

# BETTY GORDON *at* RAINBOW RANCH



*By the Author of*  
**RUTH  
FIELDING**

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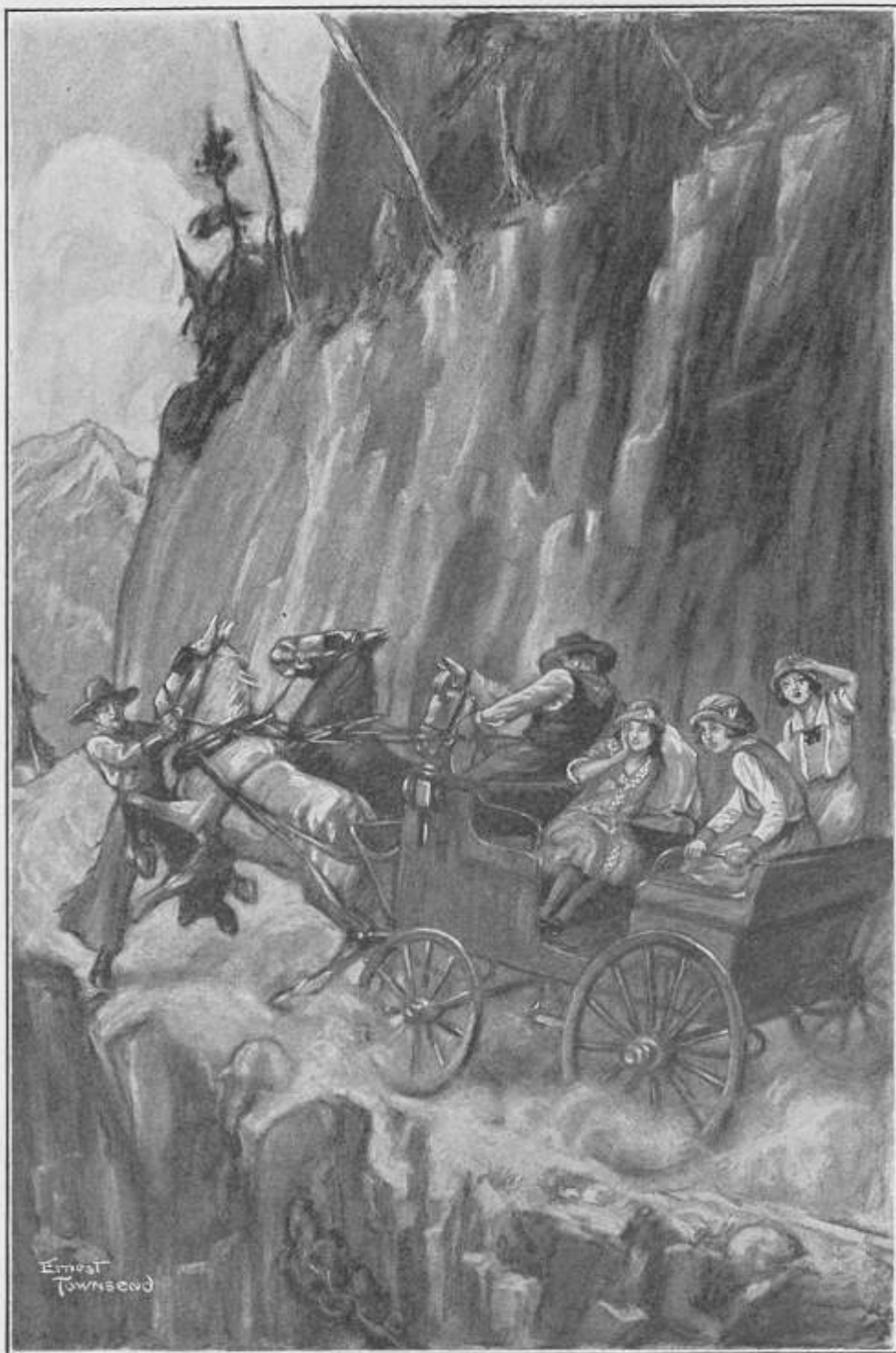




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**RUTH  
FIELDING**



**JOE KIRBY FLUNG HIMSELF FROM HIS MOUNT  
AND SEIZED THE BRIDLE OF THE STRUGGLING  
HORSE. [Page 10](#)**

# Betty Gordon at Rainbow Ranch

OR  
Cowboy Joe's Secret

BY  
ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "BETTY GORDON AT BRAMBLE FARM," "BETTY  
GORDON AND HER SCHOOL CHUMS," "THE RUTH FIELDING  
SERIES," ETC.

*ILLUSTRATED*



NEW YORK

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# **BETTY GORDON AT RAINBOW RANCH**

## **CHAPTER I A ROUGH EXIT**

“Isn’t it wonderful?”

Betty Gordon turned from the window and faced Bob Henderson across the hotel room.

“What?” asked Bob, looking up absently from the book he was reading.

“New York—the sights and sounds and even the smells,” said Betty enthusiastically. “I love them all!”

Bob laughed.

“There are worse old towns than New York,” he conceded.

“But on a day like this I prefer to enjoy it from the interior rather than the exterior!”

“As it were,” laughed Betty. Then she pouted. “I can’t agree with you there, Bob. In fact, as you made that observation, I was just about to remark that the great outdoors calls to me. The snow is so beautiful and white and fleecy!”

Bob put down his book with a sigh of resignation.

2

“Do you really want to go out in this weather?” he queried in a long-suffering tone.

Betty beamed delightedly.

“How did you ever guess it, Bob? Shall I get my hat?”

“Yes, and your top coat and your galoshes and your ermine coat, as well,” Bob called after her. “You’ll need ’em all.”

“If you will tell me where to get the ermine coat,” Betty caroled light-heartedly from the adjoining room, “I’ll be ever so much obliged, Bob. Where did I put those overshoes? Do you really think I need ’em?”

“Need them!” repeated Bob, as he put away his book with an air of finality. “Really, Betty, sometimes I question whether you are as bright as you look.”

Betty chuckled as she pulled a woolly tam-o’-shanter tight over her ears.

“You are not alone in that, Bob,” she assured him drolly.



“Various long-suffering members of the faculty at Shadyside have doubtless entertained the same doubt at various times. There! I’m all ready. How about you?”

She appeared in the doorway and eyed Bob’s unprepared state accusingly. For answer Bob grinned fondly at the exceedingly pretty picture Betty made.

3

“Say, you look great in that outfit, Betty. Don’t know that I really mind taking you for a walk, at that!” He ducked into a convenient doorway before Betty could do more than throw him a withering look.

Betty spoke again from her post at the window, from which she could view the snow-blanketed streets of the city.

“Bob, did you forget that to-morrow is Uncle Dick’s birthday?”

Bob appeared coated and hatted and ready for the street. He regarded Betty in downright consternation.

“That’s just what I did!” he admitted. “Say, Betty, I’m glad you reminded me!”

“It isn’t too late yet, so you needn’t look like the end of the world,” Betty told him gayly. “Come on, and let’s see if we can find something good enough for Uncle Dick.”

“Pretty hard work, that,” Bob said soberly as he followed Betty into the hotel corridor and walked toward the elevator. “I can’t think of anything, offhand, that’s good enough for Uncle Dick.”

Betty patted Bob's hand understandingly.

"There isn't anything, of course," she agreed. "But even at that, we can do our best!"

Betty Gordon and Bob Henderson were staying in New York for a few days with Mr. Richard Gordon, Betty's uncle and Bob's guardian, who was called "Uncle Dick" by them both. The glorious winter holidays had been divided between their friends, the Littells and the Guerins, and there were still a few precious days of freedom left before the opening of Shadyside and Salsette, the schools attended by the two young people. In Bob's language, they were "out to make the most of them."

4

Out in the street, Bob and Betty hesitated over which direction to take. The hotel where they were staying with their Uncle Dick was situated in the throbbing heart of the city. The stores and tempting shops on every side seemed to offer the young folks an embarrassment of riches.

"I tell you what we can do!" Bob was seized with sudden inspiration. "What do you say to trying some of those queer little shops on the side streets? There was one antique place I passed the other day that looked mighty interesting."

"An antique for Uncle Dick! That would be lovely!"

Betty was glowing. The rosy face and sparkling eyes beneath the tam-o'-shanter attracted so much attention from passersby that Bob's chest began to swell with pride in his companion. He became very talkative and forgot all about his former reluctance to accompanying Betty on her excursion.

They turned down a side street and found the antique shop Bob had spoken of. It was a curious little place, ancient enough in itself and sunk below the level of the sidewalk so that one had to descend a number of shallow steps before reaching the old-fashioned brass knocker on the door. This knocker was evidently only for looks or advertisement, for the door stood always hospitably on the latch.

5

Bob pushed it open now and he and Betty were fairly blown in by the brisk wind and were followed by a flurry of snowflakes. The inside of the shop was so dark that they stood blinking like owls for a moment or two, trying to get their bearings.

“There isn’t any one here,” Betty whispered. But the next moment an old man, advancing like a shadow from the deeper shadows at the rear of the shop, disproved her assertion.

He peered at the two young people over heavy-lensed glasses. He was a very old man and an absent-minded one. For a moment he seemed to have difficulty in saying anything at all. Then he spoke.

“Anything I can do for you?” he asked in a faint, far-away voice that sounded slightly eerie in that shadowed place.

“We thought we might look around a bit.” It was Bob who spoke first. He tried to make his voice as casual and his manner as confident as Uncle Dick’s. “We were thinking of buying a birthday present for an—er—relative.”

6

“Well,” came the faint voice, “I will show you what we have.

Pray follow me.”

The boy and girl complied with the request, following the old man about the shadowy shop, striving to speak intelligently about the various objects of art he pointed out to them.

It was plain that the old man loved every ancient, worm-eaten or rust-corroded thing in the place, and when Betty and Bob finally decided on a beautiful old desk with spindly legs and handsome carving the proprietor appeared ready to weep with vexation at being forced to part with one of his treasures.

However, the money that Bob counted out to him seemed to comfort him partially and he promised to have the desk at the hotel late on that same afternoon.

“Do you think Uncle Dick will be pleased?” Betty queried eagerly when they were in the street again. “He doesn’t really need a desk, you know.”

“He needs anything with worm holes enough in it,” Bob responded flippantly. “Besides, it is a really beautiful piece of furniture.”

“But where will he put it?” Betty stepped still in dismay as this very obvious difficulty presented itself. “Uncle Dick never stays in one place, you know, and he can hardly carry the desk on his back about the country with him.”

7

Bob was nonplussed for a moment.

“Well,” he said, “he can store it somewhere, can’t he? Then, when he sets up housekeeping, it will come in handy.”

Betty giggled.

“Funny to think of Uncle Dick setting up housekeeping! He doesn’t seem a domestic sort of person, some way.”

However, nothing further was said about changing the desk and the two young folks continued to wander on through the lightly falling snow, glorying in the tingling bite of the wind on their faces, the crunching of the snow underfoot, sensing the glamour of bright shop fronts and hurrying crowds.

After a while Betty awoke to the fact that they had wandered farther afield than they had intended. The gay and sumptuous shops had given place to dingier, less pretentious ones. Rows of unlovely but respectable houses fenced them in on all sides.

“Better be turning back, Bob,” said Betty. “If Uncle Dick gets in before we do——”

She broke off suddenly, fixing her startled gaze on the front of a house directly across the street. The door of this house opened suddenly and violently. A young woman appeared and, as though pushed by a rough hand from behind, lost her footing on the slippery sill and half-fell, half-slid down the snow-covered steps.

8

“You get out!” a shrill voice screamed after her. “Get out and stay out!”

9

## CHAPTER II

### HOT BROTH

Recovering from her momentary pause of surprise and horror, Betty darted across the street, Bob close at her heels.

“Oh, Bob, did you ever see anything like that before?”

“I never did, Betty,” answered the youth. “Rather rough stuff, if you ask me. Wonder what it all means?”

The young woman—hardly more than a girl—who had been so unceremoniously thrust from the house now lay huddled at the foot of the steps, a crumpled heap of misery. A shabby suitcase, thrown out after her, had bounded from the lower step and lay in the center of the sidewalk, its contents partially exposed to the eyes of any passerby.

While Betty bent over the girl Bob picked up the suitcase, stuffed in the contents, and shut it firmly. There was at least one embarrassment saved this wretched girl.

Bob approached more closely and overheard what Betty was saying.

“Can you get up?” Her hand was coaxingly beneath the arm of the other girl. “You aren’t really hurt, are you?”



The girl drew in a long sobbing breath. She seemed almost hysterical.

“Oh, no, no, no!” she said sharply as she struggled to her feet, brushing the clinging snow from her threadbare coat.

“Nothing ever hurts me! Who could expect anything to ever hurt me?” There was a wildness in the girl’s eyes, a despairing note in her voice, that frightened Betty. Almost for the first time during all her many and varied experiences, she was at a loss what to do, what to say next.

As an orphan, Betty Gordon had been forced to think for herself at an earlier age than is usual with girls. Though the ward of “Uncle Dick,” her father’s brother to whom she was devoted, Betty found herself still without any “settled” family. Mr. Richard Gordon was forced to travel extensively in the interests of his business. Since it was impossible for Betty to accompany him on many of these trips, Mr. Gordon had striven lovingly to make ample provision for his ward elsewhere.

At Bramble Farm, before this pleasant bachelor uncle had come to take personal charge of her, Betty had met with a series of rather unpleasant experiences. However, Betty considered that summer well spent for in this, the first volume of the series, entitled, “Betty Gordon at Bramble Farm,” the young girl had met Bob Henderson, thus beginning a friendship that was destined to become a lasting one.

11

Later, through a misunderstanding with her traveler uncle who had left the place on business a day or two before Betty’s telegram announcing her arrival reached it, Betty found

herself alone in Washington. She was subsequently kidnaped by a group of merry girls who mistook her for a cousin of the same given name. This mishap proved to be most fortunate in the end, since Betty found herself with three new friends, Roberta, Louise and Esther Littell, to say nothing of their plump little cousin of the same name who was promptly rechristened Libbie to avoid confusion.

Betty remained a member of the Littell household until her Uncle Dick sent for her from Flame City, an ugly but interesting oil town. Bob Henderson spent that summer with Betty in the oil fields, and later made the startling and joyful discovery that he was not only possessed of a real family, having found two maiden aunts, sisters of his dead mother, but that he and these two new relatives were joint possessors of a farm which proved to be oil land. Mr. Gordon was made Bob's guardian, a state of affairs that was most satisfactory to all.

After the glorious freedom of the oil fields Bob and Betty found it hard to settle down to the routine of school. But they went without protest, Betty to Shadyside and Bob to Salsette Military Academy across the lake. Some of Betty's Washington friends and the Guerin girls, whom she had met that summer at Bramble Farm, were registered at Shadyside, a fact that speedily reconciled Betty to the somewhat monotonous routine of school work.

12

Betty and Bob visited the Littells during the Christmas Holidays and later spent a joyful week or two at "Mountain Camp" before duty recalled them to Salsette and Shadyside.

Later they enjoyed a delightful summer at the seashore with the same merry group of friends. But when summer ended they found themselves more eager than reluctant to return to school. The term that followed contained a great deal of interest for both Betty and Bob. At Shadyside, as told in the volume before this, “Betty Gordon and Her School Chums,” Betty found a chance to champion two new teachers, the Misses Nevins, one of whom was badly scarred about the face and hands. When later this afflicted teacher proved to be a heroine, having received the painful burns about her face and hands in the course of her heroism, Betty was more than ever glad that she had championed the two unfortunate sisters and started the movement among the girls which resulted in a changed and far happier existence for the new teachers.

But at this particular moment of her life, facing the wild-eyed girl in the snowy street, Betty found herself inarticulate.

13

The young woman looked about her for her suitcase, which Bob immediately brought forward. She was actually going, and still Betty had not said a word.

It was Bob, with his pleasant, friendly smile, who saved the day.

“Can’t we go along with you for a way and carry your suitcase?” he asked. “It seems rather heavy.”

“Going!” muttered the girl. “How do I know where I’m going?”

“Then,” said Betty pleasantly, “if you are not going anywhere

in particular, perhaps you will come with us and have a bite to eat. We were just on our way to a restaurant.” Now that Betty came to think of it, the thing she most wanted in the world was a sandwich and a glass of milk!

At mention of food the face of the strange young woman lighted up eagerly.

“Why, the poor thing must be starving,” thought Betty to herself. Aloud she said: “You carry the suitcase, Bob, and let’s get along. I, for one, am freezing in this place. It’s growing colder by the minute.”

14

The stranger seemed trying to protest. She looked at Betty suspiciously, shaking the friendly little hand from her arm.

“I’m all right. I don’t want to be pitied. Let me have my baggage and go!”

“Oh, please!” Betty protested. “Here is a little place right now, made to order for us. Do come in!”

The sight of food, the nearness of food, the smell of food, proved too much for the hungry girl’s resolution. She allowed Betty and Bob to lead her within the unpretentious restaurant without further protest.

As they sought a table in the rear of the place Betty glanced at Bob. He was smiling reassuringly.

“Good little sport,” he said in her ear. “I never knew a person who could manage like you, Betsey.”

Praise from Bob was always sweet, and Betty glowed with it as she seated herself beside the strange girl.

“Isn’t it warm in here!” she cried, flinging back her own woolly scarf and smart top coat. “Better open your coat, at least,” she added, noticing that her companion made no move to follow her example. “You’ll get cold on going out.”

15

“I’m not too warm,” said the other faintly, and Betty noticed that the girl was shivering violently, her teeth chattered as though she were caught in an icy blast. A nervous chill—or something worse?

“Hot soup, and plenty of it!” she flung at Bob. “And, oh, please be quick!”

The latter nodded and immediately gave the order.

“And hurry it up, please,” he added in a low tone to the waitress.

The soup arrived after a gratifyingly short wait and Betty pushed a steaming plateful before the shivering girl.

“This ought to warm you up,” she said, and dipped her own spoon in the savory broth.

It was pitiful to see the eagerness with which the half-starved girl first set upon the food, all the more pitiful because of the restraint she tried to put upon herself. She won in the end, too, forcing herself to wait between each spoonful of soup, to break carefully and butter her roll before devouring it.

No ordinary person, this, thought Betty, but, by her speech and action, a girl of unusual refinement. What unfortunate train of circumstances could have brought her to that unhappy pass in which she and Bob had found her?

16

This question, their new acquaintance, buttering the last roll and spooning up the last bit of soup, answered of her own accord.

“This is the first real meal,” she said softly, looking from Bob to Betty and back again at her plate, “that I have had for three days. Yes, three whole days!”

17



## CHAPTER III

### MILLIE TELLS HER STORY

“Good gracious!” exploded Bob incredulously. Then added hospitably, with a gesture toward her empty bowl: “Have another one?”

The stranger did not answer. Taking silence for consent, Bob immediately ordered more soup for all of them.

Betty was leaning eagerly forward, her vivid face alight with a variety of emotions. Chief among them was compassion.

“How awful!” she cried, though careful not to raise her voice. “How did you live?”

“Oh, I’ve had something,” said the girl in a low tone. “A bit of bun or a piece of dry bread.”

“Had you no place to go?” asked Betty pityingly.

“Oh, I had a boarding house!” The girl spoke bitterly and her weary young eyes lifted to Betty’s for a brief moment. “The same one you saw me—kicked out of just now.”

“Some one else deserved to be kicked, and I’d like to do it,” muttered Bob. Just then the new order arrived and

was ignored.

The poor girl had heard Bob's indignant exclamation. She glanced at him quickly then lowered her eyes to the poor thin hands that were folded quietly on the table.

"They were quite within their rights—that woman and her husband," she explained wearily. "I couldn't pay my board, you know. And, after all, a boarding house isn't a charity institution."

"Haven't you—" Betty hesitated over the question, then continued with a rush, "any money at all?"

The girl shivered, glanced about her in a frightened way. She saw the fresh bowl of soup, drew it toward her and began automatically to spoon it up.

"No," she said in a voice so low that Betty could scarcely hear the words. "I have no money at all."

Betty felt suddenly weak and faint herself in sympathy with this poor girl beside her. She glanced appealingly at Bob and found him smiling at her. Dear old Bob! He was always so dependable. Perhaps *he* would know what to do in an emergency like this. Adrift in New York with no money and a snowstorm raging!

"Won't you tell us more about yourself?" she asked gently. "We want to help you if you will let us."

Again the girl gave Betty that curious, studying glance.

“I believe you do,” she said as though surprised that this conviction should be forced upon her. “There isn’t much to tell,” she added, speaking in the dull and colorless tone that betrayed her utter mental and physical weariness. “It all began, really, with that scrape Bud got himself into. He wasn’t to blame—I know he wasn’t! But there were others who didn’t agree with me—” The voice of the girl trailed off and Betty shot a quick, eager glance at Bob. This promised to be more interesting and more complicated than they had anticipated. It was Bob who put the next question and prompted the girl to go on with her story.

“This Bud—what scrape did he get himself mixed up in?” he asked quietly.

The girl jerked up her head. Two red spots of color began to glow in her thin face, whether from the warmth of the food or excitement could not be told.

“There was a hold-up, and they accused Bud of taking part in it. As if,” her head flung back defiantly, “such a thing were possible! Why, Bud couldn’t do anything crooked!”

“Couldn’t he clear himself? Wasn’t there some way he could prove his innocence?” Bob was intensely interested.

20

The girl shook her head despondently. The color faded, leaving her face white and wan again.

“He couldn’t seem to. The circumstantial evidence was too strong against him. I knew he didn’t do it because I knew Bud,” she added simply.

“Was he—was Bud—your brother?” asked Betty softly.

The girl looked up at her, startled, surprised.

“No,” she said. “Bud is my husband!”

It was Betty’s turn to start.

“Good gracious!” she said, abruptly speaking her foremost thought, “you don’t look old enough to have a husband!”

The girl smiled wanly.

“I’m nineteen,” she returned. “Bud and I were married a little over a year ago.”

“But you were so young!” exclaimed Betty with a grown-up air that sat oddly on her own extreme youth. “I should think your folks would have had something to say to that.”

“They did!” The girl spoke bitterly again. “They were furious when I told them I was going to marry Bud—not because I was so young, but because Bud was only a cattle dealer’s agent. I lived with my aunt and my step-uncle,” she added. “My uncle Roland was never very fond of me. I think he would have softened toward me if I had married some one very rich or famous. But Bud——”

21

She paused for a moment, then went on, toying with the spoon in the now empty dish.

“It was Uncle Roland who forced me to leave Bud when he became implicated in the hold-up scandal. He sent me off

here, a thousand miles from Bud, with only a little money in my pocket and a letter of recommendation to a business acquaintance of his. I didn't do well in the position," she added, trying to force a smile to her trembling lips. "I don't seem to do well in anything since I left Bud."

"But haven't you heard from him?" asked Bob, a curious gruffness in his voice. "Surely, he has tried to communicate with you?"

"How would he find out my address?" the girl asked wearily. "No one knows it but Uncle Roland. I tried to write to him," she added, the quietness of utter despair in her voice, "but I found that he had gone away. I don't know where. Nobody knows where. That," she finished, spreading her hands, palm outward, on the table, "is the end of everything, you see."

"It seems queer that he should have cleared out that way." Bob spoke his thought aloud, not realizing how tactless it was until Betty threw him a warning glance.

22

Too late! The girl stiffened and flung a defiant glance at Bob.

"Whatever Bud's reason was for going away, I know it was a good one!" She spoke in a tense, strained tone. "He didn't 'clear out,' as you call it, because he had anything to do with the hold-up. I know that!"

Bob flushed and looked very much embarrassed. Betty came to his rescue by putting a new question to the indignant girl.

"Do you think it would do any good if you could go back West and try to trace Bud?" she asked gently.

The girl shrugged hopelessly.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I have heard from reliable sources that Bud has actually disappeared without leaving an address. My uncle was kind enough,” bitterness crept in again, “to write me a long letter after I had found out these things myself, saying that Bud’s absence was positive proof of his guilt. I dare say he is laughing in his sleeve over it now.”

“Well, I think it is time he stopped laughing and came to the rescue,” cried Betty indignantly. “Does he—does your uncle know how you are situated?” she added.

The girl’s naturally pretty mouth set itself in a hard line.

23

“If I were dying, I would not let Uncle Roland know about it,” she said quietly.

Betty felt that it would be only a waste of time to attempt to change the girl’s mind on this point. She stared at her thoughtfully for a moment.

“What *are* you going to do?” she asked.

The girl threw Betty a queer glance and said nothing—only continued to stir her spoon around and around in the empty dish.

Betty and Bob exchanged quick glances. They were horrified at the dreadful plight of this girl. Yet, what could they do? What was it possible to do in a case of this kind?

The girl seemed oppressed by the brief silence. She shivered, drew her thin wrap closer about her shoulders, and made as though to rise.

“Wait a minute, please!” said Betty, fencing for time. “You haven’t told us your name yet.”

“Millie Harrison,” said the other drearily.

Betty leaned forward and put her warm, friendly little hand over Millie’s.

“Do you know what you are going to do, Millie Harrison?” she asked.

## CHAPTER IV

### A HELPING HAND

In response to Betty's question Millie Harrison showed a flicker of interest in her eyes but made no response in words. It was to her look of inquiry that Betty replied:

"You are going along with Bob and me!"

It was easy enough to make this decision, but not so easy to persuade the friendless girl to accede to it.

"You're sorry for me," she said over and over again, showing an unexpected stubbornness. "I don't want pity! I don't want charity!"

How she managed to overcome the girl's objections finally and override her pride, Betty alone knew. Bob stood by admiringly, not venturing to interfere.

Suffice it to say that at the end of fifteen minutes, despite the stubborn opposition of Millie Harrison, the three young folks found themselves speeding across town in a taxi hailed for the purpose.

Betty kept up a running fire of light chatter, all the time holding to the hand of Millie Harrison as though she



were afraid her wan, thin companion might suddenly make a dash for freedom.

In fact, Betty afterward confessed to Bob that she had never spent such a nerve-trying few minutes in her life.

“I had only one consolation,” she told him with a reminiscent chuckle. “If Millie had jumped for life and liberty there were plenty of snowbanks along the way to break her fall. I certainly was thankful for that snow, Bob Henderson!”

However, Millie remained quiescent enough until they reached the hotel. Before the imposing edifice she once more looked wildly about her, white and frightened.

“I don’t look fit to go in there,” she muttered, with an embarrassed glance at her shabby clothes. “I can’t go in there!”

“Of course you can! Who cares about your clothes?”

Betty linked an arm through that of the young stranger and piloted her through the revolving doors into the warm, luxurious lobby of the hotel.

No doubt they did make an odd trio—the girl and the boy, rosy, well-fed, well-clothed, and their shabby, wretched companion. There is no doubt but what people stared as the three made their way to the elevators. There is no doubt, either, but what the people in the elevator stared as it took them rapidly to the third floor.

It was torture to Millie Harrison. But she kept her head up and

shoulders back through the ordeal until they came to the door of the suite which Mr. Gordon had engaged for himself “and family” during their stay in New York.

Then once more Millie Harrison looked wildly about her and tried to pull away from Betty.

“Let me go! Oh, please, please, let me go!” she cried in a choked and desperate voice. “I don’t belong here! I don’t belong anywhere! Let me go!”

For answer Bob swung open the door and Betty gently led her into the sitting room of the suite.

“Please don’t talk like that,” Betty begged. “You make us feel bad. And we do so want to help you! Won’t you let us?”

“I don’t know why you are so kind to me,” said Millie Harrison, looking after Bob as he set her shabby suitcase down in a corner of the room. “Nobody has ever been so kind to me before!” And without the slightest warning she put her hand over her eyes and began to sob wildly.

Betty pushed her into a chair, unbuttoned her coat at the throat and pulled off the shabby hat. She gasped at the glory of curling fair hair that was Millie Harrison’s. She smoothed the hair back from the tired girl’s forehead and knelt down beside her.

Bob had flung off his coat and hat and stood by helplessly, willing to help but not knowing just how.

“Cry if you like,” Betty said soothingly. “It always does me

good to cry when things go wrong. Seems to smooth out all the wrinkles.”

Millie Harrison dried her eyes with the handkerchief Betty thrust into her hand.

“I don’t see what you ever have to be unhappy about,” she said listlessly. “You look as though you had never had an unhappy minute in all your life.”

Before Betty could reply there was the sound of quick footsteps along the corridor outside. A moment later the door was flung open and Mr. Gordon stood upon the threshold.

A handsome man, this bachelor uncle of Betty’s, tall, broad-shouldered, with a touch of gray in the hair about his temples and a whimsical smile. A commanding personality and a lovable one.

The whimsical smile was on his lips now as he surveyed the little group.

“Hello, my boy and girl! Did you think your Uncle Dick had got lost in a snowdrift? Nearly did, at that!”

His gaze rested curiously on Millie Harrison, but because he was Uncle Dick he betrayed no embarrassing surprise and asked no embarrassing questions. He merely waited.

Betty, flushed and eager, came to him and lay hold of his big rough ulster.

“Uncle Dick,” she said a bit breathlessly, “we brought a friend home with us. Her name is Millie Harrison and she has had a great deal of trouble—and——”

Uncle Dick stepped forward to where Millie Harrison sat huddled in her chair, white and miserable, her eyes red-rimmed from weeping.

He held out his big hand to her in the hearty cordial manner that no one, not even a Millie Harrison, could resist.

“My girl’s friends are mine too,” he said. “Glad to know you, Miss Millie. Now you girls run off and get ready for dinner. I think I’ll order it sent up here—a small family affair, you understand, but a spread fit for a king, for all that. Mind you’re not late!”

Betty flung her arms about Uncle Dick in a strangling hug.

“I love you, Uncle Dick!” she cried fiercely and went out of the room, taking the rather dazed Millie Harrison with her.

Mr. Gordon threw off his great coat and faced Bob, inquiringly.

“Perhaps you can explain what it’s all about, my boy,” he remarked. “I must confess to being considerably puzzled.”

“You’re a wonder, Uncle Dick!” broke out the boy vehemently. “If you had expressed any sort of surprise at seeing Millie Harrison she would have bolted for the door as sure as shooting. I was watching her. She was all set.”

“You interest me,” said Uncle Dick, drawing up a chair and regarding Bob quizzically. “Pray proceed and satisfy my devouring curiosity.”

As quickly as he could and in as few words as possible Bob told his guardian all that had passed between Betty and himself and their strange new acquaintance on that eventful afternoon.

Mr. Gordon was more than interested, and promised at once to do all he could for the deserted and penniless Millie Harrison.

Meanwhile, Betty had taken the strange girl into her bedroom and showed her the shining white bath that opened out from it.

“You were chilled through,” said Betty, turning on the hot water in the tub and returning to Millie where she still stood motionless in the center of the room. “A hot bath will make you feel like new again. And if you haven’t a change with you, I’ll lend you some of my pretties.”

Poor Millie Harrison! She was so dazed by the sudden manner in which her fortunes had taken a turn for the better that she seemed unable to utter further protest, but allowed Betty to order her about at will, following her instructions mechanically. She did not even object when Betty placed on the stool in the bathroom a frilly blue negligee and slippers to match.

30

“Slip into these,” she commanded. “We are to have a family party, so they will be perfectly proper.”

To the accompaniment of splashing in the bathroom, Betty examined her own pretty reflection in the mirror.

“I’m getting a real thrill,” she told herself with satisfaction. “I feel like the fairy godmother in the story. Only where, oh where,” and she made a sad little grimace at herself in the glass, “is Cinderella’s prince?”

## CHAPTER V

### AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK

When Millie Harrison emerged from the bathroom a few moments later, clad in Betty's dainty things, she certainly justified Betty's prophecy. Whether she felt like a "new person" or not, she most assuredly looked like one.

Her face was flushed and the blue gown was a very becoming setting for her fairness. She had let down her beautiful hair and it cascaded in shining ripples to her waist. Betty uttered an involuntarily exclamation of delight. She had pretty hair herself, masses of it, but since it was dark she had always admired fair hair.

"Pretty, pretty! Aren't you a lucky person, Millie Harrison, to have hair like that? And naturally curly, too!"

"I begin to think," said the older girl slowly, "that I am rather lucky, after all."

Little by little the ice of Millie's reserve thawed before Betty's warm friendliness. As they sat close together on the bed, Betty's arm about the older girl, Millie gradually became more talkative and gave Betty pathetic glimpses of her life with "Bud."

“We were so happy, Miss Gordon——”

32

“Call me Betty. Everybody calls me Betty.”

“Betty,” said Millie Harrison. “You have no idea how good he was, how gentle and considerate. He made up to me a hundred times over for the displeasure of my relatives. Then the hold-up—suspicion—and the end of my happiness!”

She shuddered so violently that Betty put a gentle hand over her mouth.

“Don’t talk about it. As long as you know he isn’t guilty, that’s all that counts. Anyway, you are bound to meet him some time before long, and as soon as he gets a chance to explain everything will be all right. Think how happy you will be then.”

Millie Harrison shook her head despondently.

“I don’t dare even think of that,” she said.

That instant there came a loud double knock on the door. Betty pushed the other girl on the bed as she rose to answer the imperative summons.

Bob was outside. He looked excited and his words tripped over themselves as he tried to explain.

“The desk! It just came! Uncle Dick has stepped out a minute, but I expect him back right away. If he comes in and sees the desk, the jig’s up. Where’ll I stow it, Betty?”

33



“In here, silly,” said Betty, opening the door wide. “Hurry! Oh, all right, I’ll help.”

They had barely time to push Uncle Dick’s birthday present into a corner of Betty’s room and cover it with a sheet grabbed from the bed when Uncle Dick himself reentered the sitting room. Behind him were two waiters carrying covered dishes from which streamed tempting aromas.

Betty giggled and motioned to Millie Harrison.

“If he comes in here to get us he may notice the sheet. It does look rather suspicious. To-morrow,” she added to Millie Harrison as they entered the sitting room, “is Uncle Dick’s birthday, and that,” with a motion of the hand toward the room they had left, “is his present. We want to keep it a surprise if we can.”

They had an excellent dinner. Mr. Gordon was a perfect host, gay, genial, attentive, urging everybody to have more of everything and making a good time generally.

He was especially pleasant to Millie Harrison, and it was evident before the small cakes and ice-cream arrived that this unfortunate girl had quite lost her heart to Betty’s Uncle Dick.

When the meal was over the question of their guest’s future came up for discussion.

Tactfully Mr. Gordon led Millie to speak of herself and her business training. It took him but a short time to find that this frail, fair-haired girl was very poorly equipped indeed to struggle in the modern business world where one has to be

well-equipped in order to attain even moderate success.

Ever since Bob had told him the story of this forlorn young girl Mr. Gordon had, in his own language, “donned his thinking cap,” and cudgelled his brains for some means by which he might help the girl without hurting her pride.

He hit upon the right scheme at last, and now as the three young folks turned eager eyes to him broached it in his usual easy, genial style.

“A friend of mine runs a flourishing business on a great system,” he began. “This foresighted fellow believes that in order to get the best efforts of his employees and the best good for his concern an education along the specified lines of his own business is the right thing. In short, all a young person entering his employ need be possessed of is a bright mind and an ambition to match.”

“Experience!” broke in Millie Harrison, watching him eagerly. “Surely he demands experience!”

“Not necessarily,” returned Mr. Gordon, regarding her kindly. “Experience is a fine thing, but my friend believes that a fresh, unprejudiced mind, willing to learn, is a greater. So, incidentally, do I. Now, my dear,” he leaned toward Millie with his quiet smile, “how would you like to try a position with this friend of mine? He has a miniature business school attached to his organization and supported by his organization which you can attend three nights a week if you wish. The salary will be small to start, undoubtedly, but as you improve, it also will improve. How does that strike

you?”

Millie tried to speak, but as tears filled her eyes turned quickly away.

“You might just as well,” she said unsteadily, “ask a drowning man if he wants a life preserver. Mr. Gordon, what makes you so good to me?”

“I think I am being good to my friend,” said Mr. Gordon lightly. “I am about to hand over to him a promising young business associate instead of keeping her for myself. Is that nothing for him to be thankful for?”

This view was evidently so novel to poor Millie that she gasped on a sob and choked on a laugh and had to be patted soundly on the back by Betty before she could be restored to herself.

The grateful girl took Mr. Gordon’s hand in both her own and tried to thank him, and failed miserably. She dropped the hand quickly, walked to the farther end of the room, where she stood with her back to the rest of them. Betty flung a grateful glance at Uncle Dick. She went over to Millie Harrison, put an arm about her thin shoulders, and spoke comfortingly to her.

36

In a few moments Millie was sufficiently restored to rejoin the group. Thereafter Uncle Dick saw to it that the conversation led as far from serious topics as possible. It is safe to say that Millie Harrison spent her first pleasant evening in many weeks. Sheltered, surrounded by new friends, with the prospect of immediate employment, what a

contrast was there to Millie's recent forlorn and friendless state!

Alone with Betty in her room after bidding Bob and Mr. Gordon good night, Millie again tried to express the gratitude in her heart.

"I never met people like you," she said thoughtfully, sitting on the edge of the bed and regarding Betty intently. The latter had let down her pretty dark hair and was brushing it carefully for the night. "I had begun to think that there was no more of your sort of kindness left in the world."

"Uncle Dick is the kind one!" Betty flung back her mane of hair and regarded her new friend earnestly. "There's nothing Uncle Dick can't and won't do for people to make them happy and comfortable if he likes them."

"Do you think," asked Millie wistfully, "that he likes me?"

37

"Haven't you had proof of it to-night?" retorted Betty.

Then she put down her brush and joined the girl on the bed.

"I like you, too, Millie," she said. "I want you to be happy, and I believe you will be."

"Oh, Betty, Betty! How can I be happy without Bud! Oh, Betty, if you could only find Bud for me!"

Betty patted the girl's bowed head and stared doubtfully and unhappily at the farther wall. Finding Bud seemed to Betty

about as impossible a task as had ever been set her.

“We’ll try, Millie,” she said with as great an assumption of confidence as she could muster. “And if one keeps on trying hard enough, something good is sure to happen. You just wait! We’ll find Bud for you, yet!”

## CHAPTER VI

### HARD TO LEAVE

On the morning of Mr. Gordon's birthday there was an unusually fine breakfast ordered and eaten by the family.

Directly after the morning meal the handsome antique desk was proudly brought forth by Betty and Bob and duly admired by Uncle Dick.

His enthusiasm was genuine and the two young people felt amply repaid for their visit to the antique shop the day before.

"After we bought it, we realized how little use you would have for an article of furniture, Uncle Dick," Bob said ruefully. "What will you do with it? Put it in a museum?"

"Far from it," said Mr. Gordon warmly. "I know a lady, a connoisseur of good and ancient things, who will consider it an honor to give my desk standing room until such time," he turned and playfully pinched Betty's check, "as we decide to start housekeeping." It was a standing joke between them—that far-distant, hypothetical time when Uncle Dick should cease from traveling and recall Betty from boarding school to keep house for him. So now Betty smiled and patted his hand and told him how glad she was he really liked the desk.

To all this Millie Harrison was a shy but interested listener. When, breakfast over, Mr. Gordon suggested that he take her to the office of his friend for the purpose of personally introducing her, she assented eagerly.

It was very hard for this shy girl to meet strangers alone, so that she welcomed eagerly the company of a man like Mr. Gordon, serving at once as protector and sponsor.

“Can’t Bob and I go with you, Uncle Dick?” begged Betty. “It’s such a beautiful day, and we want to know first-hand about Millie.”

Uncle Dick considered.

“Since to-day is my birthday,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “I am conceited enough to think that fact deserves celebration. We can’t go in such a crowd to this man’s office, but what do you say to lunch downtown and a show afterward? Does that strike you?”

“Hard!” replied Bob delightedly and Betty squeezed her uncle’s hand.

“You are such a lovely playmate, Uncle Dick,” she said contentedly. “We’ll all start together and Bob and I will shop first, then meet you for lunch,” she added.

So they all started out together, Mr. Gordon and Millie on business bent, Betty and Bob on pleasure. They parted soon after, Betty heading unerringly for the shopping district after wishing Millie the best of good luck.

It was an easy matter for Betty to fill in the intervening hours, since the gorgeous window displays of the department stores held a never-ending fascination for her. Bob, though slightly bored after the masculine fashion, sauntered indulgently beside her enjoying her fresh and unsated delight in everything she saw.

Now and then they made small purchases, things they expected to use during the new school term.

As the time approached for them to meet Uncle Dick, Betty found her mind filled more and more with thoughts of Millie Harrison. She wondered whether Uncle Dick's mission had been successful and unwillingly confessed to a doubt of it.

"I'm worried about that girl," she confessed to Bob when he commented on the frown that gathered between her eyes. "I have a feeling she isn't cut out to succeed in business, Bob."

"She does seem rather the clinging vine type," Bob agreed. "Still," confidently, "she can't help but get along with Uncle Dick to back her."

Betty still looked doubtful.

"Uncle Dick can't help her if she won't help herself," she said sententiously.

"What makes you think she won't help herself?" Bob was frankly curious.

"Can't you see she is worrying about this Bud of hers? Her heart won't be in anything that doesn't include him. Boys are



so stupid when it comes to such things,” she added.

“I’ll admit you can run rings around us fellows when it comes to affairs of the heart,” grinned Bob. They laughed together joyously and repaired to the vestibule of the department store where they had agreed to meet Uncle Dick.

The latter was late for his appointment, but when he did appear his news concerning Millie Harrison was of the most encouraging sort.

“She took to the office like a duck to water,” he said, piloting his young charges to a restaurant. “I left her being instructed in the duties of her new position by Jack Chaloner’s own secretary—a fine girl who can be counted on to make Millie as comfortable as possible.”

“It was so good of you to help her out, Uncle Dick,” said Betty, squeezing his arm gratefully. “We might have known you would.”

“Nonsense!” Uncle Dick modestly disclaimed all credit to himself. “I have taken a real interest in the poor thing. If she succeeds in her position she will more than repay me for anything I have been able to do for her. And now,” he added, dismissing all serious matters with a gay wave of his hand, “let us decide the momentous question of what show we shall see!”

They decided on a musical comedy and had a delightful afternoon, as they always had when Uncle Dick was host. They went home in a taxicab, laughing and merry, to meet a discouraged and wistful Millie Harrison at the hotel.

It seemed impossible to cheer her up, although Betty and Uncle Dick and even Bob did their best. To do her justice, the girl tried gamely to dispel the gloom that enveloped her, but the attempt only succeeded in making her depression more apparent.

This state of affairs continued during the remaining days of the vacation. The girl was in such a nervous state from worry and hardship and her yearning for Bud that she was totally unfitted, physically as well as mentally, for the bustle and confusion of a modern business office.

Mr. Gordon reported privately to Betty and Bob that his friend, Jack Chaloner, seemed puzzled over his new employee. The girl faithfully and conscientiously performed all the duties assigned to her, but there was no life nor enthusiasm about the performance. In other words, she was an automaton, doing just what she was told to do and not a thing more.

“I know the cure for that,” said Betty sagely. “Just let some one produce Bud——”

43

“Humph!” grunted Bob. “From present appearances you might as well talk of producing the moon!”

The happy holidays came to an end, filled to the brim with fun by Uncle Dick, and once more Betty and Bob were facing the prospect of an immediate return to Shadyside and Salsette. If it had not been for the parting with Uncle Dick and the uncertainty regarding Millie Harrison they would have been glad to go, for the prospect of meeting old friends and

teachers was always a pleasant one.

However, Betty dreaded the effect their departure would have upon Millie Harrison. Depressed and quiet as she was when in the constant company of her new friends—Uncle Dick had insisted that she share Betty's room at the hotel during their stay in town—how much more miserable would she be when deprived of their companionship?

To drive these thoughts from her mind Betty dragged Bob with her to various sections of the city to “room-hunt” for her new friend.

It was not easy to find pleasant quarters that would also come within the reach of Millie's slender purse. They found a boarding house at last where Millie could have a small but pleasant room and where the landlady was said to set an unusually good table.

To this they took Millie in triumph on the Saturday afternoon before they were to return to school and were pleased to see the girl's genuine pleasure in what was to be her new home.

44

“If only I could have you with me!” she said, clinging wistfully to Betty. “I shall miss you so, Betty!”

They were all rather quiet that afternoon and the following day when Mr. Gordon drove them up to the rather dingy but eminently respectable brown stone front of the boarding house and deposited Millie bag and baggage—there was so pitifully little of this latter paraphernalia—in her new quarters.

They went up with the girl to her tiny, sunny room and tried gallantly to act in the old happy and light-hearted way. It was of no use. The room seemed too small to accommodate the four of them, as indeed it was. Mr. Gordon alone would have seemed to fill it uncomfortably full.

The latter realized this and made his farewell to Millie kind but brief.

“You must write to us and let us know how you are getting along,” he said, holding out his hand to her.

45

“During vacations Betty will contrive to get in touch with you. I can see that in her eye! Good-bye, my dear.” He turned and went below, signing to the two young folks that he would wait for them in the car below. Millie stood staring after him with an expression in her eyes as though she were about to cry.

Bob was next. He put out his hand to the girl with boyish awkwardness.

“Good-bye, Millie, and good luck,” he said. “Remember, we’re all with you.”

“Oh, Betty!” The two girls were alone at last. “Please go before I begin to cry. I—can’t bear it——”

There were tears in Betty’s eyes as she turned from the door and flung her arms about the girl in a warm hug.

“I’ll write to you, Millie, often.”

Then she was out in the hall with a tight feeling at her throat.

From within came a swift sound and the creaking of springs as though Millie had flung herself upon the bed.

Betty paused and half turned back toward the room, then shook her head sadly and went on down the hall. Her heart was very heavy within her.

## CHAPTER VII

### BACK AGAIN

The return to Shadyside and Salsette, otherwise an occasion for rejoicing, was sadly overshadowed for both Betty and Bob by anxiety for the lonely girl whom they must leave behind them in New York.

After saying good-bye to her in her little room at the boarding house the two young folks drove back to the hotel with Uncle Dick almost in silence. The position of the unfortunate girl brought into strong relief their own happy, carefree lives.

“I feel almost guilty when I think what fun it will be to meet all the girls again.” Betty tried to put this thought into words as they reached their hotel and Uncle Dick opened the car door for them. “It seems unfair for me to have so many friends when Millie Harrison has none at all.”

“You forget us, Betsey,” said Bob, adding, with a twinkle in his eye: “Or perhaps you think we don’t matter.”

“Much good we can do Millie when we are miles and miles away from her,” Betty retorted quickly.

“We have done the poor girl some good already,” Uncle Dick reminded her as they crossed the lobby toward the elevator.

“And now, youngsters, I must start you on the road to duty with no further delay. Even now we must step on the gas with great gusto if we expect to reach our respected halls of learning while the sun is still in the sky.”

“I love speeding,” said Betty as they were crowded into the elevator and whirled aloft. “You can’t ‘step on it’ too hard to suit me, Uncle Dick.”

“You are an unreclaimed young sinner,” said Uncle Dick severely. “After being hauled up in court once or twice and forced to pay the fines inflicted by an austere justice, I fear you would lose some of your love for this famous outdoor sport.”

“How many times have you been hauled up, Uncle Dick?” asked Bob, with a grin.

“On advice of counsel,” Uncle Dick informed him with pretended gravity, “I absolutely refuse to answer!”

It took them only a short time to finish the small odds and ends of packing they had still to do. Uncle Dick had already sent his birthday present—the desk that Betty and Bob had found in the antique shop—to the woman who was a connoisseur of beautiful things. There was scarcely anything to do now but bid farewell to the pleasant hotel rooms wherein they had spent so many happy hours.

48

Betty gave a final tug to her woolly tam-o'-shanter and wound the scarf more tightly about her throat.

Bob emerged from his room, carrying two heavy suitcases.

Uncle Dick emerged from his doing the same, and the three met in the center of the room. Uncle Dick flung an arm about each of his “children” and regarded them fondly for a moment.

“For a bachelor, I’m exceedingly blessed,” he said. “I defy any regular parent to produce a handsomer pair. Now come on, both of you. Let’s check out of here!”

They checked out and a short time later found themselves speeding through the snowy landscape, luxuriously snug and warm in the closed and heated car.

Betty felt, as usual, the thrill of closing holidays and the return to school. She wanted to see her friends exceedingly, especially Bobby Littell. Bobby, christened Roberta, was Betty’s roommate at Shadyside and there existed a strong bond of affection between the two girls. Jolly, noisy, affectionate Bobby Littell could be counted upon to inject life and fun into the dullest of parties.

Sitting beside Bob in the tonneau of the car, their baggage at their feet, Betty wondered aloud what mischief this high-spirited girl had been up to since they last met.

49

Bob chuckled.

“I wouldn’t worry about Bobby,” he said. “She can take care of herself. But Libbie—you want to watch out for her, Betty. If she gets into the clutches of Ada Nansen and her sweet crowd again, there’s no telling what may happen.”



Bob's reference to Libbie Littell, a cousin of Bobby's, and her late association with Ada Nansen "and her crowd," was still fresh in Betty's mind. Ada was a wealthy and unpleasant girl who patently considered herself superior to all others at Shadyside. Libbie Littell, Bobby's plump and good-natured cousin, had fallen under the influence of this girl during the previous term at Shadyside, and by so doing had nearly come to grief.

Now as Bob recalled this fact Betty slowly shook her head.

"I don't think Ada and Ruth Gladys will give us much trouble now," she said. "They seemed wonderfully subdued after the affair of our two Miss Nevins at Shadyside. I hope the effect of that lesson will last for a while!"

Bob grinned understandingly, but shook his head doubtfully.

50

"Ada and Ruth Gladys are among the people of this world who never learn much by experience," he said.

The drive to school, though actually a long one measured by miles, was all too short for the young people. When Uncle Dick slowed before the gates of Salsette, Bob clasped his guardian's hand in silence. It was always hard to say good-bye to Uncle Dick.

"Be good, Bob. And if there's any trouble, you know where to come."

"You bet I do! Good-bye, Uncle Dick. Good-bye, Betty. Give my love to the girls!" He grinned, waved affectionately to

Uncle Dick, shouldered his bags, and disappeared within the wide-open iron gates.

The snow-covered grounds were dotted with students of the academy. As Bob appeared a group of these cadets gave vent to a whoop of joy and dashed down in a body upon the newcomer.

“Here’s Bob Henderson!”

“How goes it, Bob, old boy?”

“Glad to see you back!”

Bob turned once more, waved to Uncle Dick and Betty again before he was swallowed up completely in the crowd of his comrades.

Uncle Dick smiled wryly and glanced over his shoulder at Betty, sitting in lonely state in the tonneau.

51

“Now all that remains is to deliver my girl to the selfish arms of Shadyside and Uncle Dick once more becomes a bachelor!”

Betty smiled and, leaning forward, rubbed her soft cheek against the rough sleeve of his coat.

“Never mind, Uncle Dick. Some time we are going to start housekeeping!”

Uncle Dick laughed and swung the car into the road again.

“We’ll have to—if only to provide a home for that handsome new desk of mine! Watch out, Betty! Here’s the curve!”

As they skirted the banks of the lake that separated the military academy from Shadyside, a large bus, filled with passengers, passed them going at a smart pace along the snowy road.

“Our own old bus,” breathed Betty. “With George Buzz himself at the wheel! Oh, Uncle Dick, it is good to get back!”

The moment after she had said them, Betty wished she might recall the words. It made her sound ungrateful for all Uncle Dick’s kindnesses and the glorious holidays he had given her and Bob.

But Uncle Dick, as always, understood. He nodded sympathetically.

“I’m glad you have so many friends and enjoy your school life as you do, my dear. It is a great comfort to me when I am forced to leave you and travel to the ends of the earth—more or less. And now, unless my eyes deceive me, here we are!”

52

They had indeed turned into the drive and the white columns of the administration building were before them.

As at Salsette, the grounds were packed with young folks. The weather, mild for this time of year, had brought the girls out like a flock of gayly colored birds.

A number of them turned with interest as the car came to a

standstill. The next moment some one had discovered the identity of the girl in the fuzzy cap and there was a general rush in her direction.

“Come kiss your uncle before the flood breaks!” laughed Uncle Dick.

Betty complied, adding a great hug of her own. As Mr. Gordon opened the door she said anxiously:

“You will try to keep in touch with Millie Harrison, won’t you, Uncle Dick? And if she needs help——”

“I will see that she gets it,” Uncle Dick promised. “But on one condition, only, and that is that Betty Gordon writes to me more regularly than she did before the holidays.”

53

“Oh, I will, Uncle Dick. And mind you do the same!”

Then the flood reached Betty and she laughingly allowed herself to become submerged in a sea of arms and laughing young faces.

54

## CHAPTER VIII

### ROMANCE FOR LIBBIE

“Betty Gordon! You are as welcome as a day in June!”

“We’ve been watching for you for hours and hours!”

“Come and get hugged, Betty.”

“Don’t smother the poor girl! She may yet take some interest in life!”

Betty laughingly disengaged herself from the embraces of her chums and looked eagerly about her. There was Dora Estabrooke, as fat as ever and quite as rosy as a winter apple, Edith Ames, Laura and Nan Bennett, and a score of others. But the ones she sought, the members of her own intimate “crowd,” were nowhere visible.

“If you are looking for Bobby and the Guerin girls,” said Laura Bennett, rightly interpreting Betty’s wandering gaze, “they went inside just a few minutes ago. Shouldn’t wonder if you’d find them in the old familiar dorm.”

“Here comes Bobby now,” some one else in the crowd sang out. “Bobby! Bobby Littell! Here’s Betty Gordon!”

The next moment Roberta Littell burst through the group about Betty, flung an arm about her chum, and immediately took charge of the proceedings.

“Come upstairs this minute and relieve the horrible anxiety of your friends, Betty Gordon. We’d just about decided you wouldn’t get here till to-morrow. The Guerin girls have given me the fidgets. They wouldn’t sit still—no matter what I said to them.”

Betty laughed.

“I suppose you have sat with your hands folded all day,” she said.

The front door swung to behind them and Bobby grimaced at her reflection in a hall mirror as they passed.

“When Bobby Littell sits all day with her hands folded, prepare for the worst. Do you want to report now or will you wait till later?” Bobby paused before the office of Mrs. Eustice, the principal of Shadyside.

“Oh, let me remove the stains of travel first,” laughed Betty. “I never could face Mrs. Eustice, looking as I do.”

“Yes, you’re a perfect fright, Betty Gordon. You always are!” mocked Bobby. “Still, the girls will be glad to have you to themselves for a little while. Here comes Norma now.”

They met Norma Guerin just outside the door of the room shared by Betty and Bobby and went inside with her. The “crowd” was there in force and greeted the new

arrival joyously.

“Betty, we thought you’d never come!” Alice Guerin pulled off Betty’s tam-o’-shanter and ruffled her pretty hair for all the world like some playful young bear. “My, but you look good to me!”

“I won’t look good to any one if you keep that up,” said Betty ruefully, putting a hand to her disarranged hair. “Is every one back?” she asked, approaching the mirror to repair damages. “I saw Laura and Nan downstairs, and Dora Estabrooke——”

“Speaking of Dora,” Bobby broke in, “I believe she has gained at least ten pounds on her vacation. She and I happened to meet in a doorway a little while ago and I have my stars to thank that I wasn’t squeezed to a pulp!”

“They treat her well at home,” giggled Libbie Littell, from her perch on the edge of the bed. “Maybe too well.”

“You needn’t talk, Libbie Littell,” drawled Constance Howard. She was sitting with one foot under her on a chair near the window, and the sun, shining on her red hair, turned it to a beautiful copper shade. “I can’t see that you are exactly fading away.”

“No, I’m not,” sighed poor Libbie patiently. “The more I try to diet the more weight I put on.”

57

“Diet—ho! ho!” scoffed Bobby, who was often rather merciless in her criticisms of her cousin. “How about that box of nut chocolates you have been busy with all day? Looks a lot like dieting, that does!”

“Timothy gave them to her,” giggled Louise Littell. “She’s afraid he’ll be offended if she doesn’t finish them all by night.”

Libbie flushed and took refuge in offended silence.

Timothy Derby was a cadet at Salsette and a very good friend of Bob Henderson’s. The latter had been wont to say that proof of his friendship for Timothy lay in the fact that he, Bob, was willing to put up with Timothy’s shell spectacles and his deplorable habit of “spouting” poetry whenever the mood seized him—which was painfully often. In Libbie Littell, Timothy had found a fellow spirit. For Libbie was romantic and “adored poetry” and would listen raptly to Timothy’s reading of it for any length of time. Was it any wonder that, with such an audience, Timothy waxed expansive and even found it possible to include in his enthusiasms and affections the audience itself—or perhaps it were better to say, herself?

At any rate, the friendship between these two young people had grown apace and was the subject for much good-natured chaffing both at Salsette and Shadyside.

58

Now Betty saved Libbie further embarrassment by inquiring whether any one had seen Ada Nansen and Ruth Gladys Royal.

“That’s the amazing part of it,” said Frances Martin, who shared with Libbie one of the two rooms adjoining Betty’s. “We have all seen but not heard. Usually you know Ada has arrived by the sound of her voice raised in complaint of every



one and everything at Shadyside. To-day she and Ruth Gladys are strangely silent. Mystery!”

“We are all waiting with bated breath for something to happen,” Bobby explained in answer to Betty’s look of surprise. “We seem to be of the unanimous opinion that Ada is plotting mischief and that this lull in the storm is only temporary. In fact, she and Ruth Gladys are too good to be true.”

Betty laughed and turned to the door.

“That’s the way! Give a dog a bad name and hang him——”

“Don’t let Ada hear you say that,” giggled Norma Guerin.

“Now I’m going to report to Mrs. Eustice,” said Betty, when the laughter subsided.

“We’ll all go with you,” said Bobby, getting to her feet with resolution. “Maybe Ada is lying in wait for you, Betty Gordon. At any rate, I think you can stand a bodyguard.”

59

They all accompanied her, despite Betty’s protests, and there was much suppressed giggling as the entire party trooped down the stairs and waited outside the office while Betty went in to make her report.

Mrs. Eustice, stately and white-haired, was very glad to see Betty Gordon and told her so with a warmth unusual in the rather austere head of Shadyside.

“You accomplished something last semester that has had a most gratifying effect on the girls, my dear,” she told Betty, smiling her rare smile. “Even Ada Nansen seems more tractable and pleasant since she returned to Shadyside, and I believe it is your good example in leading the kindly demonstration toward our two new teachers that is chiefly responsible for the change. I want you to know that I fully appreciate your good influence over the girls, aside from my very real affection for Betty Gordon herself.”

In a glow Betty left the office. Words of praise from Mrs. Eustice were so rare that they were to be doubly prized. She wondered if the episode of the Misses Nevins had been the means of subduing Ada Nansen and her faithful satellite, Ruth Gladys Royal. And she wondered, too, with a quickened interest, how long this admirable change in the two snobs of Shadyside would endure.

That same evening while the girls in Betty’s room were relating their experiences during the recent holidays, Betty quite naturally mentioned Millie Harrison and her sad story.

60

Although Betty herself had been and was still intensely interested in the plight of this unfortunate girl, she was not prepared for the eager and genuine interest the other girls displayed.

“How awful! Alone in a strange city like that with no one to love you or take care of you!” It was Norma Guerin who made this exclamation, and she spoke in honest dismay. To the Guerin girls, possessed of a doting doctor father and a

mother no less devoted, such a situation seemed little less than terrifying.

“Pretty hard luck!” Even light-hearted, tomboy Bobby was temporarily sobered by Betty’s story. “I don’t see how you ever had the heart to come away and leave her, Betty.”

“I think it’s terribly romantic,” said Libbie, her eyes wide with delight. “Think of being the heroine in an adventure like that! Why, it’s just like a story!”

Bobby snorted.

“You and your romance!” she cried. “I imagine that girl doesn’t enjoy half starving to death, even if it is romantic.”

61

“To say nothing of losing a perfectly good new husband,” added Constance Howard.

“Oh, well,” said Libbie comfortably, helping herself to another bit of candy, “he’s sure to turn up all right. They always do.”

62

## CHAPTER IX

### A JOYFUL PROSPECT

After that life at Shadyside settled to its usual routine—much studying and some play.

“Only,” as Bobby complainingly remarked, “this term promises to be ninety-nine per cent. sheer work. I never knew the members of our beloved faculty to rush us so hard.”

As this was Bobby’s usual remark at the beginning of every new term, nobody paid much attention to it.

Of course the work did increase in difficulty as the girls progressed, and some of them made rather rough weather of it.

Libbie Littell was one of these, for, being incurably romantic, Libbie found everything but the reading of poetry and novels extremely dull. Betty frequently found it necessary to coach the other Betty, as Libbie was called in her own home, in private in order publicly to pull up her average to the passing point.

Add to this that Betty found her own school work unusually difficult and that she was continually plagued by anxious thoughts of Millie Harrison, one can readily

understand why, when the snow began to melt from the campus and the trees took on the look of spring, Betty was pale and tired and found herself longing for a sight of Uncle Dick.

She had kept her promise and written to him often, receiving his cheery optimistic letters in reply. She heard from Millie Harrison, too, at infrequent intervals. In spite of the hard work at Shadyside Betty managed to write to the friendless girl at least once a week, but Millie kept her waiting twice that time for an answer.

The nature of this correspondence did not tend to ease Betty's mind on the subject of this poor girl. Although Millie's letters tried valiantly to emulate the vivacity and cheerfulness of Betty's, they merely served more vividly to reveal the heartbreak and loneliness of the writer.

"She wants her 'Bud'," thought Betty, her pretty forehead furrowed with distress. "Nothing else matters to her. Poor, poor Millie! If we only knew some way to help her."

Of course, Betty's particular circle of friends were very much interested in Millie's infrequent letters. The friendless state of the girl continued to appeal to their imaginations. Perhaps their own sheltered and happy lives made it more possible for them to appreciate Millie's loneliness. Being unusually friendly and warm-hearted girls, they longed, with Betty, to find some way of being kind to this step-child of Fortune.

Libbie clung stubbornly to her belief that the mysterious "Bud" would turn up eventually like the prince in the

fairy tale. Betty wished often that she might share Libbie's faith.

In those days at school one of the constant wonders to Betty was the really remarkable change in the Nevins sisters, Harriet and Martha.

"Why, Miss Harriet is really growing good looking," said the girl to her friends. "Almost all of those hideous scars are gone."

"She has got you to thank for what happened to her, Betty," answered the loyal Bobby.

Evidently Miss Harriet Nevins thought so too, for she never lost an opportunity to be nice to Betty and she often helped the girl over the "rough places" in her school work. Not that she was unduly partial—she was too fair-minded for that—but she did many things for Betty that a less sympathetic instructor might have left undone.

So the spring term passed in hard study with a little fun thrown in. The girls went on long hikes, now and then with some of the cadets of Salsette, Tommy and Teddy Tucker, who were twins, Timothy Derby, of course, with his inevitable book of poems, Winifred Marion Brown, and others. They were occasionally chaperoned to a moving picture show in town by Miss Anderson or one of the other teachers. And as the season advanced the girls began to look eagerly forward to vacation. Some of the girls had already made plans for the spending of the summer months. To Bobby's and Betty's regret, the Littells' plans were such that

Betty could not be included. As yet Betty had nothing definite in view.

Then one day, when Betty had been studying unusually hard and coaching Libbie as well, came a letter from Uncle Dick which opened a restful and refreshing vista to her. The letter arrived in the noon mail and directly after lunch Betty slipped away to her own room where she might read in peace.

As she started to go up the staircase she collided suddenly and rather sharply with some one coming down it. The some one proved to be Ada Nansen.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Ada,” Betty instantly apologized. “I guess I wasn’t watching my step that time.”

The other girl opened her mouth for a sharp retort; then seemed to change her mind and said constrainedly:

“I guess I wasn’t looking either.”

Betty stared after the girl as she disappeared down the hall.

“Ada is changed—and greatly for the better,” she thought. “Although,” with a chuckle, “it still seems an effort for her to be polite!”

Up in her own room she opened Uncle Dick’s letter.

“How would you like,” so wrote Mr. Gordon, “to spend a few weeks at Rainbow Ranch—a real ranch this time in the real West? Business for me, and pleasure for you.

You may bring the Guerin girls with you, if you like  
\_\_\_\_\_”

Of course there was more to the letter, but Betty passed over that hurriedly. The one, great, all-important fact was that she was to be with Uncle Dick for some portion of the summer, at least, and on a ranch. He had said the Guerin girls might go too if they liked. As though there were any doubt on the score of their wanting to go! She must find them at once, though, and make sure.

But Bob! Was Bob to go, too? This thought stopped her on her way to the door. Uncle Dick had not said a word in his letter about Bob, and that in itself was odd. The party would be spoiled, she thought loyally, if Bob did not go.

This doubt and perplexity tempered her enthusiasm when she found the Guerin girls and told them her great news. But both Alice and Norma were so overjoyed at the idea that Betty speedily recovered her good spirits.

67

“A ranch and cowboys!” cried Norma.

“And horses! I wonder if we shall be able to ride?”

“Of course we shall, silly. That’s what you do mostly on a ranch. Isn’t it, Betty?”

“We-ell, I suppose so,” said Betty, with a smile.

“I shall write mother and dad immediately,” cried Alice, jumping up to suit the action to the word. “I know I won’t be



able to close my eyes until we have their blessing!”

Still through all Betty’s delight ran the refrain:

“Is Bob to go too?”

That very afternoon the question was answered by Bob in person.

Betty was “paged” by Bobby Littell and informed mysteriously that a good-looking man awaited her in the reception room. Wondering, Betty went hurriedly below. When she parted the curtains and saw that Bob was “the good-looking man”—just wait till she saw that Bobby Littell again!—her greeting was prompt and enthusiastic.

“Bob, I was thinking of you so hard it must have brought you!”

Bob grinned and displayed a crumpled letter.

“This is what really brought me,” he said.

68

Betty recognized Uncle Dick’s writing and gave a cry of delight.

“Oh, Bob, then you are going, too, to Rainbow Ranch!”

“Bet you my life I am! Like to see anybody try to stop me! Say, Betty, won’t it be great?”

The boy and girl spent considerable time talking about how really great it would be. When Bob finally took his leave,

saying that he must get to Salsette before dark, it would have been hard to find a happier pair of young folks anywhere.

At that time there was only one fly in Betty's ointment, and that was the thought of Millie Harrison. Millie's last letter had shown her as depressed and unhappy as ever.

However, as the spring days flew by, each one warmer and sunnier than the last, with the promise of an early summer, events followed so swiftly that even Millie Harrison was pushed into the background of Betty's mind.

Examinations came and passed, either to conquer or be conquered, as the case might be, and the girls began to think less of their lessons and more of the one great event of the spring term—the dance to which they were privileged to invite their boy friends.

“Ada has a millionaire or something coming,” Bobby proclaimed, looking up from the book which she had been absently holding upside down. “Watch out, girls! Maybe she will let us have a dance with him.”

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“Not unless some one chloroforms her first,” replied Louise scornfully. “Ada builds a picket fence around the boys she knows with a big, black sign, ‘*No Trespass*,’ hung on the gate.”

“I suppose we like our boys better than all her millionaires, anyway,” said Betty calmly. “Let her build her wall as high as she likes.”

As the time approached for the big dance, excitement grew.

All the girls in Betty's own crowd had passed the examinations—even Libbie, thanks to Betty's help and to Libbie's own ability in the languages, especially French—so that now they were free to allow themselves the delights of anticipation.

The great occasion was only two days away—it had been set forward in order to make room for the more formal senior celebrations—and the girls were already deep in the important subject of what to wear.

“I don't know how I'll manage,” wailed Bobby. “I have only a couple of old rags to my name.” To Bobby any dress that had been worn more than once was an “old rag.” “I suppose I'll have to fix up that horrid green thing.”

At last the great night arrived. The girls had gone through the few lessons assigned for that day automatically. Now, directly after dinner, there was a concerted rush for the “dorms.”

70

Betty was the first to reach her room. Without ceremony she pulled her one-piece school dress over her head, then regarded her flushed face in the mirror.

“*You* look as though you expected to enjoy yourself to-night,” she said, then turned swiftly about as Bobby burst into the room.

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## CHAPTER X

### THE DANCE

It was Bobby's deplorable habit to burst in upon people, taking them unawares. Though at Bobby's wild entrance Betty half expected her to announce that the school was on fire, Bobby seemed to have no other reason for her haste than a burning desire to get into her "old green rag" in as short a time as possible.

"Lucky we're on the refreshment committee, Betty," she said, her voice muffled in the depths of the closet. "Maybe we shall be able to get hold of another piece of cake or something just as nice."

Betty laughed. It was with great reluctance that she had consented to make one of the refreshment committee. In the first place, such a doubtful honor entailed a great deal of extra work and, in case anything went wrong, a great deal of undeserved blame.

However, it had been Miss Anderson who had asked Betty to take charge of that particular part of the festivities. And since Miss Anderson had volunteered to manage the dance and was looking particularly worried and harassed at the moment she asked the favor, Betty had not found the courage to refuse her.

“Greedy!” she now charged in answer to Bobby’s frankly expressed hope of an extra piece of cake. “Just now I’m too excited to think of eating.”

“Then you can give me your share too,” said Bobby, and met Betty’s indignant stare with a brazen grin. “You needn’t worry about my digestion, either. Nothing makes me sick.”

“Believe me, your digestion would be the last thing to worry me to-night,” retorted Betty, regarding herself anxiously in the mirror. She wondered if she would do, if Bob would like her new blue crêpe. Perhaps she should have worn the yellow, after all!

Her doubts on the subject were immediately dissipated by the impetuous Bobby, who flung her arms about Betty in blue and exclaimed rapturously over the becomingness of the color.

“You’ll be a riot, Betty. I never saw you look so pretty. Wait till Bob gets his first glimpse of you—he won’t be able to see any one else. And Bob is such a good dancer, too,” she added mournfully.

Betty laughed.

“I’ll give you at least one dance with him,” she promised. “Now come along, Bobby, if you’re ready. We ought to get down before the others and see if our refreshments have arrived per schedule.”

They tapped on Libbie’s door to see if she and Frances were nearly ready. Libbie popped a disheveled head out at them.

“Oh, are you dressed so soon? How pretty you look! Yes, we’ll be down right away. Oh, girls, I’m so excited.”

“If you let Timothy read poetry to you to-night, I’ll murder both of you,” Bobby promised, with a shake of her finger.

They knocked at the other door and found that Connie and Louise were ready to go downstairs, but wanted to wait awhile before “taking the plunge.”

“We’re shy,” explained Constance, with a finger to her laughing lips in the gesture of a very timid child. “We don’t want to be the first ones down.”

“Poor little shrinking violets,” mocked Bobby. “Come on, Betty. We’ll give ’em an example of true courage!”

Laughingly Betty and Bobby flung out into the hall and made for the stairs. Before they reached them Ada came out of her room, followed by Ruth Gladys Royal.

The girls were both “gotten up regardless,” as Bobby said later. They were dressed richly, but in bad taste.

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Their gowns, suitable for some big society affair, were not at all the thing for a boarding school dance.

However, both Ada and her satellite were blissfully unconscious of this fact. They even regarded Betty and Bobby with a sort of supercilious condescension.

“Wait a minute and we’ll go down with you,” Ada called.

“Can’t!” Bobby was pleasant but brief. “We have to look after

the refreshments and things, you know.”

Now, it was a sore point with Ada that she had not been asked by Miss Anderson to help with the refreshments. A place in the spotlight was Ada’s right, from her point of view, and she had bitterly, though silently, resented having this place usurped by Betty and her chum.

Now she drew herself up stiffly and regarded them with more haughty condescension than ever.

“Oh, pardon me. Really, I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You aren’t intruding, Ada,” said Betty pleasantly. She put a hand on Bobby’s arm and halted her impetuous rush down the stairs. “And of course we’ll wait for you,” she added. “Come on.”

But Ada was in no mood to accept the olive branch. She descended the stairs with Ruth Gladys in haughty silence, keeping pointedly a little behind the other two girls.

75

“You shouldn’t have spoken that way, Bobby,” said Betty when they were alone, hurrying through the empty gymnasium to the small room beyond, scarcely bigger than a pantry, from which the small cakes, ices and lemonade were to be served. “It doesn’t do any good to roile her, especially when she tries to be nice.”

“Nice!” snorted Bobby. “Did you see the look she gave us? You would think she was at least six years our senior. And those dresses——”

“Well, as long as we don’t have to wear them, why worry?” returned Betty mildly. “Bobby, do look at these cake boxes. There’ll be enough for an army.”

Other members of the refreshment committee joined them then—girls all friendly to Betty and Bobby—and the real fun and excitement commenced.

Boys began to arrive and the hum of voices and laughter filled the gymnasium.

Aunt Nancy, the time-honored cook at Shadyside, arrived just in time to save the reason of the refreshment committee—or so they vehemently asserted.

With the help of Aunt Nancy, glasses were soon set out in long neat rows, cakes piled in tempting heaps upon numerous platters, and iced lemonade with cherries and pieces of banana and pineapple floating around in the bottom of it, poured into punch bowls ready to be served.

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“Now chillun—scat!” said Aunt Nancy kindly, seeing that the girls were dancing with impatience to be off. “Ain’t nothin’ now Aunt Nancy can’t ‘tend to her own se’f. Run on now, an’ mind you has a fine good time.”

“You’re a lamb, Aunt Nancy,” Bobby cried gratefully. “Just for that you may have two extra cakes all to yourself.”

“Never you mind about dat, chile,” returned Aunt Nancy, with a wide grin. “Yo’ Aunt Nancy ain’t starved yet an’ Ah reckon she ain’t gwine start to-night!”



The girls went out, laughing, a rainbow of color against the drab and sober tones of the gymnasium. The great room buzzed with excitement. The girls of the refreshment committee made their way toward the doorway near which lingered those unfortunate swains who had not yet found their ladies.

“The boys will think we’ve neglected them shamefully,” Bobby whispered in Betty’s ear. “I don’t suppose Tommy Tucker will ever forgive me.” Tommy Tucker, the dark one of the Tucker twins, was to be Bobby’s escort for the evening.

“Oh, Betty,” Bobby gave her chum’s arms an excited squeeze. “There’s Bob, and doesn’t he look wonderful?”

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“Look out! He might hear you, and that would never do. I shouldn’t like Bob with a swelled head!”

Then Bob and Tommy saw the two girls and swooped joyfully down upon them. They were swept into the group of their friends—Libbie was there with Timothy in devoted attendance, Louise and “W.M.” Brown, and a score or more of others.

“I must say you were long enough coming,” said Tommy. “But say, Bobby, you sure look swell!”

“In this old green rag?” Betty heard Bobby drawl before her attention was captured completely by Bob.

“You look great, Betsey,” he said, his eyes full of boyish admiration. “I never saw you look so pretty. How do you do it?”

“I don’t know.” Betty’s smile was sparkling. “I guess it must be a gift, Bob.”

“It is!” said the boy decidedly. Then, as the string orchestra, hired from town for the purpose, struck up a tuneful fox trot, Bob put an arm about her and whirled her out on the floor.

“Do you see that boy over there?” he asked, with a jerk of his head toward a dapper young gentleman dancing with Ada. “He’s been staring at you ever since you came into the room. I have a notion he may ask for a dance. And if he does—” A significant gesture of Bob’s fist concluded the sentence for him.

78

Betty giggled delightedly.

“Please don’t, Bob. That must be Ada’s millionaire, and if you should speak unkindly to the poor dear Ada would never forgive you.”

“I shall do more than speak unkindly,” said Bob, with emphasis.

However, when the wealthy young gentleman, by name Hartley Cromer, did ask for not one dance but several with Betty later in the evening, Bob had no choice but to submit, albeit with the worst grace imaginable.

As for Betty, after her first dance with Hartley Cromer the rest of the evening seemed to be spent in a vain attempt to escape him.

She had three reasons for wanting to avoid Ada’s

“millionaire.” In the first place, she liked to dance with Bob and his friends and had no desire to offend either him or them. In the second, she was very anxious for a continuance of the moderately friendly relations between her and Ada. And in the third place, and this, to her, the most important of them all, she had formed a dislike for the sleek and polished Mr. Cromer himself. He was older than the rest of the boys present—Ada prided herself upon “going in” for the “older men”—and he would insist upon paying Betty fulsome compliments that distressed her.

With this one exception, however, the evening was a great success. The music was fine, the floor good, and everybody in wild, good spirits at the near prospect of vacation.

79

Bobby was enjoying herself tremendously. Even the spectacle of Libbie seated in a far corner listening with a rapt expression while Timothy read from a slender volume in his hand had the power to irritate her only slightly. If Libbie was silly enough to prefer poetry to dancing on a night like this, by all means let her enjoy herself. Who cared, anyway?

When it was all over and the orchestra struck up the familiar strains of “Home Sweet Home”, Betty, dancing with Bob, gave a sigh of pure delight.

“What a wonderful, wonderful night!” she whispered. “I’ve enjoyed every minute of it. And now—now, Bob—there isn’t a thing between us and Rainbow Ranch. Oh, Bob, aren’t you glad?”

“Glad!” repeated Bob, smiling down at her. “Say, Betsey, can’t you think up a stronger word than that?”

Betty grinned at this.

“Are you so eager to get out there, Bob?” she asked.

80

“Sure!” he replied promptly. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes, indeed, Bob! We ought to have the best times ever.”

“Now you’re talking!” And Bob gave Betty’s arm a tight squeeze of satisfaction.

81

## **CHAPTER XI**

### **ON TO THE GOLDEN WEST**

Betty had reason to be glad during the few days remaining to her at Shadyside—Uncle Dick had said he would come for her and Bob and the two Guerin girls on the fifteenth of the month and now it was the twelfth—that her time here was short.

Ada was furious over the defection of her much advertised young millionaire and insisted, as such girls will, in putting all the blame for it upon Betty. The result was that Betty was continually forced to dodge Ada in order to prevent an open quarrel with her.

“She is furious because you climbed her picket fence,” laughed Bobby.

Betty protested.

“I didn’t. He did.”

Bobby grinned and nodded.

“Either way the result was the same. Next time Ada will use barbed wire.”

At last came the formal closing day of both Shadyside and Salsette. This, of course, was a great day for the seniors, but it meant little to the undergraduates save the joyful prospect of immediate release.

Betty expected Uncle Dick that afternoon. He would call first at Shadyside for her and Norma and Alice Guerin, then go around the lake to pick up Bob at Salsette.

She was on tiptoe with excitement. Again and again she opened the lid of her small neatly packed trunk and regarded the contents of her traveling bag to be sure that everything was shipshape. She had a last, friendly chat with Mrs. Eustice and looked up Miss Martha and Miss Harriet Nevins for a particular good-bye.

Norma and Alice matched Betty's own mood of eager anticipation and pestered her with the most absurd questions. "Are you sure he is coming to-day? He couldn't have meant to-morrow, could he?" Over and over again until, to save her reason, Betty ran downstairs and established herself on the steps of the administration building.

From there she commanded an excellent view of the road. No automobile turning into the Shadyside drive from the road could escape her notice.

There were a good many of these, too. Most of the girls were going home to-day, although some were to stay over until to-morrow, among these Bobby, Louise, and Libbie Littell.

A continual stream of young folks poured from the building, greeting the newcomers and calling good-bye

to friends. Many took the school bus which plied busily between school and station, on time for various trains.

It was an eager, gay scene and Betty felt her spirits lift joyously as she thought of the splendid vacation before her.

“Good-bye, Betty Gordon! Have a good time! See you in the fall!” Again and again this was called to Betty, and she answered in kind. But where, oh where, was Uncle Dick?

Nan Bennett, passing the girl on the steps, held out two letters to her.

“Mail just came in,” she explained. “Good-bye, Betty. Good luck!” and she was off to follow her sister into the bus.

Betty glanced at the letters. One was from Uncle Dick. Her heart misgave her. Had something happened to detain him? Would the letter say that he would not reach Shadyside today?

Betty tore open the envelope and gave a great sigh of relief. The letter only reiterated what Uncle Dick had promised, sending his love and a few instructions.

The second letter was from Millie Harrison. Betty frowned as she saw that the writing on the envelope was scrawling and uneven—so different from Millie’s usually neat and pretty script.

She tore open the envelope with a premonition of something wrong. Suppose something had happened to Millie!

She read hastily through the one page of writing and found that Millie had been ill.

“Just a cold,” wrote Millie, “though how I managed to catch it this lovely weather, I’m sure I don’t know. But I am perfectly well now, Betty. You aren’t to worry, my dear.”

There was more to the letter, but Betty read it absently and folded up the bit of paper with a thoughtful frown. The same old pitiful effort to make the best of a heart-breaking situation! Betty was very sure Millie was not well, in spite of her assurance to the contrary. The writing on the envelope betrayed her true condition. Sick and lonesome in an indifferent city, forced to go to an office every day regardless of the weather in order to earn money enough to hold body and soul together! What a life!

Betty clenched her hands. For the first time she felt direct enmity against Millie’s mysterious “Bud.” Millie always spoke of him lovingly, ready with an excuse for his every action. Now Betty began to look upon him as an ingrate and a weakling, a man who would run away from scandal instead of stopping to prove his innocence, who would give up his wife, apparently, without making the slightest effort to keep her.

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“The wretch!” she cried. “I wish I might meet him now, if only to tell him what I think of him!”

These vengeful thoughts were interrupted by the tooting of a



motor horn. Betty glanced up eagerly. Sure enough, there was Uncle Dick in the old familiar car, at the moment easing himself from the seat behind the steering wheel.

Betty flew to him and Uncle Dick caught her in his arms. Then he held her off at arm's length and examined her with laughing eyes.

"I believe my girl has grown a head taller at least since I saw her last. But where is your hat, Betty? You don't mean to tell me you aren't ready?"

"Oh, Uncle Dick, I've been waiting ages. I'll have my hat in a moment—and the Guerin girls and the baggage, too!"

There followed the usual excitement of leave-taking, the promises to write soon and often, and renewed vows of undying friendship.

Alice and Norma were so excited that they became hopelessly entangled in their baggage and had to be straightened out by the laughing Mr. Gordon.

He managed to pack them bag and baggage in the car at last and backed his car out from among the numerous vehicles that filled the drive.

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Bobby and Louise stood on the porch waving to them until they reached the road and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"Good-bye, old Shadyside!" called Betty softly, and then gave herself completely to the joy of being with Uncle Dick again and on the road to freedom.

Bob was waiting for them among a crowd of boys before the gates of Salsette. He hailed them joyously and flung a suitcase in the tonneau with the girls' luggage.

"That's all I've got. I'm traveling light, Uncle Dick," he said as he climbed over the car door without troubling to open it.

"Good," said Uncle Dick. "Where we're going you won't need much."

There was a rousing cheer from Bob's friends—they were all there, Timothy squinting near-sightedly. Bob waved his hat at them.

"So long, fellows! Some one drown that new book of Tim's before I get back and save me the trouble. It's a crime!"

There was a roar from the boys as Timothy raised a hand to the bulge in his pocket to make sure his beloved book was still safe.

"We'll try to let him live," shouted Teddy Tucker as the car disappeared in a cloud of its own dust.

87

"I say, Uncle Dick," said Bob, turning to Mr. Gordon, "how far are we going by machine?"

"Only as far as the station. We can make better time by train. I've made arrangements to leave the car in a garage in town."

By the time the baggage had been landed on the platform and Uncle Dick had gone in the car to the garage and returned on foot the train was due.

It was Alice Guerin who first heard the tooting of its whistle in the distance. She pointed eagerly to a ribbon of smoke floating skyward.

“Here it comes!” she cried. “We’re off!”

Bob grinned.

“In a minute,” he said, “we’ll be on!”

“I suppose that is meant for a joke,” said Betty, and sighed.

## CHAPTER XII

### FREAKS

There was the thrill of finding seats in the car. Uncle Dick disposed of their baggage in his usually masterly manner—porters and trainmen always kow-towed to Uncle Dick—and turned to his charges with a smile.

“We won’t get our Pullman until we transfer at the Junction—only about a two hours’ ride,” he told them. “I have something here,” he turned to one of his grips, “that will probably keep you well and safely occupied until we settle down for the real journey.”

He drew forth a three-pound box of choice chocolates. Alice gave a little coo of delight.

“Oh, Mr. Gordon, aren’t you lovely!” cried Norma as she seized the box and passed it—with a great deal of self-control—to Betty.

Bob grinned as Betty quickly untied the lavender ribbon adorning the cream-colored box.

“You surely do know the way to the heart of a girl, Uncle Dick,” said the boy.

At the words Betty paused to look up at him quizzically.

“Of course you don’t want any candy, Bob. Oh, no! It would be an insult even to offer it to you!”

“Well, I wouldn’t go quite so far as that,” replied Bob quickly.

Uncle Dick laughed and reached in the pocket of his coat to make sure he had a plentiful supply of cigars.

“If the young ladies will excuse me,” he said, being satisfied on this point, “I think I’ll retire to the smoker for a short time. Better come with me, Bob,” he added to the boy. “I imagine three girls will be more than a match for one poor Salsette cadet.”

“I’ll say you’re right the first time, Uncle Dick,” answered Bob, rising with alacrity. “You see, they’re picking on me already!”

He made a grab for the candy box as he passed and succeeded in purloining a handful before Betty could draw it away.

“Thief!” said Betty, laughing at him.

“Coward!” added Alice as Bob left with Uncle Dick and his spoils.

“Sour grapes!” Bob flung back, grinning, broadly.

“Hope they choke him,” cried Alice.

“Maybe they’ll give him a toothache,” put in Norma hopefully. “Then he’ll have to have his jaw tied up in a flannel rag.”

“I’ll take a chance on the toothache,” answered the boy. “Don’t forget to leave the bottom layer of the box for me when I come back,” he added, and all three of the girls made faces at him.

90

Between the candy and the beauty of the flying landscape and their own overflowing spirits, the girls found themselves at the Junction all too soon.

Uncle Dick and Bob came back in a tremendous hurry and the girls found themselves landed on the platform amid a pile of luggage with only a minute or two to catch the train for Chicago.

“Our train was late,” Uncle Dick explained as he hurried them across some tracks, up a long platform, and past a seemingly endless string of coaches. “Too bad to have to rush like this. Here we are now. Up you go!”

The porter of their coach looked at the whirlwind group and signaled for help to the porter of the next coach, for which there were no passengers at the Junction.

Followed by the two grinning and puffing porters, one of whom was immensely tall and lean and the other immensely fat and short, they found their seats in the Pullman and settled back with sighs of relief.

It seemed that the porters had hardly deposited their luggage,

received Mr. Gordon's generous tips, and departed, before there came the last warning cry of "All aboard!" and the train started to move.

"Pretty close shave," commented Bob. "A few minutes more and we'd have been left stranded on the shore."

91

"Hear the poet," giggled Norma, and Bob stared at her.

"I assure you, young lady, I have no poetical aspirations," he said, with dignity.

"She probably mistook you for Timothy," Betty explained as she removed the candy box from temporary retirement beneath a file of magazines.

"That," groaned Bob, "is the worst insult of all."

"Libbie should be here to defend her poet," laughed Alice. "She certainly is constant in her devotion, anyway."

"I should say so," sighed Betty, passing around the candy box. "Did you see her the night of the dance, sitting out the best part of the evening with Timothy while he read to her?"

"Did we see anything else!" cried Norma. "And Bobby! I thought for a while she'd burst with exasperation."

"Bobby ought to know enough by now to leave Libbie alone. Only time will cure her."

"If anything can," said Alice.

“But they seem to be happy,” said Betty.

Mr. Gordon had reserved two sections for his party. Alice and Norma had declared emphatically that they would much prefer to share a berth than travel separately.

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“We aren’t so fat yet but what we can both squeeze into a narrow space,” Alice had laughed.

“If one of us was Dora Estabrooke now—” Norma added and did not finish the sentence, the inference being too obvious.

So Mr. Gordon, by letter, of course, had consented rather reluctantly to this arrangement, for he was not over-sanguine as to the comfort of traveling two in a berth; and Betty had made the Guerin girls promise to let her double up if either of them became tired of the arrangement.

“For we’ll be several nights on the train,” she reminded them. “And the second is bound to be more tiresome than the first.”

However, so far from finding any part of that journey tiresome, to the girls it was an Arabian Nights’ adventure. They found everything funny, from the old spinster who carried her pet parrot in a cage and occasionally allowed him to practice his vocal accomplishments, to the general delectation of the passengers, to the deaf old gentleman who spoke with a lisp and insisted upon taking the entire car into his confidence. When the train stopped at stations the old gentleman continued to talk at the top of his voice, the result sometimes being extremely funny.

As in the case of the onions. The train had stopped rather

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suddenly at a way station to take on coal, and the shrill, monotonous tones of the old man went on as usual. He was speaking of onions.

“What do you thuppothe that woman thaid to me? She thaid: ‘Heat an onion good and hot, then take out the heart of it and pop it into your ear. Thleep on it——’”

“Which—the ear or the onion?” whispered Alice at this point.

“Both!” giggled Norma.

“And in the morning,’” the high voice continued, “‘your deafneth will be a thing of the patht.’ Humph!” with a snort. “Plain, ridiculouth nonthenth, I thay. Onionth may be all right in their plathe, but their plathe ith in my stummick, not in my ear——” At this point the train began to move again and the rest of this elevating conversation was lost, to the undying regret of the Guerin girls and Betty.

Under these conditions they seldom lacked for amusement, and the dining car was a source of never-ending fascination for them. Uncle Dick was a generous host and insisted that they try as many new dishes on the menu as was possible in their rather limited time. If Betty and Bob had loved and admired Uncle Dick before, they doubly loved and admired him now. Nothing that could be done for their comfort was left undone. And he was so splendid looking!

They were sorry when they had to change at Chicago for points farther west, but were relieved when they found that the spinster with the parrot and the deaf old gentleman had changed trains also and were again installed in their Pullman.

“What a lucky coincidence!” giggled Norma. “Even if the scenery is dull we shall never be!”

But as they passed over the Mississippi, crossed the prairies, and began to climb the foothills of the Rockies, the girls found the scenery anything but dull. They came to spend more and more time on the observation platform, the pungent mountain wind fanning their faces, themselves athrill with the majesty and beauty of the mountainous, forest-strewn country they had entered.

“Always up, up!” cried Betty, stretching her arms above her head and drawing in a great lungful of the vital air. Her eyes glowed, her face flamed with the bite of the wind upon it.

They had entered the last lap of the journey. By noon of that same day they expected to arrive at Bufferville, from which place they were to be conveyed by carryall some twenty miles over hills and through rocky forests to Rainbow Ranch.

For the first time during the journey Betty found herself alone on the observation platform with Bob. Uncle Dick was inside talking with a man who was also going to the West on business and the Guerin girls were buried deep in the pages of their magazines.

95

“It seems as though we were trying to reach the sky, Bob.”

“It’s a magnificent country,” replied the boy, leaning over the rail. “It’s a chance of a lifetime to come out here like this, Betty. I’ll say we’re lucky.”

“We are lucky,” Betty answered slowly. “Sometimes it seems

as though we were almost *too* lucky, Bob—when you consider the hard lot of other people.”

“Still worrying about Millie Harrison?” asked Bob, regarding her quizzically.

“It just occurred to me that Millie’s Bud must have lived in some such country as this,” Betty replied soberly. “Poor, poor Millie! How hungry her heart must be for—this!” and there was a comprehensive sweep of her hand toward the grandeur of sky and mountain.

Seeing her real distress. Bob put his hand gently over hers.

“Good little Betsey—always trying to fix things for everybody. I wish,” he added, turning once more to thoughtful contemplation of the point where the shining rails met in the distance, “that I could help you in this particular instance. I honestly do. It isn’t fair for one person to have so much trouble——”

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“Betty! Bob! Thank goodness here you are!” It was Norma, flushed and excited. “Mr. Gordon says to come on in and get your things together. We’re to arrive in fifteen minutes!”

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## CHAPTER XIII

### A TYPICAL WESTERNER

When, in a little more than the prescribed fifteen minutes, the train slowed at Bufferville, Betty saw that the spinster with the parrot and the deaf old gentleman were still in their appointed places. It seemed as though they were permanent fixtures of the train, like the seats or the collapsible berths. Betty had time for an idle guess as to their true destination before she was hustled by Uncle Dick out upon the platform.

The station was much like any other in a Western town. A long wooden platform with a waiting room of sorts at one end of it and a few lounging Westerners in more or less picturesque costume.

One of these detached himself from a group of his fellows and came toward Mr. Gordon. He was a tall, rangy young fellow with a pleasant face, dark gray eyes and black hair that waved in pleasing fashion back from his forehead. He removed his sombrero with a courteous gesture.

“You’re Mr. Gordon, I reckon,” he said, in a slow, drawling voice. “Mr. Randall sent me over to fetch you. I’ve got horses and a carryall for the ladies. My name’s Joe Kirby, at your service, sir.”

“Glad to see you, Kirby,” said Mr. Gordon genially. “We’ll start at once if you’re ready. Here’s the sum total of our baggage,” and he pointed to the small pile of luggage that had been left in the center of the platform.

Despite the lazy grace of his movements, Joe Kirby proved himself remarkably swift in transferring their effects to the carryall.

The other loungers looked on with interest, evidently impressed by these smart strangers from a distance. One of the cowboys condescended to help Joe Kirby and was thanked by a lazily drawled:

“Much obliged, Dink. Sure you ain’t got a kink in your joints stirrin’ about so unusual swift?”

“You ungrateful young pup,” said the other good-naturedly, falling back at the laughter and raillery of his companions. “Next time you can kink up your own joints until you come to appreciate the labor of honest folks.”

Joe Kirby grinned and made a disparaging gesture as though he denied “Dink’s” claim to honesty. Then he led up the two ponies that had been brought for the use of Mr. Gordon and Bob and gravely presented them.

“I reckon you won’t find ’em much to look at,” he said. “But they’re as sure-footed on the rocks as mountain goats. Which one will you have, sir?”

Mr. Gordon selected the larger and huskier looking of the two ponies and turned to Bob with a smile.

“This piebald little fellow looks as if he had a good disposition. How about it, Bob?”

“I’m game to try anything once,” answered the boy, with a grin. As though to prove his assertion he slipped his foot into the stirrup and raised himself to the pony’s back. Whether his action had been a bit precipitate or whether the little horse merely decided that he would not submit to domination without a struggle, is a question to be answered only by the colt himself. At any rate, Bob found himself suddenly trying to ride the side of a wall while his piebald mount pawed ineffectually at the air.

Joe Kirby jumped, seized the pony by the bridle, and brought him to earth, where he stood, seemingly in a most tranquil and docile mood.

Joe Kirby looked the little horse sternly in the eyes and wagged an admonitory finger beneath his equine nose.

“You try that just once more, Baldy,” he threatened, “and you won’t get any more sugar this week. Y’understand?”

Baldy looked dejected and rubbed his nose against Joe Kirby’s arm. Perhaps the little creature really did understand. Joe Kirby said he did. Certainly the burden of proof was all on his side, for never again during their stay at Rainbow Ranch—and Baldy was Bob’s constant companion on his rambles about the ranch—did the little horse show any disposition to misbehave.

Having laid the law down to Baldy—much to the amusement of the girls—and ascertaining that Mr. Gordon was more than

able to manage his own mount, young Kirby led the girls over to the carryall.

The driver, a short, stocky fellow, had fallen asleep. Joe Kirby awakened him by a smart wallop on the shoulder and replied to his grumblings by an urgent command to start action at once.

“We’ve got a long drive before us, Jud,” he reminded the surly fellow. “Ain’t the time just now for nappin’, seems like. Get a move on you now, lively!”

Joe Kirby released his own mount, which he had tied to an adjacent tree, and swung himself into the saddle as the carryall moved off with a lurch and a jerk that threw the girls back in the wide seat.

“Goodness, Jud certainly believes in obedience,”  
whispered Norma, with a surreptitious jerk of her finger  
toward the back of the stolid driver. “Joe Kirby gets quick  
action!”

101

“Isn’t he wonderful?” cried Alice sentimentally.

The other two girls stared at her in amazement, then exchanged glances.

“Methinks I hear the voice of Libbie Littell,” said Norma with a giggle. “Surely my sister Alice could never have made such a remark.”

“Libbie Littell, indeed!” retorted Alice, totally unabashed. “If Libbie were here she would probably be trying to write an ode

to Joe Kirby's eyes by this time."

It was Betty's turn to giggle. She pointed with a warning finger toward the driver.

"You are absolutely crazy. Don't let him hear you!"

"Look!" cried Norma, suddenly creating a diversion. "I thought the view was beautiful from the train, but it was nothing to this. Look at that cañon straight ahead with the mountain stream at the foot of it gleaming in the sun——"

"Yes, and gaze upon that narrow road winding about the mountain!" cried Alice, forgetting Joe Kirby in sudden apprehension. "Do you suppose we have to go on that?"

"Shouldn't wonder," replied Betty, her own blood tingling at the prospect. "Rocky mountain roads are not exactly state highways, you know."

"But suppose the horses should slip? Suppose the wagon should slip?"

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"Another poet," chuckled Norma, but Alice was too genuinely perturbed to notice such flippancy.

They had already left the rough road through the forest and had ventured out upon the narrow road that wound about the side of the mountain. On one hand rose a straight wall of rock, on the other dropped a sheer descent to a bed of jagged rock at the foot of the defile.

Even as Alice gasped with dismay one of the horses stepped



on a rock in the path, slipped, and almost went down. The carryall slithered sickeningly toward the edge of the drop.

Alice screamed. Norma moaned. Betty, white-faced, grasped the little iron rail of the seat.

## **CHAPTER XIV**

### **THE NARROW LEDGE**

There was a flash of horse and man as a rider whipped past, hugging the rock wall. Joe Kirby flung himself from his mount and seized the bridle of the struggling horse.

The carryall jerked, lingered for a horrible moment on the brink, then tottered, swaying and lurching, to the farther side of the road.

Joe Kirby stood, his arm about the neck of the nearest horse, trembling. His gray eyes were black as he whipped a command to the driver.

“Get down out of there. You ride my horse for the rest of the way. I said get down!” he repeated quietly as the driver seemed about to protest. “Now—move!”

The driver hesitated, said something sulkily beneath his breath, and moved a hand toward his right hip pocket. Joe Kirby took a step forward and the man scrambled hastily to the ground.

“I can’t ride your horse, you know I can’t, Joe Kirby,” he whined. “It’s good as murder to ask me to try.”

“If you’ve come to this age and can’t ride a horse yet, you deserve to die,” replied Kirby, and turned away indifferently.

He turned to Mr. Gordon and Bob as they rushed up, pale with apprehension.

In as few words as possible the young Westerner explained the situation. The girls, having had time enough to compose themselves and recover from their fright, assured Uncle Dick that they were “perfectly all right.”

“You ain’t got no call to worry, sir,” Joe Kirby said, as he swung his long legs into the seat vacated by the driver. “I ain’t takin’ any more chances for the rest of this trip. Look at that now!” He pointed with his whip to the road ahead where the dispossessed driver was vainly trying to mount Joe Kirby’s horse. The animal was bucking and rearing in an alarming manner.

At last, with one despairing lunge, the erstwhile driver flung himself into the saddle. The horse started, as though surprised, then set off at a mad gallop. It dashed about a sharp curve in the narrow road as though it were out on the open prairie. Horse and rider were lost to view.

“But won’t he be killed?” cried Betty in alarm. “That horse \_\_\_\_\_”

“That horse,” Joe Kirby interrupted dryly, “knows his country, ma’am. If Jud Boswick gets himself killed it will be plain suicide. You ain’t got any call to worry.”

He tightened the reins and chirruped to the horses in the mild and gentle manner he used with all dumb animals, and they were off again.

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They met with no further mishap on the journey to the ranch, and the girls were amazed at the instinctive confidence they placed in Joe Kirby. Though they passed through scenes of rugged grandeur and often found themselves perched on the edge of some daring cañon or ravine, they were never seriously frightened. Joe Kirby's firm hand on the reins, Joe Kirby's gentle voice, urging the horses on, seemed to banish trepidation.

Since there had not been time to dine aboard the train, they stopped midway to the ranch and had a lunch, which was more like a dinner, served to them in the pleasant dining room of a hospitable ranch house.

They had chicken and dumpling, mashed potatoes and strawberry pie—all of which the young folks, and their elders, as well, consumed with an appetite born of hours in the bracing mountain air.

“If Rainbow Ranch is like this,” said Alice, with a sigh of content as they returned once more to the carryall, “our vacation will be one long sweet dream.”

The sun was far in the west, dropping its blood-red rim beyond the lofty crests of the mountains, when Joe Kirby drew in the horses, pointing to the fertile valley that seemed almost at their feet.

106

“Rainbow Ranch lies down there,” said the Westerner,

pointing with his whip. "I reckon," he added simply, "it's one of the purtiest spots that ever was made."

"Oh, it is pretty!" said Betty, leaning forward the better to see the rolling green expanse of the plain dotted with grazing cattle, the rambling picturesque outline of the ranch houses, the whole bounded and guarded by towering white-capped mountains.

"But how dark it is down there!" Norma exclaimed wonderingly. "The sun has not gone down, yet it seems like twilight."

Joe Kirby twisted about in his seat and smiled at her. The girls noticed for the first time how sad his eyes looked when he smiled.

"Easterners most always notice that," he said. "You see, the mountains throw our valleys into shadow so that night comes before it's got a call to. But for all that we love the mountains," he added, fixing a gaze that was almost wistful on the lofty peaks. "They stand guard—sort o' like sentinels \_\_\_\_\_"

"Oh!" said Betty. She leaned forward, speaking softly. "For the first time in my life I'd like to be a poet!"

Joe Kirby nodded. He seemed to understand.

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"Yes, ma'am. There are times I've sort of had that hankering myself."

"Why do they call the place Rainbow Ranch?" Betty wanted

to know, after a moment's pause.

“Account of the rainbow you can see after a summer storm,” was the reply. “We have the most wonderful rainbows out here anybody ever saw.”

Mr. Gordon and Bob came up and the Westerner pointed out the ranch with a lazy gesture of his whip. In a moment they were off again down the rocky road, the carryall swaying and bumping unpleasantly, Joe Kirby easily controlling the stumbling horses with a firm rein and a gentle word now and then.

The girls were silent. Approaching night had put its spell upon them. The grandeur of this marvelous country awed and thrilled them. Girls as they were, they felt that this adventure would always remain with them, standing out like a gleaming gem in the treasure chest of lesser memories.

Betty's thoughts were of Joe Kirby. His was a personality arresting and unique. More than that, he appealed to her imagination. He had even understood her momentary, impulsive longing for the gift of poetic expression. Betty decided on impulse, as she did most things, that she liked Joe Kirby very much indeed.

They were coming to the end of their journey. The carryall, bumping to the foot of the descent, came out upon a comparatively wide and level road.

108

The ranch buildings seemed appreciably nearer but not nearly as impressive as they had appeared from a distance. The mountains alone retained their grandeur, seeming loftier and

more remote seen from the low level of the valley.

The road was wide enough to permit Mr. Gordon and Bob to canter beside the carryall. The girls had found their tongues again and kept up a lively chatter as they neared the ranch house.

They had practically reached the building when a diversion occurred that caused the horses to swerve nervously and brought a cry of alarm from the girls.

“Hands up! Your money or your life!”

## CHAPTER XV

### RAINBOW RANCH

The three girls gave one glance at the young bandits and began to laugh.

Two lads of about Bob's age, one a bit younger, the other older by a year, perhaps, had jumped to the middle of the road, leveling remarkably real looking revolvers upon the amazed travelers.

As the latter began to laugh, the boys grinned also and came forward toward the carryall.

"Jud came in just now," said the older of the two lads, addressing Joe Kirby as he swung himself to the ground. "He was riding Apples, and Apples looked sore."

Kirby chuckled.

"I reckon he wasn't near as sore as Jud was, Dick," he said. He then pulled off his wide sombrero with a sweeping gesture as two people appeared in the doorway of the house.

"Did you drive, Joe Kirby?" asked the lady, in evident surprise.



“Yes, ma’am.” Kirby’s grin was slow but broad. “I sent Jud home on Apples.”

“Glad you did, Kirby,” said the man energetically.  
“Found after you left Jud wasn’t fit for drivin’ to-day.  
Howdy, Mr. Gordon!”

110

Mr. Gordon had dismounted. The two men shook hands heartily and Mr. Randall, the owner of Rainbow Ranch and a very fine fellow in the bargain, turned and presented his “missus.”

“And this is your boy and your three girls,” said Mrs. Randall, her kindly, quizzical gaze traveling from Bob to the girls in the carryall. “I must say, for a bachelor, you have quite a family, sir!”

Mr. Gordon chuckled, flung an arm about Bob’s shoulders and beckoned to the girls.

“Come here ‘family,’ and be introduced,” he said.

Nothing loath, the girls scrambled to the ground and approached the group eagerly, the Randall boys interestedly bringing up the rear.

Mrs. Randall kissed the girls and Bob, too—much to the latter’s embarrassment—in the hospitable and friendly Western manner, and after introducing her own brood, Dick and Billy, aged fifteen and thirteen, respectively, she led them all within the house.

Stealing a last look over her shoulder before she followed

Mrs. Randall, Betty saw that Joe Kirby had climbed back into the carryall and was taking horses and wagon to the stable in the rear.

Alice, following the direction of her gaze, suddenly put an arm about Betty and gave her a squeeze.

111

“You like Joe Kirby, too,” she whispered triumphantly.

Betty nodded gravely.

“Who could help liking him, after what happened out there,” she said, with a wave of her hand toward the road they had taken from Bufferville. “We owe it to him that we’re alive now, Alice.”

The latter shivered.

“Don’t remind me!” she cried. “That was a dreadful experience!”

They found the big living room of the ranch house comfortable in the extreme. There was a fireplace at one end of it, a leather-covered lounging chair in every corner where it was possible to get one, and a great old couch covered with cretonne and crammed with cushions near a window.

“I thought Westerners didn’t go in for comfort,” Norma whispered, as the girls took in delightedly these pleasant details. “Aren’t they supposed to spend most of their time in the great out-of-doors?”

“Most of the time they probably do,” Betty replied. “But there

are exceptions—when the great out-of-doors is engrossed in snowing or raining, for instance, and it doesn't appear half so attractive as the indoors. Girls, I just love this room!"

"So do I," agreed Norma. "But I hope we don't have to spend too much time in it. Me for the lofty mountains and the wooded hills."

112

"Good gracious!" cried Alice, "Timothy's poetry has infected us all."

Mrs. Randall proved a most attractive and pleasant hostess. While Mr. Gordon "stepped out" with her husband to "take a look about the place," and Bob disappeared with the Randall boys, presumably in search of "the old swimming hole," Mrs. Randall led the girls over the pleasant old house.

They found everything delightful, from the great porch that swept magnificently about three sides of the house, commanding a magnificent view from every angle, to the kitchen, where reigned the squaw cook, Shela, and the old stooped and wrinkled Mexican, "Petro." With their own sunny and spacious rooms on the second floor, they were more than pleased.

There were two of these. They were simply, but pleasantly, furnished with large enameled beds, dressers, and chairs and the floors were covered with fresh-smelling and colorful matting. The two rooms were connected by a small passage which was evidently intended to be used as a closet as well, judging from the hooks and shelves that adorned it.

"Like one big room," cried Alice delightedly.

“Oh, dear, if only Bobby could be here!” Betty thought. But she kept this thought to herself for fear of hurting Norma and Alice. Instead, she turned to Mrs. Randall and said:

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“What a wonderful place you have!” From the window she had been admiring a magnificent view of sweeping prairie and towering purple-swathed mountain. “It must be wonderful living here all the year around.”

“Prettier now than in the winter, child—although I must say the snow-swept mountains and valleys have a beauty all their own. But cold—the kind of cold that finds its way deep down to your heart. You step outside and think yourself pursued by wild animals. Worse, far worse, for the cold is more implacable. No,” she shook herself, and smiled again as though shrugging off some strange depression, “I think you will like it better here in the summer. And now I must go and see how Shela and Petro are getting along with the dinner.”

She left them, smiling, but the girls looked after her thoughtfully.

“Do you know,” said Alice, “I think Mrs. Randall is lonesome away out here with so many men around and no women for company.”

Betty nodded as she took off her hat and fluffed her thick hair before the mirror.

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“We must try to make things pleasant for her while we are here, anyway,” she said.

There was a knock, and before the girls could give permission to enter the door flew open and Jud Boswick entered, his arms full of baggage. He neither spoke to the girls nor glanced at them. Sullenly depositing the bags, he stalked out, closing the door behind him with a vindictive slam.

“Oof, he’s mad!” cried Norma, eyes dancing. “Maybe Apples bit him!”

“What a name for a horse!” Betty chuckled. “Sounds just like Joe Kirby.”

“Every time you mention Joe Kirby I feel solemn,” said Alice, sitting down on the edge of the bed and really looking that way. “I can’t help thinking of the way he pulled us up from the edge of the brink of——”

“Eternity,” giggled Norma. “Edge of the brink!’ What do you suppose Mrs. Eustice would say to that?”

The girls unpacked and freshened themselves up as much as possible. They were hurried in this occupation by certain delectable aromas from the kitchen.

“Shela and Petro didn’t look like so much, but I’ll wager they can cook,” Norma observed hungrily. “Betty, have you got on my new shoes?”

“Couldn’t wear them, darling,” retorted Betty. “Your shoes are much too small and dainty.”

Norma looked at Betty’s small, well-shaped feet and sniffed.

“Modesty may be a virtue, but I think it’s only smug,” she said, then giggled as Betty shot a glance at her.

“There are your slippers under your dressing gown, silly,” said Betty, pointing loftily.

“Oh!”

“Wonder where Bob is.” Betty was fastening the white fichu of her blue voile dress with a tiny blue enameled pin. No one would have thought, to look at her, fresh and dainty and glowing, that she had been traveling for days and had recently passed through an adventure that might have been expected to tire the hardiest soul.

“Out with those two Randall boys——”

“I meant, where is he going to sleep? I wonder if his room is near us.”

Bob’s voice was heard just then in conversation with the Randall boys.

“Thanks, Dick. I promise you it won’t take me long to wash my face and hands. I’m ravenous.”

Betty opened the door and peeped out into the hall just as Bob passed.

He stopped and regarded her with approval.

“My, but you look good, Betty. So this is where you girls hang out!”

Betty nodded.

“Where do you?”

“Right next door. I’m on my way there now to get ready for dinner. Can you smell it?”

“Smell it!” giggled Norma from within. “What a question, Bob Henderson! We can smell nothing else!”

“Meet you downstairs in a jiffy, then,” returned Bob and went on, laughing.

Dinner in the large, many-windowed dining room was just the kind of meal one might have expected at Rainbow Ranch. The girls and Bob ate so heartily they were almost ashamed of themselves. However, as the Randall boys ate as much, if not more, and as Mr. and Mrs. Randall continued to beam upon them and the grinning Petro to fill up their plates, the young folks eventually forgot scruples and settled down to real enjoyment.

Of course it was too late that night to see anything of the ranch, but Dick and Billy promised to “show them the sights” as early the next morning as they cared to start.

Betty eagerly named an hour that caused Alice to groan inwardly. For Alice was the sleepyhead of the party and loved her morning rest.

However, the first beam of dawn found her awake and up with the others.

Bob, from his side of the partition of the room next to Betty's—she had elected to sleep in the middle room, with Alice and Norma on one side of her, Bob on the other, and Uncle Dick directly across the hall—knocked loudly to make sure the girls were stirring.

Betty's blood was dancing and she knocked back with equal vigor on her side of the wall.

"I'll wager a dollar to a dime we'll be ready before you!" she cried.

The wager was won by a hair—the girls triumphantly slamming shut a door just as Bob opened his.

"Oh, well," he grinned, accepting defeat good-naturedly, "I'll buy you a dollar box of chocolates next time I go to town. Will that make it right?"

"Provided," Alice assured him loftily, "you go to town to-day!"



## CHAPTER XVI

### THE WILDCAT

Bob and the girls found the Randall boys and breakfast awaiting them in the dining room. Although it was just past six o'clock, the ranch seemed to have been awake and stirring for some time.

Dick and Billy greeted their new friends eagerly and told them that all preparations had been made for the start and as soon as breakfast was eaten the young visitors would be shown over the ranch. Mrs. Randall set them down to bacon and eggs and corn bread—a meal that sorely tempted them to linger despite the impatience of Billy and Dick.

The Randall boys were very much alike and both favored the mother.

“If either Billy or Dick were a girl,” thought Betty, “poor Mrs. Randall would not be so lonely on her ranch!”

Both boys were what is generally known as sandy-complexioned, both had blue eyes and a wide, easily smiling mouth. The only real difference between them was in height—Dick being three inches taller—and freckles. With these Billy had been more generously blessed, revealing a thick flock of the beauty spots beneath his merry eyes and

across the bridge of his nose.

The girls and Bob had liked the Randall boys at sight, and since the latter returned the liking a firm friendship sprang up between the young people.

Uncle Dick entered the dining room just as they were getting up from the table and expressed a lively interest in their plans for the day.

“Have a good time, but if you venture into the hills be sure to keep together,” he cautioned. “I want all my family returned to me whole!”

The young people promised light-heartedly and went out on the sun-flooded porch.

“We’ll have to go down to the corrals,” Dick explained. “Billy and I thought you might like to pick out your own mounts.”

“Oh, horses!” cried Alice happily. “What a wonderful place this is, Dick Randall. I can’t make up my mind I’m not dreaming it all!”

“When you find yourself on the back of one of our peppy little ponies,” replied the grinning lad, “you may wake up rather suddenly.”

The buildings and enclosures of Rainbow Ranch were arranged in a comfortable, rambling fashion. There were long, low sheds for the ranch hands back of the main house and a large cattle corral.

Most of the cowboys were out on the range, but some still lingered nearer home, performing duties about the corral and the ranch buildings.

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As the sightseers passed the kitchen of the ranch house Petro—his name had probably originally been Pietro, but no one about the ranch ever called him so—came forth smiling his ingratiating grin and offered them a hamper.

Bob and the girls looked mystified and appealed to the Randall boys for an explanation. Billy gave it with a war whoop of joy.

“Lunch!” he cried. “Petro, you old brick, I could hug you!”

This promise seemed to alarm the Mexican to such an extent that he retreated hurriedly to the shelter of the kitchen, nearly stumbling over the door sill as he did so.

“Whee, girls, you must have made a hit with old Petro! We never even asked for a lunch—and look!”

They lifted the cover and peered within, discovering to their delight sandwiches and chicken and cake and jelly.

“I’ll say that when Petro starts a job, he does it up brown,” laughed Bob. “Come on, people. Let’s get going.”

The girls found the corrals fascinating. Several of the ponies that had been let out to graze were brought up for inspection by the surly Jud Boswick.

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Betty chose a little black horse named Nigger, who took to

her kindly from the first and immediately began feeling about in the pocket of her knicker suit for sugar.

“I’ll bring some next time, honey,” she said, her cheek close to the black velvety muzzle. “And maybe, if you’re very good to-day, an apple!”

Norma found a little piebald colt much to her liking. He danced about a bit when Billy helped her to the saddle, but Norma managed him nicely by talking to him in honeyed tones and allowing the reins to lie slack on his neck.

Alice chose a brown horse larger than the others, with long legs that looked as if they would give him an amazing length of stride.

“Wait till it comes to a race,” she told them. “See then who will show you her heels!”

“Nigger’s a good little runner and so is the piebald colt,” said Billy. “They’ve both lots of grit, and that’s as good as length of stride for a horse.”

Of course Billy and Dick both had their favorite ponies, who followed them around like pet kittens and were always nuzzling for sweets.

Bob chose the pony he had ridden from the station, the same that had been rebuked for his antics by Joe Kirby and who thereafter was as meek and manageable as the tamest of ponies.

Bob swung into the saddle and all were off, cantering two

abreast, past the low-lying sheds of the ranch hands out upon the rolling low lands.

The wind was keen upon their faces, their youth flamed to the motion of the animals beneath them and the sense of illimitable distances.

“I could ride like this forever,” Betty flung across at Bob.

Bob looked at the bright color in the girl’s face, the gleam of her dark hair where the sun turned it almost red, and grinned.

“I wouldn’t mind myself. I say, Betsey, have you brought a mirror with you?”

“No,” Betty shook her head, puzzled.

“Good,” laughed Bob. “I never liked conceited girls. And one look in the mirror now would turn your head for life. Hello, what have we here?”

The others had drawn up before the cattle corral. Norma and Alice were exclaiming delightedly over the number of steers in the penned-in enclosure.

“I never saw so many!” cried Alice. “What would happen if they got loose?”

“Nothing, except in the case of a stampede,” replied Dick. “Then—plenty!”

Alice shivered and turned her pony’s head.

“I don’t like to think of it,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Off again, only this time with a swerve into the forest to the east. Dick stopped them at the foot of a steep mountain road.

“We’d better go single file here,” he said. “The horses are sure-footed, but it pays to be careful, just the same. One slip and—good night!”

“Sounds encouraging,” giggled Norma. “Lead on, ere our courage fails.”

“You be careful of your language,” warned Alice. “Otherwise common duty will force me to report you to our beloved English teacher.”

Norma laughed and urged her pony up the steep slope after Dick, who was already cautiously ascending.

Betty came next with Bob following close to her. And, bringing up the rear, Alice on her long-legged mount and Billy on his.

Up and up they climbed until it seemed to Betty their destination must be the sky. Wearying finally of the monotonous climb, she chanced to glance down a tempting path leading into a tiny glade, the beauty of which drew from her a gasp of sheer delight.

Without stopping to think or question the wisdom of her action, Betty turned her little black pony’s head and cantered into the tempting path, calling out to Bob as she did so.

The little animal whinnied with pleasure at finding itself on level ground again and, by way of showing its appreciation, began to run.

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In sheer high spirits Betty gave the pony its head, confident that Bob was coming directly behind her. When the path became so steep that Nigger halted of his own accord, Betty turned about to fling a laughing word to Bob and found herself—alone.

She was only mystified at first and a bit resentful. Bob should have followed!

She turned the pony and started to retrace its steps only to find that, in some mysterious manner, the path had disappeared!

“Well, here’s a pretty kettle of fish!” cried Betty aloud. “Do you mean to tell me, Betty Gordon, that you have been such an utter idiot as to go and get yourself lost?”

At her words Nigger started and pricked up his ears nervously. Betty listened. There was not a sound in all the forest but the mysterious forest sounds. She was as alone, apparently, as though left suddenly stranded on a desert island, the last sail sinking from view beyond the horizon.

“But how could I have got so far from them?” she argued with herself. “Certainly I can’t be far from the trail. Come on, Nigger, maybe you know how to get back. I begin to think you have far more sense than I.”

But the little horse, though spoken to in such complimentary tones, appeared to have no more idea

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than Betty how to regain the trail and merely wandered aimlessly when given his head, taking them, as Betty suddenly realized, only farther and more inextricably into the heart of the forest.

She paused then and looked about her, fear for the first time entering her heart. The silence of that woodland! It seemed suddenly to take tangible form, crowding in upon her, strangling her.

There came a sound above her head, a tiny, stealthy sound. Betty glanced up swiftly, stared, her glance riveted upon something in those overhanging branches. Her hand stole softly to her throat. Her attempt to cry out ended in a croak of terror. Slowly the blood congealed in her veins, turning her to ice while she stared—stared at that crouching thing of terror with switching tail and wicked, gloating eyes—stared and wondered how long it would be before she felt the impact of its teeth upon her flesh!

Betty was face to face with a wildcat!



## CHAPTER XVII

### HORROR

Betty could not tell how long it was she stood there, the wildcat crouched above her—only a matter of seconds probably. She knew that immobility alone could save her.

But she had counted without Nigger. The little horse snorted with terror and danced to one side. Shaken from her balance, Betty screamed and fell to the ground. For a moment she was menaced by Nigger's flying hoofs before the animal turned and galloped into the forest.

Mad with fright, Betty scrambled to her feet and stared wildly into the branches.

"Help! Help!" she cried, her voice ringing through the forest.

She leaped back suddenly, hands at her throat as the wildcat sprang. A sobbing cry burst from her. At the same time came the sharp, double report of a rifle.

Something struck Betty and flung her to the ground, something that rebounded from her and itself fell to earth, spitting and writhing horribly.

Betty raised herself and stared stupidly at the stricken

thing upon the ground. It had been shot! The wildcat had been shot! The incredible had happened, then. Some one had heard her cry for help, had come to her rescue.

The great cat gave one last convulsive movement and lay still. Some one was crashing through the underbrush toward her.

Trembling, Betty got to her feet, circling about the dead animal. A man parted the undergrowth and came into the cleared space. He carried a rifle and his face was grim. Betty recognized him at once.

“Joe Kirby!” she cried in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

“What are you doing here?” asked the young fellow curtly. “Don’t you know this ain’t the place for a young girl like you?”

Betty laughed hysterically.

“I—I found that out ages ago, Joe Kirby,” she gasped. “Please—please—don’t be cross with me!”

Only the hardest and most unfeeling of men could have resisted such an entreaty from Betty, and as Joe was neither hard nor unfeeling and as Betty was looking extraordinarily appealing after her fright, the young rancher’s grim expression relaxed and he laughed in a friendly way.

“Guess you did have a bad minute or two, at that,” he said, turning the dead wildcat over with his foot.

“Lucky I happened along just when I did. Where’s your pony?”

Betty looked about her with a comical expression of dismay.

“Why, he’s gone!” she cried.

Joe Kirby chuckled.

“Now, I could a’most have told that for myself,” he drawled.

But Betty was not in a laughing mood. Nigger had gone, and she was anxious. There was nothing to be personally afraid of. The rifle in Joe Kirby’s hand set her at defiance with all the wild creatures of the forest at that moment. Let them come on!

But suppose the riderless horse should be seen by Bob and the other members of the party? They would be thoroughly frightened.

Joe Kirby’s drawling voice broke in on her thoughts.

“How come you got separated from the rest of your party?” he asked. “Should ’a’ thought they’d keep a pretty close watch on you.”

“It was all my fault,” Betty replied honestly. “I turned into a little side path that I liked and got myself lost. And if it hadn’t been for you—” she came closer to the Westerner and put out her hand in a little friendly gesture to him—“something far worse might have happened to me. I don’t believe I’ve told you how really grateful I am, Joe Kirby.”

The young fellow flushed uneasily beneath her gratitude, but he gave her hand a firm pressure with his

lean brown fingers.

“You ain’t any call to be grateful to me,” he told her simply. “I couldn’t let that spittin’ cat fall onto you, now could I? But I guess,” and he straightened and looked about him with evident relief, “we’d better get you back to your friends before they’ve clean given you up for lost.”

“Oh, if you please, Joe Kirby,” said Betty anxiously. “What are you going to do with that?” she asked with a shudder of repulsion as the young fellow stooped down and picked up the dead wildcat.

“Reckon the boys’ll like a squint at her,” returned Joe. “Ain’t much for fur, account it’s summer, but it’s a pretty big cat, at that. Spoils of war, you know,” he added, with a boyish grin.

He swung the animal over his shoulder and took Betty by the hand, leading her through the thick tangle of undergrowth.

“How am I going to get back when I haven’t any horse?” she asked suddenly.

“Reckon you’ll have to share Apples with me. He ain’t averse to carryin’ two.”

Was it imagination or did a shadow of pain overspread the Westerner’s face as he made this remark? Betty, studying him covertly, decided that it was not imagination. For Joe’s face had suddenly lost all suggestion of laughter. It seemed older, sterner, on a sudden, and there were deep lines about his mouth and nose. He did not speak to Betty again until they reached the spot where he had left Apples.

The horse was not tethered. Joe explained briefly in reply to a question of Betty's that to tether Apples would be the grossest of insults to that faithful animal.

"He's a pal, that horse," Joe added, rubbing the velvet muzzle with gentle fingers. "Eh, Apples? And I don't ever insult my pals."

All during the ride down the steep trail to the lower level of the ranch Betty was uncomfortably aware of the change that had come over Joe Kirby with that simple statement: "Reckon you'll have to share Apples with me. He ain't averse to carryin' two."

What had he meant? Why was he so silent now—almost stern?

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT

Joe had helped Betty into the saddle and had swung himself up behind her. She was sitting side saddle now, while the Westerner supported and held her safe with one arm, holding the reins carelessly in the brown fingers of his left hand. Joe Kirby evidently left a good deal to Apples. Nor was his confidence misplaced. The pony picked its steps carefully and with a gravity that seemed to say he realized his responsibility and would do his best to discharge it faithfully.

Stealing a glance at the stern, set face of the young Westerner, Betty wondered again what could have happened in the past to set the stamp of pain so plainly on his face. What was it that made his arm contract unconsciously about her, that narrowed his eyes to mere slits of intolerable pain as they stared out over the pony's head—where? If Betty could have answered that she could have answered everything.

But in spite of his strange reticence on that ride to the ranch Betty felt that her acquaintance with Joe Kirby had ripened into a genuine friendship.

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As they reached the foot of the steep trail and the pony cantered into a gallop on level ground, Betty, in her most impetuous mood, said:

“If you won’t let me thank you for what you have done, Joe Kirby, you must at least let me be friends with you. Because I like you ever so much!”

Joe Kirby seemed genuinely touched and softened by her friendliness.

“That’s a mighty nice thing to say to me,” he said. “And you’re a mighty fine little pal!”

They had gone but a little way when they saw a horseman galloping toward them.

“Looks like Bob!” cried Betty, and, in another moment: “It is Bob!”

The boy spurred his horse up to the two on Apples. The hand holding the reins shook and his face was white.

“Betty—I—we thought——”

“Never mind, Bob. I’m all right now. Joe Kirby found me just in time——”

“Just in time?” repeated Bob explosively. He pointed to the wildcat and Joe Kirby nodded in answer to the tacit question.

“Got him on the spring,” he said soberly. “Miss Betty wasn’t hurt at all—just scared a mite.”

Because of the misery in Bob’s eyes, Betty reached out a hand to him. The boy gripped it hard.

“Betty, if anything had happened to you—I can’t even think of it! Uncle Dick——”

“Well, nothing did happen to me,” Betty reminded him practically. “Where are Norma and Alice and the Randall boys?”

“Off searching for you,” replied Bob. He had turned his horse, cantering with them toward the house. He was calmer now, though Betty noticed that his eyes occasionally traveled to the dead wildcat slung carelessly at the Westerner’s saddle bow. “I came back to the ranch to head another searching party and to see if by any stroke of good luck you could have found your way back to the ranch. I had almost reached the house when I looked up and saw you coming. Kirby,” he suddenly reached out a hand to the young Westerner, “we owe you a lot!”

The two shook hands gravely and Betty was proud of Bob. How much older than his years he seemed!

Fortunately Betty had appeared on the scene before Bob had alarmed others on the ranch. Joe Kirby, dismounting near the corrals and lifting Betty from the saddle, volunteered to go back and “round up the searching party” and send them back to the ranch.

“And if you find Nigger——”

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“Don’t you go to worryin’ about Nigger,” Joe reassured Betty as he slung a long leg over Apples and headed him back toward the hills. “He’ll be back soon. That little pony knows his way about. Don’t worry.”



Betty watched him go thoughtfully. Then she turned to Bob, who had also dismounted and turned his pony over to one of the “boys.”

“I think I’d like to sit on the porch for the rest of this day,” she said, with a rather tremulous smile. “I feel that I’ve had enough excitement to last me for a while.”

“I can’t even think of it!” Bob’s expression took on a grimness that reminded Betty of Joe Kirby when he had first burst upon the scene back there in the woods. “Yet I’ve got to know how it happened. How did you get away from us, Betty, anyway?”

So, walking slowly back to the house, Betty told of her adventure from the time she had impulsively spurred down the mountain path to the moment when she and Joe Kirby had met Bob on the ranch.

“What I can’t understand is why you didn’t follow me,” she said. “I know it was foolish of me to leave the trail, but I felt sure you would come too.”

“So I would, if I had seen you,” Bob answered.

Whereupon he proceeded to clear up several points that had been mystifying Betty.

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In the first place, at the time she had been farther ahead of the others than she supposed. A sudden turn in the trail had hidden her momentarily from Bob’s view. As the boy spurred on, a cry from Alice checked him and he went back to see what was wrong. This proved to be nothing worse than a lock of the girl’s hair caught on a twig, but it had taken several

minutes to extricate her.

In the meantime Betty had succeeded in getting herself hopelessly lost in the woods. When Bob reached the spot where she had disappeared there was no sign of her and he naturally supposed she was ahead with the others. Spurring on to overtake the leaders of the party, he had soon discovered the fact of Betty's disappearance. At that moment the latter was probably in the midst of her terrifying adventure.

"The rest you know as well as I do," Bob finished. And he added, fixing her with a stern eye that might have belonged to a father or an elder brother, at least: "Don't ever do a thing like that again, Betty! You hear me?"

Betty dimpled, but promised very meekly that she never would.

Norma and Alice returned in a half-hysterical state and the Randall boys looked as though they had been through a war. After a round of kisses and hugs and congratulations, the whole story had to be told over again, and Betty had to be kissed and hugged all over again too in celebration of her narrow escape.

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"Think of facing that wildcat!" cried Norma. "Wasn't it awful!"

"And Betty got lost because Bob helped me when I got my hair tangled in that tree," sighed Alice. "Gracious, how queerly some things come about!"

"Oh, it wasn't your fault at all, Alice," cried Betty. "It was my

own, entirely.”

When Mr. Gordon heard the story that night he looked very grave and spoke to Betty with unusual gentleness. But he exacted from her a promise like the one she had given Bob.

“I will be careful, Uncle Dick,” she said, and rubbed her cheek caressingly against his hand—a gesture which, according to Uncle Dick, might be taken to bind the contract.

For several days Betty kept her word to the letter, and the fact that, at the end of that time, she found herself again in danger did not in any way reflect upon her good faith or her promise to her Uncle Dick.

The Randall boys, who were the young visitors’ constant companions and guides during their rambles about the ranch and their excursions into the hills, had dragged them off to witness one of the big events of the year—the cattle round-up.

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They started early, and Petro again put them up a lunch.

“Which won’t be wasted this time,” Billy Randall said, with relish.

All the “boys” were riding the range, and as the young folks started out the place seemed strangely deserted. They rode for some time before the shouts of cowboys and the thunderous beat of hoofs on turf told them they were nearing their destination.

They mounted a ridge and looked down upon a scene such as

they had never before been privileged to witness.

Cowboys were riding wildly, wheeling, turning, coaxing, cajoling, driving the cattle before them, heading them off from the open range and toward the rapidly growing herd that gathered in the center of the plain, cropping quietly at the short and stubbly prairie grass.

Betty's eyes shone with excitement.

"Wouldn't I like to be down there helping!" she cried.

"Look!" She grasped Norma's arm, who was next her on her pony. "Isn't that Joe Kirby? No—the tall one on the right!"

"Sure is!" Billy Randall answered, a gleam of hero worship in his eyes. "Joe Kirby's the best rider we have. Believe me, he can manage cattle. Look at him drive!"

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What it was that startled that quiet herd, no one knew—no one ever will know. But Dick Randall, who had been studying it closely and knew the ways of steers, cried out suddenly:

"They're going to stampede! Jumping cricket, here they come! Turn your mounts, folks! Toward the hills! Ride for your lives!"

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## CHAPTER XIX

### BENEATH POUNDING HOOFS

Mechanically the party of onlookers obeyed that wild command. Lucky for them now that they were on horseback and that their mounts were fleet!

Behind them and to the right of them they could hear the thunderous roar as the stampeding cattle dashed toward them up the slope. Galloping ahead and a little to the right, drawing a long hypotenuse of a triangle across the plain, the boys and girls had just one chance of escaping that death-dealing sea of hoofs.

Betty flung a glance over her shoulder and saw that Bob was close behind her. Bob's mouth was set in a hard line, his eyes were turned resolutely ahead.

"Don't look back!" he cried, as Betty's swift gaze passed to that sea of maddened, tossing heads. "We'll make it, Betty. Keep your horse headed straight!" For in her horror at finding the herd so close upon them, Betty had relaxed her hold upon the reins. Nigger stumbled and for one horrible moment dashed toward the herd instead of away from it.

Betty closed her eyes and pulled on the reins. The little horse wheeled, and they were off again, but with

several precious yards lost.

Bob was beside her on his mount. Nigger was winded. Betty felt that Bob could forge ahead with the others, but was lingering behind to be with her.

“Go on!” she gasped. “Go on, Bob! There’s no use our both \_\_\_\_\_”

“Save your breath!” There was agony in the boy’s voice but his head was up and his eyes unflinching as he glanced behind at the death that pursued them—gained upon them!

The others were far in advance now. In another moment they would pass the far-flung flank of the herd and would be safe.

Bob looked at Betty, her hair flying, her game little head up, her face as white as paper.

“Betty!” he cried, “bend down—away down, close to your horse’s neck. That’s it, lower—lower—” His voice died in an agonized whisper.

That terrible wave was almost upon them. He measured the distance they had still to go, figured the speed of the great leader of the herd. There was still a chance—one little chance. A sudden burst of speed——

“Lower in the saddle, Betty!” he cried, his voice choking in a sob. “Lower!”

Betty, beneath those pounding hoofs! If he only had a rifle he might shoot the horses and he and Betty, using them for a

breastwork, crouching behind them, might have a chance—just a little chance!

Betty, looking behind, gave a strangled gasp. To her terrified vision the herd seemed already upon them. The sound of the pounding hoofs was deafening. The up-flung heads of the cattle seemed like the sinister threat of a tidal wave.

Bob, dear old Bob! So this was the end!

She had been leaning far forward in the saddle. Now she twined her fingers in the pony's mane in an agony of entreaty.

“Nigger! Can't you go faster, little horse? Please, oh, please \_\_\_\_\_”

As though he understood and answered her prayer, the pony gathered itself for one last frantic burst of speed.

Ahead the little horse shot like a lightning bolt, mane flying, tail streaming out behind. He was leaping through the air. His flying hoofs seemed hardly to touch the ground.

“Second wind!” yelled Bob in an agony of hope and fear, and loosened the reins that held his own frantic horse. The animal plunged ahead, neck and neck with Nigger.

The herd was upon them! The flashing horns of a great steer seemed to graze Nigger's flank as he swept past. The herd swept by with a mighty roar, the earth trembling beneath the impact.

“We're safe!” shrieked Betty above the noise. “Bob, we're

safe!”

The onrush of the horses could not be checked at once, and it was a moment or two before Bob and Betty could turn about and ride back to the shouting and hysterical boys and girls.

“Betty, it was horrible!” cried Norma. “I thought—oh—” She reached out a hand to Betty and the two girls clung together, shaken and speechless.

“Look!” Alice Guerin pointed with trembling finger to the tossing sea of cattle. “Something has stopped them.”

“One of them has fallen, the leader probably,” Dick explained. “The others are piling up on him. They’ll break in a minute. You’ll see.”

As he spoke the pursuing cowboys dashed up, waved to the boys and girls, and urged their horses to greater speed as they gained upon the bolting cattle. The herd, already partially checked in its headlong rush by the fall of the leader, was still further demoralized by the approach of the men on horseback.

They wavered, broke, and scattered into confused, uncertain groups. The stampede was at an end.

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The girls and boys proceeded slowly toward the ranch, putting as much space as possible between themselves and the restless cattle that were being rounded up again by the excited cowboys.

“If one of them so much as looks at me,” said Alice Guerin, “I will turn my mount and dash madly for the hills. So be



prepared, everybody.”

“A cowboy never used to affect you that way, Alice,” laughed Betty, having almost recovered her usual good spirits.

“Silly!” retorted Alice, with a lofty gesture. “You know as well as I do that I was speaking of those odious steers. I hope,” she added, with perfect sincerity, “that I shall never have to see another one as long as I live!”

They reached the ranch house without further mishap. As they entered Betty squeezed Bob’s hand gratefully.

“You were a dear to stand by me so, Bob. I—I won’t forget it!”

“Stand by you!” repeated Bob, with genuine astonishment. “Don’t talk nonsense, Betty. What else did you suppose I’d do?”

“Nothing else—being Bob!” replied Betty, and gave him such a bright glance of gratitude and affection that Bob’s heart was warm from it for hours afterward.

It was about that time that Billy remembered the second hamper of lunch that Petro had put up for them and had come safely through the excitement of the stampede. He asked what they should do with it.

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“What a perfectly mad question,” giggled Norma. “What does a person usually do with lunch?”

The answer to that was unanimous and satisfactory to every

one concerned. They ate the lunch from that corner of the veranda commanding the most gorgeous view of range and mountain and discussed as they did so the terror of the stampede and their own almost tragic part in it.

Mrs. Randall came out in the midst of the discussion, and Betty moved over to make room for the older woman on the step beside her. Norma politely passed the hamper.

“Go on, mom, take one,” urged Billy as his mother hesitated. “We can recommend the cook.”

Mrs. Randall obeyed and her face grew rosy and her eyes bright as she joined in the conversation of the young folks.

Betty had noticed that the older woman spent as much time as she could in the society of Alice and Norma Guerin and herself on those very rare occasions when they were not engaged on some adventure of their own. This fact strengthened her conviction that Mrs. Randall was a lonely woman, hungering for life and excitement as only a friendly woman in that beautiful but lonely spot, could hunger.

These thoughts ran through her mind now as she munched a sandwich and regarded the lady in question. Dick Randall was speaking in a bantering vein.

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“To-morrow’s mummy’s birthday,” he said. “Bet you a dollar to a cookie, you can’t get her to tell her age.”

Mrs. Randall laughed and playfully boxed his ear.

“I never heard such impudence. A sensible woman never tells

her age after she gets to be twenty-nine,” she added to the amused and interested girls. “I never have, and so I don’t feel a day older.”

“You don’t look it, either,” said Alice sincerely.

As for Betty, after the announcement by Dick that the next day was his mother’s birthday, she remained quiet and thoughtful, though there was a gleam in her eyes that betokened inspiration of some sort.

When Mrs. Randall went into the house Betty beckoned the other girls aside—much to the exasperation of the boys, who had urged them to go fishing—and disclosed her plan.

“You heard Dick say that to-morrow was his mother’s birthday, and I reckon no one but us girls will think of giving her a party.”

Alice and Norma stared at Betty for a moment and then, with a chuckle of delight, hugged her.

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“You precious infant! No one would think of it but *you*,” declared Alice.

Norma gave vent to a squeal of delight.

“I see to the bottom of your deep, dark plan at once. You intend us to give her a party.”

“Lovely—cakes and ice cream and everything,” exclaimed Alice. “But,” with a woeful pause, “where can we get all these delectable delicacies?”

Betty chuckled.

“It remains to be seen how well we can hypnotize Petro and the squaw,” she said.

“And there is one more weighty problem,” said Alice, wrinkling her pretty forehead. “Whom shall we invite to the party?”

Betty made a sweeping gesture of her hand that took in the entire ranch.

“Everybody,” she said. “We can’t hurt any one’s feelings, you know.”

“Even Petro and the squaw?”

“Even,” very firmly, “Petro and the squaw!”

Having once broached the subject of the party, arrangements moved swiftly. Every one, from the foreman of the ranch to the squaw in the kitchen, liked the girls and were eager to fall in with any plan of theirs. Although the idea of giving a party to Mrs. Randall was a novel thing and it was a custom of those on the ranch to regard all novelty with suspicion, the “boys” joined hands in agreeing that if ever a lady deserved a party that lady was Mrs. Randall. Perhaps the fact that Petro had promised to make a regiment of his little iced cakes and that sufficient ice-cream would be frozen to feed a small-sized army, had something to do with the hearty approval of the cowboys. At any rate, Betty had heard by word of mouth before the evening was over that she might expect a full attendance from

these husky rangers.

Mr. Randall and the boys were acquiescent, but they seemed slightly dazed by the proceedings. Giving a party for Mrs. Randall seemed to them a little like having flowers in the house for anything but a wedding or a funeral—unnecessary and rather alarming.

Before the girls went to bed that night they had things so well ordered that they were able to sleep with unburdened minds. In fact, so wearied were they from the strain of the day's exciting events that the sun was high in the heavens before they opened reluctant eyes on—the day of the party.

“Good gracious!” cried Betty, jumping out of bed. “And so many things to do!”

The party was to be directly after supper, and by the time that hour was reached the girls were in a state of excitement only surpassed by Mrs. Randall's own.

They had been in and out of the kitchen a dozen times, helping Petro and advising with him, cutting chicken and making sandwiches.

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It had been a hectic day and the eyes of the girls were bright and their cheeks rosy as they rushed upstairs after the evening meal.

Betty finished dressing first, and looked lovely in a soft, rose-colored frock that emphasized the flush in her cheeks and made her eyes unusually bright. She declared her intention of calling for Mrs. Randall.

“Come in,” said Mrs. Randall’s voice in response to the light tap on her door.

Betty obeyed. But as her eyes fell upon the pretty woman in blue, the soft hair waved becomingly about her face, the girl stared, astonished and incredulous.

This could not be Mrs. Randall, but a woman ten years younger at least. And pretty!

Mrs. Randall laughed like a girl at Betty’s surprise.

“I’ve had it for ever so long,” she said, smoothing the soft folds of her dress. “I got it by mail order from one of the big city stores, but I thought I was never going to have a chance to put it on.”

“But your hair!” said Betty. “It looks so pretty. Why don’t you wear it that way all the time?”

Mrs. Randall shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

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“It doesn’t seem right for a rancher’s wife to look so sort of frivolous,” she replied.

“I don’t think looking pretty ever hurt any one,” said Betty stoutly. “But come on,” she added, with a chuckle, slipping her arm through Mrs. Randall’s. “I can hear the musician tuning up.”

“Jed Turnwell!” cried Mrs. Randall as the wheezy notes of an accordion wafted up from below. “How did you ever get him to perform, Betty Gordon? He’s the shyest of men.”

“Oh,” said Betty, with an infectious giggle, “I smiled at him.  
As Bob would say, ‘nothing to it!’”

## CHAPTER XX

### WILD MERRIMENT

Rainbow Ranch will never forget that night—the long, living room of the ranch house lighted dimly and effectively by candles; Mrs. Randall and the girls radiant in their pretty things; the Randall boys quite uncomfortably washed, hair slicked back from gleaming foreheads; the ranchers in picturesque costume, looking as though they, too, had had an unusually close acquaintance with the wash basin—and none the worse for such a scrubbing.

Mrs. Randall was so completely disguised by her new and becoming toilet that the “boys” had difficulty in recognizing her at all, and when they did they followed her around with a puzzled look as though still doubting her identity. If some foreign empress had suddenly been dropped among them, they could not have felt more “flabbergasted.”

“What did you do to her, Betty?” asked Bob of the rose-frocked girl at his side.

“Not a thing!” Betty was hilarious. “Isn’t she lovely? Did you ever see such a change in any one? And the best of it is, she did every bit of it herself.”

Bob chuckled.



“Mr. Randall looks worried. I think he’s afraid some one has stolen his wife and left some strange and beauteous lady in her place. He follows her around with his mouth and eyes wide open like a little tame dog.”

There was a giggle from the other side of him and Bob wheeled about to find Norma at his elbow. She had come up in time to overhear his last words.

“Just shows what good looks can do,” she remarked sententiously, then dashed off with Billy Randall to beg Joe Kirby for a Dan Tucker.

The first strangeness had worn off now. Jed Turnwell, king of bunkhouse musicians, had warmed up his ancient accordion until the notes popped out from it like batter on a hot griddle.

As he played there was the stamping of feet in time to the music.

“Joe Kirby, go lead that Dan Tucker!”

“Out, old hoss! Git goin’, Joe!”

“Show ’em what you can do.”

These and other urgings like them forced Joe out upon the floor. Betty, watching him, had a queer impression that the young fellow hated to join in the merriment, that he would have liked to crawl off into some corner where he might watch it all from a distance. His feet seemed to drag as he was urged forward by his comrades to take charge of that merriest of all round dances, the Dan Tucker.

Although he seemed to join in the fun finally, calling out the turns and changes crisply, laughing with the rest, Betty still felt that Joe Kirby was only there because he had to be. She felt instinctively too, at the same time scolding herself for being conceited, that it was only the young Westerner's liking for her and the fact that this was her party that had brought him to it at all.

No one else in all that merry company seemed to share her thoughts.

Mr. Gordon, who had entered heartily into the plans for the party from the first, led off with Mrs. Randall while Mr. Randall, with great display of gallantry and to the delight of all, offered his arm to Betty.

"Cut out!" laughed Alice in Bob's ear. "And by a married man at that."

Bob grinned and caught her by the arm.

"Be my partner, Alice, and save my vanity," he begged.

"As long as it isn't your heart!" laughed Alice, and off they went.

Billy Randall followed with Norma and Dick bowed deeply before the youngest cowboy. This started a laugh that swelled to a roar as Joe Kirby offered his arm with great gallantry to the old and wrinkled squaw, "Queen of the Galley."

Shela acknowledged the courtesy by a generous display of

white teeth in a face the color of mahogany and Jed Turnwell played more furiously on his accordion.

The other boys chose “ladies” from among their comrades. They fell in and danced in obedience to Joe Kirby’s commands until they were all sore with laughter and quite exhausted.

“Oh, I never laughed so in all my life.” Betty sank down beside Norma and fanned her flushed face with a tiny, lace-trimmed handkerchief. “I’m positively weak!”

Notwithstanding, Betty was back in the dance before she had fairly finished speaking. For Betty was in demand in a dozen places at once. Every one seemed in a conspiracy to allow her not a moment to herself.

They had several other square dances—Jed Turnwell appeared to have an inexhaustible repertoire—but the Dan Tucker was the favorite and they came back to it again and again.

When it was time for refreshments every one was glad of a chance to rest and regain breath. The girls insisted that Mrs. Randall sit enthroned like a queen—for wasn’t this party all in her honor?—while they hustled around with Petro and the squaw and served refreshments.

Such ice-cream and such cakes! And how they did disappear!

Betty having served every one, saw that Joe Kirby was not in the room. She felt a little anxious and, saying nothing to any

one, stepped out on the veranda.

Her eyes made out nothing in the darkness at first, but presently she saw what might have been the dark shadow of a man around by the kitchen door.

She slipped noiselessly from the porch and came nearer. It was a man, a man who stood with his back to her, motionless, his head upflung to the dark, mysterious curtain of the sky, sprinkled now with diamond dust.

“Stars,” she heard him mutter in a voice whose utter misery caught at her heart. “*She* used to love you. Somewhere, mebbe, she’s lookin’ at you now.”

Betty paused, her heart beating wildly. It was Joe Kirby and, no matter how innocently, she had caught him in an unguarded moment, had heard what no ears were intended to hear.

She was about to turn and retreat as noiselessly as she had come when the man heard her and wheeled suddenly about.

“Who’s there?” he demanded sharply, and Betty saw his hand fly to the holster at his belt.

“It’s only I, Joe Kirby. I—I came out to see if you didn’t want some ice-cream and cake.”

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As long as she lived Betty would never forget the bitter pain of Joe Kirby’s laugh out there in the starlight.

“Oh, yes!” he cried. “How come that I forgot? Ice-cream and

cake!”

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE RUNAWAY PONY

The next moment the cowboy caught Betty's hand as she turned to go back to the house.

"I didn't go to hurt you," he said, awkwardly penitent. "I wouldn't do that to a good little pal."

"It's all right, Joe. I know you weren't thinking of me."

A brief and awkward silence fell between them. Betty broke it in her own impulsive, friendly way.

"I couldn't help seeing you were unhappy, Joe. If I—if there's anything I can do to help——"

Another silence fell, and Betty wondered if Joe Kirby was offended. His face was turned away from her so that she could see only his profile, but when he spoke his voice betrayed the struggle he was having with himself.

"You're a good little kid," he said, at last. "If I'd ever had a sister, which I ain't, I'd have wanted her to be like you. There ain't been any one who wanted to help—before. There ain't," his words were so low that Betty was not quite certain she heard them at all, "anybody who can help!"

She had no choice but to leave him there, standing as she had first seen him, his face upturned to the stars.

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During the remainder of that wild and merry evening thoughts of Joe Kirby tormented Betty. Although the Westerner came in after a while and finished the rest of the evening with them, Betty was not deceived. She saw the lines of suffering about his mouth and the effort it cost him to smile.

The others noticed nothing, and hilarity rose to top heat when the squaw and Petro in Navaho blankets gave an imitation of an Indian war dance. Jed Turnwell got a drum and worked it with a fine frenzy while the others stamped and shouted and clapped their hands and rocked with mirth.

Then, to the music of the accordion, came other dances.

Never had the staid living room of Rainbow Ranch witnessed such a sight, and, in all probability, never would it witness such another.

When the ranch hands had stamped their way to the bunkhouse at last, still shouting and singing to the indefatigable strains of the accordion, those left at the scene of the party dropped down in any convenient place that offered, exhausted and completely happy—with the exception of Betty, perhaps, who was buried deep in her thoughts.

“What a beautiful party,” sighed Alice. “I don’t believe I ever had so much fun in my life.”

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“I’m quite sure I never did,” said Mrs. Randall, with happy conviction.

It was evident that Mr. Randall and the boys stood rather in awe of this new wife and mother. They had never suspected her of being so young and pretty. When they followed her upstairs it was with a decidedly new deference and respect.

Mr. Gordon, who had been very much amused and interested in the whole affair, tweaked Betty's ear as he and Bob left the girls at the door of Betty's room.

"You have done something there, my lass," he said. "Mrs. Randall is a very charming woman, and I don't think she will forget it or let any one else forget it again. Wish I didn't have to go back to-morrow," he added, as though speaking to himself.

Betty was startled.

"Oh, Uncle Dick, must you? And shall we have to go too?"

Uncle Dick chuckled.

"Don't look so alarmed. You and Bob and the girls may stay as long as you are enjoying yourselves and Mrs. Randall will put up with you. I've got to get back to New York on important business—telegram this morning. You young people are on the go so constantly it's no wonder you haven't time to listen to the plans of an old codger like me. I'd like to stay, though," he added, with another chuckle. "Things are picking up around this ranch!"

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Betty smiled and squeezed his hand.

But her thoughts were not with Mrs. Randall nor with Uncle



Dick when she stood a short time later at her window, looking up at the star-sprinkled sky. Nor was she conscious of the chatter of Norma and Alice as they went over delightedly the merry events of the evening.

She was out there again in imagination, beneath the stars with Joe Kirby, listening to that despairing cry.

“There ain’t been any one who wanted to help before. There ain’t any one who *can* help.”

What was the reason for this mystery, what the cause of his deep trouble? Betty looked again at the stars and sighed.

“You know, perhaps,” she whispered. “And Joe Kirby.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Alice, with exaggerated politeness.

Betty started and laughed.

“I—I was talking to myself,” she said, annoyed to find herself flushing.

Norma giggled.

“Permit me to observe that talking to oneself is a sign of one of two things—you’re in love or crazy.”

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Betty made a face at her.

“I prefer the last!” she said.

The next day Betty made an occasion to go off riding by

herself. Uncle Dick had left early in the creaking carryall. Betty felt lonesome without him and wanted to be alone to think out some things that were puzzling her. She was forced to dodge the young folks in order to get away at all, with the result that, alone at last with Nigger beneath her and her favorite woods road stretching pleasantly before her, she was treated to all the thrills of a runaway.

“Let them search now!” she cried aloud to Nigger, who pointed his ears in a very comradely way. “They shan’t find me until I’m good and ready to be found!”

Betty had learned a good deal since her arrival at Rainbow Ranch. One of these things was, never to stray far into the woods. Along the edge of the forest one was reasonably safe, since the denizens of the woodland places approached the open very cautiously, warned by the hated scent of their eternal enemy—man.

So Betty had chosen for her solitary ride a woods road —two ruts with rank grass growing between—which was really a continuation of the road over which they had driven from Bufferville upon their arrival at the ranch. For a considerable distance this road wound along the edge of the woods, and Betty had determined to follow it no further than the spot where it turned, almost at right angles, and entered the heart of the forest.

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Joe Kirby was the reason for Betty’s solitary ride. That and the fact that she had received a letter in the morning’s mail from Millie Harrison which troubled her.

Millie had written, as usual with a thin veneer of cheerfulness, attempting to cover real heartache and loneliness. Millie was much better, really well again, so she wrote. The heat in the city was pretty bad, but she was doing as well as usual.

“And I out here without a care in the world,” thought Betty. “It isn’t right!”

She turned Nigger into a tiny cleared space where a flat rock offered a convenient and pleasant place for meditation. There she dismounted, tied Nigger to a tree, and drew Millie’s letter from her pocket again.

A second perusal did nothing to dispel her concern. Though doing fairly well in her position, Millie was discouraged and sick. Betty felt sure that the girl had been far more ill than she would admit. It was a wonder those in the office had held her position for her. Uncle Dick’s influence, possibly, or perhaps a liking and sympathy for the girl herself.

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Betty raised her head as she heard the swift beat of a horse’s hoofs. Who could be coming at such a mad pace down that rock-strewn road?

She jumped to her feet and instinctively backed into the underbrush as horse and rider burst into view. The horse ran madly. Head down, its flying hoofs seemed to strike sparks from the rocks in its path.

Even as Betty watched, hand to throat, the pony stumbled, fell almost to its knees, and sent the reckless rider sprawling over its head, arms and legs outflung.

The pony recovered and dashed off down the road. The man lay motionless.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A LIGHT BEGINS TO DAWN

Betty cried out and ran to the fallen man. Something familiar about the figure, face-down as it was, warned her that this was no stranger.

With an effort, for he was very heavy, she turned him over so that she might see his face. She gasped. Joe Kirby, grey of face and lips, blood oozing horribly from a cut on his head!

Betty jumped to her feet and looked about her eagerly. She must find water. There had been a tinkling sound somewhere behind her in the woods as she sat upon the rock. A little mountain stream, perhaps—one of the many running down from giddy heights to feed the streams that crossed and recrossed the fertile, mountain-guarded valleys.

Betty ran quickly toward the spot where she had heard, or thought she had heard, the sound of running water. As she went her hand felt in the pocket of her suit for a handkerchief. When she drew it forth it seemed tiny and ineffectual in the face of this great emergency.

“If only I were wearing a petticoat that I might tear up into bandages,” she thought regretfully. “That’s what they always do in books. Oh, dear—where is that water? He’ll

bleed to death before I can get back to him!”

She found the tiny stream at last, flowing beneath a rock that completely hid it from view unless one got down on hands and knees.

Betty did get down on hands and knees at the risk of falling head first into the tiny pool at the foot of the rock.

She dipped her handkerchief in the cold water and did the same with the broad-brimmed sombrero lent her by Billy Randall from his wardrobe “to keep the sun out of her eyes.”

With these she hurried back to the road, losing half the precious water in her haste and scratching her hands and face on bramble bushes and the tiny, sharp twigs of trees.

Reaching the Westerner, she found him still unconscious. The sight of the blood was alarming. It made Betty feel sick. Joe’s head was lying in a pool of it, and, with a shudder, Betty raised the unconscious head and rested it on her knee.

How heavy he was! Pulling with all her might she could only move him a few inches. Could it be possible, she wondered, working feverishly with the bit of linen and cold water, that he was dead? He was white enough, certainly.

With a gesture of terror, she loosened the broad kerchief about his neck, pressed her cold little fingers against his chest. Yes, she could feel it—a faint, rhythmic beating. He was alive yet!

It seemed impossible to staunch that blood. It came bubbling

up with horrible persistency. Her suit was soaked through with it, her handkerchief a little red ball, the water red ink.

Betty trembled as she ran back for a fresh supply of water. If she could not staunch that horrible bleeding, Joe Kirby would die! A man's life lay in her hands. And the blood continued to flow!

Several trips Betty made between the mountain stream and Joe. Her hair came down, her hands were scratched and bleeding, there was a great rent in one stocking from the ankle almost to the knee.

But Betty was wholly unaware of her appearance. Her one thought was to bring the unconscious man back to life. What if he should die on her hands? The awful thought sent a cold shiver through the girl's frame.

Always she bathed and sponged the wound and, growing desperate, flung the entire contents of the hat in his face. She remembered having read or heard somewhere that primitive people used cobwebs for stanching the flow of blood. Looking about carefully she found several webs that seemed fresh and clean. Gathering these, she packed them carefully over the wound.

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The cut stopped bleeding at last. Betty knelt down and took Joe's head once more on her knee in wordless hope.

She pushed back the waving hair from his forehead and spoke to him urgently, as though her voice had the power to draw his spirit back from those illimitable spaces where it lingered.

“Joe! Joe Kirby!” she cried, almost sobbing. “Please, please come back! I’ve done everything I can think of!” She paused and then cried out joyfully. The Westerner’s eyes were open and he was staring at her—a vague, incurious glance at first, but gaining in intelligence as consciousness swept back to him.

He raised an inquiring hand to his head.

“Seems like some one’s been givin’ me a nasty crack,” he said faintly, and closed his eyes again.

Betty could have wept for joy. In fact, she did. Two tears dropping simultaneously on Joe Kirby’s face caused him to open his eyes again.

As Betty impatiently dashed the foolish tears from her eyes a wonderful softness crept into the young fellow’s face.

“Seems like I owe you a powerful lot, little lady,” he said. “Can’t seem to remember just the way of things ——” He tried to sit up, but Betty pushed him back firmly.

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“Better take your time,” she advised. “I’m afraid your poor head is going to swim terribly.”

“Does feel sort of uncomfortable,” the young fellow admitted.

He insisted on sitting up just the same, and the wince of pain he gave made Betty ache in sympathy.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t bandage your head,” she said. “All I had was a handkerchief. I did the best I could with that.”



“Reckon you did better than most folks with a heap o’ bandages,” he said whimsically. “Anyways, I’m here, and that’s proof enough.”

His face contracted in a spasm of pain and he leaned his head dizzily against a tree.

“You must be quiet,” insisted Betty. It was wonderful how grown up and maternal she felt with this man. It was probably because she had saved his life. It gave one a sort of proprietary interest. “You must get back your strength so you can ride Nigger to the ranch. I’ll walk.”

Joe Kirby chuckled without opening his eyes.

“You good little pal!” he said. After a minute he added quietly: “What happened to the horse?”

“It bolted,” Betty answered. “I never saw anything go so fast. A hundred miles an hour at least.”

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“Bad actor, that beast!” Despite his pain there was a rueful note of laughter in Kirby’s voice. “Rode him on a bet. Next time,” the whimsical mouth hardened, “I’ll ride him to a finish.”

“Oh, but there mustn’t be any next time!” Betty was genuinely alarmed. “He nearly killed you this time. Next time he might succeed.”

“Well, I know of lots worse things that could happen to me,” he drawled.

In a flash Betty saw again the picture of Joe Kirby as he was last night, standing lonesome and remote beneath the stars. But instead of feeling sorry for him, this time her chief emotion was anger that he should talk so.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” she said, stamping her foot at him. “After I have gone and taken so much trouble with you, too!” The funny side of that little speech seemed to strike them both at the same time. Betty began to laugh while a slow grin overspread Joe’s face.

“Does seem ungrateful, for a fact,” he drawled. “Sorry. I ain’t used to shootin’ off words that way. Just sort o’ slipped out.”

Betty sat down again on the ground beside him.

“It isn’t what you say that troubles me,” she told him slowly. “But I can’t help seeing you are unhappy. I—I’m truly sorry, Joe.”

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The young fellow turned and looked at her. Something in her eager, earnest young face seemed to reassure him. Perhaps Joe Kirby was just lonesome for some one to confide in. Perhaps it was because circumstances had thrown him and this young girl together, binding them in an intimacy that could not have been achieved by years of ordinary acquaintanceship.

At any rate, he turned away from her and said in a queer, muffled voice:

“I suppose you think from things I’ve said that I’m a sort of quitter. Mebbe I am, but I don’t think so. I’ve been goin’

along actin' like everything was fine when all I wanted was just never to see a sunset again. You're just a kid—" he turned to her with sudden passion—"and mebbe you don't know what it means for a man to lose the only thing he wants and cares for, the only person that makes life worth livin'—" He raised his arms in a fierce gesture above his head, lifted a haggard face to that patch of smiling blue sky high above the trees.

Betty's heart beat fast. She felt breathless, frightened.

"Oh, Joe, who was the one you lost? Your mother?"

Her companion rested his haggard eyes on her for a moment and smiled, the bitterest smile she had ever seen.

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"No," he said quietly. "My wife."

His poor hurt head was buried in his arms. He sat as motionless as the immovable mountains above him. Tears were in Betty's eyes as she leaned over and touched him on the shoulder.

"I'm so terribly sorry, Joe. When did she—die?"

Joe shook off her hand so roughly that Betty was startled and inclined to be hurt until she saw that his anger was not for her. Indeed, for the moment he was not aware of her at all.

He threw back his head in a wild laugh.

"She didn't die. I could have got over that some day, mebbe,

when I was old and had forgot to look for the stars. But she didn't die. She just left me—left me because a cattleman's agent wasn't good enough for her—left me because the lights of the city twinkled brighter to her than our stars—” The man's voice broke and he turned away from Betty. When he spoke again his words were almost inaudible to the girl. “I gave her everything I had—my love——”

“That was a great deal, Joe.” Despite her inexperience, Betty knew she told the truth.

“It wasn't enough for her. I was only Bud, you know—the cattleman's agent.”

“Bud!” shrieked Betty. She jumped to her feet and regarded him wildly. “Did she call you Bud?”

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Joe Kirby was surprised, but his face lost nothing of its expression of pain and weariness.

“It was a sort of kid nickname. Stuck to me until I came here. Why?”

“Wait!” said Betty, one hand to her forehead, the other against a supporting tree. “Please let me think!”

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE STORM

Betty's head was whirling madly. So much had happened in the past few minutes that not until the young Westerner spoke of himself as "Bud" did the startling theory flash across her mind. Millie Harrison's missing husband! The cattle dealer's agent! Bud!

Even in her excitement she was cool enough to realize that the man before her must not know the trend of her thoughts—not yet, not until she had something more than a wild guess to go on. With a great effort she mastered her agitation and sat down again.

"You—you haven't been in this part of the country very long, then?" she said, trying to act as though she had no especial object in asking the question.

She was not surprised at the hardening of Joe Kirby's face. On the contrary, it thrilled her, since it was one more confirmation of her theory.

"No," he said curtly. "I wasn't—welcome where I come from."

He got to his feet unsteadily, for he had lost a good deal

of blood. His face looked very haggard and worn as he tried to smile at Betty.

“I didn’t have any call to bother you with my troubles,” he said, a bit shamefacedly. “Seems like I’m getting old and talkative. Hope I ain’t bored you too much.”

“Bored me!” cried Betty, scrambling to her feet. “If you only knew——”

It is quite possible that if the trampling of horses’ hoofs and the sound of her name called through the woods at the moment had not interrupted, Betty might have told Joe Kirby her suspicions then, despite her resolution to the contrary.

But the interruption did come and it proved an effective one.

Bob, Alice and Norma and the Randall boys came up the trail and paused with amazement as they broke through the bush and found Betty and Joe Kirby together.

They must have made a queer picture, as Betty admitted later when they talked things over, Joe with the cut on his forehead running up into his hair, hatless and grimy; Betty with hair flying, rent stocking, and blood-stained suit.

Kirby forestalled the flood of questions he saw about to descend upon them by telling the whole story simply and briefly, giving all the credit to Betty and thereby mightily embarrassing her.

The upshot of it was that Bob offered the use of Baldy to the young Westerner and himself swung to the back

of Nigger, who had patiently waited all this time, tied to the tree.

Bob wanted Betty to ride before him on the black pony, but Joe would have none of it.

“I’m better used to ridin’ double than you, Bob,” he drawled. “And this trail is rough in spots.”

But when the Westerner would have lifted Betty to the saddle, the girl refused his aid and swung nimbly to the place herself.

“Your head!” she reminded him severely, in answer to his look of surprise. “Do you want to start it bleeding all over again? Besides, you must have hurt your foot. I saw you limping.”

It was so surprising to Joe Kirby to be so looked out for that he swung to the saddle in silence and in silence proceeded down the trail.

The boys and the Guerin girls followed in high spirits over this new exploit of Betty’s, wherein she had been permitted to aid their favorite, Joe Kirby—perhaps had even saved his life!

“It’s as good as a play,” Alice confided to Norma.

The latter was inclined to pout.

“Only Betty has all the luck!” she said. “Now, why couldn’t I have been on the spot when the horse came dashing by?”

“Cheer up, maybe you will be next time.”

“Joe,” Betty was saying at that moment, her face and voice very earnest, “if this girl—if your wife was proved to be true to you, if you should find that she had not gone away of her free will——”

“What are you saying?” Joe Kirby’s eyes narrowed as they held hers. “Do you know anything of my wife?”

“Why, I fancied at first—utter nonsense, of course,” stammered Betty, furious with herself for having gone so far. “How could I know anything about her?” she finished lamely.

Joe Kirby said nothing, but the silence between them for the rest of the ride back to the ranch was a trifle strained.

As he got to the ground before the corral and held out a hand to Betty, he said quietly:

“I reckon you know something you ain’t willin’ to tell me, though it don’t hardly seem possible. But if you’re holdin’ back anything I ought to know you might better have left me lyin’ there,” and he waved his hand toward the hills they had left. “Wouldn’t ’a’ been half so cruel.”

Poor Betty! No wonder she separated Bob from the others as quickly as she could and, as soon as she had changed her blood-soaked clothes, rode away with him to seek his advice. Her head was whirling. She was excited and fearful at the same time. If only Uncle Dick had waited for a few days more! He would have known so well how to advise her!

Alice and Norma felt that something extraordinary had



happened and were resentful that Betty did not confide in them at once. Her evident excitement and the fact that she had challenged Bob to a ride alone with her the moment they returned to the ranch was evidence enough that romance was abroad.

“And we are left to kick our heels in idleness,” Norma gloomed.

“You needn’t kick your heels unless you like,” said good-natured Billy. “Even if Bob and Betty have deserted us, we can still have our fun. What say to catching some fish for dinner?”

Norma and Alice went because at the moment there was nothing better to do. But the two girls fished absently, their minds on Bob and Betty rather than on their game.

Meanwhile, these two were engaged in a conversation of absorbing interest to them both.

“I tell you, Bob, it’s more than coincidence,” Betty insisted, having related in detail her conversation with Joe Kirby. “He is—or was—a cattle dealer’s agent——”

“There are lots of cattle dealers’ agents.”

“And he left that part of the country because of some trouble he had there,” Betty continued, not deigning to notice the interruption. “Also, and it seems to me that this is the deciding argument, Bob, his wife called him Bud.”

“There are plenty of Buds in the world, I suppose,” said Bob.

“Oh, why will you be so stubborn?” Betty was ready to cry with vexation. “Can’t you see that all these things are more than coincidence?”

“The circumstantial evidence is certainly right on the job,” Bob agreed. “It looks as if you had hit a hot trail, Betty, sure enough. But the only way to make sure is to write to Millie Harrison and give her a description of Joe Kirby.”

“I’ve thought of that, of course,” replied Betty. “But, somehow, I hate writing to Millie until we find out whether Joe Kirby was really implicated in that hold-up scandal or not. I don’t think he was,” she added stoutly, and Bob threw her a curious glance.

“You think a lot of our handsome cowboy, don’t you?” he said.

“I feel very sorry for him, Bob. He has suffered horribly.”

“Not worse than Millie Harrison.”

“Oh, but I think he has!” Betty was very pretty in her earnestness. “At least she has had her faith in him while he thinks that she deserted him because it was lonesome here and she longed for city lights. Poor Millie! The lights of the city are dull enough for *her*!”

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“I tell you what I’ll do.” Bob turned to her eagerly. “This thing is beginning to get me, Betty. I’ll try to find out from Joe Kirby the truth of that hold-up yarn.”

“Oh, Bob, will you? And do you think you can do it without

arousing his suspicions?”

“Leave it to me!” cried the boy gayly. “I’m willing to bet that by to-morrow night I’ll have all the information your heart desires.”

A low rumble of thunder in the distance set Nigger to prancing nervously. At the same moment Betty felt a drop of rain on her hand. She turned the pony’s head toward home.

“Reckon I can beat you!” She flung the challenge to Bob.

The boy wheeled his mount and made after her, the dust rising in clouds behind him.

They arrived at the ranch house neck and neck and were forced to acknowledge the race a draw.

“We beat the storm, anyway,” said Betty, laughing.

However, the torrent was right at their heels. They had barely time to turn the ponies over to shelter and gain the house themselves when the heavens opened and let down a hissing, steaming flood. The earth trembled beneath the fury of the elements. Peel followed peel of thunder, lightning ripped across the leaden sky in jagged darts of fire, rain beat upon the windows almost with the force of hail.

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The rest of the young folks were gathered in the cheerful living room of the house. They looked up welcomingly as Bob and Betty entered.

“Thank goodness you’re back,” said Alice, drawing Betty

down on the couch beside her. “We thought you and Bob had gone and lost yourselves.”

“Lucky you got in before the storm.” Mrs. Randall was half lost in one of the big leather chairs, but as she smiled up at Bob the boy thought how nice she looked. Her hair was done in the new, becoming way and in her eyes was a pleasant new look of content and happiness. “This is the first real good storm we’ve had this year.”

“I’ll say it’s good,” returned Bob as another peal of thunder burst above their heads in a deafening detonation. “That sounded as if it hit something.”

“Maybe a tree somewhere,” said Dick carelessly, for these fierce mountain storms were no novelty to him or to any one else on the ranch. “I say, mom, what did you do to Joe Kirby’s head? Was it pretty badly split?”

“Oh, then you’ve been to see him!” cried Betty eagerly before the lady could reply. “I’m so glad. How is he?”

180

“Doing well. The cut on his head wasn’t deep, though those scalp wounds do bleed enough to scare you. He’s pretty well bruised and limping some with a strained ankle, but outside of that he’s a perfectly sound and healthy man.” Her eyes twinkled as she turned to Betty. “You should hear what that boy has to say about you, my dear. By morning, Betty Gordon, you will be the heroine of Rainbow Ranch!”

Betty colored, but the blush was not so much for Mrs. Randall’s words as for the mischievous glances Alice and Norma turned upon her. Betty could almost hear the often

reiterated words:

“Betty, you do have all the luck!”

The storm increased in fury. The wind moaned fiercely about the house, dashing the rain against the windows in staccato gusts. The thunder became more menacing, each lightning flash more blinding than the last.

“I never saw such a storm!” cried Norma, rising restlessly and wandering over to the window where Bob still stood. “Sounds like the bombardment of a town, with us dumped down in the thick of it. Oh!” and she shrank back against the lad as a blinding flash of lightning streaked across the sky. “Glass is lightning-proof, isn’t it, Bob?”

The boy’s laugh was cut short by a frightful detonation that swallowed up all lesser sounds.

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Dick Randall sprang to his feet.

“That struck something, mom!” he yelled above the noise.

Mr. Randall passed through the hall on a run. Dick made after him, grasped him by the arm.

“What is it, dad?”

“The barn, I fear. Let go of me, Dick, and come on! We’ll need you all!”

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### VICTORY

Of all the calamities that may happen on a farm or ranch, fire is the most dreaded of all. With limited capacity for fighting it and so much loss in property and cattle threatened by it, no wonder that the mere thought of a conflagration chills the stoutest heart.

Running out after Mr. Randall and the boys and forgetful of their own danger in the general alarm, the three girls saw that it was indeed one of the barns that had been struck and fired by the lightning.

“Oh, isn’t this dreadful! A fire, and on such a night as this!” wailed Alice.

“And no fire department within hundreds of miles,” added Norma. “What will they ever do to put it out?”

“They must have some way,” answered Betty. “Maybe they have a chemical engine—or something like that.”

“I’ve never seen any, and I’ve been all around,” said Alice.

Already there was hurry and confusion everywhere. Men were shouting, running in twenty directions at

once, bumping into one another.

It all seemed purposeless to the girls until they saw a squad of men dragging a great hose, like a black and slimy serpent, across the ground to the burning building.

“There’s a tank on the roof of the house,” gasped Betty, as they ran closer to the blaze. “I suppose the water will come from that.”

Another group formed into a bucket squad, hauling water from the well at the rear of the buildings.

The girls were soaked through instantly, but they hardly noticed it. They saw that the Randall boys were in the thick of things, but Bob was nowhere to be seen.

Searching anxiously among the running, shouting groups, Betty came upon the lad at last. He was helping Joe Kirby lead the frightened horses from the barn. One corner of the building was smoldering sullenly. The rain had abated somewhat, but it still came down in a steady downpour. The roofs of all the buildings were so wet that Betty felt there was scant danger of the fire gaining real headway.

Meanwhile, Joe Kirby was putting this thought into words to Bob. They had led the last of the horses beyond the danger zone and stood looking at the sickly blaze.

“Lucky for the boss it wasn’t dry lightning,” he muttered, his hand gently stroking the muzzle of a nervous pony. “Whole place would have gone.”

At the moment the men with the hose got into action and the struggling flames became more feeble.

Jud Boswick passed close to Joe and Bob.

“This is what comes of Jed Turnwell smokin’ them rotten cigarettes and settin’ the barn on fire,” he bawled at them. “Told him he’d get into trouble.”

Joe Kirby’s eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. In two strides he had reached Jud’s side. Bob followed, curious.

“Say, young feller, it ain’t healthy to talk that way,” drawled Joe gently. “Leastways, it ain’t being done on this ranch. Get me?”

Jud Boswick’s hand flew to his hip. He looked ugly.

“You think you’re boss o’ this here ranch, Kirby——”

“Are you askin’ for a little demonstration?” said Joe, still gently.

Beneath his lounging attitude, his mild manner, Bob sensed the power of the fellow. The lad watched the little drama with breathless interest.

For a moment Kirby’s cool, gray eyes held the scowling gaze of the other. Then Jud Boswick turned away with a muttered imprecation and was lost in the general confusion. Evidently Joe’s “demonstration” held little appeal for him.

“That feller,” said Kirby, with a negligent wave of his hand



toward the spot where Jud Boswick had stood, “would be better off dead.”

Bob said nothing. He was fascinated by Joe Kirby’s personality. He could understand now Betty’s championship of this quiet Westerner. His heart leaped at the thought that Kirby might be Millie Harrison’s lost “Bud.” No wonder the girl had broken her heart about him. For this Joe Kirby was a man.

“It’s fellers like Jud Boswick that start all the trouble in the world,” Kirby was discoursing, his eye on the smoldering roof of the barn. The last sickly flame had flickered out. The last danger was past. “They enjoy spreadin’ poison. It was the lightnin’ that struck the barn. Yet if Jud Boswick was let to go among the men with that poison tongue o’ his, in half an hour all the boys would be thinkin’ Jed Turnwell did it with a harmless cigarette or two. That’s the way the mischief starts—like that fire we just been watchin’. A tiny flame at first, but when it once gets hold seems like it takes a powerful lot of shoutin’ and fuss to put it out again.”

Bob remembered his promise to Betty and jumped manfully at this opportunity.

“I suppose that’s true enough,” he said, trying to hide his eagerness behind an elaborately casual manner.

“Lots of fine fellows have had their reputations hurt by rumors without a vestige of real fact behind them.”

“You said it! I had a taste of it myself.” Joe paused, his eyes half closed in bitter reminiscence. Bob said nothing, but his

heart beat high. Instinct told him he was on the verge of a great discovery.

“There was a feller,” Joe Kirby continued in his drawling, reminiscent tone, “about like our friend Jud—his same sort o’ disposition, though not his looks—and he thought he had a grudge against me. I took his girl, you see, and he wasn’t one to forget easy. There was a hold-up near the Lazy C ranch and he thought to get even by tanglin’ me up in the job.”

At this point Bob almost forgot caution. For the first time his eagerness revealed itself in a quick question.

“But you didn’t let it go at that?”

Joe Kirby chuckled grimly.

“When he heard I was goin’ out after him,” he said, with what might have seemed irrelevance, “he up and disappeared. Caused me considerable trouble, that lad, before I caught up to him.”

Bob waited quietly this time, dissembling his impatience.

“When I brought him back to the Lazy C,” again that grim chuckle, “there wasn’t much left of him that, for a time, was of any use to anybody, but I had his confession that his story of the hold-up with me in it was a rotten frame-up.”

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“Then you cleared yourself!” cried Bob, striving to hide his exultation.

“Yes, I cleared myself.” Joe Kirby’s steady glance was fixed

on the still smoldering roof of the barn. “But it’s like that fire, boy, that starts with a little flame. You can put it out after a fight, but it leaves a nasty, smokin’ ruin where it’s been. That’s why I was tellin’ you,” he ended, with his mild and gentle drawl, “that fellers like Jud Boswick ain’t any good to folks unless they’re dead.”

Bob found suddenly that he was drenched through and shivering. He was not cold—only tremendously excited and exultant.

The rain had nearly stopped, the thunder was wearing off in sullen rumbles in the distance. The men were already starting to repair the damage done to the barn. Joe Kirby had been hailed by one of the men and was now in earnest conversation with him. It was evident that nothing further could be expected of the Westerner that day.

But what more could he expect—or want? thought Bob exultantly as he ran toward the house. Joe Kirby had been innocent of any part in that hold-up scandal. He could not doubt the genuineness of the Westerner’s story. Nor could he longer doubt that Kirby was one and the same with the Bud of Millie Harrison’s unhappy story.

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Dripping wet and still shivering, he dashed into the house and met Betty at the door of the living room. Betty was warm and dry after a swift change of clothing, and her face was rosy with excitement.

“Bob, hurry and change,” she cried, seeing his sodden condition. “You will catch your death.”

“Be down in a minute,” returned Bob, adding with a grin as he leaned over the banisters: “Got something to tell you, Betsey, that will make your hair curl into fuzz all over your head. Just see if it doesn’t!”

With this aggravating statement he disappeared and with an air of finality and triumph slammed his bedroom door, leaving Betty to cool her heels in the deserted living room.

The Guerin girls had not finished dressing and Dick and Billy were still lingering round the scene of the fire when Bob, freshly garbed and sleek of hair, bounded down the stairs and into the room again.

“Dare you to ever insult me again on the time it takes me to change a suit of clothes,” he challenged as Betty ran to him.

“Bob, you said you had something to tell me!” she exclaimed, with a shake of his arm. “Out with it—quick!”

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Whereupon Bob took her by the hand and led her over to the couch where he insisted upon seating her and himself before beginning his story. When he had finished Betty’s breath was coming quickly and her cheeks were blazing.

“Bob, you perfect darling! I couldn’t have done better myself! Bet you’ll be a lawyer when you grow up——”

“Grow up!” sputtered Bob. “What do you mean by that, young lady? And where are you going?” For Betty was already halfway to the door.

“Boys are so silly,” she sighed. “Where should I be going, except up to my room to dash off a line to Millie Harrison—and one to Uncle Dick,” she added as an afterthought. “Oh, Bob, I am so perfectly, gorgeously happy!”

Indeed, Betty was so excited that her pen scratched wildly and almost illegibly across the paper which was to contain her all-important letter to Millie Harrison. Betty’s story of their meeting with Joe Kirby, of the strange, subsequent happenings on the ranch, were eloquent and incoherent in the extreme, but she trusted to Millie Harrison to understand. Her Bud had been found and was eating his heart out for a sight of her. That much Betty succeeded in making very clear indeed.

And, having finished this amazing epistle, she promptly tore it into many small pieces and threw it into the waste-paper basket. A night letter would tell all she needed to tell and would go so much more quickly! To Betty, in her present mood, the waste of a day, of an hour, was insupportable. 190

Again the scratching of a pen across paper. No easy matter to contain her startling information in the limited space prescribed by a night telegram. But Betty at last succeeded and turned her attention to a second telegram. This was to Uncle Dick in New York, briefly telling of their discovery and begging her uncle to see Millie and supply her with necessary funds for the journey to Bufferville. Betty was sure that everything was arranged for Millie and Joe Kirby and that it was only a matter of days—a week or two, at most—before their troubles would be happily at an end!

The Guerin girls were wildly curious, but Betty would tell them nothing yet.

“Wait!” she cried mysteriously and mischievously, with a finger to her lips. “Only a few days and you will know all!”

“Oh, all right!” Norma was inclined to be a bit sulky with disappointment. “But I must say, Betty Gordon, you do have all the——”

“Stop!” cried Betty dramatically. “Repeat that hackneyed phrase again on peril of your life!”

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Norma giggled, putting a period to her indignation.

After writing the night letters, the next problem was to get them to Bufferville. It was too late for any one to traverse the twenty miles of rough and perilous road to the town that night, and Betty was forced to wait, however impatiently, till the following morning.

Jed Turner, repairing to Bufferville the next day for various supplies needed in reroofing the damaged part of the barn, obligingly agreed to send Betty’s telegrams for her.

Betty was elated as she watched the cowboy gallop off down the road. The first step had been taken. Now all she had to do was, in Bob’s jargon, “to sit tight and await developments.”

She began automatically to figure the time that must elapse before she could hope to hear either from Millie or Uncle Dick.

“The telegram will reach Millie some time to-morrow,” she thought. “After she has gone to work, probably, and that will delay her answer. If she replied immediately—to-morrow night—sending a night letter, I would probably get it the following day. Day after to-morrow at the earliest—maybe three whole days before I can hope to hear from her!” Betty sighed and turned toward the house. “I’ll have to do something, keep going every minute,” she told herself, “or I shall certainly die of suspense!”

Thereafter, for the rest of that day and the next, Betty led the girls and boys a merry dance, riding Nigger at a furious pace all over the ranch, urging him up steep and rocky mountain trails at the peril of her neck and the pony’s in a reckless manner that brought gasps of admiration from Norma and Alice and frequent remonstrances from Bob.

192

“I just can’t help it, Bob,” she said, in reply to one of these rebukes—the most severe of all. “I’ve got to get rid of my superfluous energy some way. If word doesn’t come from Millie soon I shall fly into several small and insignificant pieces.”

“If you keep on acting so foolishly,” Bob retorted, with a scowl, “there won’t be any of you left to fly into pieces. That ledge you were on yesterday afternoon, for instance, was not more than five feet across at its widest point!”

“Well, that was two feet too much,” returned Betty flippantly, and before Bob could find a fitting retort was off again, riding more wildly than ever.

“I wish Uncle Dick was here,” said Bob earnestly as he followed. “This business of looking after Betty is getting too much for me!”

It was the afternoon of the following day when, arriving at the ranch house in time for dinner, Betty found Mrs. Randall waiting for her in a state of extreme excitement.

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“Two telegrams!” she cried, waving the yellow envelopes in the air for all to see. “For you, Betty dear. I hope nothing is wrong.”

Her heart beating fast, Betty accepted the telegrams and, with a word of apology to the others, tore them open.

The first, from Uncle Dick, was brief and to the point.

“Have seen Millie. Everything O. K. Congratulations and love. Uncle Dick.”

There was a mist before Betty’s eyes as she turned to the other telegram. The words swam so that it was a wonder she could make them out at all. Like Uncle Dick’s, it was brief.

“Starting to-day. Arrive at Bufferville Saturday eleven-thirty A. M. All my love. Millie.”

That was all. And no one could understand—except Bob, who had been shamelessly reading over her shoulder—why Betty



should sit down on the steps of the porch and bury her face in her arms and begin to cry with all her heart.

They ran to her then, alarmed, but Bob stopped them.

194

“Leave her alone. She’s all right. I don’t wonder the kid’s half crazy.”

Betty jumped to her feet. Her face was radiant despite the tears that still streamed down it.

“I was right! I was right! Joe Kirby is Millie’s Bud! I’ve found the Prince!” she cried wildly, waving the telegrams above her head. “Oh, what’ll I do! I’ve got to do something or I’ll die!”

195

## CHAPTER XXV

### A FITTING CLIMAX

The others calmed Betty after a while, sufficiently, that is, to get a more or less coherent account of matters as they then stood.

Alice and Norma were “shooting questions at Betty a mile a minute,” Dick Randall declared. Mrs. Randall, who clearly loved romance, was only a shade less eager and excited than the girls themselves.

“To think that a love story like that could be enacted right before my very eyes and I never guess it!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, well, you can be sure Betty knew all about it,” said Norma. “Betty has all the—” She paused before Betty’s laughing look, but added defiantly: “Just the same, you have!”

The Randall boys, shy in the presence of romance like all lads of their age, were listening just the same, with eyes wide open.

“But though we’ve missed the main part of the serial, we’ll be on deck for the last installment, anyway,” Alice reminded them joyfully. “What are your plans for the staging of this last scene in your drama, when our hero and heroine meet, Betty?”

Or haven't you made any yet?"

"What a question!" cried Betty. "As if I hadn't made my plans down to the last small detail before I even received these!" and she waved the precious telegrams.

196

"Out with it!" commanded Bob. He was no less excited than Betty, though he strove to hide his emotion beneath what he supposed to be a manly unconcern.

"If Mr. Randall doesn't object, I intend to ask Joe Kirby to go to the station for me the morning Millie is to arrive." Betty leaned forward, her hands clasped tight over the telegrams in her lap. "I'll tell him I am expecting a friend and ask him to bring her back with him to the ranch!"

"And the friend will be Millie—Millie Harrison!" said Norma softly, thrilled with the possibilities of that dramatic scene.

"Oh, Betty, if we could only see it!"

Betty turned to her in amazement.

"Did you suppose for a moment that we weren't?" she cried.

"We're to follow him!" cried Alice, understanding.

"At a safe distance," came demurely from Betty.

"And see the whole thing—the meeting, everything? Oh," said Norma, with a deep intake, of breath, "how am I going to wait for that moment?"

197

This question was echoed heartily and often by the girls

during the apparently endless days that stretched between them and Saturday, for, of course, Mr. Randall agreed to their plan.

Although they refused to spend a minute at the ranch and were constantly off on hair-raising adventures, the time did drag endlessly.

Saturday morning dawned gloriously clear and found all the young folks on tiptoe with expectation.

Betty was dressed earlier than usual, looking very pretty indeed in a soft white sport skirt topped by a silk blouse and scarlet tie. At daybreak she was off in search of Joe.

Her costume was merely a blind, for her riding clothes were laid out in readiness to be exchanged for the white skirt and pretty blouse as soon as Joe Kirby was out of sight.

She found the Westerner quite willing to undertake the mission for her, provided the “boss was willing he should go.”

“If it’s a lady you’re expectin’ we’ll need the carryall,” he said, adding, with his slow smile: “Reckon I’ll drive myself this time.”

Since the drive to Bufferville was a necessarily long and tedious one, Joe wasted no time in getting started. The girls had scarcely finished a hurried breakfast when they heard the squeaking of the carryall.

A rush to the windows discovered Joe in the driver’s seat, lazily chirruping to the horses. No more breakfast

for these conspirators now! Crisp bacon and golden eggs remained to dry in their own fat on neglected plates while the girls and boys made a dash for the corrals.

Their horses were hastily saddled, and as they swung out at a swift trot into the road the dust from the wheels of the carryall could still be seen in the distance.

The ride to Bufferville that morning remained forever in their memory. So familiar were the visitors now with the rocky trails and precipitous mountain paths that they no longer felt fear of them.

As they were winding about one of these narrow roads Billy and Dick Randall, in the lead, came suddenly upon a full-grown brown bear. The beast was ambling straight toward them, and at sight of them stood up on its hind legs in a gesture of comical surprise. The wind was blowing away from the animal so that the man scent had failed to warn it of human presence in the vicinity.

The horses began to dance nervously—an extremely perilous procedure on that narrow road—and the girls, coming up, cried out with fright.

Norma had opened her mouth for a second scream—a real one this time—when Betty gave a queer little laugh and pointed to the bear.

199

“Look. It—it’s running away!” she gasped.

The bear had evidently decided that discretion was the better part of valor. It turned and lumbered clumsily, but without

undue haste, back along the way it had come.

The incident was laughable enough in retrospect, but at the time it made them all distinctly nervous. Perhaps the next bear they met might not be in so amiable a mood!

But the remainder of the journey proved uneventful, and with a quickening of interest they finally came in sight of the long and rambling station at Bufferville.

They could see the carryall drawn up beside the station as it had been on that eventful day of their arrival. Joe Kirby stood alone, though there were several men lounging about. He was looking up the tracks. The young folks dismounted and tied their horses, standing just within the circle of some trees, where they might see and hear without being seen.

A train whistle sounded in the distance and Betty felt her heart leap to her throat and stick there, making it hard for her to swallow. A tingling sensation passed from the tips of her fingers to her toes.

Bob, reaching out a hand, touched hers and found it cold and trembling.

200

“Steady, Betsey!” he said in a whisper.

“Oh, Bob, I don’t think I can look! I feel—actually—sick  
\_\_\_\_\_”

“Here it comes!” cried Alice, pointing excitedly, as the train crawled into view like a huge serpent rounding the curve. “It’s slowing—it’s stopped!”

They said no more then, just crowded together, breathing quickly, eyes strained for a sight of Millie Harrison as she left the train.

Only two passengers descended—men! No! Betty’s fingers took a fresh grip upon Norma’s arm. There was a third—a girl—Millie——

In the midst of her excitement, Betty’s heart smote her as she saw how white and thin the girl was.

Millie’s eyes swept the station swiftly, eagerly, came to rest upon Joe while the color flooded her face. The Westerner saw her, straightened suddenly, for a moment was a figure carved out of stone.

There came a hoarse cry, “Millie!” audible to the young folks even where they stood, and Millie was caught up into arms that held her, oblivious of the gaping loungers on the platform. They were alone, these two, nothing mattered but that they had found each other. Millie’s arms crept up about the neck of her “Bud” and clung there.

Betty turned away, blinded by tears.

201

“Come away!” she cried. “They don’t need us—now. Bob, take me home! We ought not to have come!”

It was the evening of this same eventful Saturday. Again the ranch house was the scene of festivity—just a little party, this time, a family affair in honor of the reunited pair.

The girls had planned it all on the ride home from the station.

“I’m so excited I can’t sit still!” cried Betty. “We’ll have to do something to celebrate!” To this all had heartily agreed.

However, Millie and Joe had been so long returning to the ranch that the conspirators began to fear their party would have to do without its guest of honor!

Just as the sun was setting in a glory of scarlet and royal purple the familiar squeak of the carryall was heard on the road. The young people wanted to dash out in a body to meet the returning pair, but, showing marked self-restraint, allowed Betty to go alone.

There was a soft glow of happiness about Millie that utterly transformed her. When Joe lifted her from the carryall she came to Betty with hands outstretched.

202

“Bud has told me everything. Oh, Betty, Betty, do you know what you’ve done for me?”

“And for me?” Joe Kirby was standing beside them, looking gravely down at Betty. “I reckon there ain’t any payin’ the kind of debt we owe!”

“You don’t have to thank me,” cried Betty. “What I’ve done, I’ve loved to do because I—love both of you! And now come inside, you two,” she cried gayly, to cover the break in her voice. “You probably don’t know it, but we’re giving you a party!”

There was dinner first, a joyful meal. And then—the party!



There was a great deal of fun and laughing, for the girls and boys were keyed to a high pitch of excitement and Petro and the squaw had done wonders in the way of ice-cream and pastry.

The main trouble was with the guests of honor, for Joe and Millie could not, try as they did, see any one in that pleasant little company but each other.

“What a different Millie!” thought Betty as she sat on the couch close to the girl, her fingers and Millie’s intertwined. Millie’s hair was prettily disarranged and clung in becoming, golden tendrils about her flushed face. Her adoring eyes followed the Westerner wherever he went. As for Joe Kirby, whenever he looked at Millie—which was often—there was an expression in his steady gray eyes that made Betty want to cry.

After a while and at the very height of the merriment just when Bob was about to make a speech appropriate to the occasion, it was discovered that both Millie and Joe had disappeared!

203

“Well, I never!” cried Alice. “What do you know about that?”

“Hamlet without Hamlet,” giggled Norma. “Where do you suppose they’ve gone to?”

“I really can’t say,” said Betty. “But I might, if pressed, give a guess!”

However, she would not, even under pressure, give an audible guess. It was some minutes later when they were all

uproariously engaged in a good-natured squabble over ice-cream and cakes that Betty took Bob by the hand and quietly led him from the room.

Not a word did either of them say until they had noiselessly encircled three sides of the porch. Finger to lips, Betty pointed to two shadows, clearly discernible in the starlit night.

“I thought you were tired of me, honey.” Joe Kirby’s voice was husky, just above a whisper. “You see, I always knew you were too good for me——”

“Oh, Bud—don’t! I can’t live without you! And if you ever let me get away from you again, I—I won’t even try——”

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Instead of two shadows then, there was only one. Betty turned and led Bob quickly back into the house.

“Because, Bob Henderson,” she explained as the sound of hilarity in the living room increased in volume, “I certainly don’t intend to cry again today!”

“What a vacation!” said Bob. “I’ll never forget it, Betty, not if I should live to the ripe old age of a hundred and ten.”

“Nor I,” said Betty softly. “Oh, Bob, I don’t want to go home!”

THE END

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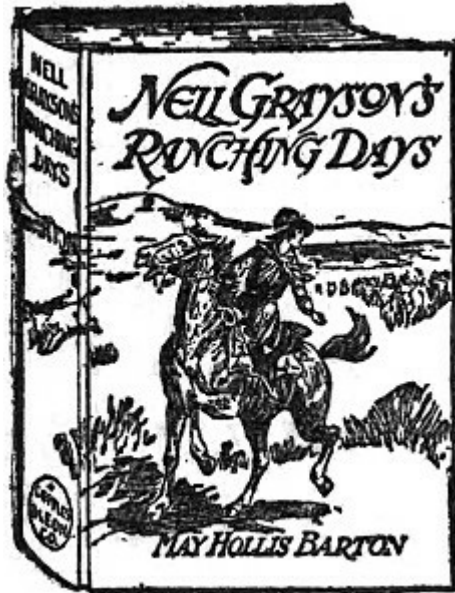
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[The end of *Betty Gordon at Rainbow Ranch* by Alice B. Emerson]