew," she breathed softly.

Cautiously the girls crawled to the edge of the rocks and peered down. The three horses stood directly below. The men were some distance away, in front of the cave entrance, where a good-sized fire was blazing.

Quickly Linda thought of a plan of escape and whispered it to Kathy. Silently Linda slid down, took the rope from Patches'

saddle, and climbed up to the roof of the cave again.

Swiftly she built a loop. With Rango following, Linda and Kathy crawled to the edge of the rocks near the cave entrance. The men were right below them.

Taking a deep breath, Linda neatly dabbed her loop over the nearest man and pulled it tight, yanking him off his feet. The ruffian yelled in surprise and the second man stared up at the girls in amazement.

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As he tried to pull the rope from his companion, Linda screamed, “Get him, Rango! Get him!”

Instantly the big dog sprang down at the man, knocking him to the ground. Then Rango stood with his jaws at the fellow’s throat, growling.

The man’s eyes rolled as he lay frozen with terror. Holding the rope tightly and reeling it in, Linda scrambled and slid down the rocks to the two men with Kathy right behind her. Hastily but thoroughly the two girls tied up the roped man first while Rango snarled a warning to both ruffians. Then Linda cut the rope and they trussed up the second man.

Linda rose to her feet and patted Rango with a trembling hand. “Good boy!” she said shakily. Rango switched his tail in appreciation, but did not relax his guard for a moment.

Still pale with fright, Kathy brought the three horses over to Linda and Rango. Swiftly they tied the third horse behind Patches and mounted the other two.

“You’re going to leave us here on the desert like this?” the second man whined.

“Only long enough for the sheriff to pick you up,” Linda replied. “We’ll turn your horses over to him also.”

“That’s better treatment than you would have given us,” Kathy added spunkily.

Linda noted that the fire at the cave entrance was nearly burned out. “There’s no danger of it spreading,” Linda remarked, “because there’s no brush around these rocks and no breeze.”

With that she called Rango, and the riders loped off for Scotsward. When they arrived at the ranch, they found the place in a tumult. Several deputies were on the patio. Everyone rushed up to greet the two girls, firing questions at them.

Mrs. Scott’s voice called for silence. “One at a time! One at a time!” she shouted. “Land o’ Goshen, you girls are a better sight than a freshet in a sand dune. We were just ready to start combing the desert inch by inch for you.”

“When Chica came back without you, we really got worried,” Bob said to Linda.

“And after we found that thar bank loot in the saddlebags, we didn’t know what to think,” Cactus Mac added, his blue eyes still showing the strain of worry.

“I’m mighty glad Chica d’Oro made it,” Linda said with

a smile.

“And so are we,” broke in one of the deputies. “Now, if we can just get a good line on the bank robbers, maybe we can bring them in. They’re two of the worst.”

“Your robbers are tied up near where we found the moneybags, waiting to be picked up,” said Linda.

“Well, I’ll be—” exclaimed one of the officers with a dumfounded expression, as he scratched the back of his head under his hat.

“Tied up!” Bob was astounded.

“How did they get tied up?” asked Cactus Mac, amazed.

Quietly Linda and Kathy told their story. When they finished, the men looked at the girls in silent astonishment and Larry gave a long, low whistle of appreciation.

“Where is this place?” one of the deputies asked.

Linda gave them explicit directions, and they set off in their jeep. As the others broke out in excited laughter and congratulations, Linda pulled Rango to her side.

“This fellow saved our lives by leading us out of that cave those men were filling with smoke,” she declared, an affectionate hand on the big, yellow-tan dog. Then she asked, “How is Amos Trippe? I’d like to talk to him.”

“He’s pretty good this morning,” Mattie said.

The patio was just outside Amos's room. Now, as Linda went into it, the old man said, "I heard most of what you was sayin' out there. So you found my gold!"

"It wasn't yours, Amos," Linda said gently. "How did you ever happen to have it?"

Amos pressed his lips together in stubborn silence.

"Are you in partnership with those bank robbers?" Linda persisted. "Is that what you want us to think?"

Amos Trippe's expression changed a bit as he looked at Linda, then at the others around the bed. His eyes wavered and he ran his tongue around his cracked lips.

"Don't figure I want you nice folks to think that," he rasped. "Reckon I'll just tell you how I come by them bags of money."

XII

Old-timer's Confession

“Wal,” Amos began, “as I was havin’ my flapjacks at the Green Corners Café—’twas the first meal I’d et in town for a year—a couple of fellows crowded me.

“‘You know this desert country good, old-timer?’ one asked.

“‘With my eyes closed,’ I told him, givin’ the fellow a shove with my elbow for a leetle more room with my cutting tool.

“‘The other one blasted in my ear, ‘Say, I think you’re just the man we’re lookin’ for to help us find a nice, secluded spot out there in the desert for a dude ranch!’

“‘I give one man, then t’other, a good look. They didn’t ’pear like the duded-up sort to me, with their day’s stubble and mussed-up clothes.

“‘One caught on I wasn’t bein’ taken in. He laughed and said, ‘We been roughin’ it.’

“‘It’ll cost you,’ I told ’em.

“‘Sure thing, pardner,’ one says real chummy-like. ‘How much do you ask?’

“I figured a five spot would keep me goin’ for quite a spell, but I wasn’t for scarin’ ’em off, so I says, ‘Make me an offer.’

“‘We’ll pay you fifty dollars,’ one o’ them jaspers said.

“I like to choked to death on my last bite o’ flapjack. Wal, we got ready for the trip. They had a couple of stable horses they’d picked up, and I had my old horse and jack. I told ’em what grub to buy and they carried it in feed sacks swung over their saddle horns. They had somethin’ rolled up in an old coat behind one of their saddles, but I reckoned it was spare clothes.

“I headed ’em out Ghost Town way, figurin’ to drop them off by one of them rocky buttes beyond it, near a water hole.

“We made camp that first night at the south end of Ghost Town. While them two was finishin’ their supper, I took a gander about. They didn’t hear me come back behind ’em. They was laughin’ and talkin’ about what an easy time they’d had holdin’ up the bank.

“I figured then what was in that roll behind one saddle and took a peek. Sure ’nuf, it was the bank loot. And I knowed then that all them two was aiming for was a safe place to hide out with the loot till the sheriff had stopped lookin’ for ’em.

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“I was sharp enough to know too that they wasn’t goin’ to let me go back to town to answer any questions about the pair of ’em. I’d end up a heap o’ bleachin’ bones for sure, soon as they had no further use for me.

“So when they began snorin’, I shifted them moneybags onto my own saddle and slipped away from Ghost Town real quiet-like.

“I knowed that the first thing next mornin’ them two would tear all over that desert like wild critters, huntin’ me. I started makin’ rock arrows, all pointin’ to the highway so’s maybe they’d think I’d headed that way, and follow and get caught.

“I branded the jack with the arrow and turned him loose, hopin’ they’d run onto him and know it was me, all right, who’d made the rock arrows.

“I lit right out for that cliff-dweller place to hide the money in one of them high caves.”

Seeing the troubled look on Linda’s face, the old man frowned and added, “Oh, I always knowed I’d have to give it back someday, but I was afraid just to take it to the sheriff for fear he’d think I was one of the gang. I needed time to figure out some way to return it without gettin’ into trouble. Meantime it’d be in the cliff-dwellers’ caves. I never knowed about that old hermit livin’ up there and I got caught in his trap.”

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Amos Trippe gave a deep, quivering sigh. “There’s no more to tell.”

Mattie said, “You shouldn’t talk any more.” She fluffed the old man’s pillow, straightened the bedclothes, and prepared a mild sedative.

The others drifted out to the patio. “Poor Amos!” Linda said.

“I wonder what will become of him now.”

“It’s all settled,” Larry said. “Fred Scott says Amos can stay here to help at the barns when he’s well.”

Angie appeared to announce lunch. “The dessert’s that chocolate cake Linda won last night.” Everyone beamed.

Late that afternoon two deputies returned to make a routine check. They told Linda and Kathy the bank robbers had been picked up and taken to jail.

“Could those two men be the same ones who stole the package from the mailbox?” Kathy wondered.

“I don’t think so,” Linda replied. “The men in the car didn’t look the same as the bank robbers.”

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“Besides,” said one of the officers, “their belongings have been thoroughly searched, and there were no signs of wrappings or contents of the parcel.” He smiled. “By the way, a sport jacket among their things had a button missing. It matched the one your dog had, so apparently he saved the old man from them.”

“Have you heard any news about Mary Sutton?” Linda asked hopefully.

“A news broadcast concerning her came in just a few minutes ago,” the officer said. “There was a report that a girl answering Mary Sutton’s description was seen in a car with a dark-haired woman and a blond man near San Carita.”

As the officers drove away, Linda looked thoughtful. “San Carita,” she repeated. “That’s where the Cherry Blossom Fiesta is being held this weekend.”

“You wanted to go and ride in the parade, didn’t you?” Kathy asked.

“I still do,” Linda replied. “And now for a double reason. Maybe I can find Mary.”

“Why don’t you go? There’s still time,” Kathy urged.

“Let’s all go and ride in the parade,” Linda proposed.

“What a wonderful idea!” Kathy’s eyes sparkled, but a moment later she looked skeptical. “How could we get our horses there?”

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“Mr. Scott has a big stock truck we might borrow,” Linda replied. “Let’s check with Cactus Mac first.”

They found him halter-breaking some colts for Fred Scott while Bob and Larry watched. Linda’s proposal was eagerly accepted by the boys, but the foreman was leery. Finally he said, “Paradin’ ’s a little out o’ my line, but so long as it ain’t painful, I’ll try it this once.”

The girls hurried off to find Fred Scott, who gladly agreed to lend them the truck. Linda immediately wired the chairman of the fiesta committee at San Carita, requesting that a spot be assigned to them in the big parade Saturday morning.

Then she phoned Dona Mallory, who said, “Good luck to all

of you!”

Swiftly and gaily the foursome loaded their gear and bedrolls into the truck. Then Bob and Larry led in the horses and burro, tying them crosswise, head to tail.

The cab was large, and the seat comfortably accommodated four. A foam-cushioned stool was put in with the horses for the boys to take turns using. Behind the seat was a wide ledge, to which Rango was assigned.

146

After warm thanks and good-bys to their hosts, and some money to Amos Trippe for the purchase of Vagabond, the Craigs and their friends left Scotsward in a merry mood. At the last moment Angie had given them a big box of sandwiches and cookies with vacuum bottles of cold milk for supper along the way.

“How long will it take us to get there?” Kathy asked Cactus Mac, who was at the wheel.

“About six hours with this speed demon,” he replied with a chuckle.

En route Linda bubbled with plans. “In the telegram I said that we would enter the Family Class competition as the del Sol group.”

“Does that make you my kids?” asked Cactus Mac with a grimace and the others laughed.

“We’ll have to fix up some sort of look-alike costumes,” said Linda. “We all have white Western shirts and blue jeans,

which we'd better wear. Then we can pick up some bright matching hats and ties. There will be a lot of fiesta stuff in the shops for sale. We can get some early in the morning and have the rest of the day to fix ourselves up."

"That will be fun," Kathy beamed.

Linda's dark eyes sparkled as she made plans. "We might get red Spanish hats, red ties, and red cummerbunds to wear."

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"Great," said Bob dryly.

"Won't I look cute in a red sash?" grumbled Cactus Mac.

"Sure you will," Kathy teased. "You'll have all the ladies trying to date you!"

A few yards farther on, the truck was waved to a stop by a sergeant of the highway patrol, who stood in the middle of the road. Two cars with more officers were parked on each side.

"A roadblock," murmured Larry.

At Cactus Mac's quick stop the horses began stomping. The foreman jumped out quickly and went around back to investigate. The officer gave the others in the cab a sharp appraisal as Larry, who had been seated on the stool, joined them.

"We're on our way to participate in the fiesta parade," Linda smilingly told him.

The sergeant gave her a penetrating look and started poking around the front. “Where’s the registration card for this truck?” he asked.

The Craigs quickly looked about for it, but in vain. “Actually I don’t know,” Bob replied. “We borrowed the truck.”

“Your driver’s licenses, please,” requested the officer.

The boys exchanged looks. “We don’t have them with us,” Larry said.

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“If none of you can produce identification, you’ll have to come along with me to the station.” He peered at Linda again. “You fit the description of that girl who was kidnaped.” At a signal the other two officers joined him.

“I’m the girl who was supposed to have been kidnaped,” said Linda evenly. Briefly she related the circumstances to the surprised patrolmen.

Just then Rango decided to have a stretch and leaped out the open door of the cab. He had been lying on several articles on the ledge.

Quickly Larry went through them: an old sweater, papers, a couple of stock magazines, and at the bottom a small, flat, black, zippered case. He opened it and produced the truck registration.

Cactus Mac came alongside. “Thought one of my horses might be down,” he explained to the sergeant, “but they’re all right.”

“Your driver’s license, please,” the officer requested.

Cactus Mac slapped his pockets, then looked perplexed. Linda’s heart sank. The group was under suspicion already because she looked like Mary. If the foreman had neglected to bring his license, they probably would be taken all the way to Los Angeles! And never get back in time to prepare for the parade. 149

Suddenly light dawned on Cactus Mac. He took off his hat and from the inner band produced the license!

The sergeant was satisfied and waved them on, as Rango jumped back in. But he gave Linda a last, lingering look. With the time lost, it was nearly midnight when the travelers arrived at San Carita.

“What a charming place!” Linda exclaimed. “And how fragrant!”

The long main street was lined with tile-roofed homes and shops of Spanish architecture. Among them and set back in a lovely old garden was a mission. On the side streets were cottages, all with little gardens, belonging to the Mexican and Spanish inhabitants. Everywhere cherry trees were in bloom.

“Over on that thar hill to the east,” Cactus Mac told them, “are some mighty good-lookin’ estates with big cherry orchards.”

Although it was late, there were tourists in the street and some of the shops were still open. A smiling man, wearing an official badge, stopped the Scotsward truck, 150

greeted the riders pleasantly, and directed them to the walnut grove at the edge of town where they were to camp.

The grove was dotted with little bonfires, aglow in circles of rocks. Many outfits were already there, and the people gaily called out “Hi!” to the newcomers as they slowly made their way through the grove until they found a cleared spot.

“I guess the horses will be glad to get out of that truck,” said Linda.

Everyone helped to unload them and walk the animals around a bit to get their blood circulating. The men tied them to trees and fed and watered them, while the girls gave Rango his food.

“Now we’ll go to town and get some supper,” said Bob. They ate at one of the many attractive little eating spots.

There was little sleep for anyone in the grove that night, with outfits coming in and people making merry around the campfires. But the del Sol group was tired after the long trip and managed to doze off in the comfort of their sleeping bags.

Next morning the place was abuzz with excitement and gaiety. The Craigs and their companions ate early, and as soon as the shops were open, Linda and Kathy went to buy their costume supplies at Fernando’s.

They found five red Spanish hats in the correct sizes, red string bow ties, and good-looking, shirred red cummerbunds with sash ends. To these, the girls added a bolt of red satin ribbon to braid in the manes and tails of the horses; a few

yards of Turkey-red cloth to cut for top saddle blankets; twenty yellow cotton tassels to fasten to each of the four corners, and several cards of safety pins.

Linda found a frayed, straw peon hat. “Let’s put this on Vagabond,” she said, and Kathy chuckled.

Feeling impish, Linda laid her pocketbook down and laughingly tried the hat on her own head. “Size is just right,” she said.

Linda put the hat with their other purchases and reached for her purse to pay for them. It was gone!

XIII

Hacienda Sleuthing

“My purse!” Linda exclaimed, dismayed. She looked about hastily. “I laid it right here!”

The sales girl looked concerned. “A tall, dark-haired woman was standing here. She came in right behind you. I noticed her particularly because she had a leather shoulder-strap purse with some unusual Mexican silverwork on it.”

Kathy ran to the door. “There she is!” she exclaimed. “Across the street.”

Linda hurried to look and caught a glimpse of the silver-ornamented bag.

“Please hold these things for us,” she called to the salesgirl. “We’ll be back!”

Staying on their side of the street, they followed the woman swiftly.

“She’s going through your bag!” Kathy remarked indignantly.

“Let’s cross over now and get it away from her,” Linda said.

As the girls started toward the woman, she looked up and saw them. Snapping the purse shut, the stranger quickened her steps. At the corner she thrust Linda's bag into the hands of a policeman, rapidly said something to him, and lost herself in the crowd milling about the mission garden.

The officer shoved the slim tan purse into his pocket, as Linda and Kathy hurried up to him. "I think you have my purse," Linda said breathlessly. "It was stolen at the store where I was shopping."

"I have a purse," said the officer calmly. "But the woman who handed it to me said that she'd found it. What did yours look like?"

"It was braided straw," Linda told him. "It contained twenty-five dollars, a compact, lipstick, and my riding-club membership card with my name on it, Linda Craig."

The police officer smiled and pulled the purse from his pocket. He checked the contents, and then handed the bag over to Linda. "You're lucky," he said. "Better keep a tighter hold on it hereafter."

"Thank you, I will," Linda replied.

"Well, that was a happy ending," Kathy said on their way back to Fernando's. "I wonder why the woman didn't take your money? Even after she saw us, she had time to do it."

"My guess is she wasn't after the money," Linda said soberly. "Do you remember, a news report said Mary was seen in a car near here with a dark-haired woman?"

Kathy's eyes widened. "You think this person was the one?"

Linda nodded. "She spotted me somewhere and followed us into the store. Because I look so much like Mary, she probably suspected that I'm the girl they intended to kidnap."

"But why take your purse?"

"To make sure by checking my identification."

Kathy looked puzzled. "I don't understand why they should be interested in you any more. After all, they have the clay horse from the mailbox."

"The kidnapers could be getting nervous with police hunting for them," said Linda. "Maybe the woman thought my being here was too much of a coincidence."

Kathy paled. "Then you're still in danger, Linda. They may try to get you out of the way."

"You, too, Kathy," Linda concluded quietly as they entered Fernando's. "The woman knows we both saw her."

The salesgirl was genuinely pleased that the purse had been retrieved. Linda paid her, then the girls gathered up their bundles.

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On the way back to the grove they stopped at the police station to report the purse incident. The officer listened to Linda's description of the dark-haired woman and agreed that she must be the one mentioned in the news bulletin.

“We’ll step up the local search for Mary Sutton and her abductors,” he promised, “now that we know the kidnapers are still here.” He thanked the girls for their cooperation.

When they reached their camp, Linda and Kathy saw several children and a few adults gathered around Bob, Larry, and the palomino, who was untied.

“What are you doing with Chica?” Linda asked anxiously. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” Bob grinned and looked at Larry. “Just showing her off to these kids.”

Taking the boys and Cactus Mac aside, Linda and Kathy told them about the stolen purse and described the dark-haired woman. “The police are going to be on the lookout for her,” Linda said, “and we should be too. She may lead us to Mary.”

“Hm, looks like we landed right in the middle o’ the hornets’ nest,” Cactus Mac remarked somberly.

“We’ll sure have to keep our eyes on Linda and Kathy,”

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said Larry worriedly.

Just then Chica, who had been standing without attention long enough, to her way of thinking, gave a fretful whinny.

“All right, baby,” Linda apologized. “I’ve been neglecting you.” She took some pieces of carrot from her pocket. “How about showing me how nicely you can bow?” She stood to the side and brought her hand back in a signal.

With glowing eyes Chica went down on her right knee in a perfect bow. Vagabond, who was near by, wagged his head up and down, bent a knee, and pawed the ground.

The children clapped for the filly and laughed at the burro.

Linda slipped a treat to both animals and said softly to Chica, “That was a beautiful performance, baby. Please do as nicely in the parade.”

“Show us some more tricks,” the children begged.

“All right,” Linda agreed. “Someone ask Chica a question.”

A little girl piped up, “Do you like me?”

Linda gave a hand signal, and the filly shook her head up and down for yes.

“Do you like horseflies?” asked an impish little boy.

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Again Linda cued the palomino and the animal shook her head violently back and forth for no.

“That’s a clever horse!” exclaimed a man onlooker.

Linda quickly gave a signal and Chica lifted her head and rolled back her lips in a good horselaugh of pleasure at the man’s compliment.

“My horse will do a trick too,” an eager little boy named Johnny said. He was from the next camp and had his mount with him.

“Oh, please show it to us,” Linda urged.

Johnny walked ahead with his small bay horse following, then stopped suddenly. The horse gave him a nudge in the back, pushing him a few steps, and repeated the shove every time the boy stopped.

Linda laughed. “That’s a funny trick!” She turned to Chica. “Do you think you could do that?”

“Just you watch!” Bob exclaimed, and he and Larry exchanged winks.

Bob stood directly in front of the filly and began walking, with Chica following. Like Johnny, he stopped suddenly, but the horse gave him such a hard push with her nose that Bob Craig fell down.

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“Hey, not so hard!” he cried, turning around quickly so as not to get shoved again. Everyone laughed.

“Bravo!” Linda exclaimed. “When did you teach her that trick?”

“While you were out shopping,” her brother replied. “Johnny helped us.”

“May we have a ride on your horse?” asked a couple of little girls.

“She’s a bit too spirited to put children on her back,” Linda replied gently. “But how would you like a ride on Vagabond?”

The youngsters jumped up and down in delight, crying, “We’d like that!”

“Here you go, then,” Bob said. He lifted both little girls to the burro’s back.

Vagabond’s eyes went stubbornly glassy. He braced his legs and brayed.

“Come on, now,” begged Larry, tugging at the halter rope. “Earn your hay.”

Vagabond brayed his protest again and suddenly sat down. The two little girls slid off.

Linda ran to them. “Are you hurt?” she asked anxiously.

Both of them were giggling. “No,” said one, jumping up. “That was fun!”

During this performance Rango was having his own fun with the dogs who had come with other outfits. They went tearing through the grove or stopped now and then to grapple with each other, to everyone’s amusement. It soon became evident that Rango had assumed leadership of the pack.

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“I hope they don’t get it into their heads to run off,” remarked Cactus Mac, who had been enjoying himself in a talk with some of the other men. To avoid this “call of the wild,” he ordered Rango to his side.

Meanwhile Linda and Kathy unpacked their purchases and

gave the boys their outfits.

“Will I wow ’em!” said Larry with a grin.

Bob looked at his watch and announced he was going into town to see if he could get a gunnysack of carrots for the horses.

“I hope you can,” Linda remarked. “They deserve a good treat for parading tomorrow.” As he left she added, “We’d better start getting the parade things ready.”

“I’ll polish the gear,” Larry volunteered. Cactus Mac joined the three to help.

There was a lot of equipment for the five horses. First the men cleaned it with saddle soap, then polished the leather to a high gloss.

Larry, slapping a polish rag back and forth assiduously, said, “Why didn’t I think to go for carrots?”

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“Thar’ll be plenty left for Bob to do,” Cactus Mac assured him.

“Our boots have to be polished,” Linda said with an impish grin. “We’ll set those out for him.”

While the men worked on the gear, Linda and Kathy cut oblongs of red cloth to go over the hair pads under the saddles, and pinned a yellow tassel to each corner. Then the girls measured and cut pieces of red satin ribbon to braid into the horses’ manes and tails.

They had just finished when Bob came hurrying into camp with a half-filled gunnysack over his shoulder. His expression was so disturbed that everyone gathered about him hastily with questioning looks.

“I think I saw that woman who took Linda’s purse,” Bob told them. “She was tall and dark-haired and carried a strap bag with Mexican silver on it.”

“It sounds like her!” Kathy exclaimed.

“Where did you see her?” Linda asked.

“In the old part of town,” Bob replied. “As I came out of the feed store with the carrots, she was hurrying up a lane alongside it.”

“Where did she go?” Larry asked.

“I followed her along the main street,” Bob said, “but lost her in the crowd. The town is really packed now.”

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“Did you report it to the police?” Kathy asked.

Bob shook his head. “The police have all they can do without being bothered to run down such a slim tip. After all, I didn’t see where she came from or went, and am not absolutely sure she’s the woman they’re looking for.”

“We’d better forget her for now,” said Larry, “and get ready for the parade.”

Kathy said, “How about me giving all the ponies a treat of

carrots?”

“Go to it,” said Bob.

Linda’s mind was on the dark-haired woman. Was she holding Mary Sutton a prisoner in this town?

“I must try to find out,” Linda told herself.

That evening while the men were busy with parade preparations, she asked Kathy to go to town with her for some sleuthing.

“The streets are so crowded I’m sure there’ll be no danger. If anyone tried to grab us, a scream would bring plenty of help.”

“Okay,” Kathy agreed.

They found the feed store easily. Its sign rose high above the low-tiled roofs around it. The girls turned down the lane. At the end was an old, walled Spanish hacienda with a courtyard. In front of it stood small cottages, with children and women holding babies, talking and laughing.

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A splash of unusually beautiful yellow roses beside a cottage caught Linda’s eye. She decided to come back early in the morning and try to buy some to decorate the horses’ tails and manes.

The girls turned to the open gate of the courtyard and paused. Could the strange woman have come from here? Was Mary in the hacienda?

Quickly they crossed the paved enclosure to the big garden. At the far end of the tree-lined walk stood the house, its balcony deeply shadowed by a big blooming magnolia whose branches draped over it. There were no lights in the windows. Linda and Kathy wondered why. The late hour and heavy shade of the magnolia and pepper trees must have made the interior very dim.

Suddenly Linda's heart jumped. She had seen a movement on the balcony, and whispered this to Kathy. Staring hard into the darkness, they made out the figure of a girl.

Then a voice called faintly, "Help!"

The cry was sharply cut off. Straining their eyes in the fading light, Linda and Kathy could see nothing on the balcony now. They listened, hearts pounding. There was not a sound from the dark building.

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XIV

False and Fair Play

Kathy had grabbed Linda's arm. Had they imagined the figure on the balcony and the voice calling for help? Was it a joke? Or could the person have been Mary?

The girls walked quickly toward the house, watching for any further movement and listening for the call to be repeated. A stairway on the side led up to the balcony.

“Kathy, you stay here on guard while I tiptoe up,” Linda requested.

Cautiously she ascended. At the first window the draperies were partially open. Linda peered in. She was just able to make out the dark, carved furniture and a beautiful crocheted counterpane on the bed. The room looked unoccupied.

Quietly she stepped along to the next window. Inside was a neat bedroom, and there were articles on the dresser indicating that it was in use. Linda could see no one.

Her curiosity aroused, she rapped on the pane. No one appeared, nor was there any answer.

“It's hopeless,” Linda thought and slowly went down the

stairs.

“Any luck?” Kathy asked.

Linda shook her head. Then she boldly walked up to the front door and rapped. Her knocking echoed within the house. Still no answer.

Linda turned away with a strange feeling. The big home stood silent and apparently empty, but she felt as if the girls were being watched.

“Let’s go!” Kathy urged. “We don’t want to let our luck run out.”

As the two friends made their way back to the main street, they decided not to mention their experience to the boys.

“They’ll say our imaginations are running away with us,” said Linda. “And maybe they are.”

The girls returned to the grove and were not questioned. Apparently the men thought they had been visiting other campers. The boys had just finished their polishing.

“There!” exclaimed Bob, with a slap of his polishing rag. “That does it, and if anybody’s equipment is in any better shape than ours, I’ll eat one of my boots.” He grinned. “I’m so hungry I might do it anyway.”

“I’ll settle for a good Mexican dinner,” Larry declared. “How does that sound to you all?”

There were three enthusiastic replies, but Cactus Mac groaned. “You youngsters kin burn the linin’ out of your innards with that thar hot stuff, but not me. I’ll have steak.”

Before they left, Linda asked about Rango.

“He’s locked up in the truck,” explained Cactus Mac. “Hurt his foot. I’m makin’ him stay off it so he’ll be okay for the parade.”

“If anyone comes around,” thought Linda as they walked off, “he’ll bark and alert the neighbors.”

The young people went to the El Toro Café near the grove, and Cactus Mac continued up the street looking for a good steak house.

At the El Toro, Linda and her friends ordered four combination plates with milk. In a short time the waitress brought platters of enchiladas smothered in melted cheese, fried frijoles, slim, sauce-covered beef tamales, and tostados heaped with shaved lettuce and tomatoes.

“Looks marvelous,” said Kathy.

Larry lifted his fork. “Well, here’s to the fire food!” Everyone laughed.

“We’d better get some sound sleep tonight,” Linda said later. “From the outfits I’ve seen, we’re going to have stiff competition. The truth is,” she added slowly, “we’re outclassed in equipment and horses.”

“You admit Chica d’Oro is outclassed?” Kathy asked incredulously.

“Not individually,” Linda replied, “but our horses aren’t matched. There’s a family of four who have matching blacks. Then there’s a couple with a little girl who have matching Arabians and silver equipment.”

“Sounds as if there’s not much hope for us to win a trophy,” Larry commented.

“I don’t think we’ll win anything in the pre-judging before the parade,” Linda said frankly. “But we might pick up the winning points when we’re judged for performance in the parade.”

“How?” Kathy asked.

Linda thought for several seconds, then replied, “I think we should ride with Cactus Mac leading. Bob and I will follow—his bay quarter horse and my golden palomino will make a striking combination. Rango should be at Rocket’s side, and Vagabond at Chica’s, where they’re accustomed to being. Then Larry will follow on bay Gypsy and Kathy on brown-and-white Patches.”

“But what do we do?” Bob prompted.

“Wave and smile at the spectators,” Linda replied. “As soon as we arrive at the judges’ stand, form a line before them, salute with a wave, and I’ll put Chica d’Oro into a bow. Immediately fall back into our parade formation and ride on.”

Larry looked doubtful. “Wouldn’t that take a lot of practice?” he asked.

“Practice would help,” Linda said with a wry smile, “but since we have no time for it, just keep thinking about what we’re to do and it will probably come out all right.”

They were only about halfway through their meal when a neighboring camper came hurrying in to their table. “Hey,” he blurted out, “good thing I heard you say you were coming here. I just saw your burro running down the street.”

“Thanks,” said Bob, jumping up. “We’ll go after him.”

“Vagabond wouldn’t leave without Chica d’Oro!” Linda cried. “She must have gone too!”

“Did you see a palomino with the burro?” asked Larry, dropping a bill on the table to take care of their meal.

“No, I didn’t,” the man replied. “I just noticed the jack.”

“Larry and I will go after Vagabond,” Bob said to Linda. “You and Kathy run back to camp and check on the palomino.”

The girls hurried to the grove and saw at once that the filly was missing. None of the campers had seen anyone take her. They had heard Rango bark but thought nothing of it.

“Let’s follow the boys on horseback,” Linda said. “We’ll catch up with them sooner.”

“If we can only find Vagabond, he may lead us to Chica d’Oro,” Kathy added hopefully.

Hastily the girls bridled Patches and Rocket, jumped on them bareback, and rode out of the grove. They quickly wound their way through the throngs on the main street, asking along the way if anyone had seen the palomino or the burro.

The answers were disappointing. So many people were mounted and the crowd was having such a good time that no one had noticed one more horse.

As the girls reached a side street, a thin, black-haired boy darted up to them. “You the ones looking for a palomino?” he asked. “It went there.” He pointed down a narrow lane, then slipped away in the crowd before they could question him further.

Linda and Kathy stared down the narrow street, which was lined with shacks and the drooping branches of big shade trees. At the far end they saw Bob and Larry attempting to hold Vagabond. Apparently they had just caught him, for he was struggling to get away. The girls urged their horses to a gallop to join them.

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“You’d better let him go,” Kathy cried as they reined up, “or he’ll lose Chica d’Oro’s trail.”

“Wait!” said Linda. “Chica would never run away by herself. This may be an attempt to knock us out of the competition tomorrow. Someone had better go back and guard our parade stuff. Cactus Mac may not have returned.”

“That’s right,” Bob agreed. “Larry, you and Kathy go.”

“But I think I should ride with you,” Larry protested. “You may run into trouble.”

“My sister had better come with me,” Bob replied. “She may be able to find Chica by calling her. The filly will answer Linda.”

“That’s true,” Larry conceded, but he looked worried as he jumped up behind Kathy on Patches and they started for the grove.

Bob held Vagabond until he was astride Rocket, then let him go. As the burro ran down the shadowy road, the Craigs followed.

Suddenly the burro stopped, uncertain about going on. Then he brayed desperately.

Bob and Linda heard no other sound, but Vagabond must have, for he started off again confidently. He turned into an alley along which there were a few ramshackle sheds.

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Vagabond stopped and gave a soft bray. From one of the tumble-down buildings came an answering nicker! Linda and Bob slid off Rocket.

“Chica! Chica d’Oro!” Linda cried softly, running toward the shed.

The filly answered with a joyous whinny that directed Linda,

Bob, and Vagabond to her. They fumbled in the dark for the door latch, hoping to release her.

Suddenly two figures leaped from the shadows and yanked burlap sacks down over the Craigs' heads.

“Hey! What—” The rest of Bob’s protest was lost as he fought to free himself.

Linda struggled blindly against their captors. Despite the sack over her head she screamed, “Chica! Chica!”

Instantly strong hands clapped the rough burlap close to her nose and mouth. As she desperately pulled and scratched at the smothering hand, she realized that it belonged to a woman.

On the verge of fainting from suffocation, Linda heard the beating of hoofs against the shed door, the scream of an angry horse, and then the splintering of timber.

“Watch out!” a man’s voice shouted. “The horse!”

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A frenzied whinny sounded over Linda’s head, and she knew that Chica d’Oro was striking out with her front hoofs. At once the hands fell away from the girl’s face and she heard running feet. Dropping to her knees, Linda pulled the bag from her head. The palomino’s soft muzzle touched her face.

The next moment Bob was at her side. “Linda, Linda,” he asked softly, “are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she answered shakily.

As he helped his sister to her feet, Kathy and Larry galloped up and dismounted.

“We decided to come back,” Larry said. “I had a hunch you were riding into trouble.”

“We heard Chica d’Oro whinnying,” Kathy said anxiously. “What happened?”

“A couple of thugs tried to tie us up in sacks!” Bob said with a laugh.

“Chica rescued us,” Linda told them, hugging her horse close. Then she turned to Vagabond. “But we wouldn’t have found the pony if it hadn’t been for you.” She stroked the little gray burro affectionately.

“Good fellow,” said Bob, patting him. Vagabond waved his long ears appreciatively.

“We’d better hurry back to camp now and see if your gear is safe,” Larry said.

173

With Bob on Rocket and his sister on Chica d’Oro, they headed for the grove. Linda was silent and thoughtful as she rode along.

When they reached the main street, she whispered to Bob, “There’s somewhere I want you to go with me. Let’s get off here. Kathy and Larry can take the horses back.”

Bob agreed and they reined up. Linda explained to the others that she had a clue she wanted to follow. “You and I started it,

Kathy.”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” her chum said.

“Then we’ll all go,” Larry declared.

“Someone should check on our camp,” Linda protested.

Although Kathy and Larry did not want to leave them, they saw the necessity of returning.

“I’ll tell Larry your suspicions,” said Kathy. “And you two be careful!” she warned sternly, as the friends parted.

“Now what is this about?” Bob asked, as Linda led the way through the crowded street toward the feed store.

“I’ve been thinking,” his sister replied, “that the attack on us tonight had nothing to do with the parade. After all, our act is not enough of a threat to any other outfit to justify such violence.”

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“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” Bob agreed.

“My assailant was a woman,” Linda went on. “Suppose it was the dark-haired one who kidnaped Mary? Maybe she and her partner stole Chica d’Oro to lure me out after her.”

Bob looked doubtful. “I don’t see how they could be sure you would go to the sheds to find your palomino.”

“I think they planted someone to show us the way,” Linda replied. “We found you and Larry and Vagabond on that side

street because a little boy ran up and told us my horse had gone there.”

Bob frowned. “This looks bad,” he said. “But why the attack on us?”

They had reached the lane alongside the feed store. Linda stopped. “Because I think I know where Mary Sutton is.”

Bob stared at his sister in astonishment as she told him about the girl Kathy and she had seen at the hacienda. “If it really was Mary,” she said, “the kidnapers may be afraid we saw her and that we’ll report their hiding place to the police.”

“The theory makes sense,” Bob said seriously. “Lead the way!”

175

“We’d better hurry,” Linda said. “If I’m right, the kidnapers will have to change their hide-out right away.”

She led the way through the open gate into the moonlit courtyard. They crossed swiftly and entered the deep shadows of the garden. No lights showed within the house.

“Let’s go around to the back,” Linda whispered. Keeping to the trees, they worked their way to the rear of the house. It also was dark.

As they watched, a dim light appeared behind the iron grille of a ground-floor window. Instantly Bob and Linda darted across the clearing, flattened themselves against the house on either side of the window, and peered in.

They saw a tall woman with dark hair and a bandage on her hand, and a large blond man with a mustache. Between them, at a small wooden table, sat Mary. She looked pale and drawn.

The man strode toward the barred window and yanked the heavy curtains almost shut. As he did, Linda noticed that the sash was open a few inches from the top.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” the man said. “That Craig girl and her friend may have reported to the police already.”

176

“Whose fault is that?” the woman retorted sarcastically. “If you hadn’t been scared off by the horse, we’d have had Linda and her brother right here, where they couldn’t talk.”

“Whose fault?” the man responded angrily. “If you’d been watching your prisoner this afternoon, she wouldn’t have got out on the balcony and been seen.” Then he added roughly, “Get up, Mary! We’re leaving!”

The girl’s voice replied faintly, “I don’t feel well. I’m so hungry. . . .”

“She hasn’t had anything to eat all day,” the woman said. “I’ll get her some supper.”

“We haven’t time!” came the gruff reply.

“It’ll only take a minute,” the woman replied tartly. “We’ll really be slowed down if she faints.” A moment later a light went on in the next room, showing the woman in a small

kitchen.

Bob signaled to Linda and they slipped away from the window. “We must get in there and stop them from leaving,” he whispered. “There’s no time to go for the police.”

Staying in the shadow of the house, sister and brother crept to the back door. It was locked. They hurried along the row of ground-floor windows, but each was covered with an iron grille. Silently Linda and Bob slipped around to the front door, but it, too, was locked.

177

“Let’s go up on the balcony,” Linda whispered.

Quickly they mounted the stairs and tried five bedroom windows without success. When they reached the sixth and last, Linda was tense.

“We mustn’t fail!” she thought.

As Bob exerted his strength, the window slid open. Quickly he climbed into the dark room after his sister. Using Bob’s pencil flashlight, they found their way into a hall and tiptoed downstairs to a stone-floored corridor. At the far end of it light streamed through a half-open door.

Hugging the wall, Linda and Bob approached the room and cautiously looked in. The blond man was pacing up and down, scowling, while Mary sat by listlessly.

“Come and get the tray!” the woman’s voice called from the adjoining kitchen. The man turned on his heel and strode out.

“Now!” Linda whispered to her brother.

XV

Prisoners and Prizes

The eyes of the kidnaped girl widened and her mouth flew open as Linda and Bob slipped into the room.

“Oh!” Mary exclaimed.

Linda put a finger to her lips, cautioning Mary to silence. She and her brother pressed against the wall beside the kitchen door.

In a moment the man entered with the tray. As he set it on the table, Bob struck him a hard blow, knocking him down. At the same time Linda turned the key in the kitchen door and locked the woman in.

“Get the police as quickly as you can!” Bob said to Linda.

As she ran to the hall door, the man leaped to his feet, pushed her aside, and fled. Bob raced after him and neatly brought the fellow down a second time. He apparently was stunned.

“You’d better get help pronto,” Bob panted.

Linda dashed off. She could hear the woman pounding on the kitchen door and calling.

Ten minutes later Linda returned with two police officers, and presently two more arrived. The prisoners were handcuffed and the entire party escorted to headquarters.

As they alighted from the police car, questions were shouted at them, flash bulbs popped, and a crowd of curious people pushed and shoved to get near them. Police held back the crowd. Linda walked with her arm around Mary, who was thinner and still had on the jeans and blue-checkered shirt she had worn when kidnaped.

“Don’t worry,” Linda said to the trembling girl. “You’re safe now.”

“But there are more people in the gang,” Mary said.

Inside the police station Mary and the Craigs were hustled in to the chief’s private office. Mary’s parents had been notified and were on their way to pick up their daughter. The grateful girl tried to thank Linda and Bob, but her eyes filled with tears and all she could say to compliment them was, “You’re wonderful—just wonderful.”

A lean, tall FBI man spoke up, “We think so, too, but we’d like to know the details.”

Quietly Linda and Bob told the officers of their search and how they had found Mary. The girl herself had been so closely confined that she could add nothing except that her abductors were a married couple named Dolores and Sid, that they were part of a gang, and that she had also seen a heavy, swarthy-faced man named Rico.

At that point another officer entered with a report that the woman, Dolores, had a past record for smuggling. She was brought in, but when questioned about the kidnaping would only say, "It was a mistake."

"Then why didn't you let Mary go?" Linda demanded.

"The boss wouldn't let us," Dolores replied. "He was afraid she'd set the police on us."

"Why did you want to kidnap me?" Linda asked.

"Boss's orders," Dolores answered. "He thought you had something of great value that belonged to him."

"A yellow clay horse," Linda said. "Where is it?"

The woman shrugged. "It has not been delivered to my husband yet."

"Then your boss will get it from him?" queried the FBI man. The woman sat in stony silence.

"Who is your boss?" the police chief inquired.

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"I would not dare to say," Dolores replied, her dark eyes fearful.

"Is it C. Sello?" Linda asked suddenly.

The woman looked at the girl a long moment, then surprisingly she laughed. But she would not say another word.

Sid was brought in and questioned. He refused to admit to any charges and was taken to a cell.

In the meantime Mr. and Mrs. Sutton arrived and tearfully showered their daughter with affection and Linda and Bob with praise.

“You’ve made us the happiest people in the world,” Mrs. Sutton declared.

After Mary and Linda exchanged promises to visit one another, the exhausted girl was taken home by her parents.

Before Linda and Bob left the station, they called Rancho del Sol to inform their grandparents Mary had been found. It was then that they realized the rescue had been covered by radio, press, and television! They hung up in confusion.

“Guess we’re famous, kid.” Bob grinned.

When he and his sister finally got back to the grove, they found all the campers bursting with excitement.

182

“We heard about you on the radio!” said one. “Tell us all about it!”

Linda and Bob told their story again, and finally the neighbors went home.

“I’m so glad it’s all over!” Kathy said with a sigh of relief.

“But it’s not over,” Linda stated. “There are others in the gang to be captured. And we still have to solve the mystery of what is in the clay horse and where it is.”

As they got ready to climb into their sleeping bags, Linda suddenly remembered C. Sello and how strangely Dolores had laughed at the name. What was behind it? A little later Linda drifted off to sleep, but awoke as it was becoming light.

“The yellow roses for the horses!” Linda thought.

She awakened Kathy and after dressing, the girls hurried through the grove, where other outfits were beginning to stir. When they reached the cottage where the roses were in bloom, they saw a woman in the yard. She was delighted to sell them the flowers and proud to think that her roses would be in the big parade.

On the way back Linda and Kathy stopped at a wagon near the entrance to the grove and bought hot chocolate and doughnuts for everyone. When Linda and Kathy arrived in camp, they found that the men had washed off all of their animals, including Rango, much to the dog’s disgust.

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After breakfast the girls French-braided the red satin ribbon into the horses’ manes and tails, leaving long, fluttering streamers, and fastened a rose on the top of each mane and tail. It was the perfect touch, complementing their yellow-tasseled red saddle blankets.

Linda made a flower rosette of ribbon which she fastened to Rango’s collar. He looked none too pleased. And when she attempted to braid ribbon into his tail, he rebelled, going into a whirling-dervish act.

“Oh Rango, stop that!” Linda begged. “We have no time to

waste.”

“You’re going to spoil our outfit,” wailed Kathy.

Cactus Mac strode over. “You, Rango,” he said gruffly, “cut out them thar shenanigans and stand still!”

The dog looked at the foreman with uncertainty.

“You stand still now, and get on those goo-gaws,” Mac threatened. “If I can wear a sash around my middle, you can wear one on your tail.”

Rango stood with the look of a martyr, and Linda finished fixing him up. Next she trimmed Vagabond’s straw hat with ribbon and roses, made a couple of slits for his ears to slip through, and settled the hat on his head. He accepted it, pleased at the attention, though he knew he was being laughed at.

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Linda inspected the gaily bedecked animals. “You look great. Now,” she said, “it’s our turn!”

In a short while the Old Sol group had dressed themselves. As the five participants gathered in front of the trailer, they made a striking picture. With his leather-tan face and graying hair, Cactus Mac looked like a real Spanish don. He turned away, embarrassed at the compliments the girls gave him.

The various campers, now dressed for the parade, began riding out to the judging lot as Arabians, Spanish cavaliers, señoritas, charros, Indians, and plain and fancy Westerners and clowns. Horses shone and silver equipment gleamed.

There were five groups in the Family Class up for judging. The first was a man, woman, and little girl in royal-blue, jeweled suits on silver-equipped Arabian horses. The child had trouble handling her mount. It kept sashaying to the side and pivoting, bringing a frown from the judges.

Next came four black steeds with the riders in black-and-white suits, then two families with unmatched horses and equipment, but wearing plain, matching Western clothing.

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The del Sol group came last, with Rango in perfect line under Cactus Mac's threatening eye. The originality of their costumes excited unusual attention, and they were the subject for many camera enthusiasts.

When the parade finally got under way, beautiful floats and several bands were fed into their positions. Linda and her companions drew enthusiastic approval from the crowd all along the route. The judges, officials, and dignitaries on the big central stand looked down the street to see who was causing the exceptional stir.

When the del Sol group arrived at the stand, they formed the line as Linda had directed. Chica d'Oro executed a perfect bow. Vagabond wagged his hat and bent his right knee, while Rango gave a friendly bark. Then the group smoothly turned back in their parade formation and rode on. There was hearty laughter and applause from the stand.

As soon as the del Sol exhibitors had circled back to the judging lot where the awards were to be presented, Kathy

asked, “What do you think, Linda? Do we have a chance?”

“You all performed beautifully,” said Linda happily.

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“Whether we won or not, I’m proud of you.”

They moved up to a big, decorated platform where the awards were displayed. Along the edge of it stood tall mahogany trophies bearing carved clusters of cherry blossoms on the standard and topped with a golden horse statuette. On the table beside a microphone were boxes of blue, red, and yellow ribbons for first, second, and third place, and special awards of green rosettes. There was a milling crowd of people about the platform and police to keep order.

While Linda and her friends waited for the announcement of the winners, she suddenly spotted a small, dark man who slipped to the platform, pushed a yellow clay horse in among the trophies, and disappeared.

“That looks like my statuette!” thought Linda excitedly.

Quickly she rode toward the platform, and was almost close enough to pick up the clay horse when a heavy, swarthy man in a Spanish costume sauntered up. Quick as a wink he snatched the statuette and put it under his cape.

As he turned aside, Linda swung Chica d’Oro in front of him, blocking the way, and called to a nearby policeman, “Help! Hold this man!”

In two strides the officer was beside them and grasped the man. “What’s the matter here?” he demanded.

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Linda told him that she had seen the man take the clay horse from the platform. “It looks like one that was stolen from me. I believe this man is part of a gang that kidnaped Mary Sutton.” Linda explained that she was sure they were after the statuette because something valuable was secreted inside.

The policeman looked doubtful. “Let’s see the horse,” he said to the suspect.

Boldly the man pulled the figurine from under his cape. “I don’t know what this girl is talking about. I won the horse on the spin of the wheel over at a booth.”

“What do you say is in it?” the puzzled officer asked Linda.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “but if we could open it, you’d see I’m right.”

“This is a serious charge,” said the officer. “I think you’d both better come to the station to answer a few questions.”

As the policeman spoke, the swarthy man began to edge away. With a fast movement Linda put her palomino behind the man, with the filly’s nose to his back, and touched quick heels to her side.

Remembering the trick she had learned, Chica d’Oro gave the man a strong push, and he went sprawling to the hard ground. The clay horse shattered, and out rolled a bright gold disk!

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Quickly the officer nabbed the man and blew his whistle. “You were right,” he told Linda.

At the same time Linda jumped from her horse and picked up the disk. Kathy and the men had just ridden up. They dismounted and gathered around as Linda looked, fascinated, at the solid-gold piece marked with the three crosses of Cortez.

“C. Sello!” Linda whispered. “This isn’t anybody’s name! It’s Spanish for Cortez Seal! The gold piece must be priceless!”

“The only one of its kind,” said the swarthy man softly, his eyes glittering. “There are collectors who would give almost anything for it.”

“This must be part of the stolen Cortez collection that Bronco was reading about,” Bob put in.

The swarthy man nodded grimly. “The most valuable piece of all,” he murmured, “and now I’ve lost it!”

Two more policemen responded to the whistle. The small man who had left the statuette was handcuffed to one of them.

“We just picked up this fellow,” the officer said. “He’s one of the kidnapers. There was an alarm out for him.”

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The handcuffed man glared at the swarthy prisoner. “Rico, you clumsy ox! What a fine leader you turned out to be!”

“Rico!” Linda exclaimed. “He’s the man who ordered the clay horse from the pottery in Mexico.”

“That was the first of his many mistakes,” the other man said bitterly.

“Is it my fault, Fernandez, if the pottery made two horses instead of one?” Rico retorted. “They forgot to enclose the seal in the first one. It is their mistake, not mine.”

“It was your mistake to send that stupid Juan to purchase the horse,” replied Fernandez. “He let the Craig girl get both of them.”

“Was it Juan who broke all the statuettes in the pottery booth?” Linda asked.

Fernandez nodded wryly. “He thought maybe the seal had been put in one of the glazed horses by mistake.”

“I told him to look for the curved-arrow sign on the bottom,” Rico said angrily.

“And I told you we couldn’t trust him, Rico,” Fernandez retorted.

“Which one of you tried to poison my palomino?”
Linda asked sternly.

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The stocky man laughed shortly. “Juan again. When he stole the horse’s head from your purse and found it did not have the seal in it, he poisoned your filly in a fit of temper.”

“And he also left us the warning note?”

“He thought it would scare you off,” Fernandez told her.

Rico growled. “He wasn’t supposed to do that. He made more trouble than he was worth. I’ll be glad to turn him in. You can

find him around Olvera Street. Juan Doreno is his name.”

“What about the two men who stole the horse package from the Scotsward mailbox?”

Rico scowled. “No more questions. I’ve talked too much already.”

“You’ve told them where to find Juan,” Fernandez said. “That’s all they need to know. He will tell them everything else.”

“We’re going back to the station now,” the first officer said to Linda. “Please follow us there as soon as you can. Your statement will be needed.”

Linda promised and the policemen bundled their prisoners off. She and her friends turned their attention to the presentation of the awards, which had already started.

There was a smattering of applause, then the voice of the judge came over the microphone:

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“Family Group.”

Linda and the others exchanged looks of anticipation. As they stood tensely beside their horses, waiting, Kathy quietly crossed her fingers.

“For theme of costume, originality, and performance,” the judge announced, “a blue ribbon for first place and a trophy to —” he paused for dramatic effect—“Rancho del Sol!”

Linda's heart thumped in happiness, Kathy squealed, and the two girls hugged each other ecstatically. The men grinned, pleased.

“Will a member of the group please come forward to accept the award?” the judge asked.

“You go, Linda,” Bob said as his sister kissed Chica d’Oro lightly on the nose.

As she hesitated, Larry said, “The act was your idea. You go!”

“Get goin’,” said Cactus Mac gruffly, smothering a grin. “You can kiss everybody later.”

Hastily Linda mounted and rode to the front of the platform—Vagabond following Chica d’Oro as always.

“That was a mighty fine performance, little lady,” the judge commented as he handed Linda the trophy and the ribbon. As the flash bulbs popped and the crowd applauded noisily, he held the microphone down for her to speak.

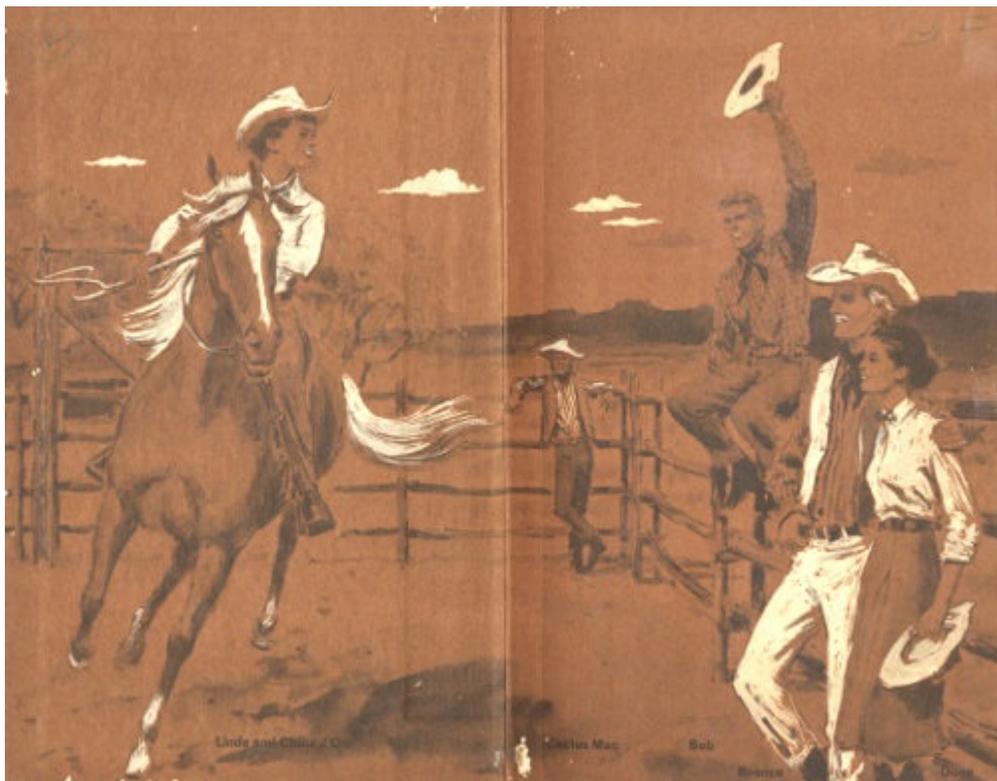
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“We have had a wonderful and exciting time,” Linda said happily. “Thank you very much for the trophy. It will be displayed proudly at Rancho del Sol.”

As the applause broke out, Linda put Chica d’Oro into a perfect bow, and Vagabond bent his knee awkwardly to show his gratitude.



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[The end of *Linda Craig and the Clue on the Desert Trail* by Ann Sheldon]