

# JILL

## THE HOSTAGE

By MAY WYNNE



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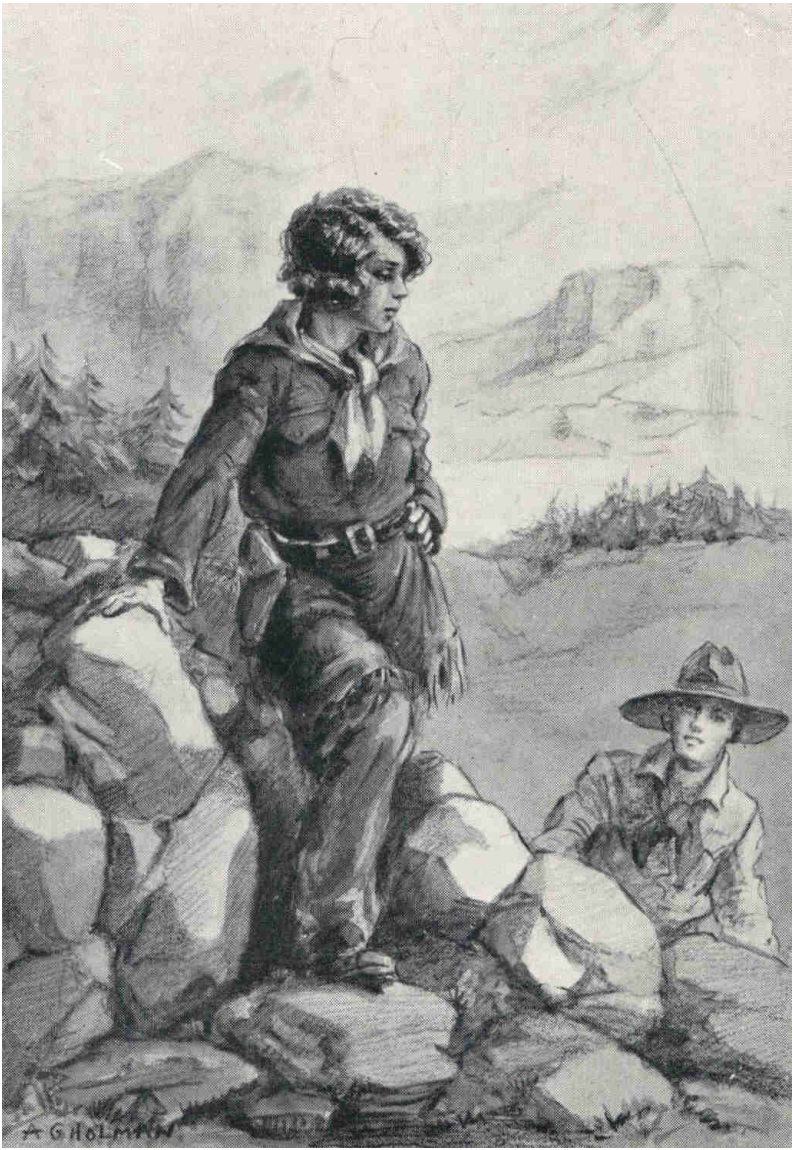
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*A voice hailed her cheerily from behind a cluster of rocks.*

# JILL THE HOSTAGE

BY  
MAY WYNNE

WITH EIGHT FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. A voice hailed her cheerily from behind a cluster of rocks
2. Startled by the flash of light . . . Jill struggled up
3. Jill knew nothing of a wild ride up—up—up
4. It needed all Curly's alertness to grasp a jutting rock
5. The bear began again to advance
6. "Play game, little chum!"
7. "Manitou!"
8. Winning through at last

TO THE  
GIRLS OF CALLEVA HALL



# Jill the Hostage

## CHAPTER I

### THE TRAP

A girl stood on the rugged path, staring out over the prairie; behind her the slopes of the foothills stretched up into the grim heights of the Rockies.

The girl—scarcely sixteen years of age to judge by appearance—wore the leather suit of a cow-girl, one booted foot resting on a low rock at rather higher level than the path. Short, dark curls clustered under her slouch hat, her hazel eyes were intent, watchful. She started when a voice hailed her cheerily from behind a cluster of rocks, and turned to stare at the lad, who, dressed somewhat similarly to herself, came up the path.

“Hello, Kid!” said the boy, “whatever are you doing around here? Is that your horse yonder? Who are you and where do you hail from?”

The girl recovered herself with an effort. She had been startled.

“It’s my horse,” she replied evasively, “I’m waiting for my friends. They’re riding out from the town. Who are you? I never saw you coming across the prairie.”

He laughed, still regarding her curiously. The foothills hereabouts were not the right haunts for lonely kid-girls. Her father it seemed was blameworthy.

“I was below in the creek,” he replied, “having a sleep. I guess my inside woke me, calling cupboard.”

She seemed still curious.

“You’ve not been located round here long?” she queried.

“No, only three months, but I’m not any sort of tenderfoot. I was on Hardman’s Ranch before, but when he died I was out of work. I’ve been at odd jobs ever since.”

“And you’ve left your horse in the creek?”

“Yes. And you? You’ve not told me your name? Are you likely waiting here long?”

She pondered.

“My name’s Kits. You see—I may as well tell the truth. I’ve run away from my people. I only left the town this morning. I’ve—well, I’ve nowhere to go.”

The boy rubbed his nose.

“I’m going on to Broton,” he replied, “to friends. If you’ve nowhere to go you’d better come along to Ma Reckill. She’s just a kind old mother.”

Kits had been staring away over the wide stretch of prairie which seemed bounded by the foothills amongst which they stood. A girl on horseback was cantering towards the river winding its way snake-like between low banks. From the distance one could judge her to be a fine horsewoman, splendidly mounted.

Kits began to climb down the path; she was slightly flushed and she looked back as Nat followed.

“I’ll race you to those three rocks,” she sang. “Catch me if you can!”

He did not catch her, for, as she sprang down the steep path, she slipped and fell, rolling over to lie—a huddled heap—amongst the stones. In horror, Nat stooped over her. The girl’s face was hidden, but she moaned pitifully.

“You’re sure hurt,” urged the boy. “What can I do? Can I fetch help, or may I lift you on to Red Morn’s back? I’ll do my best to carry you steady back to the town. You’ll have to go right back now—to your friends.”

She nodded her head.

“Help!” she whispered, “help! That girl over there. She’ll come! You bring her straight. Tell her—it’s a kid-girl who is lost amongst the foothills. Don’t say—don’t—say I’m—I’m no more’n a runaway.”

Nat hurried down to where his horse stood waiting. He had tumbled on this adventure. Yet—if this Kits were not badly hurt he would take her right back to her people. He was riding, as he meditated, at a rapid pace towards that other girl, who reined up at sight of him racing so wildly towards her, and seemed to meditate flight. It was a lonely enough spot in spite of the fact that a high snake fence close by circled the property of some big boss from Los.

Maybe the girl belonged to Stanways. Nat shouted to her as he saw her turn her horse's head ready to gallop off—and she hesitated, looked back under a shading hand and prepared to wait. Nat could see now she was quite a young girl not more than fifteen, dressed in a smart riding suit, her fair hair hanging in a single plait, her pretty face shaded by a Panama hat.

He recognized her, too, for one of his chums had pointed her out to him yesterday, as she drove through the town. It was Jill Stenford, stepdaughter and heiress of Senator Abways of Los Angeles. An English lassie, whose dead mother had some ten years ago won the heart of the grim old Senator.

“Hey!” sang Nat, who was in no way abashed at so hailing a stranger, “there’s a kid-girl smashed herself to bits down over there by the foothills. Will you come an’ give help? She won’t let me lift her.”

Jill touched her grey horse lightly, bringing it to Nat’s side.

“A kid-girl?” she asked eagerly. “Alone?” Then—with a touch of suspicion—“Who are you, boy?”

He smiled.

“Just a lone hand,” he explained; “a cowboy out of a job. I was riding out to Los when I met the girl up there. She belongs to Los.”

She nodded, her doubts vanishing at once. Of course Aunt Kezia would have had fits if she had known that she, Jill, were riding down by the river alone; but she had wanted to see if Blue Barbe could jump the Creek, and being a very wilful young woman, she had come. And now—she was going farther still.

Never had Jill ridden alone as far as the foothills; in fact, she could not recall riding that way at all. The place had a bad name, and her stepfather, Senator Abways, possessed many enemies. But none of these things entered into the bonnie head of the girl, who rode willingly to the succouring of a lone little lass, hurt and lost over there.

“She’s there,” said Nat; “I left her at the bottom of the path. She can’t have crawled away. We’ll have to leave the gees here.” He slid to the ground and Jill followed suit, though not without a nervous glance around. Evening shadows were gathering about the grey heights above and rolling down towards the foothills. Aunt Kezia would be wondering where she was. And she somehow hated to leave her Blue Barbe. But Nat was already scrambling up the path and she had given her trust instinctively to the handsome lad whose grey eyes had looked so honestly into her own.

So, with a caressing touch to her horse's neck, she left him and followed up the track. But there was no sign of any broken or suffering girl—no sign of any girl at all, and Nat stood, puzzled, with his right hand resting on his hip, as he shouted again and again “Kits! Kits!”

It was not Kits who answered—but some dozen men, who rose suddenly from behind the boulders; sun-blackened, grim-faced men, who came springing towards the two who had drawn closer together on the path.

“Hands up!” shouted the leader, pointing a pistol at Nat, whilst half a dozen similar weapons covered the girl. “You’re our prisoners.”

At first Nat hesitated. He was so utterly taken by surprise.

“Steady, mates,” he urged, “this isn’t a play-acting show. We’re out to look after a lame kid-girl.”

But the men took no notice of the appeal, and Nat heard the girl at his side give a little cry of fear.

“They’re rustlers,” she panted; “it’s a trap. Horton warned us—but we didn’t believe. You—you—*and I trusted you, boy.*”

She looked round at Nat—and all at once he realized the truth. These were no jokers but the real thing. Rustlers—who were out to kidnap Senator Abways’ darling and heiress.

He heard the reproach in Jill’s choking tones, and his manhood surged over him, new-born, clamorous. Whatever the odds he must fight for this girl who had trusted him.

“Get back down to your gee, Kid!” he shouted, covering her against the approaching desperadoes. “Get back and away. Run—like mad!”

But Jill did not move. She understood better than the boy what this trap meant. She had heard her stepfather speak only the last time he visited his country home at Stanways of the rustler band, calling itself the Cherokee Boys, whose leader, Silent Sylvester, he had safe in jail at Los. This then would be—the rustlers’ revenge. But for all that she would not allow even a cowboy to sacrifice himself as a last hopeless chance for her escape. It was *almost* impossible for her to reach Blue Barbe before the men gained the ledge where she and the lad stood. So, catching Nat’s arm, she clung to it.

“I guess—you didn’t know,” she panted, then saw Nat again fling up his arm in her defence, struggling, shouting against the two ruffians, who had closed in upon them. She saw one man lift his gun to shoot Nat and sprang between. There was the sound of an explosion, some one struck her a heavy

blow, and even as she saw her boy defender fall she swayed and staggered, felt a deadly faintness overcome her, and sank unconscious over Nat's body.

## CHAPTER II

### JILL MEETS KITS

Jill opened her eyes languidly. How her head did ache to be sure—and she couldn't think properly. Something must have happened, for this was surely not her own comfortable bed at home. She did not seem to be able to breathe freely. All was dark, stifling, strange. Then—a long beam of light came sliding towards her—and as the girl struggled up into sitting posture, memory began to return.

She had disobeyed orders in riding beyond the Senator's property, and then—a handsome young cowboy had come—she had gone to the foothills, and the rustlers had kidnapped her.

Was this a rustler whose figure she could dimly see crawling towards her holding a lantern?

But no, it was a girl—a dark-eyed girl, with crisp curls clustering round her head, who came to crouch opposite her.

“So you're alive?” said the stranger. “I guess I'll bring breakfast along, unless you'd like to come out. Most of the men are sleepin', and Rattler Bob won't be sending for you some whiles. What's your name? Mine's Kits.”

Jill moaned, passing her hand over her brow. She was not bound in any way.

“What's this place?” she asked. “How did I come here?”

“Across the Rattler's saddle. This is a cave. We ain't back in the valley, but this is safe hiding. All the pleece in Los wouldn't find us, so you can quit the idea of a rescue.”

“And the boy?” asked Jill, “he's a rustler too?”

Kits snorted.

“Not he! He's a cowboy. He told me he wasn't a tenderfoot, yet he was cheated all right. But—but he's some boy! I'd like to be chums with him, but he won't speak to me this morning. He's ragin' like a wet hen because I told a lie. I s'pose he thinks I'm all black like the Rattler. He don't know, or care to know. You'll be the same.”

“My head’s cracking,” sighed Jill, “and I’d give a lot for a drink of real cold water. Is it money the rustlers want? I s’pose I’ll have to be ransomed?”

Kits was groping away; presently she returned, a pitcher of water in her hand. Jill drank feverishly, bathing her burning forehead. Afterwards—it was easier to think.

“No,” Kits was saying in her sharp way, “it’s not money we want. Senator Abways has Silent Sylvester locked away in Los. He’s my daddy—the best in the world, even—even if he *is* a rustler chief. Sure, he plays on the square, does Silent Sylvester, he’s no sneaking snake like—like some. The boys love him, least those who ride straight do; there’s others who throw in with Rattler Bob. They’re not white men—and I wouldn’t trust one. That’s how it is. I played traitor sure in making Nat bring you along—but it was for my father’s life. They’ve got a black lie against Silent Sylvester in Los. They hold him answerable for what the Rattler’s bunch did without leave, and it’s said that Senator Abways isn’t the man to have pity. So—we had to take you. It was the only way. I hated myself for what I did—but it was for my daddy I had to play low down.”

Passionately the girl poured out her story, rocking to and fro, peering at Jill with her bright, restless eyes. And Jill was as generous as she was impulsive. Somehow, this wild lass—a rustler’s daughter, outlawed and homeless, appealed to her. She stretched out her hand with a whimsical smile.

“Shake,” said she, “for if the Senator had been some rustler, even though he’s only my stepfather. I’d have done the same. We might be friends, Kits, and—and I’d breathe better out in the open. This cave chokes me.”

Kits gave a gasp, and Jill was startled to feel the tight clutch on her hand, whilst the next moment Kits’ burning lips were pressed to her fingers.

“I’ll play straight, chum,” muttered the girl. “And—and we’ll find Nat outside. I reckon Big Bess’ll give us breakfast. Slim’s ridden already to Los. He’ll be driving cattle when he gets nearer the town—and—well! the Senator will know what he’s up against in two days’ time at latest.”

Two days! Jill crawled after her companion, wondering in dreary dismay what Aunt Kezia and all of them would be doing. The whole place would be upside down, and when Blue Barbe was found without a rider, why, Aunt would be all for holding a funeral service.

Then—Jill forgot Aunt Kezia in wonder as she came out into the daylight. What place could this be, shut in by sandstone cliffs, with

precipitous paths winding upwards? The clearing or hollow beneath was not large—and there seemed to be no proper camping ground. A single tent was fixed in the centre, whilst round a wood fire lolled and lay some dozen of the rustlers. There seemed to be no road out at all. It was a mysterious, well-like spot, with those towering heights almost shutting out the light of day. Standing apart, resting against the cliff, was the boy Nat, gloomy-eyed, with bandaged head and drooping shoulders. A bit of a wreck was Nat, ready to bite though if he could! At sight of Jill and Kits he flushed up and his head drooped lower. Kits hung back, whilst Jill went forward, holding out her hand.

“Kits has told me the story, Nat,” said she. “I’m not blaming you one bit, though I’m sorry to be here and see you here. But I—I’ve forgiven Kits right away. I’d have done the same for my dad.”

How Nat straightened up at that! He had hated refusing forgiveness to penitent Kits—but he had been too sore at the thought of being reproached as a traitor. Now, he could be generous too.

“You’re a white girl,” he told Jill. “I’m proud to shake hands. As to Kits—I s’pose I’d better shake with her too.”

Kits heard her name and came slowly up, looking doubtfully from one to the other. Then she smiled.

“That’s dandy,” was all she said. “And when Silent Sylvester rides out from jail, I—I guess he’ll be thanking you both. As to me, why! you needn’t fear I’ll play traitor again. Now, come ’long and we’ll have our feed before the boys wake up.”

Big Bess—a strapping, middle-aged woman, dark enough to suggest she had negro blood in her, was busy already over her rough-and-ready cooking; she shouted and swore in answer to Kits’ request, but ended in doling out the coarse fare, which Nat and Kits ate readily enough, but which Jill felt would choke her. She had succeeded in pushing a great lump of bacon towards a hungry-looking dog, when, looking up, she saw the dog’s master grinning down at her. A big, broad-shouldered young fellow he was, not at all like a rustler, with short curly hair, and the bluest of eyes which twinkled slyly at sight of Jill’s stratagem.

“Nabs’ll be chummin’ to you, Kid,” said he, “but you’ve got to skip now. Rattler Bob wants a talk.”

Jill rose. From what she had heard she did not at all relish the idea of interviewing this particular rustler; and Kits called out at sight of her



departure:

“Say, Curly, what’s the game?”

The big young rustler chuckled.

“That’s Rattler’s business,” he retorted. “You’d better ask him, anyway.”

Jill tilted her chin in the air. All her life she had longed for adventure and dreamed dreams in which of course she had played heroic parts—but she was not sure that this lonesome rustler camp, with its impenetrable walls, quite fitted with her ideals.

In the tent she found the lean-faced, sinister-eyed man, whom she had particularly noticed yesterday. His oblique eyes narrowed in an expression of furtive triumph at sight of her, and he beckoned her nearer.

“So you’re Senator Abways’ girl,” said he. “Where’s your stepfather? At Los, sure?”

She shook her head.

“No, he has had to go on family business to New York. He won’t be home till next month.”

“Ah!” It was a peculiar whistle with which the Rattler ended his brief exclamation, and again Jill’s blood chilled as she saw him fix his cruel eyes on her.

“See here, Kid,” he went on in his low, purring tones: “you’ve not told the boys that news—nor Kits?”

“No, I—my head was so bad when Kits talked. I forgot.”

“Lucky for you. A silent tongue’s best, as you’ll learn before you’re home again. Wait here, whilst I go and have a word with Bess.”

He left her in the littered, dirty tent, wondering and weary. Presently she crept to the door, raising the flap. She had heard voices—quite a babel of voices, and looking out, saw that the Hollow was filled by men. Rustlers all, some forty all told—the full strength of the Cherokee Boys. These would be the men who mostly adored Silent Sylvester. And her stepfather had probably condemned Silent Sylvester to death.

Jill shrank back, seeing Kits moving from new-comer to new-comer, laughing, lolling against their horses, evidently the chum and heroine of all. Was that girl really likely to be a loyal friend? Jill was asking herself that question when Rattler Bob returned—with the big woman Bess.

“This is the kid,” remarked the former. “She’s your charge. She’s not to talk any, not even to Kits, till Slim is back with his message. He won’t be later than to-morrow night. Quit, old woman, and do as you’re bid. It’ll be the worse for every one if the girl gets talking, and I’m boss here whilst Sylvester’s away.”

The woman laughed snarlingly, and caught Jill by the arm.

“You come right ’long,” she said, in no kindly tones. “ ’Tain’t likely I’ll be shouted at for sake of yo’! You come ’long. Clickers’ Cave is the place. You won’t be talking in there.”

Jill felt herself hustled along; she saw Kits come running towards her—and Rattler Bob interpose. Kits, rebellious and arguing, was driven back to the camp fire. Evidently, the Rattler did not wish them to speak.

What did it mean? Why had Rattler Bob repeated what Kits had said about the messenger returning so soon with her stepfather’s message, when she herself had told him Senator Abways was away in New York for weeks to come?

## CHAPTER III

### “CHECK” FROM RATTLER BOB

“Kits! When are these brutes going to let me and Jill get away? I hate being in this old rat-trap. What does it mean, Kid?”

Kits flung out a friendly hand and laid it on Nat’s shoulder. Dusk came before its time in the rustlers’ lair, and the two could barely see each other’s faces, as they sat together on a ledge of the sandstone rock, watching the men who were gathered in a big, noisy group over the fire.

“I—don’t quite understand Rattler Bob’s meaning,” the girl said slowly; “he’s sent Slim to Los—and Senator Abways won’t risk leaving the girl in rustler hands. It’s sure that my father will be set free. Silent Sylvester has friends thick as bees from Los to Frisco; there’s thousands who don’t believe he had a hand in the shooting of Inspector Lawrence at Selby Creek. But—Slim ought to be back, and I’ll tell you straight what I’m afraid of, Nat. Rattler Bob has something up his sleeve. Curly was talking to me, and he says, the Rattler’s playing to take over the band—in my father’s place. It’s this way. Silent Sylvester’s one of the finest men that ever trod shoe-leather, but—but somehow he was never cut out for a rustler. I’m his only kid, yet he’s never even told me what brought him to the game, ’cepting that he had a big enemy, who drove him out to the mountains.

“So, though he’s boss of the Cherokee Boys, he keeps too tight a hand on them to please some. It’s clean fighting Silent Sylvester puts up—and if he takes from the rich he gives to the poor. There’s no cutthroat work with the Boys and no low-down game played—’cepting the once, which was the Rattler’s doing. And now—well!—I don’t believe Rattler Bob and his pals want to change Jill for Silent Sylvester, so—so he’s got her away to Clickers’ Cave and maybe will slip off with his bunch—and her. Then—it will be too late when Slim comes back.”

Nat was afire with excitement. He had forgotten his first bitter anger against Kits’ trapping, and looked the girl in the eyes, reading honesty there. She was chum to Jill same as he, and he had no shadow of doubt as to her dealing now.

“What are we to do?” he asked. “That Kid—alone in a cave, and she’s not the same as you and me, Kits. We’ve knocked about, whilst she’s been kept under a glass case.”

“She’s grit though,” nodded Kits; “and I’ll tell you what even the Rattler don’t know. There’s a third entrance to Clickers’ Cave, and if we can give Big Bess the slip and reach the ledge up there where those bunches of wild sage are growing, we’ll be talking to Jill to-night.”

Nat gripped the girl’s hand. They were comrades already, and lonely Kits’ heart glowed as she realized it.

“I’d trust Curly,” she said, “but it’s not fair on him. If the Rattler gets his snake eye on him he’ll have a bad time. Now, I’m going right back to help Bess—you creep up there on to the ledge and keep watch till I’m around again.”

Nat nodded. The ledge Kits pointed to was some fourteen feet above their heads and it needed the balance of a mountain goat to reach it. But Nat had had his training and his blood was up. He just glued on to that precipitous bastion and slowly wormed his way up. The rough surface of the rock cut his hands, and his shins were raw, but he reached the ledge and lay down panting, wondering how Kits would ever climb the rock. The heavy scent of the sage rose to his nostrils, producing a curious drowsiness, and he had some unpleasant qualms as to snakes. But—he managed to keep watch, and when the faint moonlight tried vainly to pierce the shadows of the Hollow, he heard a whisper close to his ear.

“St! It’s Kits. Yup! I came up another way. There’s something brewing, Nat. We shall have to be quick, pard. I never did trust Rattler Bob—but I guess he’s worse than I figured him. Now—I’ll lead—and don’t speak. You’ll need to grip on—or——”

Her voice died away as the girl, twisting sideways, began to crawl among the narrowest of paths which zigzagged up—and in—so that gradually huge crags shut out sight of the Hollow and brought them into what seemed to Nat a network of crags and cliffs. Then—the boy was close up against the girl, who had suddenly crouched back, almost crushing him to the rock.

Voices were speaking near—or maybe some vagrant echo made it seem near. Nat knelt stiff and rigid, listening, whilst the sweat stood out in beads on his brow.

“Midnight then,” drawled Rattler Bob’s silky tones, “the boys had better move out and down the valley as far as Verrall’s Gap. Sylvester’s bunch will be useless—after drinking that squirrel whisky. No fear of a fight—we won’t risk it. I’ll see to the girl. Tiger and I’ll bring her along, and we’ll

make for Death Valley. Then we can plan out and hold all the cards. Always is in New York, so Slim won't be back till long after we're away in the old nest in Skeleton Mountains. When the Senator finds he's not struck a bargain he'll likely shoot Sylvester or string him up. That's all right, and the best way to be rid of the fellow with his chicken spirit. We'll wait till we see how many of the old gang join up—then we'll start our game. But we'll keep the girl up there in the mountains as *mascot* till the day when the police are one too many. Then—it's us or she. Say!"

A muttering of husky approvals came rolling to the listeners' ears. Then a voice asked, "And the boy? Shall we leave him to Sylvester's crew—or \_\_\_\_\_"

A mocking laugh echoed the question.

"If he crosses our path we'll scrag him for a weasel," mocked Rattler Bob; "if not—he won't hurt. He's no count anyways."

Then—the voices died away. Silence reigned. Kits' hand was cold on Nat's cheek. The boy understood, and once more they crept forward till they reached the tiniest of rocky platforms.

"Lie flat here," whispered Kits, "and wait. Jill's below. I'll fetch her back—and join you. The horses . . . are under the ridge down there. We'll have to ride back to Stanways, Nat—and Jill must do the rest for . . . Silent Sylvester."

It was generously planned, with a touch of faith which thrilled Nat. He hated playing "possum" up here, but there was no questioning Kits, who swung downwards over what looked like a black chasm with the agility of a monkey.

Fearlessly the girl crawled along the tunnel passage, which twisted unexpectedly, sloping downwards, then rising and twisting again, till at last Kits rose to her feet in a circular cave about ten feet square. Drawing her electric torch from one of many pockets, the girl flashed it round. Ah, yes, there on a heap of sacking in the corner lay Jill Stenford, her wrists and ankles lightly bound, a pitcher of water beside her, with food which she might with some difficulty reach and eat.

Kits ran quickly to her side, as Jill, startled by the flash of light, struggled up moaning. Poor girl! brave as she was, she had reason enough for her fears, knowing herself in the power of villains. She gave a low cry of welcome, as Kits, stooping, kissed her quivering lips.



*Startled by the flash of light . . . Jill struggled up.*

“Nat’s outside,” whispered Kits, “we’ve got horses and we’re taking you home. Rattler Bob’s a devil. Don’t cry or faint, Jill. We’ve got to be real smart to get away. Yes, I’ve a knife. That’s right. Now, your ankles! I’d like to talk to that Rattler! Never mind! Wait till Silent Sylvester’s around! Can you walk, Jill? Fine!”

With her arm round Jill's waist Kits moved back towards the tunnel, but, as she reached the entrance to the passage, a soft but cruel laugh reached her ears, whilst a silky voice purred out a still more cruel gibe.

Both girls gave a cry of horror, as Kits, raising her torch, allowed the light to fall full on the crafty features and mocking eyes of Rattler Bob.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HOSTAGE

“So you think you’ll cheat me, do you, Kid?” whispered Rattler Bob hoarsely. “Put up your hands—now——”

The last word was a snarl of fury, as Kits, desperate and unnerved, hurled herself blindly upon the man, whilst she screamed to Jill to run.

The rustler, unprepared for such a move, reeled back, but, as Jill made a dash for the opening used by Kits, he raised his right arm, bringing the stock of his pistol down heavily on the girl who clutched him in a vice. Kits dodged, but, though the cruel blow missed her head, it struck her shoulder and brought her to the ground. Free of those clinging arms, Rattler Bob grabbed at poor Jill, dragging her back into the cave. She too struggled, but weakly, for her limbs were cramped, her terror dazed her. She saw Kits lying huddled on the ground and believed her to be dead. Perhaps this terrible man would kill her too.

He saw the wild fear in her eyes and whispered his threat.

“If you squeal I’ll punish you. Come on—or I’ll make you pay for it.”

“Kits!” moaned Jill. “You’ve killed—Kits.” But he only laughed, hurrying her towards the second place of entrance. This was the way he had entered and had so missed seeing Nat. Jill had no time to think of any plan of resistance. Poor child! what indeed could she have done? And all had happened so quickly that Rattler Bob had carried off his victim before Nat, alarmed by the clamour and cries in the cave below, forgot his orders and came crawling down.

It was not till after difficult searching that he reached the side of the girl who was just recovering her senses. As Nat crept in to the inner cave Kits was sitting up. She stared, shivering, as he flashed his light in her face.

Nat’s voice, however, dispelled her fears.

“Why, Kits,” he cried, “what’s happened? Where’s Jill? Haven’t you found her?”

Kits tried to rise, but fell back.

“It was Rattler Bob,” said she; “he’s got her. Help me up, Nat; we’ve got to get back to the camp at once and rouse the boys. Rattler won’t have taken



Jill back,—he’s carried her off! It’s his game. You remember? But Curly and the rest will help us now the Rattler’s shown his sting. Give me your hand,—so. Sure, that man’s nearly broken my shoulder.”

She fought gallantly against faintness, setting her teeth into her lips as Nat hauled her to her feet. It would be a race indeed if Jill was to be rescued.

“Can you walk?” asked Nat. “Here’s your torch! Seems as if there must be a hundred twists to this old passage,—I kept running into the wall. I’m afraid it’s single file.”

“I’ll go first,” said Kits; “if I drop, you can leave me and get back to the valley. You remember what the Rattler said? He and his boys were doping the others. If they’ve been trapped—we shan’t get on the trail for hours. Curly’s our best hope. He’s no drinker, excepting when the mad moods are on him.”

Nat obeyed. He was realizing the situation to be fairly desperate and it hurt badly to think of Jill helpless in the power of ruffians.

Kits led the way without faltering; she had been used to hard knocks all her life and was as brave as a young lion. At present she was thinking far more of the girl who had trusted her than of herself. The coming of Bonnie English Jill, fresh and sweet as a rose, with all the bloom which a sheltered life and loving care ensured, meant so much to this child who had never had a girl friend but had lived all her life amongst lawless men. Poor, brave, passionate Kits was feeling now she was prepared to sacrifice life itself if *only* Jill could be restored to her friends.

Moonlight lay on the great bare crags around as the boy and girl stood once more on the broad ledge above the cave. There was no sound of movement in the valley below, but this did not surprise them. Rattler Bob’s men would not be rousing drugged sleepers before they crept away to the rendezvous.

“We must find Curly,” was Kits’ cry. “Curly will be ready for the trail. Likely as not those brutes have tied him up, since he wouldn’t be joining the others in their drinking.”

“And Jill?” said Nat. “Where’s she been taken?”

Kits pointed away in the direction of a deep gully to the right.

“Tiger would be waiting with the horses outside the cave,” she replied, “and Rattler’s bunch will be waiting in the Gap. *We* couldn’t go on the trail

alone. They'd just shoot us down, and that wouldn't help Jill. Come right down the path. I'll feel happier when Curly knows."

It was easier climbing back than it had been to come, though again and again Nat marvelled at his companion's pluck. Kits' shoulder must be hurting cruelly, but she never made a murmur, keeping her head up and even trying to hum a tune at times.

As they stood at the head of the valley, Kits curled her hands round her mouth and sent a ringing cry echoing and re-echoing. It was the signal cry used as warning of danger, and the girl ought not to have had to repeat it twice. Yet, even after a third shout, the valley remained seemingly empty and deserted.

Kits sprang down on to the short turf and made her way towards the long shack where the men had their meals. It was here that Big Bess had her quarters, and the girl expected to hear the woman's loud voice bawling an enquiry.

*Had the whole of the rustler gang gone?*

"I can't force the door," she said to Nat, "my shoulder's too sore. Call for Bess—whilst I go down to the other huts. I—I can't quite understand it."

Nat put his own sturdy shoulder against the locked door and after one or two efforts it burst open inwards. Big Bess's silence was soon explained. She lay gagged on the floor of her own kitchen, her arms and legs tied.

Nat released her, and no sooner did the woman find herself free than she went staggering and shouting out into the open.

Kits was already returning with a man limping by her side. It was Curly. The latter was swearing huskily. Big Bess stood, arms akimbo, and if she did not swear she certainly screamed and scolded till the man was silenced. But even Bess discovered at last that she must keep quiet if she wanted the riddle read to her.

Kits was the first to explain.

"They tied Curly up too," she said to Nat and Bess; "the rest are all doped. The Rattler's men have gone off. Curly thinks they'll make for the Skeleton Range—and the old nest. Rattler will settle there and see what happens. He means to be Captain of the whole bunch—and he reckons the police won't dare do too much, since he holds Jill. She's his trump card—and he'll take her right back to the River Caves, as we call them. It's a mountain lair, and however much the police locate it, they can't get inside,

unless there's treachery amongst our boys. Say, Curly, what do you advise us to do right now?"

The young man rubbed the back of his head in rueful perplexity. Nat noted, just as Jill had done, that this "Curly" was different in most ways from the other rustlers. He was English—that was plain to English Nat, and not so very much older than the latter. He might well have been some mother's darling, who had got into audacious mischief at home, and run off to seek wild adventure without meaning in the least to embark on a career of crime.

"We've got to fetch back that girl," said Curly, "but with the band sleeping off a heavy dope it won't be quick enough work, I'm afraid. There are four of us to work at the job—and the Rattler's traitors have left the horses behind. That was a big blunder which wouldn't have been made if Rattler had been with them."

He turned as he spoke, and led the way to where some twenty-five or more of the rustlers lay outstretched in the dead stupor of drugged men.

Big Bess took in the scene at a glance and squared her shoulders. She had no real love for Rattler Bob, though she feared him.

"Water," she ordered, "pails of it. Ice-cold water may bring them round, and if once we can get them astride the horses they'll *grow* to the game."

"What a hope!" murmured Curly,—but though he didn't put much faith in Bess's measures, he was soon busy with the water cure.

No use! Rattler Bob had done the business thoroughly, and there was no rousing the men, who lay like dead things, or else showed ugly signs of delirium. Kits had a suggestion to make when even Bess gave up the task.

"You'll have to tell the boys as soon as they come round, Bess," she said coaxingly. "They're Dad's boys, every one, and they will be ready to fight to the last ditch before owning Bob as Captain. It would mean the end of the Cherokee Boys. So tell them the plain story and how Senator Abways is in New York—and not likely to be back. Let them know what Rattler's game is, how he wants Sylvester to swing so that he can be boss—and how he'll hold the Senator's heiress till he can come to terms with the authorities. Mascot Jake will boss this lot for sure—and he's good on a trail. Tell him we're riding for Death Valley and Wolf Crags. That's all. Curly,—you'll captain us."

The young rustler nodded.

“Yup,” he agreed, “though, of course, I know what that counts for, Kits. You’d boss the President of U.S.A. if you’d the chance. But we’ll ride together. The sooner we teach Rattler who our chief is the better, and—we’re going to save Sylvester.”

Kits’ eyes shone like stars. That was it. They must save her daddy—and there was only one way as she saw it now—to bring Jill the English girl, upon whom the Senator lavished a father’s love and devotion, back to Los to plead for the life of a man to whose daughter she owed her rescue.

It was still moonlight as the three strange comrades rode out from the Hollow. Kits was a trifle in advance. Nat, mounted on his own Red Morn, was side by side with Curly. The latter grinned in friendly fashion at his compatriot, pointing a sly finger towards Kits, who, stiff in the shoulder still, was contriving somehow to forget the fact!

“When you know Kits as well as I do, chum,” said the young rustler softly, “you’ll know she is the worst poss’ble in following anywhere at the back of a bunch; she’s leading all the time. In the blood, maybe; Sylvester’s that sort—and I like it. We’re going to follow Kits, rescue Jill,—and bring Sylvester back to headquarters in style. Will you shake on that, pard?”

Nat smiled too as he held out his hand.

It was a bargain worth making.

## CHAPTER V

### WOLVES

Where was she? Jill asked the question, in dazed fashion, as she raised herself on the great slab of stone where she had been lying. A red dawn spread over the eastern skies and was reflected in the most wonderful scheme of colouring on the jagged mountain slopes. Jill shivered with cold and fear, seeing the grey rocks around, the clumps of wild sage and coarse grasses, with quaintly pretty mountain flowers growing in odd crannies and niches.

It was a lonesome awakening for the poor child, who was trying to realize what had happened. Yes, yes, she was remembering now. The cave prison—Kits' coming—and the intervention of the man called Rattler Bob who had dragged her away to where another rustler had been waiting with horses. Then—her captor had set out on his horse, mounted behind her, and ridden away to some distant spot where a number of friends had waited to greet them.

Jill, half fainting with weariness and distress, had not taken in what was said to her, and had been incapable of resistance when these men had forced her to remount another horse and so ride—ride—ride—away into the mountain passes—over wild prairies, through a river, and up a long slope of hill-paths till past and present had blended into a deep blank.

Now she was awake—and alone. Free too—and oh, so hungry! She stood up, feeling shaky and uncertain of herself, whilst as she did so, voices came drifting along the pass in her direction.

The rustlers were returning. Jill put out her hand, resting it on a rock. Her instinct was to escape, but, even as she looked around to choose the best path, her gaze became riveted on a coiled grey body in the hollow centre of the boulder.

It was a sleeping snake. Jill froze where she stood. A snake!—maybe a rattler! Horrors! She stared fascinated at that grey body. It would be death if the reptile bit her—and there might be others about.

Instead of escape Jill found herself actually climbing *towards* the newcomers. Ah! she had seen them now, and drew back, clutching the twigs of a sturdy bush. There were some thirteen men on a plateau below; sun-

blackened desperadoes—a few of them still barely more than boys. They had lighted a fire and were preparing a morning meal. Jill sniffed the air and whispered “Coffee!”

It was a discovery. Coffee, hot, strong, reviving. All at once it seemed to her that nothing mattered one bit so long as she had her hands circling a mug of the fragrant drink. Boldly advancing, or rather descending, she made her way towards her enemies and was greeted with a shout from the first who spied her. Jill paused—she had recognized Rattler Bob—the man who had struck down poor Kits, and the craving for coffee and companionship died. She turned to reascend the path, but the rustlers called to her. Not unfriendly, either, some of those rough voices seemed, and Jill, knowing she could never win free, retraced her steps.

A man who wore a short dark beard was holding out a mug; another waved a hunk of bread and cold bacon. Jill was hungry at first sight of it—and accepted her breakfast in silence. The men were hungry too, and ate without attempting to speak to her or each other. Jill was the first to finish her meal. She was warm now, braver, too, with all the tiredness gone from her limbs. She had a question to ask now and an offer to make.

“I’m Jill Stenford,” she said suddenly in loud, clear tones. “Senator Always is my stepfather. He’s just my true father too. He loves me—and I know he’d pay the man well who—who would take me back to Los.”

They stared at her, surprised at first to hear so bold a speech.

Rattler Bob was the one to reply, shouting an oath, as he came towards her.

“Sure true,” he added, gripping her arm, “sure true. The Senator will pay—*well!* But not yet. He’ll have to wait for his stepdaughter, and before he gets her back again he’ll have learned to respect the Cherokee Boys and Rattler Bob.”

Jill shrank away, whilst another of the men struck in with a sly chuckle:

“Say now, Bob,” he chaffed, “you’ve left out the boss’s name. It’s Silent Sylvester the Senator will have to be treating proper—and Silent Syl who will be being welcomed by his boys in the River Caves.”

A curt order to be silent was Rattler Bob’s response.

Jill looked anxiously from one grim face to the other. What did it all mean? Her head ached over the puzzle.

Rattler Bob had folded his arms across his chest and left her to stand before him. She might have been a prisoner at a bar!

“You’ll answer us quick, Kid,” said he. “What’s your name? Jill Stenford? Huh! And your mother’s dead. She was English, eh?”

“Yes,” said Jill, “she was English. My father was English too. He died long ago. I never remember him. Senator Abways has been like a father to me.”

“Sure!” retorted Rattler Bob, “and means to treat you like a daughter? You can swear he’s named you as his heiress? What of your own father’s dollars?”

“He was not rich,” replied Jill, “but he had a home he loved in England. The Senator is going to take me to see it one day. Now I’ve told you, and you will let me go home? The Senator will pay my ransom.”

“With the rope,” sneered Rattler. “No, no! Not so hasty, my dear. You’re going to learn how the rustlers of California live first. You’ll have to make yourself useful too. Not too much of the Senator’s heiress, and rather more of Jill the hostage, who will go free when the Senator has paid with the right cash and a bunch of free pardons. Now, we’ll be riding, Tiger; you can help bring up the horses.”

The man called “Tiger” went off silently. Jill had noticed him before: his hair was flaming red, and his green eyes round and large as an owl’s. Though he swaggered fiercely, it was a fact that he had often proved himself to be the greatest coward in the band.

Jill seated herself on a rock. She had the common sense to know that escape was impossible and, if she wanted to avoid ill-usage, she had better be obedient.

Cruelty was stamped plainly enough on the faces of these men and she must be careful not to rouse the evil spirit in them. If only she could have reached her horse and ridden away—away over the prairies which she saw below, stretched wide under the blaze of the morning sun.

Where was Blue Barbe?—the dearest horse, which would never have allowed her to be taken!

It was with sinking heart that the girl heard she was again to be mounted on the Rattler’s horse. They would not allow so valuable a prize to be risked by allowing her to ride alone.

For hours the band rode on. At first Jill was alert, tormented by fears, wretched at the thought of the long, long distance being placed between herself and rescuers. Then, after the midday halt, they were back in the saddle again, riding over great plains of purple sage, hearing the melancholy cries of the prairie birds, the lowing of cattle, the clamour of wild-fowl. Dusk drew down and Jill was sleeping again—dreaming of the boy Nat—and dark-eyed Kits, awaking with a cry to find that darkness had deepened towards night. It was only just possible to see the objects around, whilst black heights against a pale light in the distant sky told of a ravine. What a ravine! Jill was more widely awake now. She had distinctly heard the howling of wolves. Could this place—so dreary, so lonely, so filled by mysterious sounds and sinister shadows, be the famous Death Valley itself?—or that other scarcely less ill-omened a spot known as Wolf Craggs?

Jill would have liked to ask the question, would perhaps have summoned up her courage to do so had not the violent shying of the rustler's horse and an ominous snarl from close at hand warned her of a danger threatening the whole party.

Wolves! Earlier than usual they had been driven by hunger down from their dens, and, grown bold with fasting, were ready to attack the little party.

Rattler Bob raised his pistol and fired, shouting to his men to do the same. Jill clung in terror to the saddle. The horse was rearing and plunging, the clamour of snarls and hunger-cries around grew more threatening. In this place of darkness and many shadows it was impossible to tell beasts from rocks, and to shoot without aim might result in maiming a member of the band!

It seemed to Jill—unused to wild adventure—like some frightful nightmare in which it was impossible to believe.

Rattler Bob, after firing every bullet in his revolver, backed his horse towards a ridge of rocks rather higher up, whilst he yelled to his men bidding them to do the same.

Here they rapidly reloaded, waiting for the enemy to renew the attack, but this time the wolves had had enough of the game. Many of their comrades lay dead and the firing had stricken fear into their coward hearts,—back they slunk—in a broken pack, quickening their pace, too, as the rustlers sent another volley after them. That completed the rout!—and, to Jill's bewildered gaze, it seemed as if grey ghost-shadows went flitting away, scattering to right and left, plunging into the river which ran at the



bottom of the ravine, and so up the slope opposite, to be finally lost amongst the crags.

The rustlers waited till it was certain the four-legged foes would not return. They had had a narrow escape, for, if the wolves had attacked them down below where there were no rocks and the ground was marshy, it would have gone ill with them.

“Ride,” was Rattler Bob’s order. He asked no question as to wounds or bites, his own horse was bleeding from an ugly tear on its flank, but such details were trivial! They must be far on their road before morning, since there were other dangers hereabouts more critical than that of wolves.

And he was obeyed, though the men were experiencing a good deal of difficulty with their horses. The poor animals’ nerves had been badly upset, and the terror always inspired by wolves was increased by the flickering moonlight and black shadows which suggested that many a grey rock must be a crouching wolf!

Rattler Bob’s horse was the most unmanageable of the lot. The pain of its wound,—added to its fears,—maddened it, and at last, free of all control, it went galloping up the ravine in a panic there was no restraining. The men who followed shouted loudly, but they could give no help. The animal, always one of the fleetest in the rustlers’ stables, raced like the wind, perilling its rider’s neck every second! Jill clung pluckily to the saddle, but presently, when the horse shied again at a gnarled tree standing alone amongst the rocks, the poor girl was flung on to the ground. Here she lay, stunned at first but aware of cries, the receding echo of horse-hoofs,—then silence. She was free—but what a freedom!—more terrible than captivity! She sat up, staring around. Not a sign of the rustlers could she see; nor any sign of wolves or living creature. Not very far below, she could see the foaming waters of the river rushing between rocky banks, whilst the murmur of waters helped to drown lesser sounds.

She was alone in this unknown place—and could hardly decide whether she would not welcome the sight of Rattler Bob returning in search of her.

But Rattler Bob did not return,—and his comrades, knowing nothing of the loss of their prize, followed down the long zigzag path of the ravine towards the more distant prairie and forests which stretched westward. Jill was safe from recapture for some hours to come—though she realized even now that as soon as possible the rustlers were sure to return and look for her. Nor did she feel any enthusiastic eagerness to escape.

What *could* she do with her freedom?

She had neither horse, food, nor weapon, nothing but an electric torch given her by Kits when she found her in the cave. Standing up to survey the wild scene, Jill's hopes sank to zero. Who was likely to come to such a place! If she walked for miles and miles and miles it was only a bare chance that she might reach a farm or shack. Yet she could not remain here. A long-drawn whimper, far off amongst the crags, told of a sentry wolf. And there must be hundreds of snakes and such dangers amongst these rocks.

Jill clasped cold little hands in an agony of prayer, then slowly began to climb down towards the river. She was thirsty—oh, so thirsty! At least she could drink, and the water seemed to suggest some kind of protection. The wolves might not find her trail so easily if she were able to cross the stream,—and she was sure that would be no difficult task. Rocks everywhere,—grey shadows everywhere,—fear everywhere.

Could even Kits herself have shown courage and defiance in such a situation? Jill stiffened. The mere thought of Kits *was* a help. What a brave, reckless little thing she was! Jill had quite lost sight of the fact that it was Kits who had helped to lure her into the clutches of the rustlers. The girl's passionate penitence, her confession, and the reason she had shown for her treachery, had quite condoned the offence. Jill was generous with her, *once* forgiven also meant forgotten! And she was sure she should find it quite easy to love the little rustler lass.

Ah, she had reached the river now,—and stood, peering through the shadows, making as sure as she could that the rock on which she perched was not shared by a snake. Snakes were so much worse than wolves, though another howl—nearer now—suggested that wolves were quite bad enough!

"I *must* have a drink," said Jill aloud. "If I kneel I shall be able to reach the water. I *am* thirsty."

She was hungry too, but there was no cure for that at present! When day came she might find some fruit. The water—ice-cold from its mountain springs—was wonderfully refreshing, and Jill plunged her tired face into the stream. How lovely!—though there was no towel to dry her dripping hair and cheeks!

Jill could have laughed as she rubbed away with her handkerchief, then, grown bold now with this new courage born of refreshing drink, she climbed cautiously down, poising half-nervously on a rock. How the current swirled and churned about her; but there was another rock farther on,—giant

stepping-stones to the farther bank! Jill was half across when her foot slipped, and she sat heavily down on the rock, which rose well above the water.

Here she was—not feeling quite equal to the task of going backwards or forwards—yet with a certain sense of security. She heard more howling of wolves,—the cries of night-birds,—the barking of foxes,—and fear of the black slopes around her grew rapidly. She would stay here—and wait for the dawn. With hands clasped round her knees the girl sat there, patiently watching the mysterious approach of day. It seemed as if her sheltered, happy life at Stanways must be years away. Tears came to her eyes as she thought of the anxiety and distress her loss must have caused.

Aunt Kezia—really the Senator's sister—would have sent for every police officer and detective in the State. Daddy-pops, as she had learned long ago to call her stepfather, would be heart-broken. They were such devoted comrades—and she loved the grey-haired, stern man with quite daughterly devotion.

And now——

Jill locked her stiff, numbed fingers together. She had taken a sudden leap back from past to present, for,—the first grey light of dawn was breaking in the east,—and Jill, looking towards the rocky sides of the ravine, felt a sudden thrill of fear—as she saw—creeping through the mists—a figure so shapeless that she could not decide whether a human creature or animal approached. Whichever it was, however, it seemed to have seen *her*,—and came gliding swiftly down between the crags towards the river.

## CHAPTER VI

### KITS AND CURLY TAKE UP THE TRAIL

“I wonder,” said Curly, as he dismounted from his horse and led it to where Nat and Kits were already tethering theirs, “whether Bess has got Mascot and the rest moving? You see, not knowing exactly what the Rattler had stored away in his brain-box, leaves us a fairly wide trail!”

“Wolf’s Crags and Death Valley,” said Kits, “that’s the location. Afterwards, they would be trekking for the old nest. The Rattler’s game is to leave Dad to his fate, and—and he’ll likely carry it through. I was wondering as we came along whether it wouldn’t have been better to let Nat ride back to Los and wait for the Senator. Dad won’t hang till after he’s been tried. Old Abways is just enough—but—but—I’m wretched as long as Dad’s in prison.”

Curly shook his head.

“Nat here would be willing, I’m sure,” he replied, “but it wouldn’t wash, Kits. He’s no rustler—and he’s a lone hand. The Senator couldn’t hear anything from him which would save Sylvester. It’s all that black business at Selby Creek which the boss will have to answer for. *We* know Sylvester was miles away at the time and knew no word about it. Twenty of us could prove it—but the Law won’t take a rustler’s dying oath. Seems to me our only chance is to get hold of the girl Jill, and take her back to Los. Then, when Abways is looking every way for an excuse to let Sylvester off in gratitude to us, we can bring as many proofs as we can c’llect to show Rattler Bob was acting on his own and would have been punished by Sylvester himself if the chief hadn’t been trapped. The trapping was the Rattler’s own job, too, I do believe.”

Kits sighed. She was as she had said—desperate in her longing to save her father. Yet how could it be done, unless by rescuing Jill and throwing herself on the Senator’s mercy?

“We’ll saddle up again,” she said restlessly, as soon as they had eaten some of the food they had brought. “We may be close on the trail. You might stalk the next shack we locate, Curly, and make enquiries as to whether a party of riders has passed this way.”

Curly nodded. He was really sorry for Kits—and he was fond of the chief for his own sake. He was so straight, and, well! Curly owed him a whole lot in having been saved by the big silent man from joining the bad set in the band.

“We’ll ride good and true,” said he; “I have a sort of feeling that the Rattler’s bitten off more than he can chew. He’s a crooked one—and I’ve figured out, Kits, that that sort of crookedness doesn’t pay. What a time we’ll have up in the old nest when we get Sylvester back.”

Kits smiled through a mist of tears. She was grateful to Curly for speaking like that. What a help he was! And Dad had always liked him.

Nat had climbed up amongst the crags and was looking out over the rugged landscape.

“Not a sign of the bunch,” the young cowboy called; “it would be good to know we were on the right track. Gee! There’s the trace of a camp fire down there. Wait a bit before saddling up, Kits. We might get a clue.”

And away bounded Nat, eager to be the one to find they were on the right road. Kits and Curly were not believing in that camping ground, and called to their comrade to hurry. But Nat was not hurrying. He was nosing round that patch of blackened grass like any old pointer. The ashes were cold—but—that fire had not been lighted too long ago.

“It might—yes! . . . it—might . . . and what was this?—a curiously carved whistle—and a broken chain.” Back went Nat, dangling his prize.

“What sort of a clue?” he called. “Some whistle! You’ll know it again if you’ve ever seen it.”

Curly gave a shout.

“Right. One to you, boy. Why, Kits, look at that! It’s Dick Dorrock’s whistle—the one his sweetheart carved for him. That’s fixed it! We’re on the trail.”

Kits’ eyes fairly danced with joy. The three hurried back to the camping ground.

“The fire’s been stamped out,” said Curly, “so there’s no getting down to the time they fed here. But you can see where they were heading for—Wolf’s Crags—and then round by Randon. With luck they’ll reach the Range in a couple of days.”

He kicked a sod of charred grass moodily. He could not disguise the fact that Rattler Bob had the game in his hands. Once let the old nest in the mountains be reached, and it was unlikely enough that Jill would ever be rescued.

“There’s no short cut we could take, is there?” asked Kits, gulping down a sob. “What about the Fox Leap? That would bring us out below Randon, and we could likely get news there about the band.”

“Yup,” agreed Curly, “you’re not losing a chance, Kits, and it’s true. We should save a long stretch by taking the Fox Leap.”

“We’ll saddle up then,” said the girl, and vaulted cleverly on to her horse’s back. “No more camping till—till we come up to Rattler Bob.”

Curly wrinkled his nose in a wry grimace. Even if they were hot on a trail—how were they—three youngsters—to rescue a closely guarded prisoner from nearly a score of determined men? Kits’ wonderful faith was amazing. She was so pathetically sure that some way would be found to succeed! Curly, who had just seen enough of the world to become sceptical, and not sufficient to realize that seeming miracles were often performed, shook his head, as he studied the upright back of the girl before him. Rattler Bob was a very king of snakes and would not be thwarted by a scrap of a girl and two boys.

“It’s just a gamble on the off-chance,” said Curly to himself, “but if I argued like Solomon, Kits wouldn’t listen—so we’ve got to go on.”

And go on they did, through a long day, from dawn till nightfall. It was the horses threw up the game then—and not their riders.

“There’s a farm there—to the right,” said Curly. “Almond trees! Say, what orchards! The people who grow them right up here have a hope.”

“Frosts?” queried Nat, and the rustler nodded.

“Late frosts. One’s enough for the mischief. I’ve seen acres of trees—just a pink sea of bloom one day—and next morning every bud killed by a frost. But—say! Captain Kits,—you’ll saddle off here? We may get news whilst we feed—and if you don’t give the gees a few hours they’ll be tuckered out.”

Even then Kits might have persisted, since she had a big streak of obstinacy about her, but her horse stumbled badly—as though to bring home the truth of what the boy had said.

“I s’pose we’d better ride in and ask,” she said regretfully. “I’m sorry though. We’d have been bound to pick up a red-hot trail soon.”

“Or been picked up by a bunch of stray redskins or prairie prowlers,” retorted Curly. “Say, there’s a man out there with a gun. I’ll go and put him wise as to our being tame sheep.”

And, setting spurs to his tired horse, Curly rode up to the homestead, before which stood a bearded owner evidently preparing for a fight.

Nat remained by Kits. He was ready enough to do his job—or anyone’s job—but saw plainly that he would blunder through ignorance. As Kits had quaintly remarked not an hour previously, he didn’t yet talk their language.

Nat had rather smiled over that word “yet,” for he most surely did not mean to settle with a band of rustlers! He preferred a less thrilling but more honest way of life.

Curly was already engaged in a pow-wow with the farmer, who came back with the rustler down the road.

“Come right in,” he cried to Kits, “you must be tired out. What’s your trouble, chums? You want to catch up with a band of rustlers and rescue a kid-girl? That’s the right game!—but ugly odds. Do you know the Cherokee Boys?”

“Sure!” said Kits naïvely, “but they’re away to the north. It’s just a bunch of boys we’re after, captained by a man riding a piebald mustang.”

As she spoke she looked enquiringly and none too trustingly at the farmer. She didn’t like his oblique eyes or the furtive way he licked his lips.

“Ou-aye,” said the man carelessly, “I noticed the bunch when I was out in the orchard. About a score or less. You come right in, friends, and have supper. Then if you like I’ll saddle up myself and ride with you on the trail.”

“Sure!” laughed Kits, in that boyish way of hers. “We’ll come in—and to-morrow will do for the trail. Only—if you’re married, I’ll be real pleased if you’d go ahead and tell the missus of the invitation you’ve given? It’s she will have the trouble of cooking for us—and sleeping us too, so I’d like to be sure of her welcome. It’s fair.”

The man—Relf Underfold—gave the speaker a keen look, but the girl’s eyes were pools of innocence, she was yawning wearily, with one slim arm curled round her head.

“Mary Emily’ll be ready enough,” he growled, “but I’ll go in and tell her if you’d sooner have it that way. Don’t worry any though. You’ll stay here the night.”

Kits laughed very softly under her breath as the speaker ran off to the house.

“Round about, boys,” was her unexpected order to her companions —“and use up every breath the gees have got in their bodies. We’ve gotta get clear of this place. *Ride!*”

She set the example smartly, and the horse, tired as it was, responded to her cry of appeal and the light touch on his neck. Kits knew better than to strike the animal she loved, and the Scamp understood now that it was up to him to answer that demand.

With Nat and Curly hard on her horse’s heels, Kits dashed down the short avenue and out on to the prairie. A fringe of forest showed to the left; and, though a forest after dark was no happy shelter, the girl knew it was better than remaining in the open to be captured.

Behind them rose the angry shouts of a man who had been bested by a girl, and they heard the firing of a gun before they reached the first of the trees.

Nat looked back. Men were riding and running across the open towards them, but their start was a good one—and before any of the shots came within range of them the trees were reached.

Kits gave no word of explanation till they had followed a dozen zigzag paths, but at last her gallant horse stumbled and fell—unable to rise again. Kits freed herself from the saddle and ran to the poor creature’s head. Its heart was broken, and even as Kits reached it it had breathed its last. Nat had never seen Kits cry till now; in fact he had not believed she had a tear in her! Yet she was sobbing like a baby as she hugged her dead favourite’s neck, talking to it—entreating its forgiveness for her cruelty.

Curly interfered at last.

“Listen, Kid,” he urged, “those folks from the farm are on the scent. Who were they? What was wrong? Sure they couldn’t have been the Rattler’s chums!”

Kits shook her head.

“No,” she replied, “but they recognized me as Silent Sylvester’s girl. That man had a saloon which he ran under the very noses of the police near



'Frisco. There was an ugly row there one night though, and if it hadn't been for Dad and Mascot there'd have been murder done! Afterwards, that skew-eyed rogue had to flit. He'd made a pile of money with the liquor game and must have bought that farm with it. He'd never forgive Dad—and he recognized me. He meant mischief, but he won't come far into the forest—he'd be afraid the Cherokee Boys might be here in force. Now—now—we'll have to strike the trail again. Listen—what's that?"

Curly and Nat straightened. They expected to hear the shouts of pursuers, but instead they heard the thunder of a cataract leaping down over great stones. Boom! boom! But there *was* another sound, penetrating, dominating even the roar of the cascade. Weird and thrilling, it rose and fell, then swelled in a scream of terror, dying down and mingling with the boom of the falls.

Could it possibly be that the place was haunted by some restless ghost? And yet once more the anguished cry rang out—a wordless wail—appealing to all three listeners by its very helplessness.

## CHAPTER VII

### A PRISONER OF THE ARKANSAS

Jill drew her feet up beneath her. Should she remain where she was, here amid-stream, with the racing, turbulent river as sole protector, or risk drowning by trying to reach the farther bank, and attempting to hide amongst the rocks?

A sense of her own weakness, the hopelessness of trying to escape from so many enemies, overwhelmed her. Even if she had known flight from that shapeless creature were possible she could not have attempted it.

Each moment the light was growing clearer. Great banks of mist rose higher—higher, breaking and scattering in twisted, fantastic shapes till they resembled a fleeing army.

The mists were parting and rising from over the river too, and Jill, crouching there, saw a man standing on the bank. Yes, a man, though the reason for her perplexity was explained now, since this was no rustler or rancher but an Indian, wrapped in his blanket, his lank, black hair decorated by a splendid head-dress of red, black and green feathers.

Jill had seen Indians in the reserves many a time. She had always listened to tales of the native tribes with keenest interest, and it seemed to her that this splendid and fierce-looking warrior was a very different creature to the poor degenerates who spent their time in apathy and idleness, because fighting and hunting were no longer their rightful trades, and they disdained the toil which they regarded as only fit for squaws!

The Indian for his part seemed equally interested in the white girl. Plunging across the stream, proving to Jill that after all she need not have had any fear of drowning, he grasped the girl by the arm, pointing to the bank.

Jill obeyed. There would have been no resisting that grasp, but—she was afraid. The Indians of the reserve had been friendly and gentle enough, but the fierce glance bestowed on her by the savage thrilled her with dread.

What terrible eyes this man had! Did he mean to kill her?

The Indian read the fear on her face, and a faint smile of contempt spread over his hatchet-like features.

“Blue Eagle,” he said—speaking English, to her surprise. Then, pointing to her, “Yengee girl?”

She nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “Blue Eagle take Yengee girl to Los, given big reward.”

Blue Eagle showed no interest in the information.

“Wow!” he retorted, with still more contempt, “Blue Eagle lives in mountain. Prairie full enemies. Agent watch, try clip Blue Eagle’s wings. Yengee girl come mountain village. Never go away. Yengee girl safe if peoples leave Blue Eagle’s people safe.”

Jill caught her breath. *What* did the Indian mean? That she was to remain—a prisoner of his tribe—*always!*

If so, this was a thousand times worse fate than being the prisoner of the rustlers. Jill looked around. Actually she would have hailed the sight of Rattler Bob with joy. But—instead of the leather-clad figures, with their slouch hats, she saw other figures rising from behind rocks and trees, standing amongst the broken mists till she grew faint with watching the nightmare vision.

Indians! Indians here in the wilds of the Wolf Crags! Indians who meant to carry her off to some hidden eyrie and keep her there—safe only as long as they themselves escaped the knowledge of the police—and the vigilance of the Agent.

Jill had heard tales of such captives before. Aunt Kezia had been fond of telling how her own sister’s nephew had been carried off by the Blackfeet Indians as a child and kept hidden for fifteen years, so that when white men discovered him he was more Indian than American and refused to leave his adopted people.

She *could* not endure such a fate. The fantastic figures in blankets and feathers, their fierce, painted faces showing like those of hobgoblins in the dawn-light, roused a sudden panic in the half-frenzied girl.

The Indian had left her standing on the river bank, whilst he beckoned his comrades, and Jill, seizing the opportunity, plunged desperately into the shallow water. She had actually reached the opposite bank before Blue Eagle discovered her flight, and, with a grunt of anger, the Indian sprang after her.

Jill ran—ran—seeing the steep sides of the ravine a blur before her, feeling her pulses leap and throb painfully, aware of a growing weakness, yet still fighting, fighting for freedom.

If she could reach some cave—if—she could *only* find the shelter of trees—if she could hide . . .

But Blue Eagle's sinuous arm was round her waist in a grip of steel, she could see the mocking anger in those black eyes as the painted face was thrust close—and, with a moaning sob, the poor child fell back fainting into her captor's arms!

Unconsciousness is a blessed state at times! Jill knew nothing of a wild ride up—up—up towards those eternal snows. For hours everything was a blank to the poor little prisoner, otherwise it is probable she would have swooned again and again as she saw the precipitous paths up which the wiry little Indian ponies scrambled like cats, whilst they fearlessly clambered across the uneven rocks stretched over thundering cataracts.

Up—up—up—towards the unknown and mysterious heights of the Rocky Mountains.

It was evening when Jill did open her eyes, to find the Indians were bivouacking on a grassy plateau surrounded by deep cliffs and great, bold crags.

Some twenty Indians lay or squatted about the fire. Jill had been placed under shelter of a rock. She was not bound—such a precaution would have been unnecessary! She could not escape.

An Indian boy—no older than herself—saw first that she was awake, and, obeying the order of his impassive-faced leader, came across bringing food and a pitcher of water. Jill was starving, though she did not know it at first. She felt too ill and languid to care to touch the mysterious-looking food of which she could not tell the nature!

But Blue Eagle, watching her with cold contempt, spoke a word of command.

“Eat,” he said, and Jill raised a flat cake to her lips. How dry and tasteless it was! but the water was cold and refreshing. After a long and eager drink her appetite returned and she finished all the food brought to her.

Blue Eagle nodded.

“The White Fawn is wise,” said he, “if she obeys she no suffer. Now—ride. To-morrow reach village.”

More riding! Jill ached in every limb; she could hardly rise, she was so stiff, but the effort had to be made, and Blue Eagle, seeing her weakness,

deigned to lift her before him on the little black pony, which bore the double burden easily enough.

“Not up *that* path,” was the cry which rose to the captive’s lips, as she saw how the Indian urged his horse towards a track which, zigzagging like a snake between great rocks, led almost perpendicularly to heights above.

Blue Eagle took no notice of her dismay. Up, up they went, till Jill closed her eyes, perfectly sure that in a few seconds of time she would find herself being hurled downwards to death.

But—it was not so—and a keen blast of snow-laden air told Jill they had reached the higher slopes of the most mysterious mountains in the world.

The Senator had often told her that the secrets of the Rockies never would be read—and she could well believe it, though it seemed likely that one at least of those secrets was being disclosed to her now.

For here—on the rocky slope, she saw before her the strangest of natural arches of rocks forming a long, dark tunnel in the mountain side.

Blue Eagle laughed, that cold, cruel laugh of his, as he murmured in her ear:

“The White Fawn sees before her the eyrie of the eagle—the home of Arkansas warriors. She rides in—but never rides out. Blue Eagle speaks.”

This time Jill did not attempt to reply—or struggle in desperate longing to escape. She was riding—through the dark tunnel into the mysteriously hidden village of rebel savages, men whose hand was against the white people who had robbed them of their native land—and the right to live as princes of the free forest and prairies.

It seemed to poor Jill, half fainting in her terror, that to enter such a stronghold was indeed—to leave all hope behind.

And—she was alone. Not even Kits—or the English boy who had become her comrade were with her.

Surely—she would never see them or the kindly friends of her childhood again.

She was the prisoner of the Arkansas.



*Jill knew nothing of a wild ride up—up—up.*

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE RESCUE OF GREY HAWK

“*Where* did the cry come from?” asked Kits breathlessly.

“It seemed as if it might have been from the river,” replied Curly, leaning over the bank; “but there’s no one to be seen! Some mystery. Hark!”

Once again the cry rose, gathering strength, then dying again.

“It seems to come from under the cascade itself,” said Nat, “but sure then it must be a ghost! Perhaps some one was murdered here.”

Kits shivered.

“At any rate those men haven’t followed into the forest,” she said bravely; “you were right, Curly. They were afraid of meeting the Cherokee Boys. We—we may as well ride on. The forest is none too safe at night. If we listen long enough we’ll hear the wolves.”

“Or bears,” suggested Nat. “Hullo, Curly, what are you after?”

The young rustler did not reply. He was deliberately climbing up the face of the great jagged rocks, forming a miniature precipice, over which the river flung itself. Kits and Nat, holding the horses, watched him curiously. The cry—so strange and eerie in its echoing appeal—had died away. Only the thunder of the fall filled the air with sounds.

What *was* Curly after?

Nat was tethering his horse. Kits followed suit. Neither of them were good at the looking-on game! Curly had reached the head of the fall and was crawling over the closely placed rocks which formed a chain from bank to bank. Between these rocks the water thrust itself in foaming spouts, joined into a broad stream of water, churned into a mass of froth and spume as it hurled itself down into the whirlpool.

“They’re sure like a set of giant teeth ready to trap you,” called Kits to Nat, as they climbed in the wake of Curly; but Nat only shook his head. Close as they were to the waterfall, he could hear no other sound!

Curly had seen them coming and was standing up—signalling to them. They could not hear what he said, but the young man was a good actor—and

his pantomime of pointing and gesticulating at last told Kits what was needed.

The girl climbed like a squirrel, and now, with an ease her comrades envied, swung herself down the precipice. Nat, standing poised half-way, frowned in perplexity. Kits was certainly quicker-witted, and of course that hurt his pride. He half hoped she had mistaken Curly's meaning; but nothing of the kind! for the latter was grinning like an amiable tom-cat as he watched his little pal slip the reins off his horse, twist them about her slim body, and return to her climb again.

So, Curly wanted some sort of a rope! Whatever for? Nat puzzled in vain, then suddenly realized the quickest way to get an explanation would be to crawl across and join the elder lad.

Curly had not taken to the most comfortable of resting-places! There he squatted on a foam-splashed rock—peering down. . . . At what? His back was to the falls, and Nat, as he swung his legs over the steep river bank, saw that the rocks were not only a single barrier at the head of the fall, but rose in scattered formation from one side of the stream to the other. Curly was looking down into what might have been an isolated pool ringed round in the midst of foaming chaos by protective rocks.

In storm time the pool would be completely flooded, and the rocks covered; but the river happened to be low.

Ah! Nat was looking down now into that well-like space and his blood grew chill, for—there was no water for some ten feet beneath that rocky wall, and there, standing on a ledge which filled about half of the space below, was a man—an Indian—bound hand and foot so that he could not attempt to escape from a frightful death which might come in more ways than one. For, if drowning did not end the poor wretch's tortures, he must eventually be starved to death unless he chose to move from the ledge and fall down into the waters which rushed so sullenly beneath him.

Kits had arrived by now, and had also seen the prisoner, who, ungagged as he was, seemed to be crying some appeal for help.

What was Kits doing? The girl, standing straight on the water-washed rock, was slipping the stout leather reins under her armpits. Curly at first frowned, attempting protests which the roaring of the waterfall drowned. Nat awoke to the realization that Kits intended to be lowered into that awful hole so that she might cut the Indian's bonds. It could *not* be allowed! Nat



nearly choked over vain arguments; and finally Kits—laying her lips to his ear—bawled an explanation:

“Both—too heavy. You’ll—hold me up—best.”

Then—she was over the edge of those rocks. The Indian saw her coming and flattened himself as much as possible against the wall. Lower—lower—and if the rein broke—the girl’s death would be hideous. Ah! she was on a level with the prisoner now! Her knife was raised. . . . The task was no easy one, so cramped were the quarters, so dark the river-pit—that more than once the keen edge of the weapon bit deep into the man’s flesh. But the Indian made no sound, only stretching those long, lean arms with a deep-throated sigh of relief. He was free. Yet, with stoicism of his race he waited motionless now, whilst his liberator was drawn up again on to the stone slabs above. Once more the reins were lowered and the man, though he must have been suffering agonies from cramp, grasped the stout leather thong, and was dragged up from that living tomb into the fresh, sweet air of the outer world.

Blood-stained, starving, suffering as he was, the Indian’s bearing was one of proud dignity. Bowing his head in pathetic stateliness he offered brief thanks.

“My Yengee brothers and sister save Grey Hawk from death. Grey Hawk the friend of brave Yengee comrades. One day repay.”

Kits held out her hand.

“Shake,” said she; “this daughter of Big Gun Chief of the Mist Mountain. Always friend to Indian man. No friend to Agent or police.”

He understood, and, though too proud to display relief, a faint smile dawned in those black eyes.

“The friends of the white girl, the friends of Grey Hawk and his people,” he said. “Grey Hawk return to village of Choctaws, away among mountains. When another moon is full then Grey Hawk goes destroy false Arkansas—treacherous snakes, enemies to Choctaws.”

They had reached the bank by this time and were climbing down to where in the forest below the horses of the white people were tethered. Nat could see how one of the animals was straining at the rein, whilst the others showed signs of restlessness. Was there a timber wolf lurking in the shadows?—or had the people from the farm struck their trail after all? Evidently Curly suspected something of the same kind, for he had halted,

laying his hand on Kits' arm as though to draw her back, whilst, at the same time, he raised his pistol.

Ah! From behind the bushes which grew thickly at the foot of the precipice of rock and soil, figures sprang up. Not those of the farmer and his people, but fierce-faced, blanketed Indians, with brandished weapons and cheeks daubed with war-paint. These were the men who, having waylaid the young chief of an enemy tribe, and doomed him to lingering death, had returned either to taunt their prisoner or see whether he was dead already.

Kits glanced to where, only a few seconds before, Grey Hawk had been standing on the river bank close to her. He had gone! Evidently the Indian's keen ears had heard that faint rustling before his companions, and he had chosen to take the risk of diving down into the torrent of rushing waters rather than suffer the certain fate of death at the hands of his foes.

The new-comers had not seen their victim's escape, though they sprang furiously upon the three white strangers, who, at sight of them, had drawn very close together. Kits stood back to back with Nat, whilst Curly, leaning against a tree, fired his revolver with deadly effect. One Indian fell head-foremost with a shriek of pain, but scores of his comrades pressed boldly forward, and, overwhelmed by numbers, the gallant trio fell. Even Kits fought to the last, using fists—and nails when her weapons were dragged from her. It seemed like some pandemonium of horror—this horde of leaping, shrieking, delirious redskins who became intoxicated by their own fury when they discovered the ledge under the waterfall untenanted.

Their enemy had escaped! Mirambo! The Arkansas warriors knew what that meant, and the "word" passed from mouth to mouth that the Yengees were "wizards" who had rescued Grey Hawk and would bring destruction upon Blue Eagle and his people unless they were first killed.

So "prisoner strings" were bound fast about the prostrate Yengees till they lay helpless; then the Indians, raising them in their arms, carried the prisoners to where some of their number waited beside the horses.

Kits managed to move her head as she lay across the neck of one of the sturdy little beasts, and stared towards the river. Had Grey Hawk perished in the torrent?—or had he escaped? If the latter there might be the shadow of hope of a rescue—though barely so much.

As for Jill—Rattler Bob would by now have reached the River Caves and would hold his hostage on his own terms—which terms, as poor Kits

knew, included—the death of her darling comrade and Dad—Silent  
Sylvester.

## CHAPTER IX

### AMONGST THE MOUNTAINS

For some days after her arrival in the mountain village of the Arkansas, Jill found herself taken little notice of. She was free to roam about the pastures, or amongst the native huts. The men-folk ignored her altogether, regarding her with the disdain an Indian ever shows to her sex; but the women were more friendly and the children soon had smiles for the bright-haired stranger who smiled back and even attempted to play with them. Once, Jill approached the entrance to the tunnel through which she had entered the valley, but two Indian sentries at once sprang forward with such threatening gestures that she was glad to escape without punishment.

Soon after her coming, the chief went on the war-path again with his warriors, and Jill, hiding in the darkness of the hut assigned to her, watched in horror the grim, fantastic "scalp" dance which was performed the night before they left around blazing fires. Alone, in that prisoner hut, the poor girl shivered in very natural terror as she watched, wondering whether messengers would be dispatched from the gruesome throng to seize and carry her to death.

If only some one had been here! That splendid boy Nat—or even Kits. Oh, if only she could have clung to a friendly hand, or shared her fears with a comrade! But, no! she was alone, and had to try to rally her courage to sticking-point.

Faster, faster whirled those dancing figures performing in rehearsal and dumb show what would be real deeds of blood on the morrow, whilst in and out, threading his way like an evil shadow, whirled Magana, the witch-doctor of the tribe, chanting, leaping, waving his sticks, and probably—could Jill have understood it all—prophesying.

Tired out at last, the girl stole to the back of the hut and slept.

Next morning the warriors had gone, but Magana, the witch-doctor, remained. Jill regretted that. She regarded the weird creature with undisguised fear, his lank grey hairs, his skeleton frame and burning eyes seemed to belong to some mountain-wolf rather than a man. The burning eyes too were fixed on Jill with no friendly gaze! For some reason or other Magana hated the Yengee girl and had done his best to persuade Blue Eagle

to destroy her. But the chief was firm. The Yengee girl might be “Manitou” to the tribe, and if so, must be safely guarded.

The superstition of the red man is his religion. To them their “Manitou” is a talisman bringing good fortune to its owner. Each Indian has his own “Manitou,” symbolized in a bird’s feather, a leaf, a flower, or a hundred other things. Tribes have their Manitous too, so have the animals and birds of the forest. The Indian believes in a presiding “spirit” or “Manitou” guarding the interests and welfare of every living creature.

So—Blue Eagle argued—this Yengee girl *might* be Manitou to the Arkansas in their hidden valley, and if so evil to the tribe would follow her death.

But Blue Eagle had gone on the war-path against another of the broken tribes which still haunt the wild recesses of those mountain ranges in spite of the vigilance of Agents and police. If their ancient glory had gone, though they no longer reigned as masters over forest and prairie, the Indians still preserved much of their war-like character when they succeeded in escaping from the reserves. Here, in the ringed valley with its one grim entrance, the Arkansas were free enough to live according to their ancient laws and customs, though it was very seldom that they returned to the lower slopes or prairies inhabited by the white men.

Jill could not understand a word of what the dusky-eyed women said to her, but it needed no interpretation when they came about her touching her fair skin, her golden hair, or holding up their quaint bundles of babies for her to kiss and admire.

It was through one of the brown-skinned piccaninnies that Jill found her first friend. She herself had been searching for flowers amongst the grass and rocks at the foot of a mountain slope, when she heard a cry and saw a woman running from the direction of the huts—or wigwams—towards what looked like a deep gap or cave entrance in a wall of rock which rose sheer close to the winding stream flowing along one side of the valley.

Perilously close to that gap toddled a little child, and Jill realized at once that the mother could not reach the baby girl before the latter arrived at the threatening point of danger. Springing from the rock she had just climbed, Jill flung away her nosegay and raced to where the child went staggering nearer the hole. Its curiosity must have been aroused by some sound, or else the little one was attracted by a scarlet-petalled flower growing near. Jill reached her just as she swayed on the brink of a hidden abyss and caught her

back. Jill herself only saw the chasm at her feet at the moment she seized the child, and the sight sent her reeling back half fainting with terror.

The baby screamed, then laughed as she clutched Jill's curls, whilst a few seconds later the mother arrived. It was pathetic to see her gratitude; hugging the child she kissed it again and again, crooning, scolding, sobbing, and laughing, then turned to Jill.

What Singing Bird said the English girl could not tell, but she knew those breathless words were those of thanks, and that Singing Bird's kisses bestowed on Jill's hands, frock, hair and lips were those of a grateful mother.

And sure enough from that moment Singing Bird was bound to the Yengee maid by the strongest of bonds.

If her Little Rabbit had perished, the light of Singing Bird's life would have gone out.

Then, seeing Jill could not understand mere words, the Indian woman took the girl's hand and led her towards that black hole in the rock. Jill went cautiously. She thought she had seen enough! Yet, standing at a safer distance, her curiosity was aroused by the strangeness of the sight she saw.

The cave or hollow in the rock ran back no more than a dozen feet, and instead of flooring a great black hole like the mouth of a monster well gaped wide. On the farther side, reached by a narrow ledge, could be seen a series of tiny footholds cut in the rocky soil leading down—down to where the booming of a subterranean river rushed along its mysterious course. Who could tell—whither! Perhaps into the very bowels of the earth!

And yet to Jill's astonishment she could see the prow of a canoe hanging from a ledge about twenty or thirty feet below—well above the water.

Singing Bird, the Indian woman, pointed down, shuddering, hugging her child as though she feared it might escape from her arms, then beckoned Jill away. Evidently the place was one of ill-omen. Jill had noticed how both women and children as a rule avoided that part of the valley; now, quite a large group of watchers greeted her and her companion. Jill was welcomed with smiles and caresses, curious gifts were pressed upon her, including sweetmeats and many beads. Jill could have laughed in sheer amusement. It was easy work, it seemed, to be a heroine to Indian women! Yet Jill was pleased at her popularity; it made her feel safer, though she asked herself hopelessly whether she would ever be allowed to escape. And, even as the question echoed in her heart she looked up and saw the cunning eyes of

Magana fixed on her. There was only *one* way in which the White Fawn of the Yengees would leave that valley if Magana had his way.

Yet—she must not show her fear. When Blue Eagle returned she would talk to him and tell him what good ransom her stepfather the Senator would pay for her. Yes, Blue Eagle would listen to that. Indians were not difficult to bribe. So Jill comforted herself, knowing nothing of “Manitous” or the wild superstitions upon which her fate hung, only seeing in her present safety and freedom the hope that one day she might return to her happy home.

Three nights later, Jill was awaked from sleep by the beating of tom-toms and the cries which greeted returning warriors. To Jill, suddenly awakened from heavy sleep, it seemed as if enemies had burst in upon the valley, bringing destruction and disaster. Wailing cries rose on the air, the clamour became a din. Jill thought of the wolves she had heard howling years ago when the Senator drove her through a winter’s forest on the return from a visit to friends. Yet these were human wolves, howling no less for blood!

Jill rose and raised the heavy brown bear’s pelt, which served as door. It was moonlight—and though the valley lay partly in shadow the white rays showed her the crowd of figures with others surging towards them. Some one was speaking. Was it Blue Eagle? She heard the ringing tones speaking; heard the howling answer; saw a small cluster of warriors moving back alone towards the hut she occupied. Prisoners! Prisoners! Perhaps wounded Indians of another tribe being brought to the prisoner hut?

Jill stood petrified, watching the advance of that small circle of figures. Then—they were here—and her guess was at least partly right, since three bound and helpless figures were brought to view and flung rather than laid on the floor of the hut.

Without a word the warriors departed. Jill had shrunk so far back that they must have forgotten her presence in the hut—nor did they wait to keep guard. They were in haste to join the conclave being formed yonder. The bear-skin hung looped between the door-posts and Jill was kneeling on the ground beside the prisoners, tears of pity—and welcome—raining down her face, for already she had recognized the girl Kits—who had appealed so tragically for her friendship, together with Nat the cowboy and Curly the rustler.

How was it that they too should have become the prisoners of the Arkansas! Had they been on the trail of Rattler Bob?

Jill still possessed a knife, and she took the very quickest way of getting her questions answered! Carefully she slit each of those thin but cruel strips of hide which cut into the flesh. Long sighs greeted her, followed by stifled moans of pain. The three latest prisoners were barely conscious. Jill stood over them pondering. There was neither food nor drink in the hut, but if she could reach that of Singing Bird she might count on a supply. The little Indian mother had already shown more than a wordy gratitude. Reluctantly leaving her friends to recover from the ill effects of their ride, Jill slipped away. Not only was the prisoner hut unguarded, but she had seen how every brave of the tribe had gathered about the fire to join the conclave.

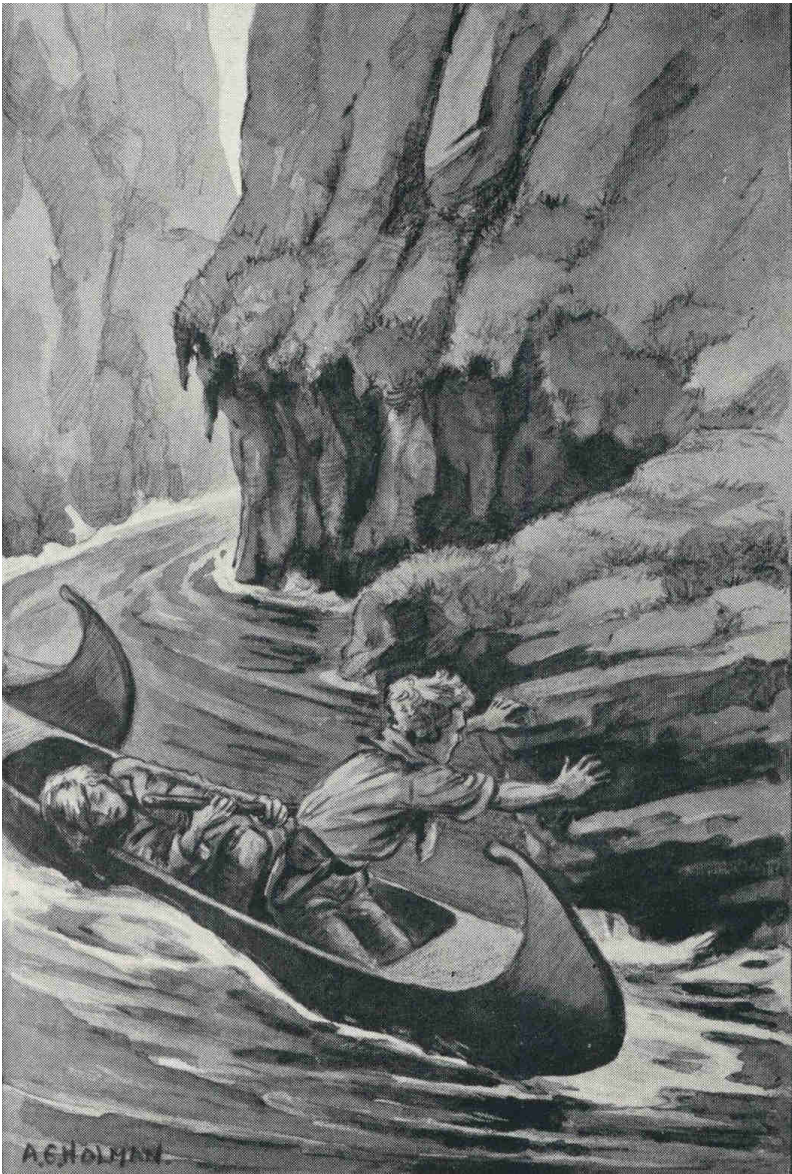
Perhaps it was a war council, since certainly Blue Eagle and his friends had not returned from an entire eating up of their enemies! No matter! The way was clear for *her*—and Jill, feeling the responsibility weighing on her with the coming of her friends, slid like a shaft of moonlight from one rock to another, one place of shadows to another.

She reached the tent and found the woman preparing supper for her man. Luckily the “man” was a Counsellor at the great pow-wow. Singing Bird heard of the arrival of the White Fawn’s friends at the prisoner hut and instantly loaded the petitioner with food and goat’s milk, together with a small quantity of strong native wine called *pombé*.

Jill laughed gleefully. How pleased her chums would be!—and now they were all together *nothing* would be so bad again. Her thoughts were running ahead to the time when, thanks to her pleading and Kits’ proving, Senator Always would be sending a free pardon to a man called Silent Sylvester, at present in a prison at Los. But she returned with a start to the present as, at the door of the prisoner hut, she saw several Arkansas warriors—grim, forbidding figures, two of whom moved silently forward to seize her. Others were already dragging forth Kits, Curly and Nat. She herself was being added to their number. Even before her chums could properly recognize or welcome her she was being hurried towards the conclave of warriors. Sentence was to be passed on them without delay. Was the reason for this decision because Blue Eagle and his warriors returned defeated from battle?

If so, this journey across the valley was likely to be the last they would ever take!





*It needed all Curly's alertness to grasp a jutting rock.*

## CHAPTER X

### MAGANA THE WITCH-DOCTOR

Magana was dancing.

Jill for one thought he had gone mad. Never in her life had she seen anything so weird, so fantastic, so demoniacal as the contortion of that leaping, swaying, twirling figure. The warriors who stood in a complete circle around the blazing fire showed neither curiosity nor anxiety concerning the witch-doctor's performances. Rigidly erect, with expressionless faces and staring eyes, they waited. They might have been men in a state of coma but for those eyes—which gazed into the depths of the fire.

Jill felt a hand clutch hers and turned to find Kits beside her. The marvel to Kits of finding Jill here in this mountain recess was so great that she almost forgot to speculate on their coming fate.

"*You!*" she whispered. "Gee! how did it happen? Where's the Rattler? Where are the boys? Have the redskins got the lot?"

Jill shook her head, looking from Kits to the lads beside her.

"The Rattler lost me in a ravine," she replied; "his horse ran away, I suppose,—and—and before any of them came back to find me the Indians came. The chief is Blue Eagle, he speaks English. I—I don't know what they are going to do. One Indian woman is my friend. What *is* happening?"

"Can't quite get it," said Kits, "though I know a bit of their palaver. Things have gone crooked with this bunch. I think they are throwing the blame on us. We saved the life of one of their enemies who they were killing by slow torture. I'm afraid, Jill, we've brought you bad luck. P'r'aps if you moved away,—but no!—it's that old beast of a witch-doctor. Steady!"

She clutched again at Jill's hand, whilst Curly, coming to the other side of the perplexed girl, took her arm. Magana seemed to be leaping actually through the flames, coming in a straight line towards the guarded captives.

Talk of taking the high jump! Never had any of those four spectators seen anything so surprising as the way that bundle of skin and feathers managed to hurl itself above the leaping flames. The next moment Magana was standing before them, pointing his hideous "stick" of office, with its

skull head, at first one then the other of the strangers. Kits and the boys knew what it meant—whilst Jill did not find it difficult to guess. They had been “smelt out”—discovered to be the enemies of the tribe, the cause of a failure in some war-like enterprise. Magana was triumphant. The Yengee girl would never be the Manitou of this tribe, she would die—and that was good.

Yes, that was what Magana wished. He had no desire to be rivalled at his art. Now, he was safe. The “spirit” had very plainly proven to the warriors that evil influences were at work, else the scalps of the Choctaws would now be adorning their lodges. It was necessary that these evil influences should be destroyed. Magana waved his wand above his head, then swung round to face the warriors. A shout went up, grim, monosyllabic, final.

It was sentence of death.

Kits and Curly knew that. Jill and Nat guessed it. But not one of them flinched. As Jill had said—nothing mattered so much now she was no longer alone. Yet—what lay before them? Would death be swift? Jill closed her eyes. She wanted to shut out the impression of nightmare. The moonlight and firelight contrasted so oddly. High above them towered the mountain crags, white with snow, cold and magical with their crown of moonbeams, so different to the hectic scene around the red firelight. Those painted faces with the nodding plumes surmounting lank black hair, the tattooed bodies, the bead necklaces and embroidered leggings, seemed to belong to beings of the underworld of whom the ruler was—not Blue Eagle the proud chieftain, but Magana the wizened, Magana the sorcerer, Magana the smeller-out.

Ah! Jill re-opened her eyes. Some one had seized her by the shoulder, and she knew Kits had been dragged away. At first she was afraid she was to be separated from her friends, but no!—one by one they were being led towards a large hut which stood alone—not far from the cave-hole down which the child of Singing Bird had so nearly fallen. Jill had often wondered concerning this hut. It had appeared to be quite empty, although it was the best and largest in the valley. Women were moving from the doorway as warriors and prisoners approached. They had been busy decorating the place with flowers, bringing baskets of cakes and fruit, pitchers of milk and pombé as though for a feast.

After all—Magana could not have been their enemy . . .

Kits knew better and her cheeks paled. This was a grim ordeal before them and—and—likely to be a last one!

At the door of the hut the warriors left them. They were free to enter this flower-decked shelter and feast as they wished. What did it mean? As the four stood alone at last within the hut Kits flung her arms round Jill and hugged her.

“You great little dear!” she cried, “but oh, Jill, Jill, it is *partly* our doing that it’s come to this! Can’t we save you? Even if we have to die! Nat, Curly, it’s up to us. Here’s Jill,—and she’s in this place with us.”

“Sure,” said Curly grimly, “but—what are we to do, Kits? We can’t fight a whole tribe—and these Arkansas seem fairly thick.”

“But I don’t understand,” protested Jill; “I’ve been here for *days* and no one has tried to hurt me. I’ve not even been bound. And we’re all free—and together; look at the flowers and cakes. I—I thought after all we were going to be allowed to go home.”

There was a little pitiful break in her tones as she held Kits’ two hands, looking towards the lads. Nat’s brow was wrinkled.

“They *don’t* seem to be treating us too bad,” he murmured. “What do you think, Curly? Is there something under it all that Jill and I don’t understand?”

Curly flushed, looking appealingly at Kits. He wouldn’t have minded telling *Nat*,—but Jill—but Jill——

Kits held her chin high, her hands clenched.

“I b’lieve they were keeping you here as a sort of mascot, Jill,” said she. “Blue Eagle wanted it that way, but it was no use; they didn’t grab the enemy they wanted to, and it was we who spoiled their game. Magana used that against you at once. He wanted you killed. Witch-doctors don’t like mascots of your kind. And he’s got his way. We are goin’ to be killed. The warriors have spoken what they call the ‘word.’ This hut is a sort of Indian condemned cell. Dad’s often told me about it. We’ve been up against Indians before,—friends with some of them too. The redskins make a show of finishing their enemies. For twenty-four hours they stay here or are free to go about the village as they like. They’re the honoured guests, feasted, favoured, kept amused, just as they wish. But—at—at the end of the twenty-four hours they’ve got to go through it. They’re killed—Indian fashion. It’s not nice. Reckon it’s too long a business to be pleasant. You’ve got to hold on to the fact you’re *white* and don’t mean to funk, then you pray hard to die quick.”

Jill went very pale. So this was the explanation. She understood now. And away over the mountains a white dawn was breaking.

Curly and Nat stood in the entrance of the hut. They felt—bad, and to give them credit they were not thinking of their own trouble. If only they could have saved the girls! But the Indians had taken their weapons—they were helpless.

Inside the hut the girls were rising from their knees. They were quite quiet, very grave, but resolute. They guessed it was worse for the boys.

“Listen to those brutes,” groaned Curly. “If only I had a brace of revolvers—I—I’d run amuck through that crowd. I——”

“I’ve got my revolver and knife,” said Jill suddenly—and the boys turned.

This was—news. They knew what it meant too. If they had the right pluck there would be no need for the girls to be tortured.

“You’ll have to hide them up,” said Curly huskily, “and trust to the Indians not guessing. The next thing, girls, is to feed. Look here, there are twenty-four hours . . . Tw—en—ty-four hours. A whole heap might happen in that time. Cheerio! Kits, your grin’s worth a whole bottle of brandy. You’re both sports, you two. And I’ve heard of tighter corners.”

“We couldn’t escape back through that tunnel, I suppose?” said Kits. “If you took Jill’s pistol, Curly, could we rush it?”

The young rustler shook his head.

“Too big a risk,” he replied, “and if we failed they’d have the pistol. That’s our biggest salvation—I mean it saves—torture. We’ve got to face that, girls. Don’t worry any. Nat—or I—will see you out—by a quick road.”

Kits held out her hand.

“Thank you—chum,” she said,—and only Curly saw the tears in her bright eyes.

Jill had moved to the door, where Nat lingered. The noise of *musical* (?) instruments was deafening by this time. The whole of the population of the valley had turned out to enjoy the gala day, and show honour to the victims of to-morrow. Girls, bearing garlands of flowers, approached the prisoner hut; dancing youths paraded the meadows, blowing horns and shouting in glee. Plainly, they wished the prisoners to join the fun, and Nat looked back towards Curly.

“What’s the best line?” he asked. “Would it be all right to leave the girls here and join the show? What’s best for—them?”

Curly looked grim. He was feeling more like twisting those treacherous redskins’ necks for them. The idea of dancing and feasting turned him sick! But he knew better than Nat that they had got to go through the whole programme. He nodded now.

“We’ll join the ‘fair,’ ” he said; “it may help us to get a scheme going. Hullo, Kits! Not you?”

Kits’ mouth was tight, but her eyes were brave.

“Yes,—all of us,” she said. “Dad’s told me what to expect. It will be better to go *now* before they get mad with pombé-drinking. Then, we’ll come back here. There—there’s the chance they might all get drunk—and leave the tunnel unguarded. Come, Jill.”

And Jill came. It was an ordeal she would have been thankful to escape, but she would not fail her comrades. She was English—and must prove the proud boast of the title. Yet during the wild hours which followed she would have fled despairing to any shelter had it not been for Curly, who kept her sheltered from all insult. The sickly perfume of the flowers heaped upon her was stifling, but she laughed back at the throwers and then shrank away into some corner with her protector. Once, she saw Singing Bird come to the door of her hut and hold Little Rabbit high in her arms. Somehow the action and the quick retreat of the woman into her dwelling gave Jill a thrill of hope. She whispered her tale to Curly, but the latter was too hopeless to dare to speak of a “chance.”

“I’m afraid a dozen Singing Birds couldn’t fly away with us, Jill,” he said sadly. “I thought at first we might have made a dash for it through the tunnel, but—cast your eye over there, Kid, and tell me what you see?”

Jill looked. At the tunnel entrance of the valley squatted half a dozen Arkansas warriors who were taking no part in that wild revel.

The tribe knew how to guard its village against foes within and without!

“No road,” said Curly gently.

Jill straightened herself.

“Thank Heaven for—my revolver,” she replied. “Come—chum—let’s go back to the hut. I believe I’m rather—tired.”

## CHAPTER XI

### THE PLACE OF VOICES

Jill had been dreaming of Aunt Kezia. They had been arguing—over some silly trifle—and Jill was repeating again and again that she did not care, when an insistent whisper reached her ear.

“Jill! Jill!—my dear. It’s time. Curly—says—the dawn will soon be breaking, though it’s black enough now. Only—he won’t trust the redskins enough to leave it—later.”

“Leave *what* later?” asked Jill drowsily,—and then all at once she understood.

The twenty-four hours were drawing to a close—and if they left it till Magana and the Indians came it would mean torture.

Side by side the girls knelt on the floor of the hut. At the end of ten minutes Curly’s voice reached them from the other side of the prison.

“Ready, Kids. I—well, I thought some one—was coming. It might be that old snake.”

Kits stood up.

“You can switch on the torch, Nat,” she said. “Curly will want it. Stay a bit! We—yes,—we’d like to shake hands first.”

Silence. Neither Curly nor Nat had replied, but from the doorway of the hut a whisper had reached the four within.

Jill had nerved herself a moment before, but now she began to tremble. Though she did not know what those softly spoken words meant she believed she recognized the voice of Singing Bird the Indian woman.

Nat had heard it too, and the ribbon-like flare from the electric torch swept the interior of the hut. Fading flowers, pitchers and piles of broken food were seen in that swift flash. Kits and Jill, standing against the opposite wall, were figures which neither Curly nor Nat would ever forget,—brave, resolute figures, with lips that smiled and dauntless eyes, even though the girls’ cheeks were colourless. But this time the flash of light passed them by and concentrated on the kneeling figure of the Indian woman, who had flung back the feather mantle she had drawn up over her head.

It was Singing Bird, and Jill, with unerring instinct, ran forward to kneel beside her.

“It is—the woman whose child I saved,” she whispered breathlessly.

Kits and Curly moved forward even before Nat.

Singing Bird’s arms had embraced Jill, but, as Kits addressed her in her own tongue, she turned eagerly to her. Soon the two were whispering—with Curly, his hands on his knees, stooping to join in. Nat and Jill were in the background, understanding nothing.

Presently—to Jill’s distress—Singing Bird crept away, leaving them in darkness.

But Kits was clasping Jill’s arm.

“It’s a chance,” she breathed. “We’ve not got to die *yet*, Jill. Guess we may not have to die at all! You—you’re our *Manitou*! Singing Bird has told us all about it. Magana is at the bottom of the trouble. Blue Eagle isn’t half sure even now that you’re not *Manitou*. He’d like to kill us and spare you, only Magana won’t have it! But Singing Bird’s husband has heard about your saving the kiddie—and—and we’ve got the *chance*. It’s only a chance, but we’ll take it, Jill. There’s a place—the woman called it the Place of Voices—but it must be the same you told us about—with the subterranean river. That river comes out—miles and miles away—into a cave in the mountain side. Only once since the Arkansas came here has it ever been used, and that was when enemies were fighting their way into the valley. Then—some of the Arkansas warriors went down the river and reached the rear of their foes as they fought in the tunnel. The foe, believing a whole army of warriors was attacking them, fled,—and the valley was saved, but the men who used the subterranean river gave such an awful description of its horrors that no one has ventured down it since,—only two canoes are there—in readiness—should the tribe be in danger. Singing Bird has gone to fetch some of those native cloaks for us to wear,—and—we must do the rest ourselves. Only her husband will see that we can reach the Place of Voices without being caught.”

“St!” muttered Curly, raising the bear-pelt. “Here’s Singing Bird back again. No more talking. Ready!”

To Jill it seemed as if she were hardly given time to take breath after listening to this amazing tale before she found herself being wrapped in a turkey-feather cloak by Curly himself.



Singing Bird had already drawn back into the shadow. If her part in this night's doings were discovered she and Little Rabbit as well as her man Calf Shirt would die. But there was little fear of this. When the prisoner hut was discovered to be empty Blue Eagle and his warriors would believe Magana had misled them and that their Manitou—offended past forgiveness—had left them to destruction.

Jill, seeing the slim little figure, paused, and the Indian woman and English girl embraced silently. Then, Jill moved forward. It was not yet dawn, the night was dark, but not so intensely so that Jill could not lead the way, guided by the river. The whole valley lay silent. Not a dog howled, not a child cried. So intense was the stillness as to suggest the coming of storm. It was bitterly cold too. A night of frost.

And the dawn would break red in the east. The dawn which was to have been so fatal to those four fugitives who even now hurried to a perilous undertaking.

This Place of Voices might indeed be their tomb.

Once launched on the tide of a subterranean river and how were they to know that there were not two streams branching the one out on to the mountain side—the other into some hidden place in the centre of the earth?

“It is here,” whispered Jill. “Look! Look!—here at our feet—just inside and under the rock. We shall have to have the light, Nat. There’s a ledge—ever so narrow, and footholds down to another ledge to which the canoes are moored. See?”

Her companions saw, aye! saw more than that narrow ledge,—*more* than the tiny footholds,—for over the mountains crept the first faint flush of dawn and a long roll of tom-toms told them the Arkansas were bidden to awake to witness the terrific sight of tortured prisoners doomed this day to death.

But there was still time, and indeed, had it not been for the growing light and clashing music, the fugitives might have hesitated in taking what looked like being another road to death.

Nat led the way, in such haste that he nearly slipped, but the girls guessed the reason for the boy’s bravado and blessed him for his thought of them. Kits followed—not minded to be *too* near the tail of that queue! and Jill’s pulses raced in a kind of desperate resolve that she would show herself as well plucked as this daughter of the wilds. But—it was a perilous climbing—and Jill, clenching her hands, breathed what seemed to her a last

prayer. She *must* fall—there was no room—no place—no hold at all! Yet she was still climbing—and Curly was following too!

Only just in time. As the young man's head disappeared into the Place of Voices an imposing force of warriors wheeled and whirled in stately dance as they approached the prisoner hut.

Five seconds more—and Magana would be screaming the news that the prisoners had vanished.

Curly had stooped to whisper to Jill as the four stood, huddled like wind-blown sea-gulls, against the rock. Below them rushed the river black and mysterious as the Styx; perhaps, like that fateful stream, leading to some vast underworld.

“Knife, Kid!” muttered Curly, “knife!”

She had already given him the revolver—which should have been used to grim purpose ere now, and Jill thought of that as she pushed the knife into his hand.

Curly turned at once, slashing the thongs which held the canoes. He knew even better than Nat that the trouble was going to be in the launching of those frail craft. How was it to be managed?

Kits solved that difficulty. Without a word she dropped to her knees, then lowered herself over the ledge.

“Now,” she called, looking up.

Curly muttered a “Brava!” These girls would stand foremost in the ranks of any set of men he could mention for sheer pluck!

And Kits had found the way. As the cockle-shell canoe floated stormily on the stream Kits dropped into it, seizing the paddle. The launching of the second craft would be easy. Nat first this time! then Jill. Finally came Curly. The latter stood alone on the ledge above, listening.

Some row those Indians were making! Sure!

Were they coming this way? Well, if so, they could watch the inky flood tumbling on its way, and he reckoned no one would be looking too closely after canoes.

Ah! Curly slid down into the rocking cockle-shell just in the nick of time, for—somehow the first canoe, with Kits and Nat in it, had been swept away down that black passage through the mountain, and a second later that with Jill would have followed.

How it happened Jill did not know. Kits had been leaning towards them to cry a warning even as the current caught and whirled their canoe away. Jill sat very still. She had no idea whither they were going—she did not even know whether Curly had any skill in managing a boat. It was not just the moment to ask questions, only to remember—that they were at least escaping from savages who wanted to kill them.

Curly clutched his paddle but did not attempt to dip it into the water; had he done so it would have been swept from his grasp, but it was useful to stretch out first on one side then the other, and so gauge the width of this underground passage.

On—on—on—they were hurried—not a gleam of light to show them where they were, whilst the rushing of the river deadened the sound of their voices at first. It seemed quite hot down here,—*stifling*—and,—was something *alive* moving in the water near? This last impression became so vivid that Jill could not repress a scream—but the next instant she sat dazed by the effect of her cry. Over and over again came the echo of her voice, rising crescendo-fashion, then repeated in fainter waves of sound as though a mighty megaphone had been used.

Curly himself nearly capsized the canoe in his first panic, then, as the cry faded in the distance, he spoke.

“So that’s why—they called it the Place of Voices,” he said. “Guess the redskins took the echo for ghosts.”

“Took—the—echo—for—ghosts,” thundered overhead. Then—from the blackness behind them—roared another questioner.

“That you, Jill and Curly? All safe?”

“All safe!” shouted the giant of the cavern.

Then Kits laughed, and shuddered like the rest at the eerie mockery she herself had wakened. This was the Place of Voices with a vengeance! but—it was some comfort in such darkness to know that they could locate each other.

“What’s—that?” came Curly’s question, swelling into endless repetitions which suddenly checked, cut off as it were by another sound, more titanic than their own cries.

Kits herself answered, warning the two ahead.

“Waterfall—underground. For Heaven’s sake, Nat,—show—a light.”

It was all Nat could do to hear. They did not realize the racing speed at which they were travelling, and thus it seemed as if that awful thundering had burst suddenly upon them out of silence.

At Kits' order Nat gripped his paddle between his knees and raised his electric torch. The light showed the rocky formation of the roof of this river passage, it showed the black waters of the river—it showed the white faces peering towards him from behind; but it was Jill who, crouching forward, realized what the thunder meant, and saw the crisis which would soon be upon them. For it was here the subterranean river branched, one stream flinging itself down a precipice into some dim underworld—the other no doubt hurrying out to the mountain side.

Jill screamed her warning, but it was not heard. Nat, dazzled by the light, had not yet seen,—and it was the girl who must act, since—a few seconds more and it would be too late.

Snatching the paddle from between her companion's knees, she contrived to thrust the canoe against the wall of the passage,—and, as she did so, Nat had seen the danger! Not only to them, either, but to those behind. In such an uproar they could not have made Curly or Jill hear a warning, but already the second canoe was passing them, swinging out towards the fatal second current.

At risk of upsetting their own craft, Nat stretched forward and gripped the side of that second canoe. Then—they were fighting—both of them—all of them—to get back into the current of the first stream which should carry them out once more—into the blessed light of the day.

## CHAPTER XII

### CURLY CONFIDES

As Kits afterwards described it, it seemed almost as if myriad hands grasped and clawed at those fragile craft to drag them towards the subterranean abyss. The roar of the fall transcended any storm they had ever listened to. Shut in, as it were, beneath the mountain, sounds were compressed,—beating back and down on their own echoes!

Jill fought stubbornly with her comrades, but when it was over, when the first stream caught them back, rushing them past the dividing wall of rock, and past that awful threat of death, she fell forward senseless. Curly knew she was lying there huddled at his feet, but he could not help her. He had his work cut out, using the paddle first for one purpose, then another, till—miracle of miracles! grey light broke through abysmal blackness and the stream, fulfilling its purpose, swept the canoe out into such a cave as caused the boy to gasp in amaze.

For the morning sunshine was at that moment pouring in through the opening, shining on the clustering stalactites which hung from the roof. Glittering fairy-like lamps they seemed, ablaze with dazzling colours, so that Kits, arriving with Nat a few seconds later, clapped her hands in enthusiastic admiration.

“Lovely! How lovely!” she cried. “Jill, look at those curly ones, aren’t they—why, Jill—where’s Jill?”

“She’s fainted, sure,” said Curly huskily, “but—she’ll soon come round. You first,—Nat, steady! there’s rocks ahead,—this is a sorta private entrance, I should say,—though there’s no boat would fight its way against *that* current.”

Curly was right—and it needed all Curly’s alertness to grasp a jutting rock outside the cave, drawing the canoe to one side of the stream which descended precipitously into a ravine below.

It was a wild spot, and it occurred to the young rustler that their plight was scarcely a happy one. Even if they had escaped from the eyrie of one enemy they might fall foul of a dozen others.

But wild adventure breeds a trustful spirit! It didn’t do any good to look far ahead. And the present business was to bring Jill to her senses.

Wild and rocky as the mountain slope showed itself, there were patches of grass and moss. Very gently Jill was lifted from the canoe and carried to the spot where the sun shone warmest.

“I’ve got maize cakes by the dozen in my pockets,” sighed Kits, “but not a drop of pombé. I reckon Jill’s had enough water to last her a considerable time!”

“Guess when old man Stayles was near drowned last fall,” said Curly, “we held him up by the heels. That brought him round fine! We might try it, anyway.”

But fortunately for Jill she was spared the cure which had proved so useful for old man Stayles, since at this moment she opened her eyes.

Kits had her arm under her head, and they were Kits’ bright eyes which Jill saw first as she looked up.

How the wonder grew in Jill’s eyes!

“The Place of—Voices,” she whispered. “Was it a dream? Where are we? What happened?”

“Why, the Place of Voices was the finest sort of place in creation,” retorted Kits, with rather an uncertain laugh, “and here we are, outside prison, ready to set off back to Los. You—you’ve only got to go on being *Manitou*, Jill, and we’ll be at the end of adventure, just telling it all to—those we love best in the world. Now,—you’ll have to eat a maize cake or two—before we start. It’s some way back o’ beyond that those redskins brought us.”

Jill sat up. She felt queer and “joggly,” as if the world of crags and boulders were making fun of her by trying a crazy dance; but things steadied down after a bit, and she had a ready smile for Curly and Nat, who returned with a supply of berries they had found growing in a cranny.

“I don’t want to hustle you girls,” said Curly, when he saw the colour had returned to Jill’s cheeks, “but we ought to get a move on. It may occur to Magana that we must have used the Place of Voices, and, if so, some of the tribe may take a fancy stroll around. Shall we start?”

Kits, standing arms akimbo, nodded.

“Which way, boss?” she asked; “there’s a puzzler for you! It’s all roads and no roads,—I s’pose we’ll get climbing till we reach some place we can locate?”

Curly nodded.

“That’s so,” he agreed. “There’s a dandy path to the right. We’ll take it for luck. Two and two. Come on, Jill,—Kits, you’ll show Nat your near relationship to a mountain goat.”

It was good to be able to chaff, even though a grim shadow hung over them.

“Talk of goats,” said Nat,—who hardly liked Curly’s hint that he was to be put in charge of Kits!—“who says milk? We shall be giants refreshed after that, so it’s worth waiting for. How’s this for a jug!”

How the girls laughed at him, as he pointed eagerly to a goat and her kids on a ledge above. As to jug—well, that leather bag would certainly hold all the milk *Nat* was likely to get! They watched him start his climb—Curly impatient, the girls amused. A drink of goat’s milk would be all right, and to begin with, Nat was showing some prowess at his task. He had reached the goat, which stood chewing grass, whilst its kids gambolled a little in advance, but—hardly had Nat laid a finger on her than Madam Nanny acted with promptitude and resolution. Head over heels went Nat in a complete somersault, and Jill, checking her laughter, was the first to run forward and ask if he were really hurt.

“Hurt!” grunted Nat, who was the only one not to see the funny side in the affair; “do you think having a goat’s hoof half down your throat’s partic’lar fun? Gee! I’m not taking on any more milkin’ jobs again. Now, Curly, shut laughing. I tell you I’m sore.”

“So’m I,” agreed Curly, wiping his eyes, “’specially about the ribs. Never mind, Nat! Everything’s a matter of ripe experience. You’ll be able to write some yarn before you get back to the British Isles. Now—business, Kids. Come along, Jill. I bet that goat’s milk has done you a whole heap of good. We’ll be singing nigger tunes before long if we get so gay.”

Jill smiled. It was so much easier to face dangers and perils this way, and as the four adventurers climbed down the winding path amongst the crags that black nightmare of captivity soon slipped from their young shoulders. No sign of pursuit, no sound of it either. The sun shone, melting the ice and bringing fleeting warmth to the atmosphere.

If you want to know the most absorbing question which filled those busy brains, it was that of supper.

Kits still had maize cakes in her pockets, and chaffed back readily enough in reply to jokes at expense of her foresight.

“Hadn’t we been *told* to feast?” she queried; “and so, whilst Singing Bird went for those cloaks, I was loading this vessel with supplies. We wouldn’t be talking of looking out for an innocent bear for the sake of his steaks if you three had thought of pockets instead of your *skins!*”

“You’re a great little Kits, anyway,” said Curly affectionately, “and ought to have double rations for your common sense. So—supper’s provided, and I’ll sure guarantee breakfast. Not bear-steak, since the same’s too tough for Nat’s tender digestion, but a mountain-trout or two, grilled *à la Rocky*. Sounds somehow good.”

“One or *two!*” retorted Nat. “Much use they would be! If you got talking of salmon that way it might be sensible! but *trout*, why, half a dozen might do me as a snack.”

Curly grinned, whilst Kits, who had been exploring a corkscrew path between gigantic boulders, returned to say that she had discovered a cave.

“We’d better bivouac, then,” decided Curly, after taking a long survey. Though they chattered and laughed in the best way, not one of them could quite smother out of sight the fear of pursuit. The Arkansas had a double reason for wishing to recapture their prisoners, since, besides being “bringers of evil” as Magana had declared, three of them had certainly freed the chief of an enemy tribe, and might be guiding the latter to the hidden valley. But, though four pairs of questing eyes studied the wild panorama of mountain slope, deep ravine, and towering crag, no sign of human being could be seen.

“Not so much as a feather,” said Curly, with satisfaction. “Say, Nat, do you see that old grizzly over there, way up to the left? I’m glad he’s not on our trail. Mighty tough customer, I should guess. You’d need a new set of teeth after chewing his steaks.”

Nat chuckled, but, distant though the grizzly was, the sight of him warned the four that there were other dangers besides Indians to be met in these wilds.

The cave found by Kits was a shallow affair, and a thorough search could be made before daylight failed in case a rattler or two might have chosen the shelter for headquarters.

Tired out, after the thrilling experiences of the day, the fugitives slept soundly, though the boys took turns to play sentry. Curly chose second watch; he meant to be off fishing as soon as daylight appeared. And, with the first streak of dawn, he had quitted the cave. It was a wonderful



dawning, and Curly, though not easily impressed that way, felt his pulses quicken, as he looked out upon the marvellous sight before him. The ravines were still black with shadows—places of threat and mystery,—the lurking-places of wolves and bears as well as wandering red men. But up—up—nearer the skies than the earth, it seemed, the white slopes of the mountain peaks showed pink and primrose with the first kiss of the sunlight.

Curly drew a deep breath as he raised his hat. Maybe he was thinking—of the time before he joined Silent Sylvester’s band, and was wondering—aye! wondering in a passionate longing whether there were any way back. He started to feel a touch on his sleeve and swung about amazed, possibly irritated to find Jill beside him.

“What’s up, Kid?” he asked. “It’s early yet. I—well, I guess those fish ain’t ready to be caught yet awhile.”

“I saw you come out,” said Jill, “and I wanted to come too. Oh, Curly, isn’t it different from yesterday morning?—and—it’s just wonderful.”

He did not reply, but stood, fumbling with his hat, a shy awkwardness taking him.

Jill, however, was not noticing. She was watching the dawn-light amongst those grey crags.

“Curly,” she went on dreamily, “it’s easy to thank God out here, isn’t it? It *was* God brought us safe through the Place of Voices, and it would be real mean if we called it ‘luck’ or just ourselves. I’m thanking Him now, aren’t you?”

“I guess I will,” said Curly huskily, “though—well, Jill,—you—you see,—the boys of Silent Sylvester’s bunch ain’t exactly got religion. It wouldn’t work alongside of the rustler game.”

She looked up suddenly into the handsome face of this lad who might have been a mother’s darling easier than a hardened rogue.

“Curly,” she asked softly, “what was it made you a rustler? I—I asked Kits, but she couldn’t tell me. She said you hadn’t belonged to the band long. She doesn’t even know what made her father an outlaw, though she is sure it was—well, some one else’s fault. Was that the same with you, Curly?”

Curly half turned away his head.

“No, Jill,” he replied; “guess it was *no* one’s fault but my own. I’ve never told Kits the story. She—she’s the best chum in the world, but she’s

one of the bunch and wouldn't understand. But—say! it was this way. Dad died when I was a nipper, and my stepbrother had the farm—way in the Butte Country. A dandy farm it was—and a dandy home, with the best mother in creation. I had a chance too. My uncle wanted me in New York—to fix me in his business, but I hated the idea of a town. I was wild on adventures, and I'd seen some of the movie shows, featuring life in the wilds. So—so when Jake—my stepbrother—told me it was New York or nothing, since he wouldn't have me hanging around, I just quit. I was mad angry and didn't care for anything, not even my mother's tears. I went right out and came to these parts. Then—I was on board the locomotive which Silent Sylvester was holding up, and I joined the band right there. I rode out with him to the River Caves—and I've never heard since from home—and I never shall. It's near two years now—and there's no way back, there never *will* be in twenty years! So—that's the story, Kid, not a very flash one either. My mother's an English woman, settled out in America, and that's what drew me to liking you. She's got just the same sort of goldie hair with a curl in it, though—though I guess it's some grey now."

The tears were running down Jill's cheeks. She knew what those queer little breaks and defiant emphasis in Curly's voice meant. She guessed there was a big ache in this rustler-lad's heart for home and all it stood for.

And the mother—oh! the mother. Jill had lost her own mother, but I believe that made the thought of mother-love all the more sacred. She felt she could have given whole worlds to send Curly back to his mother—whom she could just picture waiting—always waiting for the latch of that dandy farm-home door to be raised, and her boy to walk in.

A shout from Nat—who had come out to see how the breakfast-providers were getting on, roused the two who had been adding a link to their strangely formed friendship, and Curly, half ashamed of having drifted so easily into sentiment and memories, hastened to scramble down to the stream which raced so busily over the stones.

Jill sat perched on a rock above, dimples flashing in her cheeks as she watched the rival fishermen. Both lads were resolved to be the heroes of the breakfast-table, and Nat, with a wonderful rigged rod and line, stood under a sheltering rock, watching for a bite, whilst Curly, disdainful of so ancient a method of fishing, squatted mid-stream—his long arms deep in the water, whilst he watched his chance to play the old poaching trick of tickling trout.

Who would catch the first prize?

Flick! With a too impatient jerk Nat had flung up his line before the fish he had hoped for had thoroughly inspected that bait of maize cake. But—hullo!—what was happening? Why had Jill suddenly sprung from her rock and screamed to him to drop his rod? Sure! he had caught a whale up—there on the rock above—or—— Nat gave a vigorous jerk, and the next moment, uttering a yell of terror, dropped his rod and plunged wildly down into the deep pool below him.

## CHAPTER XIII

### SEEN IN THE MISTS

Jill's scream was already turning to a merry giggle. From her perch above she had seen the striped form of a mountain-cat come out from its nest in a deep cranny. The animal had been attracted by the unusual sound of human voices and stood watching till the line zigzagging through the air rested with its bait of cake on the ledge of rock. At the same moment Dame Puss pounced, seized the morsel, felt the sharp prick of Nat's cunning hook, and fell rather than sprang on to the bent shoulders of the fisherman below. Nat, startled by the stabbing of the animal's talons, did the only thing which would have saved him from a mauling, and dropped into deep water. This was shock two for Puss, who let go of her victim, and went struggling back towards the bank. As Nat again rose to the surface his face was a study of comical alarm and indignation which convulsed Curly, who arrived on the bank just as Puss came up it. From the ledge above came the plaintive mewings of kittens, and the cat, with wet fur and arched back, paused, divided by the wish to attack the enemy either in or out of the water and her natural instinct to return to her young.

The mother triumphed, and, as Curly prepared to do battle with a piece of stone he had picked up, Dame Puss turned and fled, miauling furiously up the wall of rock.

"Some fish, that, Nat," chaffed Curly, "though she seemed likelier to breakfast off you than t' other way about! Look at Jill laughing, and here comes Kits, wondering what we're all up to."

Kits stood eyeing her companions in mocking scorn.

"Where's the trout?" she cried. "Where's the salmon? Say! I've got that fire lighted and a big appetite ready, and here you are havin' a morning bath with your clothes on—least, Nat is."

Nat came to land grinning and grumbling.

"If you stay there much longer the tiger'll be combing your back hair," he told Curly. "She's got talons on her too. I've a mind to go cat-hunting. What would she eat like—roast on Kits' fire?"

But Curly had already returned to his fishing.

“Shooting’s not on,” he called decidedly, “too many prowlers of the wrong sort for that. Kits, you chum, I believe you’ll beat us at our own game.”

Kits chuckled. Whilst the others had been talking she had waded across the shallower part of the stream and was crouched as Curly had been. Just as Jill came running to the bank she was raising a speckled fish of about a pound weight to view.

“Here, Curly, take it,” she called. “You kill it and Jill and I will start cooking. After all, we shan’t go hungry. I guess this river’s alive with fish.”

Jill took care to keep clear of the “cat rock.” She was quite pleased when Kits joined her. Not that Jill would have minded the wetting, but she was absolutely sure she would never have caught a fish!

Kits was a practical cook and slit up and cleaned that trout without making the least trouble. Jill had never tried her hand on anything but bread and cakes, so made excuse to go fruit-gathering, whilst the other girl cooked.

“Don’t go far,” cautioned Kits, “there may be rustlers around, and you, —well! I guess you’re still a tenderfoot, Jill. And it shan’t be long before the fish is ready.”

Jill wandered off up a mountain-path, looking carefully to right and left. She had a horror of snakes, and she had a shrewd idea Kits had been thinking of other dangers too when she gave the warning.

And—I am afraid Jill was thinking over Curly’s tale of a foolish flight from home rather than fruit-finding, as she walked to the edge of a ravine, looking down in wonder at the contrast of thickly growing shrubs and bright-hued flowers to the grey world of boulders and snowy peaks above.

A tree covered in dark blue berries attracted her; the fruit looked something like a wild damson, and Jill had set her mind on gathering a hatful, when she heard Curly calling her name. He wasn’t shouting this time, and the insistent command in the low call suggested that he was afraid of being overheard.



*The bear . . . began again to advance.*

It seemed such a pity to leave such a tempting chance of bringing the most welcome addition to the breakfast-table, but Curly kept on calling and Jill hurried back. Her three companions were beckoning eagerly, and Nat came forward to draw her into the cave.

“Curly saw Indians up there to the left,” he whispered; “they haven’t struck our trail, but they’ll do it if we aren’t cautious as snakes. We’ll have to stay here till the coast’s clear—and then strike that path to the right. That’s it, eh, boss?”

Curly nodded. He was helping Kits beat out the fire of sticks without allowing any smoke to drift beyond the cave. Three trout were already cooked—after a fashion.

“Very much *à la Rocky*,” observed Kits, “but anything will taste good this morning. No, Curly, you and Nat are to have one each, and Jill and I will split the smaller one. We’d better not start talking.”

Kits had always been one to be obeyed, and the four gathered as commanded round the ashes of the fire. It was a cold morning, but perhaps Jill was the only one who was keenly aware of the chill atmosphere. The others were “tough” where weather was concerned.

And how good those blackened and smoky trout did taste! *hot* too, and quite a fine flavour, with hunger sauce added to the meal. Jill told the story of her wild damsons, but the general vote was that to stop and gather them would be too dangerous.

“Indians are too cute at tracking to be easily given the slip,” said Curly; “we’ve not got to take a chance with them. You come with me, Jill; Nat and Kits will follow. We’ll stick as close as we can, but it may not always be possible for the four of us to take the same road. Ready? Then wait here till I look round.”

He did not wait for an answer, but slipped out on to the path, crawling up a precipitous path, almost on his stomach. Silent Sylvester’s boys had learned scouting in a tough school, and Nat from the shelter of the cave watched his chum in growing admiration. He could not have competed with that!

In less than five minutes Curly came dropping back on to the path, his lips close set.

“There are Indians where we thought we saw them,” he said briefly, “but they’re not showing up. They have the best of it with those mists still hanging around up there. They *may* be stalking us, but even then we may escape. Look, chums, there are layers of mists below too. Cur’ous how the mists do lie. Bet we must use them for all we are worth. If we can reach those slopes where the paths are hidden, Mister Blue Eagle and his braves

will have to strike a new trail unless Magana is cleverer at smelling out than I take him to be.”

Curly was right. Now was their chance, which already had been delayed too late. He and Jill were not long in reaching the winding path zigzagging to the right of the river. They did not speak. The girls were too wise to ask questions. Neither question nor answer would carry them beyond reach of Indian trackers! They must trust to their legs—and brains.

The paths were legion, but Curly had had experience in mountain-climbing and his bump of locality was good. He and Jill led. For once Kits had to be content with following! Not that Kits intended to keep in the background. Her sharp eyes and nimble wits soon gave her the crow over Leader Curly.

“Over these rocks, Nat,” she whispered, “and I guess we’ll be walking back to meet them over that slope.”

“You’ll never climb down there,” urged Nat. “Gee, Kits! you’re more monkey than kid-girl any day. You’ve got me beat.”

Kits kicked her way out from a mass of brambles and shook her curls from laughing eyes, as she looked up at her boy-chum.

“Slide,” she urged. “Quick! or they’ll be ahead of us.” So Nat slid—and came up panting with the girl, who was already half across the rocky plateau. From another path two figures, dimly seen in the mists, were emerging. Kits gave a shout—for Curly, believing she and Nat were far behind, had raised that one and only revolver of Jill’s. He lowered it with a cry of dismay.

“You, Kits!” he called. “Why, where did you spring from? We were going to wait for you to catch us up.”

Kits laughed. She loved stealing a march on Curly, whom she had always made a point of teasing since he joined the band.

“Here we are, anyway,” she replied. “And now we’re here, what about another bird’s-eye view? We can see without being seen from under those trees.”

The mists had cleared more rapidly from the higher slopes, but no sign of Indians could be seen.

“And yet, they are around,” said Curly slowly. “You can tell that from the flight of those birds. Yes,—and I saw—a man moving back from behind those rocks. They are Indians, but I couldn’t locate whether they were Blue



Eagle's bunch. Red and black plumes—they are the Arkansas colours—the Choctaws yellow—with feathers from the wing of the blue-bird in the centre. If only I could be certain!—but anyway I guess it's a dead sure thing on those men being Arkansas—looking for us."

"We'd better take the path along the ravine," said Kits. "The trees shelter us, and by the time we reach those tall crags over there we may have escaped their scouts."

She spoke feverishly, a red spot of colour burning in her cheeks. To be caught *now* would be terrible—almost unendurable. And this time there might be no chance for Curly to use that revolver!

Down the wooded path they hurried, with the one thought above all in their minds: to escape pursuit. Not a word was spoken. Nat was leading, when suddenly he stopped short, flinging up his arm. He was standing on the very verge of one of those sheer precipices which so often cut off these mountain-paths.

And—down the slopes behind them came the pursuers, who knew no mercy—no quarter. At first the situation seemed hopeless. Then Kits with a little cry pointed along the wooded fringe of the precipice to where a narrow bridge—evidently of native workmanship—spanned the abyss. At this point the two mighty cliffs leaned towards each other, both wooded, so that the fissure between seemed as though some gigantic force had cleft the earth, leaving it gaping. The bridge, formed of three mighty pine stems, stretched where the gap could not have been fifty feet apart.

And yet, to crawl across those rough trunks—knowing that to slip meant being hurled headlong to instant death—needed courage of no small degree. But—in such a situation as theirs there could be no question of hesitating. Quickly they turned, hurrying along the fringe of the precipice till they stood opposite the bridge. The latter looked even worse at close quarters, and Kits felt Jill's hand cold in her own.

Nat was not to be checked this time. It was his right to lead after having followed so often! And, without waiting to argue, he dropped on all-fours on to the bridge. The trunks were lashed and held together by hide thongs—which might or might not hold firm—it depended on how long they had been exposed to the weather!

Nat was lucky in being too inexperienced to question this. He just saw that bridge and crawled along it.

What he did *not* see till he had traversed one-third of the distance was that a large brown bear, anxious to reach the cliff Nat had just quitted, had already embarked on the same enterprise, and, in fact, was advancing slowly and steadily towards him across the narrow bridge, where to pass each other would in any case have been impossible!

## CHAPTER XIV

### GREY HAWK ASKS A FAVOUR

A cold sweat broke over Nat as, raising his eyes, he saw that second traveller on a "single line." The bear had paused too, its wicked little red-rimmed eyes full of menace, whilst a deep-throated growl was almost enough threat to send the boy toppling! He dared not retreat—he could not go forward, his limbs seemed palsied, whilst he knew that to look down meant certain death. Those terrible depths would draw him fatally; the very thought of how an unwary movement must send him spinning through space made him grow faint in horror.

And the bear, confident that one sweep of its massive paw would fling that pigmy foe out of its way, began again to advance.

Jill sank on her knees, covering her face with her hands. Nothing could save Nat, nothing! But Kits was made of tougher stuff. She had seen the revolver raised instinctively by Curly, and as instinctively lowered. She knew why he did not fire.

The sound of a shot would bring the questing Indians from the paths above straight on their track. Already they might be nearer than they supposed—and an Indian located in the Rockies with his liberty, so to speak, in his own hand, does not easily give up the trail of an enemy!

Curly's thought was that the girls came first.

If he saved Nat by putting a bullet through the bear's head, he would sacrifice the lives of those girl-chums. Kits was sure Curly was not giving himself a thought, and it made action easier.

With a snatch, as swift as it was unexpected, the girl had wrenched the weapon from the young rustler's grasp. Nor did she give him time to recover it. Kits was the pride of the Cherokee Boys in more ways than one, but perhaps they were proudest of her skill in shooting.

With quick, practised eyes she had measured the distance, whilst her voice rang out, breaking a tense and agonizing silence.

"Steady, Nat, I'm shooting that ole sinner. Grip hard and keep still."

The bear, hearing the voice too, halted again, raising one paw and uttering a roar of—was it protest?

Alas for Bruin! that halt was fatal. A flash, a crash, and the bullet had sped home even as Curly's hand seized the pistol. But there was never any need for a second shot, for the mighty brown body had fallen to one side of that narrow bridge, aye, and mercifully fallen clear too, whilst the three standing on the cliff-edge watched—no, Jill for one did *not* watch—the sight of that dead beast falling—falling into the abyss.

Nat had proven his metal. He had gripped hard during those seconds of crisis, and had neither fainted nor fallen. He knew, even as he heard the pistol-shot, that that bear might easily wreck so frail a bridge; but Nat prayed to Providence—and sang his thanksgiving as he saw his enemy fall. Then—he was crawling again—along the lashed logs to the farther side.

Would the other three follow? Kits had her arm round Jill and looked at Curly. It was understood that Jill was not quite one of themselves, and, however plucky she might be, and always did prove herself, it was not to be expected she could face situations which Kits never thought of shirking.

And, whilst they hesitated, with Nat in a fever of impatience on the farther side of the chasm, the result of Kits' shooting was made obvious.

The mists had wholly cleared by now, and the heights above stood out bathed in morning sunshine. But it was not from the heights that trackers were coming! Nat actually saw those lithe brown forms first, and, realizing no sort of flight would save them, actually dropped down and began to recross the bridge. It was a crazy act, for he was a figure clearly outlined against the cliff-side. Yet no arrow winged its way towards him.

Curly had sprung lightly in advance of the girls, revolver ready. He might—scare the brutes, who very likely knew nothing about fire-arms;—and yet, even *he* hesitated, noting those plumes of yellow feathers with the wing of the blue-bird inset in the centre of the head-dress.

*Were* those the braves of the Arkansas come to bring them back to the place of torture?

Not a single red or black plume waved amongst those many head-dresses, yet the fierce faces of the warriors were streaked with war-paint, the wild whoops echoed and re-echoed amongst the trees.

In a few seconds they must be discovered!

Nat sprang across the cliff-edge to join his comrades. He was unarmed, yet something in his eyes reminded Jill of that wild-cat before she sprang.

Nat would fight—somehow.

But—there was no need.

Kits had recognized that fact. Girl-like, she was mindful of details, and she had memorized that captive Indian Chief who they had saved from the prison under the falls. *He* had worn the yellow and blue insignia of the Choctaws.

“Don’t shoot, Curly, don’t shoot!” she screamed. “These—these aren’t the Arkansas. Say—it—it—it’s Grey Hawk himself.”

The tall figure of the Indian Chief towered above those of his followers as he stood on a rock near. A party of braves had swooped upon the “Yengees,” surrounding and threatening them. Then—the voice of their leader came peeling down to them—and hatchets, tomahawks, and knives were lowered. The redmen waited—so did those four who knew their fate hung on a thing uncertain as the wind—*Indian gratitude*.

The latter is in quality rather like the old song. “When it’s nice, it’s very, very nice, and when it’s not—it’s *horrid!*”

Grey Hawk himself classed his own feeling in a few words. Striding through the ranks of his followers, he held out his hand to Kits and the two boys.

“Grey Hawk welcomes his preservers,” he said, in a fine, brief simplicity of style.

Instantly his followers had lowered their weapons, a low hum of excitement passing from lip to lip.

The braves of Grey Hawk’s tribe must have heard an eloquent tale of their Chief’s rescue from death and prisoner strings!

Indian braves pride themselves on their stoicism. Never ought they to permit themselves to show any sort of emotion! Yet for once Grey Hawk’s dark eyes sparkled with feeling and welcome as he bowed his stately head over Kits’ hand.

“My sister, the White Fawn,” he said, “is safe. For that I thank my ancestors and the Great Spirit. Often has the heart of Grey Hawk been as water in thinking that he and his braves would be too late in saving his sister and his brothers from the false Arkansas. But the ‘Manitou’ of the ‘Yengees’ is a great ‘Manitou.’ My sister and my brothers *are* safe.”

Even the haughty Chief could not keep the echo of curiosity out of his tones.

When he dived into the river under the falls which were to have sung his requiem, he believed he was leaving his rescuers to a grim fate. And—the Indians of the Rockies do not often allow enemies to escape. To the superstitious Indian this was a miracle he saw before his eyes.

“Surely,” said Kits, “our ‘Manitou’ *is* great, Grey Hawk, for, though the feet of our enemies are upon the mountain slopes, they have not overtaken us. Yet it is also true we grow weak for want of food, and we have lain our hands upon our mouths, not knowing the way we should take to reach our friends.”

Grey Hawk looked rather glum. The truth was, the young Chief was in a fix. He had been leading his braves to “eat up” the treacherous Arkansas. Thanks to a betrayer, they had the secret of that tunnelled passage through the heart of a mountain crag, leading into a sheltered valley.

But haste and secrecy were needed if the Arkansas were to be wiped out. There could be no delay. Yet the ready-witted savage understood Kits’ hint.

He answered in the roundabout fashion of his people.

“The White Fawn and her friends have found the Arkansas wicked—treacherous—not fit to live. They wish to see their destruction! Wa!—then is not best that they should come with us—and sing a song of victory over the smoking ruins of many lodges?”

This was the very *last* thing Kits and her friends wished to do. To the girls the sight of bloodshed was a horror they both prayed never to witness, whilst the mere idea of returning anywhere near the fateful neighbourhood of the tunnelled valley, Magana and Blue Eagle made them shudder.

Curly and Nat looked anxiously at Kits. Jill had not understood all that was said, since part of the Chief’s speech had been made in his own tongue.

Kits, however, answered with rare wisdom. She had had more dealings with Indians than any of her companions, since Silent Sylvester had taken her with him more than once when negotiating with the redmen of the Rockies.

“Very gladly, oh Grey Hawk, would the daughter of the Big Gun Chief and her friends come to sing the song of victory over the burnt wigwams of the Arkansas,” she replied. “But alas! my father, Grey Hawk will understand when the White Fawn tells him that the enemies of her white father have taken him and flung him into a dark place where they will torture and kill him. So we seek the way to that prison without delay, since we hold the key

by which he, the Big Gun Chief, the friend of Grey Hawk and his people, will be freed. It is understood?"

Again the Chief regretfully bowed his plumed head.

"The little daughter is understood," he replied, "and she too will understand the heart of Grey Hawk is filled with sorrow that he and his braves cannot come with her to rejoice with the Big Gun Chief. But—Grey Hawk and his warriors are upon the war-path. They hasten as the wild-cat hastens after the slayer of her young. What can Grey Hawk do to serve one who saved his life?"

The Chief was in far too great a hurry to elaborate his speech with all the flowery embroidery he loved. He was ashamed of his own ingratitude to those who had certainly saved his life from an ugly death. But what could he do? His braves were already impatient to be on the war-path again!

Removing a small armband of plaited grasses and feathers which he was wearing, he slipped it over Kits' wrist.

"See, little sister," he begged, "this is 'Manitou' between us. If you have favour to ask of Grey Hawk and his people *after* they have eaten up their enemies, you have but to show this armband and you shall ask what you wish. Now—we must go, since the voice of our 'Manitou' bids us hasten, but Running Deer and Red Axe shall lead you through the paths of the mountains to the place where your friends await. Is it sufficient?"

Kits smiled as she looked from her gay armband to the Chief.

"All the gratitude of the White Fawn and her father belong to Grey Hawk and his people," she replied; "it was a good day when I and my comrades cut the prisoner strings of a great Chief."

Grey Hawk bowed and waved his hand. He was evidently much relieved, though the two braves selected to act as guides down to the foothills looked somewhat sullen at first. They did not like the idea of being cheated out of a carouse of fighting and feasting.

But the "word" of their Chief was law, and after a few more polite speeches between Grey Hawk and Curly, in which Kits did not join, the parties separated, though Kits stood looking very thoughtfully around before she moved to join the new guides.

"I must remember," she kept repeating; "you others must remember too. Of course, it is not in the very *least* likely we shall ever want to ask Grey Hawk a favour, but in case we do, I want to get it right into my mind that the

hiding-place—or village—of his people lies between those two valleys over there in a kind of small plain, with mountains all round. Got it, Curly?”

“Sure!” said Curly, winking at Nat. “We can locate Mister Grey Hawk now easy as snuff, so come right on, Kits, or you’ll be having Running Deer and Red Axe sure scalping us instead of taking us back to civilization. Take my hand, Jill, and we’ll show the Redskins that even if we’re pale-faces we’re tough customers.”

A remark which was echoed by peals of laughter from Kits, as the valiant Curly promptly lost his balance and rolled headlong down a slope into a pool of ice-cold water. There was a grim smile even on the expressionless features of Running Deer as the brave solemnly assisted his companion to pull the crestfallen young rustler back on to terra-firma.

“Slow and sure, Curly,” sang Kits; “slow and very sure!” The sunlight was full on her small brave face as she spoke, whilst she caught Jill’s hand in her own.

Were they not at *last* on the homeward trail, bringing to Senator Abways the most eloquent of pleaders for the life of Silent Sylvester?

Kits was young enough and joyous enough of heart to believe that the road to happiness lay before her.

Cruel enemies, plotters and foes both red and white—were overcome. They had won.

The long-drawn howl of a wolf calling to its mate on some distant crag struck a note of warning into the listener’s heart.

They had not won—yet.



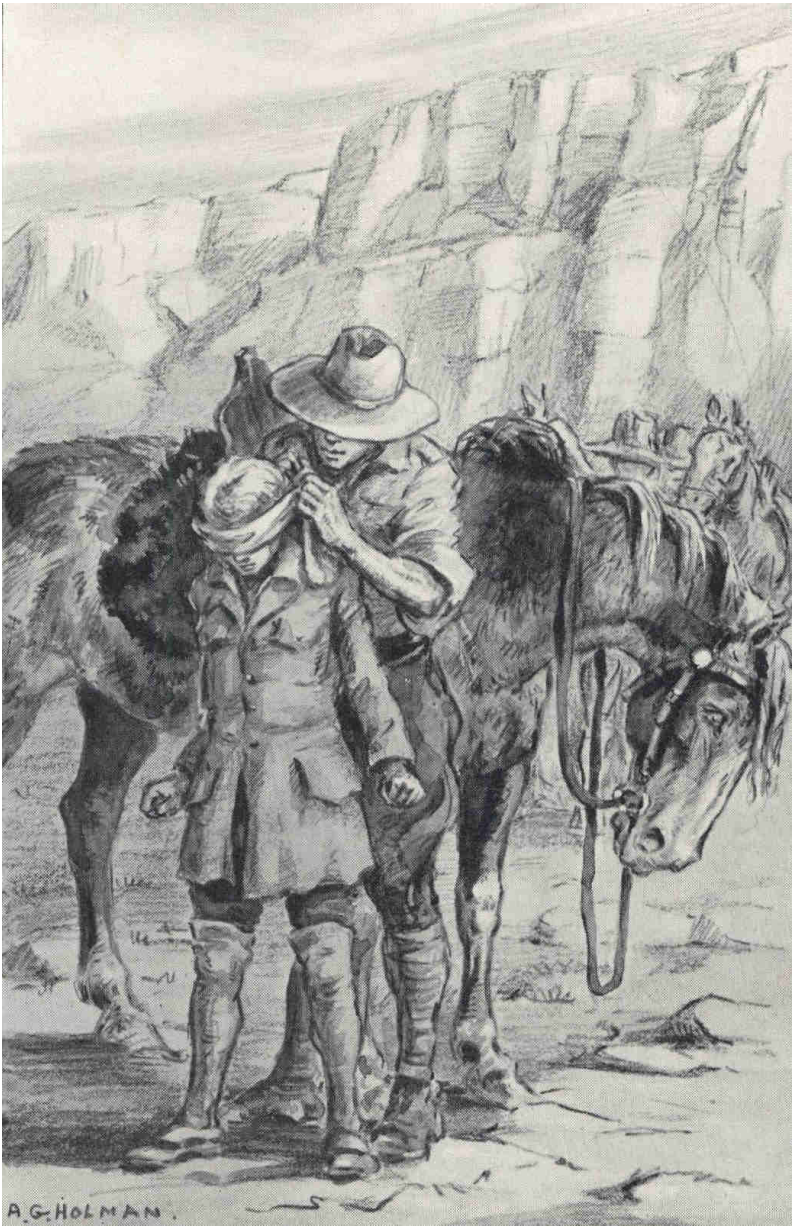
## CHAPTER XV

### TO SAVE KITS' DAD

Down a long, rocky ravine came a party of six tired people. More properly speaking, four of the number only were walking with lagging steps! The Indian guides, slightly in advance, had done their job silently, courteously, but showing neither interest in their companions nor desire to talk of their own concerns. Their single object was to return at the very earliest opportunity to the fight against enemies who had been at feud with them through countless generations.

As they reached the lower ridges of the mountains the scenery changed considerably. Orchards covered part of the foothills; there were small homesteads, prospectors' shacks and the like, dotted here and there in contrast with long, bare slopes, cold and barren, or deep gullies with bristling rocks.

There were grim stories told of these foothills; escaped criminals, cattle thieves, and wild adventurers located themselves hereabouts. A man settled here at his own risk if he had more than his own head to guard. Clever and experienced as the local police might be, the cleverest of all knew not one-tenth of the secrets of the mysterious foothills.



*“... Play game, little chum!”*

Yes, to those tired travellers, the mere sight of a rough shack was like a glimpse of home.

The gaunt heights behind them held horrors and nameless fear. Death brooded amongst vulture-haunted precipices, so that even Kits quickened

her pace as they reached the end of the ravine and stood looking out and away towards the distant prairie.

I say “even Kits,” since during the last few days Kits had been suffering in the grip of one of those strange fevers which are bred in mountain mists and are not unlike the malaria of warmer climes. Kits called it a “chill,” and declared she was not “too bad” to continue the journey.

“It’s so cold,” she kept repeating. “When once I’m warm I’ll be as right as a trivet.”

It was cold too, with sharp frosts and occasional snow-showers, yet Kits’ hands were burning, and her cheeks flushed rosily though she shivered continually.

Curly and Nat did not think much of the illness, being deceived by the girl’s careless manner and the bright colour which gave her a peculiar beauty.

But Jill was more understanding, and, when Kits woke up one morning without realizing where she was, and persisted in talking as though Big Bess were scolding her, Jill went out from the rocky shelter where the two girls had slept and called her companions. She herself was half crying in distress.

“Kits is awfully ill,” she declared. “I knew she was. She’s been feeling bad for days, only she wouldn’t give in. Now she doesn’t even know me, and—and she’ll die if she lies there on the cold stones with this horrid wind blowing. Where can we go?”

Curly and Nat were terribly concerned. They had never dreamed their plucky little pal was really sick, and now, after the manner of boys, they looked helplessly at the girl on the rock above them.

“Running Deer has just been asking if he and Red Axe have brought us far enough,” said Curly; “they pointed out the ‘lodges of the Yengees,’ and were so keen that I told them they might clear off. I think they wanted Kits to give formal permission. I reckon because the Chief gave her the armlet they look on her as top-dog of our little show.”

“Kits won’t know them,” said Jill mournfully, “but if the ‘lodge’ they pointed out is really a farm, or even a shack, we might carry her there. She’ll die if she stays here.”

Curly returned at once to speak to the Indians. They showed no distress or interest on hearing of Kits’ illness, but Running Deer, moving in his

deliberate fashion down the ravine, returned presently with some leaves which he offered to Curly.

It appeared that these were “good medicine,” which, if laid on the White Fawn’s brow, would drive the bad spirits from her.

Then, having saluted the White Fawn’s companions, they turned away, hastening now as they thought, no doubt, of the fight up there amongst the wigwams of the Arkansas.

The crushed leaves did seem to bring soothing to the sick girl, and she lay breathing heavily, her head in Jill’s lap, whilst Curly and Nat climbed down in quest of shelter.

This part of the foothills was not unfamiliar to the former, and he told Nat he fancied they should find the wife of a certain Jake the Grip, who he believed lived here with her two kiddies.

“He’s one of Sylvester’s men,” added Curly, “and hates Rattler Bob. If I can locate the homestead, we shall be all right. Jake’s a chum, and only joined the band because the police at Crandale got a down on him for a crime he had never had a hand in. That’s an old game of the police! They make more jail-birds than ever they catch! Some of ’em are in with the blacklegs, others only joined the police for the sake of sport. There’s a whole heap of injustice I could put you wise about. Jake’s a case in hand. Only one either. Gee! If that isn’t Nellie herself pulling apples.”

And Curly, snatching off his hat, waved it excitedly.

The woman—a little dumpling creature, with a weather-beaten face which had once been pretty—stood, basket in hand, staring towards the two figures which began rapidly to descend the path.

Nat noted with a thrill of pity how she slipped her free hand towards her belt, where a revolver was thrust in readiness. The women of the foothills had to be on the watch when visitors came in sight!

Like a careful hen, she was clucking to her chicks to come back to her side, and the small boy and girl stood clutching at her short skirts, eyeing the new-comers.

Curly laughed, flinging up his arms.

“Say, Nellie,” he called, “don’t you know the boy who eats apples? Where’s Jake? Is he at home by good luck!”

Nellie Bretton gave a laugh of relief and welcome as she stood straight.

“That you, Curly?” she asked. “Well, I’m real glad. I—I was afraid some of the others were around. No, Jake’s not here, though he came home not too long ago. Dorrock and the boys were here with him. They had just ridden from the old nest and told me the news. They wanted to know if I’d seen you and Kits around.”

Curly wrinkled his nose.

“We’ll get talking presently,” said he, “but first it’s Kits we must be thinking of; she’s sick, Nellie, real sick. Fever, I reckon. There’s another kid-girl along with her who sent us to find some one who would nurse Kits well. Shall we go back and bring her right along?”

“Should say so,” cried Nellie. “Kits ill? Poor kid! And they tell me Senator Abways and his bunch will be hanging Sylvester down in Los. ’Twill be black murder if they do, since the Chief wasn’t within twenty miles of Selby Creek when the Inspector was shot! Nor was my Jake.”

Curly nodded.

“We’ll go and fetch Kits,” he said, “and there’s a word in your ear, Nellie,—but no, I’ll wait till we’re back again with those girls.”

“Girls,” echoed Nellie, coming nearer to the rough fencing. “You don’t mean *you’ve* got Senator Abways’ lass away from the River Caves?”

Curly glanced cautiously around.

“We’ve been nowhere round River Caves,” he replied; “but it’s a sure thing we’ve got the Senator’s stepdaughter—and mean to ride to Los with her to make bargain for Sylvester’s life. If we’re in time, Nellie, we shall be having the Chief back once more, and then’ll come the day of reckoning for Rattler Bob and his traitors.”

The woman clasped her hands.

“No one will be better pleased than my man at that news, Curly,” said she; “but you’ll have to ride with loose rein, lad, since they say the Senator’s like a madman about the kidnapping of the girl, and vows that more than Sylvester shall swing for their black deeds. It was Dorrock told me the tale. He and his boys—Sylvester men—have gone back to the Hollow, since, when it came to rounding the rest of the band up at the River Caves, the boys hadn’t the stomach to fight against the men they’d ridden with for so long. That’s why Dorrock came away—and, to tell truth—I’ve had my fears that some of the Rattler’s bunch were stalking them hereabouts. But you fetch Kits right now—or my tongue’ll run on for a week!”

So Curly and Nat climbed back to where Jill sat, growing stiff with cramp as she held Kits as near as possible in her arms for fear of the damp rock striking chill to the fevered girl.

Kits roused, when Curly raised her, and the delirium had passed, for, though her voice was weak, she spoke sensibly.

“You’d best leave me, boys,” she pleaded, “and take Jill on to Los. Dad’s in danger—maybe—it’ll be too late unless you hurry, though I’ve prayed God you’ll be in time—and Jill will help when you reach the Senator. Jill will help.”

“Sure!” said Jill, in clear, reassuring tones, as she held Kits’ hot hand. “The Senator will listen to me. He’s as loving as any Daddy-pops in the States—and I’ll tell him how it can be proved Sylvester never shot the Inspector. It’s all coming right, Kits, it’s all coming right, only you’ve got to rest and get well quick.”

Kits sighed. Her head felt as if it were full of water, and thought slipped away from her whenever she tried to realize what was happening. Only—when she was really—warm once more—she would be better. She tried to ask Curly where he was carrying her; but the effort was too great, and she was beginning to babble nonsense again before they reached the low-roofed homestead where Nellie Bretton was waiting to receive her patient.

And Nellie, being a woman who had to depend on her own wits and common sense in illness, without the help of a doctor, did not waste time in asking questions. It would have been sure waste of time to ask Kits how she felt. Nellie could guess that very easily, and when Curly had lain his burden on Nellie’s own bed in the room upstairs, she sent the boys down to forage for their own breakfast, whilst with Jill’s help she undressed Kits, heaping every available coat and rug on the bed.

“It’s mountain fever,” said she, “and no moving from that bed for the next day or two. Of course, as soon as she can raise a finger Kits will want to be off,—I know that, and I don’t blame her, but I’ll be keeping her where she is as long as she’ll stay.”

She looked sharply at Jill as she spoke.

“So you’re Senator Abways’ girl,” she added. “Gee! What a slip of a child you do sure look! And yet men’s lives hang on you. That’s not justice. But never mind! You don’t look any too good yourself, Kid, so come right along to the next room, and after twelve hours’ sleep you may be thinking easier of getting on to Los.”

Jill stifled a yawn.

“If Curly thinks—we ought to go on without Kits—I’ll go,” she declared. But Nellie only laughed.

“That’s grit—and you but a town-girl,” she said. “But I’ll talk to Curly. Always won’t be thanking him for bringing you back more dead than alive, and if you’re not careful you’ll be down with fever next. Come right away to bed, and I’ll bring you up a dish of hot soup and bread to sleep on.”

So Jill yielded—only too thankfully. She would not have failed Kits and Curly—for anything; but since she was bidden to rest, she was truly glad.

Before her head had lain ten minutes on the hard pillow of that narrow bed, she was sound asleep, whilst her hostess passed smiling from her room to the kitchen, where, in spite of their protests that they were not tired, Curly and Nat lay snoring on the floor.

“A bunch of kids, the lot of them,” muttered Nellie to herself, as she stepped back to her apple-gathering, and she sighed sadly enough as she watched her own two babes romping in the sunlight.

If only there were no such things as injustice or outlawry. If only Jake could come and live here honest—working for her and the kids in their own homestead, how happy she would be.

Maybe that girl with the goldie hair and brave blue eyes might help her as she was to help Silent Sylvester. How good that would be.

So the rustler’s wife dreamed of happy days unshadowed by the threat of prison or crime, nor did she happen to glance to where beyond the orchard two men crept Indian fashion through the long grass towards the gully near.

But Rattler Bob’s chum, known as “Tiger,” and his mate, Laughing Jim, seemed in haste to reach the shack in the shadow between the rocks.

They were very well content with all they had heard and seen up there.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A TRIAL FOR KITS

“I’ll be well to-morrow,” said Kits restlessly.

Jill smiled sympathetically down into the eager eyes of the invalid. Of course, anyone but Kits would have been a *real* invalid after so sharp a bout of fever; but Kits had been fighting desperately towards recovery, and, as her friends declared, had just defied the sickness—and got the better of it.

To-morrow, she was urging, she would be riding away across that stretch of prairie towards Los.

“And to-day,” went on Kits, with still more decision, “I’d like fine for Nellie to tell me what Dorrock and his boys are doing. I—I know they wouldn’t be letting dad down if they could help it.”

“I’ll go and fetch Nellie,” replied Jill. “But say, Kits, what we’ve all been saying is, why not let Nat and me ride to Los? I’d tell Senator Abways the whole story and what you’ve done for me. I can sure promise he’ll never allow Silent Sylvester to hang after he hears it all, till he’s proved the story about Inspector Lawrence. Curly can help me there, and he’s ready to come with me to Los and say all he knows, but it would be better not. Curly’s still outlawed, and I’d rather get his pardon signed before he goes to the town. Dad loves me as if he were my own dad; but he’s strong on justice, and he’d feel it was up to him to arrest a rustler even though he had saved my life.”

Kits smiled.

“You’re a jewel of a chum, Jill,” she said gratefully. “It makes me feel mean as dirt to think how I helped the boys to get hold of you. But I thought it was going to be a fight on the square then, not counting on Rattler Bob’s double-dealing. You’ll forgive me, Jill, same as you forgave Nat, who was just cheated by me?”

Jill bent and kissed the speaker lovingly.

“I’ve never had a sister, Kits,” she whispered, “but you’re the best kind of one, and I’m sure all you say of Silent Sylvester is true. He’s straight. I wish you’d let me go and tell dad so?”

But Kits had a streak of obstinacy in her bones.



“I’ll be well to-morrow,” she repeated, “and you could be telling Curly to see about the loan of horses. We ain’t sure *walking* to Los.”

“I’ll fetch Nellie right now,” said Jill, “and then get busy about the horses. Curly had an idea he could borrow them from a friend of Jake’s.”

Nellie Bretton was ready enough to come and tell her news. She had got it firmly fixed that if once this bunch of youngsters reached Los, they would not only “magic” Sylvester out of jail, but win pardon for Jake and some of those dare-devil rogues of “boys,” who had had enough of outlawry and would be glad enough to disband and start again honestly on life’s great adventure. The more daring—and more vicious—of the famous Cherokee Boys had thrown in their lot at once with Rattler Bob. Dorrock and his bunch were no villains, only men made reckless by misfortune—or the pure love of adventure.

She stood at the foot of Kits’ bed, her arms akimbo, looking at the two girls.

“It’s Rattler Bob who’s out for trouble,” she said. “Of course, it’s easy reading now I know how he lost Jill here in the Wolf’s Crag Valley. They must have searched tired for her, and in the end ridden on b’lieving the Indians—or the wolves—had got her. Anyway, they were in the River Caves when Dorrock and our boys got there. Rattler Bob spoke to Dorrock from the ledge. He told him plain that he meant to be boss of the Cherokee Boys, and that if Silent Sylvester swung, it was his own look-out for playing tenderfoot. He wouldn’t say a word about Jill or you, Kits; he said what he had he held and he was a law to himself. If Dorrock and his bunch swore to recognize him as Chief, they might come right in; but if not, they’d have to stay out. He said if it came to a fight he’d have to treat Dorrock and his boys as mutineers. You can guess how that got their goat! But after a long pow-wow Dorrock decided to ride away. None of them could face fighting old comrades. He told the Rattler so—and then off they rode. They came here because they were bothered about you, Kits, and Curly. But they didn’t stay. They were going back to the Hollow to see if they couldn’t think out some plan of rescuing Silent Sylvester. Dorrock was going into Los in disguise, and Jake wanted to go too. They were fed with everything, but—they wouldn’t disband and leave Sylvester to his fate. That’s all. I reckon, and if you think you could get astride a horse to-morrow, Kits, why, it seems to me you’ll be quicker well than lying there fussing. The fever’s gone, though any other kid-girl would be tuckered out after such a bout.”

"I'll be strong to-morrow," laughed Kits. "And, oh, Nellie, I hope *I'll* be the one to tell dad the story of how his own boys stuck to him, ready to risk the rope to save him. It'll kinder make him proud. Same here! As to the Rattler, I don't count him and his bunch as Cherokee Boys. They'll pay, and pay dear, even though Sylvester would never raise a finger against any man who failed him. It's not his way. He's too big to take notice of jackals."

"Sure!" agreed Nellie. "And you're your father's lass. He'll be proud of you, Kits, when those ugly prison doors swing back. If he'd had a son he couldn't have fought pluckier for his dad. As for Jill here"—and the rustler's wife looked wistfully at the other girl—"she'll know by you that rustlers aren't *all* bad. They've been made bad often enough without their fault, and if they could find a way back they'd sure take it."

Jill stood up, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"That's all true, Nellie," she cried, "and I'll be on my knees to the kindest-hearted man on earth to help Sylvester and his boys to a fresh start. I won't *ever* forget these weeks—never! It's shown me what a big thing life is—and the pity of it for some who are more good than bad though they take a wrong road."

Nellie Bretton caught the girl in her arms.

"Heaven bless you," she sobbed, "and send you home to do the good work. Heaven bless your generous heart—which can find good in those who treated you ill!"

"Ill?" echoed Jill. "Oh, you mean when they carried me off from home. That was half my own fault—and I've told Kits often I'd have done the same as she. Now, there's Curly in the orchard, and I'll run down to ask him about those horses for to-morrow."

Before she left the room, though, she had turned back to kiss Kits tenderly.

Poor Kits, who fairly hated lying still when there was so much needing to be done. But Kits had her teeth set, and was fighting still—fighting against throwing herself back into a fever with her own impatience. That was why she drank the milk-posset Nellie brought her presently and fell asleep directly afterwards—so fast asleep, indeed, that she never wakened when, hours later, the sound of raised voices and the running to and fro of feet, the calling of Nellie to Nat to hasten, and other confusion of cries, told of unexpected happenings—and unlooked-for trouble.

## CHAPTER XVII

### WHAT WAS CURLY'S GAME?

Curly was at the orchard gate when Jill reached him. He smiled at sight of her eager face. They were great friends, these two. Curly had never said any more about the past to this girl-chum, but he would not be forgetting that hour of confidences in the dawn of day on a distant mountain side. It made the bond between them very close.

"Well," he asked, "is Kits coming to-morrow, or are we to ride without her?"

Jill shook her head.

"Kits is coming," she replied. "She's so set on it that Nellie says it would do her more harm to be refused. She'd fret herself back to a fever. And she's not too weak either. Nellie says there never could be another girl like Kits."

"That doesn't mean there aren't others just as well plucked," retorted Curly; "but if we are making a start to-morrow, I may as well be off to see Steve Albriggs about those horses. Nellie says he'll loan them readily if he knows our errand, and he has a piebald mustang which can't be distanced."

"I'm coming too," sang Jill. "I want to help bring back those horses—and I want to talk to you, Curly. Nat's over there, romping with the kids. Isn't he a great little Nat—just a boy. I feel years older than he, I guess. I wonder if I'll be a romp-about kid when I get home?"

"Sure!" said Curly, with a half-smile. "Why not? You've not turned rustler, Jill. You'll go back to Los and—why, this game will be only a memory forgotten like any other game with ugly bits in it."

They were walking together down the path leading to a smooth slope reaching to a wood with more orchards beyond. Orchards with a couple of big shacks amongst the trees.

Jill had grown serious.

"I'll never forget an hour of it all, Curly," said she; "and if you were to say, would you rather never have been trapped by those rustlers, but ridden back to Los and just got your scolding from Aunt Kezia, I'd say—*no*. For, you see, that way I'd never have known Kits, or Nat, or you, Curly."

Curly was looking ahead.

“I’m not much of a one to remember, Jill,” he replied. “I’m not worth a thought. Why, my old dog Nabs, who I left in the Hollow, is a better object than I am for a kind memory. I—well, you know the story—and what I’ve come to. Once a rustler, always a rustler. Sure!”

“Once a mother’s son, always a mother’s son,” said Jill; “and if you like to put it that way, Curly, *she’s* worth thinking of, I reckon. *She’s* worth making happy. Ever since you told me I’ve been picturing her looking at that door and sighing when it grew dark, saying, ‘He won’t be home to-day, but maybe—to-morrow.’ So, don’t be angry, Curly, or make swear-grunts in your throat, for I’m going to ask you a question. If Senator Always gives you a free pardon, will you go back to that farm and open that door—just so that that good mother may be able to say, ‘I knew he’d come. I knew he’d never forget.’ ”

Curly’s groan could not be stifled.

“Don’t, Jill,” he entreated; “it’s *hell* to think of her waiting. And there’ll never be a pardon for me. If there were—if I *could* be just as you put it—I reckon no horse would carry me as quick as my own legs. I’d be there—before it was dark, and——” A sob shook him.

Never had he dared vision a home-coming, and now it stirred all the old passionate love which he had tried to smother out of existence.

He would be running sure along the homeward road.

Jill was crying too—and her sympathy made Curly put out his hand, resting it on her shoulder.

“Quit it, Jill,” he begged. “I never could face sob-stuff. In pity quit it. We’ve got to be around borrowing those horses. There’s the shack over there where Jake’s friend lives. We mustn’t fail Kits.”

“Of course not,” said Jill; “it’s Kits and Silent Sylvester first. Look, Curly, there’s a girl over there by those trees, she’s signing to us.”

Curly looked, shading his eyes with his hand.

A tatterdemalion girl, the kind often found in the smaller shacks where whole families herded in squalor and misery, was signalling to them. She was bare-legged, grimy, her tousled hair hanging over her eyes; but she seemed wildly excited, running forward, then back to peer over the edge of a wooded hollow.

She screamed to the two who came hastening towards her.

“It’s Pete—it’s Pete, down there—don’t you see? He was felling the tree—there—and a timber wolf loped out at him—he killed the wolf with his axe, but he’s hurt—then—there—the tree fell and pinned him. I can’t get him out.”

She thrust scratched hands and bleeding arms out for them to see, then turned to scramble back down the Hollow. Curly hesitated. He knew the sort of crew these foothills bred, but Jill was more compassionate.

“Poor Kid!” she cried. “Come, Curly, there is some one down there—under a tree. We can’t leave him.”

“Seems sure the old trick,” called Curly, “that caught you first, Jill. Come back, Kid. I’ll investigate first. There’s too many traps which can be easy set for a soft heart. I——”

A laugh answered him—not Jill’s merry ripple, but the cold jeer of a man who had stepped out on to the path of the Hollow.

Jill had sprung back towards Curly—but further retreat was impossible. There were half a dozen men in the Hollow with their horses tethered close.

Curly knew them all. They were Rattler Bob’s men. The one whose pistol covered him was the crony and friend of the Rattler, a man known only as Tiger, middle-aged, scarred, desperate. The very one who with Rattler Bob had shot the Inspector near Selby Creek. A man who cared nothing for human life when it stood in the way of what he wanted.

“Hands up!” called Tiger, “hands up! It’s a fair catch. *Our* prize, Curly. *Our* prize. You’re a dead man if you interfere.”

But Curly had managed to put himself in front of Jill.

“That’s fool talk,” he answered, after a quick glance round that ring of grim faces. “The girl’s my prize. I’m riding with her to the River Caves, and I make my claim fair and square. Ain’t I one of the old bunch same as you? Seems to me I know your faces. What’s wrong, anyway? Rattler Bob lost the girl he was carrying to the River Caves to hold as ransom. Left her in Wolf’s Crag Valley—sure! The Indians carried her off, then, and much use she’d have been as far as ransom’s concerned if she’d been left up there; but I brought her away, and she’s my claim.”

“You’re a hero, Curly, always was, always will be,” drawled a sinister-eyed man, standing behind the first speaker, “but that won’t wash. You always were Sylvester’s woolly lamb and never had a hand in with our

bunch. You can get back along to your own camp an' sing psalms with Jake the Grip in the penitentiary; but you won't bluff us!"

Curly laughed.

"That you talking, Spider?" he queried. "But I'm not asking *your* permission. Listen, boys"—he raised his voice as the other rustlers moved up from the bottom of the Hollow. "There's been a split in the camp," he called, "so Jake's wife told me. How was I to know it? I've been on the trail of Senator Abways' heiress—a dollar princess, eh—boys?—who'll see us clear of our trouble. But there's a law even amongst Cherokee Boys. No going back on a pal who's played square with the rest. There's no one of you can name a dirty trick in which I've gone back on any one of you. So, if I choose to ride back to Rattler Bob with the girl he dropped by mistake in the valley yonder, there's not one of you to forbid it."

A murmur rose amongst the men, who came up to Tiger and began arguing without troubling to lower their voices. They had come to the foothills on the track of Dorrock and Sylvester's boys, and this capture of the Senator's girl was an unexpected plum due to the scouting of the youngest of their number. It was a general feeling that Curly's claim should be allowed. The lad was popular with all the band, though they recognized the fact that he was no rustler born. But they *could* rely on his fair dealing, which was more than they could say of the Tiger, who, if he carried the girl back as his prize, would take care that he and Rattler Bob handled the best of the ransom. And, though Tiger snarled, threatened, and cursed, the others were too strong for him.

"You can ride with us, Curly," called one of the men; "but if you're trying to cheat us by playing into the wrong camp, I'll blow your head off with my own pistol!"

"Right, Rallick," sang Curly, "but you'll save your bullet. It's a square deal. The girl's my prize—and we'll settle up about the business when we reach the River Caves."

Jill had listened speechless with horror.

Was this hectoring, loud-voiced man the boy Curly, whose eyes had been wet half an hour earlier when he spoke of the mother who still watched for his return?

Had he, indeed, purposed to carry her off to the rustlers' lair when he had so insistently urged her to let him ride to Los instead of Nat?

With a low cry she turned to run up the path. She must return at once to Kits and Nat, leaving this strange new Curly to these mates, whose very voices struck fear into her heart.

But, to her horror, Curly himself checked her.

“No road, Kid,” he said quickly; “you’ll be riding our way. You, Rallick, have you a spare horse? If not, there’s a piebald mustang b’longing to the owner of that shack which will carry two as easy as one. You’d better do the borrowing tho’, for fear Tiger thinks I’m bolting.”

The man Rallick grinned and went off at once. Tiger scowled.

“You’re a deep one, Curly,” he muttered, “but not deep enough. Wait till Rattler Bob hears the tale. We don’t want any of your colour at the old place.”

“What colour’s that, pard?” asked Curly easily. “I s’pose right now yours is pea-green, but we can’t all be winners, and, if I know the Rattler, seems to me he’ll be pleased enough to see the Senator’s girl without being partic’lar who brought her.”

The Tiger’s eyes narrowed. *Was* this bluff? Certainly the girl didn’t seem any too taken with her captor, though she’d been free and easy enough as they came together towards the Hollow. There was no mistake now that Jill’s expression was one of fear and indignation as she struggled against Curly’s detaining hand.

She even seemed to forget the presence of the rustlers. Curly a traitor! Why, he *must* be! If not, he would have helped instead of hindering her to escape back to the little homestead over there. But Curly’s hand was heavy on her shoulder, and she heard every word he said. He was actually glorying to think he had got her in his power. He was haggling with these men as though she were a bale of goods instead of his girl-chum, his friend, his confidante. Tears blurred Jill’s vision as she panted her demand.

“Let me go!” she cried. “You shan’t keep me here. I’m not going to the rustlers’ caves. You know yourself they—they are my enemies—and Kits’ enemies. They’ll get Silent Sylvester killed. They’re *murderers*. You’re a coward and a traitor, Curly, if you don’t—let me—escape.”

“She’s a screecher, she is,” mocked the Spider. “You’ll have to gag her, Curly, or there’ll be trouble. We ain’t going to be called black names by any half-grown vixen. If you don’t get her quiet, we’ll try tying her up and walloping her.”

Curly swore. His face was white, and Jill herself could not read the expression in eyes which were no longer those of a boy.

But she seemed to understand all at once that this dreadful thing was real. Resistance was as useless as rebellion. The threat of the other man was not without its effect. The poor girl seemed to collapse, her courage gone in face of what was to her the heartless treachery of a friend whom she had trusted—and loved.

Curly's white face was like a mask as he bent over her. He was hoping she had fainted, but it was not so, and he could have groaned aloud when he saw actual fear looking up at him out of those blue eyes which had seemed like guiding stars—only an hour ago.

But—he set his teeth and without a word lifted her unresisting form in his arms.

Rallick had re-entered the Hollow by an opposite path; he was grinning as though at some good joke as he brought the piebald mustang across to where the others had assembled.

“You know a horse when you see it, youngster,” he said, as he helped Curly and his burden into the saddle; “that animal's worth a fortune to a man who wants to show the police a clean pair of heels. But”—he lowered his voice—“take the word of a chum—and don't try getting away with the girl. The Tiger's not Rattler Bob—but he can bite. You'll be up against it badly, lad, unless you play straight.”

Curly's laugh was the oddest thing.

“Sure, Dick,” he agreed, “thanks for the tip, but it's straight all right. You've never known me let a pal down, and you never will.”

Though he spoke to the rustler, the words reached Jill, as she lay huddled up against him, and brought a vague comfort.

The tones of the speech rang clear and true like those of the friend whose hands she had clasped so trustingly. Yet, what was she to believe? If Curly were carrying her to the River Caves, he *must* be a traitor not only to herself but to the “Chief,” whose life depended upon her own pleading.

Now, Silent Sylvester would die—Kits' loving heart would break—and she herself would be at the mercy of reckless, lawless men without a single friend to protect her.

It was odd that in her hopelessness Jill should bury her tear-stained face against Curly's leather coat as if in mute appeal for the protection she had



just told herself he would never afford, since—all the while—he had—he had been deceiving her.

“And—if he has a mother,” thought poor Jill, “she will wait—and wait, but he’ll never come—how could he, when he doesn’t—really care for anyone or anything but himself. And, oh, whatever will poor Kits do now? What will she do if her father dies!”

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A DESPERATE RACE

“When will Jill and Curly be back?” asked Kits anxiously. “They must sure have bought those horses by now. Will they come and tell me about them?”

Nellie Bretton was standing in the shadow, so that the speaker could not see her face. When she answered it was in a slow, expressionless fashion.

“It’s too late for you to be talking to them chums of yours, Kits,” she said; “you’ve had an almighty good sleep, and it’s late. Drink your milk good and go to sleep again. You’ll wake up fine in the morning. There now, the kids are calling. I can’t wait to answer any more questions.”

Kits drank her milk obediently. She was surprised at Nellie’s manner. The woman had been so ready to talk before, and surely Jill must be wanting to come up and say good night?

However, Kits’ chief concern was with the morrow—that great day when she would actually be riding, with the means to hand for opening her dear dad’s prison door. She was sure the Senator must listen,—and—the happy day would dawn when Silent Sylvester rode to the Hollow to disband his men—with the joyous news of free pardon for all. When Kits awoke next morning this thought was with her to add its spur in helping her fling off the bed-clothes and begin to dress. Her clothes lay neatly piled.

Ah, Nellie must have been in to put them there—or maybe Jill’s hand had done the task. Dear Jill! What a chum she had been right through—so unlike what tough little Kits had imagined a daintily reared town-girl to be.

Kits dressed—long boots and all, then, opening the door, went down the ladder-like stair to the kitchen. Nellie was there alone; she was seated at the table, her head resting on her folded arms.

The hopelessness of the attitude, so unlike sturdy Nellie with her managng ways and bright nature, struck a note of foreboding.

Kits ran forward and laid her hand on the woman’s arm.

“Is it the fever, Nellie?” she cried. “Are you taken sick too? Oh, my dear, you’re not ill.”

The rustler’s wife sat up, pushing her hair from her brow.

“That you, Kits?” she asked dully. “You’re early. Nat’s only just coming back across the orchard with the horses. You’ll have to breakfast first, and the kettle not boiling.”

“Why isn’t Jill helping?” asked Kits, growing more uneasy. “She’s no lie-abed. And didn’t she and Curly bring the horses yesterday from Jake’s friend?”

Nellie caught the girl’s hand.

“Kits,” she said earnestly, “Nat says he’ll ride to Los with you. It all depends on you, Kid. There’s no one else to save Sylvester or—any of them; for Jill’s been kidnapped by Rattler Bob’s men—they’ve taken her off to the River Caves and Curly’s gone along with them—though whether he’s took as prisoner or played coyote right through and knew what was happening we can’t find out.”

Kits sat down on a chair near. She had been near fainting with the first shock of the news. It had come as a bolt from the blue—stunning her.

Jill—a captive? Jill, taken after all to that mountain lair which defied all besiegers? Jill—no longer free to come to Los and save dad!

Nellie stared pityingly at the girl. Her own grief and disappointment had made her careless of the shock she had given. Now, she went across, and, pouring milk into a mug, held it to Kits’ lips.

“You must ride to Los,” she repeated. “Nat says you’ll have to tell the Senator the whole story. It’s no use to throw up the sponge, Kid. It depends on you, now. You can save the lot of them if you play up. I—I’ve always said you’re a girl in a thousand. But what I want to know is—where does young Curly come in? Has he been playing coyote?”

“*No!*” snapped Kits. “I’ll not b’lieve it of Curly. He’s a white man same as dad. He’d never have let us down. It’s Rattler Bob who’s worse than coyote—and he thinks now he has the game in his hands. But he’s just wrong. That’s sure! I’m going to beat him, Nellie. Straight fightin’ gets the coyote in the end. Where’s Nat? He’ll see me through. We’re ridin’ for Los.”

Nellie was setting the table hastily. Her hand shook as she caught up the frying-pan.

“You won’t forget Jake—eh, Kits?” she pleaded. “If you get the Senator writing pardons, you won’t forget Jake Bretton—the best husband and father in U.S.A.! Aye, and one of its best citizens if he gets his chance!”

“No,” said Kits, “I won’t forget Jake.”

Then she went out to meet Nat. The boy was tethering two horses to a walnut tree. He looked anxious and nervous. Kits came up to him.

“Where’s the piebald mustang?” she asked. It was about the last question he wished to hear, but, with Kits looking at him with those eyes of hers, how could he beat about the bush?

“Albriggs loaned—or sold it last night to Curly,” he replied; “least it was one of the rustlers who brought the message. Curly wanted it to ride with a girl to the River Caves. It—it looks black, Kits—but I don’t hardly believe it. Curly ain’t the sort. He’s a white man.”

“He’s black all through,” was Kits’ swift rejoinder, “if he’s joined in with the Rattler. P’r’aps my head’s got weak with being ill. It won’t think properly. Seems to me like now that Curly must have known the Rattler’s men were here. And he took Jill along on purpose.”

“It might be,” said Nat simply, “if Curly were anyone but Curly. I don’t believe all that black cheating against *him*; but the other thing’s sure, Kits. The Rattler’s got Jill at the River Caves and we’ve got to ride and tell the Senator.”

Kits stood up, she was dizzy but resolved.

“Where are the horses?” she asked; but Nellie Bretton was calling, and came out to join them.

“Breakfast’s ready,” said the woman, “and you’ll have to eat, Kits. It’s no use making those great eyes at me. If you want to be of any use when you get to Los, you must fill yourself up first. Come right in. You’re fighting, Kits, and you’ll win. You always were a winner. Jake said it. He said you were a reg’lar mascot. Now—eat.”

And Kits ate. She felt as if every mouthful would choke her, yet she stuck to it gallantly, winning the silent admiration of her companions.

What grit the girl had. When it came to leaving, Nellie kissed the child’s sun-tanned cheek with a mother’s tenderness.

“I feel I can most trust my Jake to you, Kid,” said she. “If anyone can get him a pardon and send him back to me, it’ll be you.”

Kits smiled as she warmly returned the woman’s embrace.

“I won’t be that mean as to forget Jake, Nellie,” she promised, “though I’m thinking hard of my daddy-pops.” Then up she climbed into the saddle, showing no sign of recent weakness.

Nellie Bretton watched the riders out of sight, waving her handkerchief as they looked back at the bend of the road.

“She’s a brave girl is Kits,” she muttered, “the sort to stick to a trail if she dropped dead at the end of it; but pray Heaven it won’t come to that. Pray Heaven she wins round Senator Abways and—and sends back my Jake. What a happy time we’d have if he lived—honest right here with his kids and gave up the rustling for always.”

And, whilst she repeated the prayer almost as though she were rehearsing a charm, Nellie Bretton went back across the orchard to pick up her wee girl and call the younger Jake in to his breakfast.

And meantime Kits and Nat were riding down the long slope of the foothill towards the prairie, asking themselves two questions over and over again.

How long would it take them to reach Los;—and would Senator Abways ever believe the wild story they brought? And if not—what could be done next?

Like a knell the reply to that last question rang out:

“Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!”

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE SENATOR DECIDES

“I can see no one,” said Senator Abways. “I am engaged on important business. You can give that reply to all enquiries.”

The secretary glanced across at the great man who had just spoken. Senator Abways was a fine-looking, grey-haired man, with penetrating eyes and a firm chin. It only needed a glance to tell that he was a ruler of his fellows.

But to the secretary’s surprise, the man who brought the message was lingering. A most unusual thing, since the Senator’s single “no” was generally sufficient for an answer!

The Senator himself noticed the delay and looked up again sharply.

“Well,” he asked shortly, “you heard what I said?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the man, “but—the girl was just desperate to see you right now. There’s a boy with her. They say they’ve brought news of Jill; the girl told me she was Silent Sylvester’s daughter, though I should say——”

“No matter what you’d say, Kington,” replied the Senator, rising instantly from his seat, “send them in at once. Wrightley, you can take them papers into the next room and ’phone to Garret’s that I shall not be able to keep my appointment.”

The secretary gathered up his papers and left the study; maybe he would have liked to stay. What did a rustler’s daughter want with his chief! Seeing what times they lived in, the young man hardly liked quitting. The girl might be holding up the chief—and Senator Abways was more than just that to his people, he was their friend.

The door swung back and those importunate visitors entered.

Both Kits and Nat showed signs of travel. They had not spared themselves in that ride across the prairie, but, though there were rings round Kits’ eyes, she held her head high as she crossed the room and stood before the man who, as it seemed to her, held her father’s life in his hands.

“I’m Kits Sylvester,” said she, and her tones were almost shrill in their pitch, so that only her listeners’ keen ears heard the catch in them. “I’m daughter to the man you’ve got lying in the town jail.”

Her eyes searched the Senator's face anxiously. They had told her he was not long back from New York—and that the rustler leader had not yet been tried, though it seemed likely his sentence would be the electric chair, since there was a charge of murder as well as outlawry against him.

“Go on,” said Senator Abways. “You have news of—my girl?”

He always spoke of Jill as though she were his own daughter.

Kits clenched her hands.

“Yes,” said she, “Sylvester's boys took her as hostage. *I* helped to trap her. I guess I—I thought anything was fair dealing, since my father was no murderer as he was named. He never was near Selby Creek, and—he never had a hand in shooting the Inspector. He would have brought the man who did it to book and turned them out of the band if you hadn't got him jailed. But—it's no use talking! And—it's not about Sylvester exactly—that I've come—it's about Jill.”

Senator Abways was watching the speaker intently. Now he half turned towards his desk.

“It's a strange thing, Kits Sylvester,” said he, “that only this morning I received information which matches what you've told me. Sylvester had no hand in the affair of Selby Creek. That at least is clear. He will not be tried on the capital charge.”

Kits gave a little cry and swayed, clutching a chair.

“Not tried?” she whispered. “Then—he'll be freed?—we—we shall be able to go right away to the River Caves—and save Jill.”

“Silent Sylvester is still in jail,” said Abways; “there are other charges against him. But—I cannot discuss all these details with you now, girl. Tell me your errand? Have you come to bargain with me? Was my daughter to be held as hostage against your father's life?”

His tones grew sterner, a frown drew his brows together. He was thinking of sunny-haired Jill and her sufferings.

Kits wrung her hands.

“Nat and I were bringing her—to Los,” she wailed, “but the Rattler's gang carried her off. They—they hate Sylvester—they don't play straight. I \_\_\_\_\_”

Nat stepped forward. He saw that Kits was physically unfit to tell a coherent story.

“You leave it, chum,” he told her, “and Senator Abways shall have the whole tale.”

Abways looked relieved.

“You’re one of the band?” he asked. “You look no more than a boy.”

Nat smiled, that honest smile of his.

“I was taken by Sylvester’s boys with Jill,” he replied. “I was on the look-out for a job on a ranch when I met Kits here. I’ll tell you the whole business in ten minutes if you give me my head?”

The Senator raised his hand.

“I’ll listen,” said he, “without asking questions.”

Nat settled to his task. His grammar might be faulty, but his story was clear as crystal. He told the whole narrative crisply, joining Jill’s own tale of her lone adventure from Wolf’s Crag Valley to the eyrie of the Arkansas.

Senator Abways kept his word. He listened patiently, without interruption, but the beads of perspiration lay thick on his brow by the time Nat had finished. It was awful to think of his Jill—the child whose life had been so sheltered, so guarded, exposed to such dangers and horrors. Yet he could not help feeling proud of her as Nat told of the girl’s uncomplaining cheerfulness, her quiet pluck.

“You must let me think,” he muttered, as he sank into his chair. “I—I can’t grasp it all at once. Jill—amongst savages—in danger of her life? Jill—a hostage, with men who did not scruple to shoot down that defenceless Inspector—or plot to leave their own comrade to the fate which was their due?”

For several minutes he sat, covering his eyes with his hands. In his personal suffering he must not forget his position as judge.

Yet—Jill must be saved.

Kits, emboldened by her own eagerness, came to his side.

“We’ll be asking dad the best way to save Jill,” said she. “I reckon, Senator, that you’ll have to do that. Silent Sylvester is still Chief of the Cherokee Boys. Dorrock and Sylvester’s own men are loyal. They are waiting now to find a way to get their leader back. You can fetch my dad out of jail this day and he’ll give you his word—a word that’s never broken—to go back to jail when Jill’s safe home in Los. Say, won’t you do that? Silent Sylvester’s the only man to help. He might bring the Rattler’s bunch to listen



—and the sight of him will tell Bob and his chums that their game is up. Say—we ought to be riding—to the River Caves right now!”

Senator Abways uncovered his face and laid his hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“You’re a brave lass, Kits Sylvester,” he said, “and I believe you. I’ve been hearing things—more than about the Selby Creek affair—since I came back from New York. I believe your father would do just as you say. That’s why I’m taking you to him now. We shall have to talk—and other folk will not have to hear. Then—it’s likely we’ll be riding for the River Caves. It doesn’t bear thinking of—Jill in the hands of those men.”

Kits burst into tears. Poor child! She could not help it. The strain had been too great after her recent illness. But the Senator knew it was no time to sympathize. There was work to be done—prompt action to be taken. The thought of Jill away in the wilds daunted him, may be clouding his judgment.

He rang his bell and gave the surprised secretary a most unexpected order for sandwiches and wine to be brought to his study at once.

Kits stared through a mist of tears.

“You said—we were going——,” she faltered.

Abways nodded.

“Sure! When you’ve eaten. The boy here looks as if he needed a meal too. Listen, both of you. You’ll eat what’s brought, yes, and drink the milk too. My secretary will see to that. I’m going out to make arrangements about horses. You rode here?”

Nat nodded.

“Sure! But the horses were only loaned.”

“Good. I’ll see the man who lent them is paid well. We’ll need fresh ones for the journey.”

The Senator gnawed his underlip thoughtfully as he spoke. It would have been better could they go without the girl. Yet—somehow he had not the heart to say so.

Kits had gone very literally through fire and water to her goal. It would break her heart, he guessed, to be left behind now. Besides, he had the idea they would want her. She had already shown herself clear-witted, daring, and she as well as her father knew the secret of the rustlers’ lair.

It was the hardest job Kits had undertaken to get that first sandwich down, it felt like dust in her throat; but she swallowed it at last, and after a drink of milk she felt better. Before ten minutes had passed she was eating almost as ravenously as Nat, and the sparkle had come back to her eyes.

“Guess I don’t feel so like a boiled hen now,” she laughed quaintly, “but I’ll know what it is like. Will the Senator be long? He—he said he was going to take me to the jail.” She got up restlessly and began to pace the room like a caged bear. The secretary laughed.

“You wouldn’t be the best patient if you were sick, Kid,” said he, “but there’s the Senator’s step. You’ve not learned to wait well.”

Kits didn’t laugh, she was too excited. Somehow she found Nat’s hand and grabbed it. That helped her. Nat was nearer in understanding what a big minute this was to her. Only now did she realize what her fears had been concerning the fate of her darling dad.

Senator Abways, having made up his mind just what he was going to do, went straight ahead.

He beckoned Kits and Nat, who followed him closely; there were many passages, many stairs; finally they were out in the street, climbing into the big automobile which carried them swiftly and silently down many back streets to the rear of the city jail.

What a grim building it was! Kits’ heart pounded furiously. It made her just sick with pity to think of any human beings caged up in such a place, but when it came to her dad—ah! it was so terrible she felt even her courage fail her. She wanted to escape the ordeal before her even whilst she longed to fly to her father’s arms. But—would Silent Sylvester, the jailed prisoner, be the *same* as that big-hearted, adventure-loving dad of hers, with his reckless ways and warm generosity?

Up went Kits’ chin. She had to be her father’s daughter. That meant she had to go through with her job,—smiling! Down the cold, stone passages went Senator Abways side by side with the Governor of the jail. They were talking together in low tones—arguing, it seemed.

Kits heard one sentence spoken by the Senator and it thrilled her.

“I’ve gambled on my faith in a man’s loyalty before, Ipsley, and I’ll take the chance now,” said he. And Kits understood.

Presently, they had reached the prison door—the bolts were thrust back, the key turned. Then, Abways glanced round. In the gloom of that dark

place Kits saw his reassuring smile.

“I’ll give you ten minutes, child,” he said, “to make your father my offer. He is free, if he chooses, to ride with us to the rustler headquarters and help me in getting my girl safely back. If we succeed or fail, it’s all one as far as he is concerned. He must come back here—and answer the charges against him. He rides—for the honour of his band.”

Kits did not reply. The door of the cell was open—and she went right in.

A man was standing by the narrow bed on which he had been seated. One swift glance was enough and Kits’ vague fears had vanished.

Running forward, she flung herself into her father’s arms.

“Dad!” she cried, “dad!—my own daddy-pops!”

Silent Sylvester’s handsome face paled. He was a big man—bigger even than the Senator—but he was trembling now as he held his only child.

“What does it mean, Kits?” he asked. “They can’t have jailed a kid-girl!”

Tears were running down her cheeks, but she managed to answer.

“Senator Abways brought me, dad. Rattler Bob and his bunch have broken away from the band—and they’ve taken the Senator’s girl Jill to the River Caves. Dorrock and our boys tried to get her away, but—well—she wasn’t there then—and the Rattler bluffed them. It near came to a fight. The Rattler wanted you to pay for the Selby Creek business. Now, he’s got Jill—and—it’s up to us to save her for the honour of the Cherokee Boys—and *more*. For I love her, dad. We’ll have to go, and—the Senator takes your word that you’ll come back here after,—and stand your trial—not for murder—but for—well! rustling.”

She paused breathless, glancing up at her father, but he was looking over her head at the man in the doorway. And it was to Senator Abways that Silent Sylvester gave his reply as man to man.

“The boys who follow my lead don’t fight over kid-girls,” he said, in that deep, musical voice of his, as he held Kits close. “And I thank you, Senator Abways, for letting me have the chance to put things straight. I’ll ride to the River Caves—and—God helping me—claim your lass and see you have her back safe and unhurt. Then, I’ll come back to this cell and face my trial—and take my medicine, though it’s good to know—you’ve got the truth about Lawrence.”

Senator Abways came into the cell.

He was holding out his hand, and after the briefest hesitation Sylvester gripped and wrung it.

“I’ve heard more tales than that of the Selby Creek affair, Sylvester Rendallen,” said Abways quietly, “and when you stand your trial I shall be in the witness-box to see you get—justice.”

Silent Sylvester gave a faint cry at sound of that name—and covered his eyes with his hand.

A moment later he looked up. The Senator had his arm round Kits.

“You owe much to this daughter of yours, Sylvester,” said Abways. “Sure, it’s of our daughters we are thinking now. Come.”

And Silent Sylvester came.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE RIVER CAVES

So, after all, Curly had cheated her when he pretended that all he wanted was to help Kits and Nat take her back to Los! That was Jill's bitter thought as she rode with the rustlers across the prairie, down long, bleak ravines, through orchards and valleys, till they came to that grimmest and gloomiest of strongholds set in a mountain gorge and known to Silent Sylvester's band as the River Caves.

After some quarrelling and arguing, Curly had succeeded in having Jill mounted on a spare horse and seeing she rode beside him.

The man nicknamed "Tiger" had been dead against allowing this, but the other rustlers had upheld Curly, who was a favourite with all.

Poor Jill! Over and over again tears brimmed in her eyes as she thought of that other Curly, kindly, chivalrous, somehow wistful, who had talked about the mother who watched and waited all the while in the distant home.

It seemed to Jill that that mother's watching would be vain. For Curly was ruffling it with these boon comrades of his, taking little or no notice of the girl who rode by his side, though he spoke boldly enough of the ransom coming from Los and the time he and his pals would have with the dollars down in 'Frisco.

The Tiger got in a snarl here and there, but, on the whole, the rustlers were all applause for the boy who had planned to bring a prize to the River Caves.

Jill would have liked to thrust her fingers deep in her ears to shut out the sound of all that talk, and Curly's loud laugh, but it was no use, and now, here they were at the famous spot where the Cherokee Boys had so long defied the local police. Jill looked up at the plateau some hundred feet above them, seeing the sentry peering down but not knowing in the least how they could reach such an eyrie.

Nor was she to learn, for, at the junction where two mountain streams rushed tumultuously together, the men dismounted, and Curly himself lifted Jill from the saddle, getting busy in tying a big handkerchief over her eyes. As he did so he stooped and whispered in her ear:

“Play game, Jill. We’ll see it through together. Play game, little chum.”

Then he was shouting to the Tiger to lend him a smoke.

But Jill’s pulses were leaping in sudden hope. Scales seemed to have fallen from her blindfolded eyes. So Curly was straight. He was play-acting, because somehow it was the only way. He had been trapped, same as she, and had bluffed just so as to save her from the Tiger’s clutches.

How thankful Jill was to have known this before undertaking a climb in the dark.

Were these steps she was mounting?—and could that be the rushing of a river on its way down the hillside? Then—she had been thrust forward into some sort of cage, with Curly still beside her, and was aware of being drawn up—up—high—over the rocks, till she must have reached that platform above. Again, the strong hand which had held hers all the while drew her out, guiding her over the rocky ground, till she and her captor paused together and he unfastened the bandage.

It needed all Jill’s courage to hold herself erect, as she saw she was standing in a large cave—the very largest she had ever seen—with the man known as Rattler Bob before her.

The self-styled “Chief” of the Cherokee Boys looked at the girl in amaze—then at Curly.

“Say,” he asked, “so Tiger & Co. have herded the lambs back to the fold, eh?”

Curly threw back his head.

“I sure met your bunch, Rattler,” he replied easily, “as I was bringing the girl along here. I’m one of the band, with same rights as the rest. What does it matter to me whether you or Sylvester’s ‘boss’ here? Nothing at all! But it matters a whole lot that I should get plum share in the ransom of a girl I took off the Indians.”

Rattler Bob’s eyes narrowed.

“So that’s your game, eh?” he sneered. “Well, we’ll see to it. If you’re all in with us we’ll play you fair. But the main thing is that the girl is here! We’ll keep her close, too, till we hear from Los.”

Jill caught her breath, whilst Curly went on:

“We’d better have the cards on the table, Rattler,” said he. “Are you going to bargain for Sylvester’s life against the Kid?”

Rattler Bob laughed.

“Gee!” he retorted, “Silent Sylvester’s got his quietus. He sat in the chair last week, and is buried and forgotten by now. The boys are coming in fast. Dorrock and his bunch mean to join in. As to the girl, she’ll keep Abways’ paws off us. We’ve got news of a rich hold-up. We’re riding to Kinglake to-morrow. Of course, you’ll come. We go ahead now we’ve got Sylvester’s swaddling-clothes off us.”

“Ah!” said Curly, in odd tones, “so Sylvester’s dead? I *wonder* now.”

Rattler Bob snarled again.

“You can keep your wondering,” he replied angrily. “What I want to know—are you coming to the hold-up at Kinglake to-morrow?”

“No,” said Curly. “I’m sure not.”

There was a pause. Rattler Bob’s look meant trouble. Several of the rustlers had come in and stood by listening.

“You’ve gotta play square, Curly,” said Rattler. “You can’t play coyote with us. Are you in police pay—or what? Has Dorrock landed you on us, eh?”

“No,” said Curly, “to both questions. I’m staying in the River Caves till the Senator sends along his ransom. You bet, Bob, if you’d located the Koh-i-noor, you wouldn’t be leaving it to the boys to take care of, whilst you rode out in search of a dollar bill.”

Curly’s tones were bantering and the rustlers laughed. Rattler scowled, but he was too shrewd to quarrel with a popular boy. So he changed round.

“You’re the stuff, Curly,” he approved, “and you’re right. We won’t trouble the Kinglake folk this awhile. It’s the girl we’re holding—and if all’s true Senator Abways will pay our price.”

A murmur of approval went round the gang.

Rattler Bob was a rare hustler in getting their fortunes made! And yet—already some of the men were regretting the split with old pals. If Dorrock had come back to-day he would have been welcomed.

“I guess,” said Curly simply, “the poor Kid is tuckered out. Is Mollie Manways round, or Sadie Flanders?”

“Mollie’s over on the ledge, washing,” struck in one of the rustlers good-naturedly. “I’ll give her a shout; she’ll keep her eyes skinned on the Kid.”

Jill was glad enough to hear there were women in these caves, and the little fluffy-haired woman with the wide mouth and freckled face, who came in soon after, looked kind enough.

“Hand the Kid over,” she said. “I’ll see she doesn’t beat it. Not much chance there. She don’t look much like running away either. Say, Kid, come with me anyways, and so long as you behave yourself you’ll come to no harm.”

Jill went reluctantly. She hated leaving Curly—and was disappointed to see that the latter never so much as turned his head in her direction.

This “nest” amongst the mountains seemed a most bewildering place—the ledge ran back into the mountain itself, forming a series of large caves. Below the ledge the ground fell away sheer.

Half a dozen men could have guarded the place against an army.

No one, so Jill thought, would *ever* be able to rescue her from here. Mollie Manways proved to be the wife of one of the rustlers. She did not have much to say to Jill, but gave her food and told her to lie down on a mattress in an inner cave. Jill was too tired to argue or even think. Her brain was in confusion! She went to sleep, asking herself whether Curly were traitor or true,—friend or foe. She had not solved the problem before drifting into the land of dreams.

During the next two days Jill was kept prisoner in that inner cave. Mollie Manways gave her meals—and a task of sewing. Two curly-haired children came creeping in to her for a game of play too. There was nothing actually to alarm or scare her.

Nor did she see a sign of Rattler Bob—or Curly. At the end of the two days the woman who guarded her came into the cave in a great state of excitement.

“There’s going to be trouble, Kid,” said she, “and seems you’re at the bottom of it. D’you know who is standing down there at the River’s Meet telling the boys you’ve gotta be given up?”

Jill sprang to her feet.

“Is it my dad?” she asked breathlessly. “Is it Senator Abways?”

The woman laughed dryly.

“Chuck it!” she retorted, “not likely. River Caves isn’t real healthy for Senators. No, it’s Silent Sylvester—the chief who Rattler Bob has been



telling the boys had sat in the electric chair at Los. Rattler said that Slim had brought the news and then gone off to New York on private business—but he lied. Silent Sylvester’s down there—and there’s going to be trouble. You come ’long.”

Jill drew herself up very straight. She hated to own she was afraid of Rattler Bob—yet it was truth.

Outside the caves, on the wide plateau, the rustlers were standing about in knots. Some were talking excitedly in undertones, others were smoking and staring towards Rattler Bob, who, with the Tiger beside him, stood looking over and down to the place where far below them Silent Sylvester—seated on a powerful grey mustang—had delivered his speech and demanded not only the surrender of Jill but the company of his whole band at the old rendezvous in Grasdale Hollow.

“If you’re the same Cherokee Boys who’ve ridden with me these years,” he added, in ringing tones, “you’ll obey your chief. It’s no trap—and no fight. Seems to me though there’s a whole lot to be cleared up, and it may be I shall be resigning my place amongst old chums. You’ll not fail me.”

There was just a brief pause. Rattler Bob looked round. He had been paving the way for this, but he was not *too* sure of his men. Would they go over to his rival?

It needed a bold bid—and the man knew it. His glance rested on Jill’s fair face and a smile curled his lips.

He held a big card there—and he meant to play it boldly. Turning his back on the man below, he beckoned his comrades together.

“You’ve heard the fellow who calls himself Silent Sylvester,” he snarled, “and you can read for yourself. He’s going to get clear himself at the expense of the boys. He’ll take the Senator’s girl here to pay his ransom,—leaving us to clear his debts! Say, what’s the answer to be? You’ve got to choose right now. Are you going to take me as boss of the gang? I’ve not got much of the tongue-twist myself, but you know what it means. Sylvester’s out to disband the old crew. If you go back with him, you can see the end of it. If you stay with me, why! we’ll hold up some prizes worth the taking and laugh at the whole bunch of police from Los to ’Frisco! Say,—is it the River Caves—or a black jail, boys?”

They yielded—at once, answering him with a shout. They were desperadoes, all, and had always chafed over Sylvester’s restrictions. Now

they saw a leader after their own heart. At least—so it was with the majority. And it was no moment to speak to those who hung back!

Rattler Bob advanced again to the ledge. This time he and Tiger had Jill between them.

“Here’s the Senator’s dandy girl,” called the Rattler, with a curse, “and here she’ll remain as hostage for the Senator’s good behaviour. If he interferes with the band which has chosen *me* its chief, Mister Sylvester, he’ll know who has gotta pay. That’s the answer you can take back to Los, see? And that’s all you get for playing with a foot in two camps. If Dorrock and his boys are with you, they can talk to me.”

Silent Sylvester rose in his stirrups.

“Boys!” he cried, addressing the men who now crowded behind Rattler Bob, “I’m not speaking with the jackal there who was out to steal my place as soon as I was jailed for his crime. But I ask you if this is your answer. It used not to be the way of the Cherokee Boys to shield themselves behind kid-girls. If you’re the men I believed you, you’ll give up the girl. I ask you, as your chief. I could have brought my boys—your comrades—to enforce my command, but it couldn’t be done! It would be civil war—against comrades and chums of old standing. I am here—alone. And if it is the last time I give an order to my loyal band, I give it now.”

A murmur arose—but Rattler Bob silenced it. He had placed his pistol at Jill’s head.

“If you try to raise a mutiny in my band, Sylvester,” he called, “I’ll shoot the girl right now! If you bring Dorrock and the boys or Los police against the River Caves, the girl will die. There’s your answer and the last one you get. So you can chew it which way you like!”

And—with the Tiger still guarding the prisoner he held—Rattler Bob drew back out of sight.

Silent Sylvester had played his last card—and failed. He knew that only too well, as he turned his horse’s head and rode away down the bank of the stream to where, below in the ravine to the left, his return was anxiously awaited by three people.

## CHAPTER XXI

### JILL THE HOSTAGE

“If we only knew,” moaned Kits, “whether Curly is loyal—or whether he’s playing double for Rattler Bob!”

The four who had come so confidently to save Jill were standing in a shallow cave not far from that stronghold of rustlers. Silent Sylvester’s face was even grimmer than the Senator’s. It was a terrible blow to Sylvester to find that so many of his followers had proved disloyal to him.

Like many another, the rustler chief was learning the bitterness of having lighted a fire and not being able to put it out. He had prided himself on his band of wild adventurers. Lawless he knew them, and yet their slate had been clean with regard to any acts of violence. They had robbed the rich and given to the poor, as Robin Hood of old had done or the gallant Rob Roy of Scottish fame. But they had shown a certain chivalry in their misdeeds which had thrown a glamour about them and won love rather than hate, till Rattler Bob and his like, creeping in, had blackened the whole band’s reputation.

And now—Silent Sylvester knew what it meant to reap what he had sown. Senator Always paced up and down the cave.

“What is to be done next?” he groaned; “what do you advise? My girl must be rescued—even if it is necessary to bring the whole army of police to storm that lair of robbers.”

Sylvester shook his head.

“That’s the trouble, Always,” he said gravely; “Rattler Bob is a villain—and the girl is in his power. Likely she has not a friend up there to help her. Rattler Bob will not mind keeping his threat if we push things. I guess I can hardly say what’s best. The band is on the watch. The secret entrance will be guarded. What I should advise is that we ride back to the Hollow and consult with Dorrock and his boys. It may be that after all the sight of them with me to lead them may change the Rattler’s bunch in their choice. They won’t want to fight old comrades—and I could make them an offer. It’s a gamble. I can’t say how deep Rattler Bob has his claws into his men, but we may win—and it’s worth trying.”

“Anything,” groaned Abways, “anything to save Jill. When I saw her up there with those men—I—well! I guess I’ve learned how murder’s done.”

“We’ll ride back to the Hollow,” said Sylvester. “There’s nothing to be gained by waiting here.”

To his surprise Kits hung back, her hand in Nat’s.

“We’re not coming, dad,” said she quietly. “Guess we two can’t help any, and there’s a job we might be able to do. Only, will you trust us? We don’t want you to ask questions, we just want you both to know we’re out to save Jill some way.”

Sylvester hesitated.

He knew his girl’s daring, her reckless courage, her devotion to himself,—and he was afraid for her. Yet he could not refuse his trust. Kits was looking better than when she reached Los. She had fought against sickness and conquered by sheer strength of will and wisdom in doing all she could to help recovery. The bright colour had returned to her cheeks, and her chin was held high.

Sylvester’s smile was whimsical as well as tender.

“Kits! Kits!” he replied. “Well, have your way. It’s up to you to do all you can. We fight side by side.”

“Yup!” agreed Kits contentedly. “And Nat’s a chum. He’ll help me—and—we’re going to do our bit.” She slipped forward as she spoke, and thrust a small, brown hand into the Senator’s grasp. “We’ll save Jill,” said she, “and you’ll save my daddy-pops from Los jail.”

The Senator looked down into the eager face. He had come to know and admire this little rustler girl immensely during the last few days.

“We’ll both play the game, Kits,” he replied. And Kits was content.

It was characteristic of Nat to accept the rôle given him by Kits without asking questions. He was there when she wanted him, though he had not the ghost of a notion what idea she had got in that busy little head of hers.

Nor did Kits enlighten him till they had watched the two elders ride away down the valley.

“The Rattler’s men will be watching,” said she; “they won’t recognize Abways—and they don’t know we’re here. They will be reckoning on dad going to the Hollow—and they’ll know how many days must go before they

return. We'll have to slip in before then, Nat, but it'll be a race—even with the horses.”

Nat wrinkled his nose.

“Are we goin’ to burgle the caves and bring Jill away?” he asked meekly.

Kits shook her head.

“Not likely. Rattler Bob’s too cute for that. He grows eyes under his back hair. But there’s one thing he’s not reckoning with.”

Nat was quite at a loss.

“And that?” he asked.

“Indians,” replied Kits, in cryptic tones.

Nat stared. Then he rubbed the back of his neck. From the first hour of their acquaintance he had felt Kits to be too clever for him.

“Indians?” he repeated. “You don’t mean to say there are redskins up there?”

Kits shook him playfully.

“Silly!” she scolded, “but you’re half-way there. Redskins *will* be climbing to the River Caves—but we’ve got to bring them. You’ve not forgotten Grey Hawk, Nat—or this?”

And she stretched out her wrist, showing the bracelet of plaited grass and feathers which the Choctaw chief had given her.

“It’s a sort of talisman,” explained Kits; “Grey Hawk was on the war-path when we met him before, but he likes to pay his debts. Dad had dealings with his bit of a tribe long ago. He liked them. He said they had fine ideals of gratitude. We’re going right now to prove it, Nat. We’re going back to that village amongst the mountains and I’ll have a pow-pow with Grey Hawk. He’ll help us save Jill. Indians are the cutest scouts and trackers in the universe. They’ll get inside those River Caves—though it’s not so much that as the getting *around* them. Rattler Bob’s not counting on Indians paying him a visit. They’ll get the wind up at sight of a whole bunch of savages in their war-paint. Grey Hawk will play them better than I can show him how to do it—and if he uses one of the secret entrances it will be the lower one up along the dry river-bed. There’s another entrance though, which Rattler may or may not know. It’s up there—and leads down into the back of the inner cave. We’ll be getting in there and finding Jill, whilst every

rustler will be fighting the Indians. They never will guess that those Choctaws have anything to do with Jill, and so they won't be getting away with her. See?"

Nat grinned widely.

"You're some girl, Kits," said he, "but—will there be time? Will the Indians be here before Sylvester's back?"

Kits nodded.

"They've gotta be," said she; "for Rattler will be having Jill away miles from here if he thinks his boys will join round with dad. He's cute as any coyote. But even he's not as cute as an Indian."

"We'd better saddle up then," said Nat stolidly. "Gee! I'd be glad to see old Curly crawling round. I hate to think he was playing false all the while. He was a pal."

Kits shook her head.

"Curly's no rustler," said she, "and no coyote. Seems as if he'd played bad on us, but I don't believe it. He was cornered, same as Jill was. Rattler Bob won't give him a chance of showing up good. Still, I'll trust Curly. He's not got it in him to play down on pals."

And Nat's face brightened as he listened. He would have hated to be convinced that Curly had betrayed their trust.

Leading their horses, the two adventurers passed down the valley. They could not see the plateau or caves from where they passed, but all seemed quiet enough. It was not likely that the rustlers would be riding out on any raid or hold-up when they knew enemies would be visiting their headquarters.

Once out on the prairie Kits was into the saddle like a bird. Impulsive as she was she did not seem to give the dangers they were facing a thought. There was a double reward in view for success! Not only would she be rescuing the only girl friend she had ever known, but she would be winning Senator Abways to fight on their side for dad's freedom.

Did they reckon as they rode out across the purple sage that not only might some fatal accident overtake them in reaching those heights, but that they might find the lodges of the Choctaws empty, and the Arkansas waiting to ambush them and carry them back to a distant prisoner hut in the tunnelled valley?

As both Kits and Nat knew, that ride could not be accomplished in a day—or even a week. But then the chances were that Sylvester and the Senator would not locate Dorrock and his boys for a considerably longer time.

They must take the chance, but Kits had one plan in her head.

“We’ll make for the foothills and Nellie’s homestead,” said she; “it’s just possible Jake may be there, and he’d come with us—sure. He knows the Rockies considerably better than we do, Nat, and if he’d go with us, we’d reach that village in half the time.”

Nat nodded. He left Kits to do the talking, but this last plan of hers pleased him well. It lightened a responsibility he was not capable of shouldering. Though he was ready to do anything in his power, he could not lead Kits by short routes when the whole journey was strange ground to him.

And besides, their horses were finished before they once more sighted the homestead—which stood out plainly enough with the foothills under their first mantling of snow.

“No more apples on those trees,” Nat was saying, as he pointed to a bare-branched orchard; but Kits interrupted with a glad cry.

“There’s Jake himself,” she sang. “I had it in my bones we should find him here. Jake! Jake, old sport, put down that gun of yours. It’s Kits—Kits Sylvester—come to bring you big news—and ask your help too.”

The rustler had come out of the house just as Kits cried out—and, seeing the riders, had raised his pistol as a preliminary greeting. He dropped the weapon quickly enough as he recognized the girl, and shouting to Nellie, vaulted over the fence, coming up with Kits and her companion as they reined in their horses.

Eagerly he looked at Kits.

“News of the Chief?” he asked. “Is Silent Sylvester alive still?—is——”

“He’s out of jail, Jake,” said Kits huskily, “and a lot depends on—on you and me and Nat as to whether he goes back to it again.”

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE INDIANS AGAIN

“Will it be much farther, Jake?”

Kits’ voice was brave enough, but there was a catch which told its own tale.

Jake swung on the path to look at her.

“Tired, Kid?” he asked.

“No,” said Kits, “it wasn’t that I was thinking of—but—there’s snow about.”

Jake nodded. He and Nat had been watching those black clouds sweeping down from those peaks. The wind was strengthening, and blew from the north. It was bitterly cold, and Kits was thankful for the warm coat Nellie had insisted on her wearing over her own leather suit. The horses had been left tethered in a cave some distance below where they now stood. Jake had seen that they had food and water before he piled up the rocks against wolves.

Kits had done well in her choice of a guide, for Jake the Grip had a dash of Indian blood amongst his forbears and knew these mountain-paths as few knew them. He knew more too. He was weather-wise, and those tearing black clouds carried a warning.

They were likely to be caught in a snowstorm—and if so, their plight would be hard. Bad enough for the men—but how about Kits?

She stood sturdy and erect on the narrow path, watching the clouds which gave the illusion of being literally hurled down from those distant peaks.

“We shan’t reach the place where those Choctaws have located themselves before night,” said Jake.

Another pause. Then Nat struck in briskly:

“It’s going to snow in proper style. We’ll have to find a cave, Jake. Lucky we’ve got supplies.”

“We ain’t going to bury ourselves in any old cave,” retorted Jake, with decision. “Where did you hail from, bo’? Why, if we once got in—and the



snow lay the wrong way for us, we'd be buried alive. When the snow comes—as it's coming—it doesn't melt where it drifts—not in one week or two. All right for the bears. They're used to it and would likely end our troubles if we intruded, but—I'd rather stick to the open—even if it means being snowed under quick. See?"

Nat did see: he knew Jake was speaking out plainly because it was a desperate situation. If the snow came as they feared, they could not escape.

"You're right, Jake," said Kits. "I was thinking that way myself, but—you see those crags—leaning against each other up there? Seems as if the snow would lie up against the one—and leave a shelter between."

Jake nodded.

"That's so, Kits," he replied admiringly. "You've got scouts' eyes, Kid. But we'll need all our grit to reach those crags. And you——"

"I'm coming," said the girl; "remember, it's each for himself—and whoever gets through *must* reach the Indians."

She bent her curly head against the blast, putting her shoulders square as a fighter should do. And at first she led the way.

But it couldn't last, for the fierce wind, ice-cold in its breath, was beating down from the heights, bringing the cruel burden of snow. Thicker and thicker fell the flakes,—slantwise with the wind, beating against the three travellers as they struggled on their way. But this was merely the beginning. Kits could still lead, whilst the frozen particles *only* beat on face and breast and legs like warning hands, urging her back, yet yielding to her determination to press forward. But—as the three stood on a wider ledge where it was possible to gather close together, they heard the shriller shriek of the hurricane and knew the real battle was beginning.

"We'd better stay here," shouted Jake in Kits' ear; "we couldn't reach those crags. Guess a polar bear wouldn't do it! Steady, Kits, back against the rock."

They reeled back only just in time as that mad tempest came rushing down the gorge shrieking like a horde of wild Indians.

Kits closed her eyes and lay flat against the stone. Jake gripped her by one arm, Nat by the other. All three were powerless to move. The snow was suffocating, terrible, each frozen particle struck and stung like a whip. They hid their faces in their coats and fought fear which might easily have become frenzy. Presently Kits felt Jake move, dragging her slightly forward.

The terrific snow shower had passed, whirling downwards to the lower slopes, and as Kits, stunned and dazed by the ferocity of the blizzard, moved a few steps, the snow fell from her in caked masses.

The movement saved them all from the beginning of snow coma. Their brains were clouded, their minds dull. Jake, with his wider experience, knew the symptoms and sought the path. He found it with difficulty, but the snow came almost to his knees, he had to struggle back on to the ledge.

Kits stretched out a stiff left arm.

“Look!” she screamed, making herself heard in the momentary lull. “The crags are clear. You—could shelter. The blizzard—travelled—sideways. That slope’s clear—now. It’s your chance—quick! You *must* go. Jake—Nat—go.”

They heard and knew what she meant. With all her high courage she realized she could never reach those crags. They must go, she was telling them, without her.

They could have laughed at the idea, only it stirred something deeper than laughter. Kits, a mere kid-girl, could be content to sink down to her death so that those she loved escape with life.

But they didn’t trouble to answer. Nat led the way now. Jake found room on the path they had struck to walk abreast of Kits, his arm round her waist. The snow was only about two feet deep here—but the ice-cold of it deadened all feeling in their lower limbs. For half an hour they struggled on. Then—Nat had reached a rock—and scrambled up; Jake, questioning the boy’s wisdom till he could make sure they were not on the brink of some chasm, shouted to Kits to remain where she was, whilst he fought forward to see that all was well.

It had begun to snow again, but the wind was not so fierce, the flakes were much smaller, so that they formed a drifting veil, hiding obstacles which were not close.

Kits had seen Nat wave his hand. It seemed as if he and Jake would have no great difficulty in reaching the shelter above. But—not if they were hampered by her. She knew she could *not* climb those rocks—just as she knew that her companions would find it physically impossible to aid her. They could never all three reach the crags, but those two might—if she were not with them. Kits turned and took a few desperate, plunging steps through the snow. The white veil—was helping to hide her—helping to cover her

tracks too. Pray Heaven she might go—so that the others could save themselves.

She could hear the shrieking of the wind amongst the mountain passes; all around her lay snow-covered crags, boulders, narrow paths which might lead over hidden precipices. The white veil of falling snow confused her; she stumbled and fell on her knees.

Ah, yes,—she was on her knees. She must pray—perhaps for the last time. It was so like Kits to be praying for the dearest daddy-pops in the world,—for Nat—Jake—Curly—Jill—Jill who was her friend and sister, though it had been she, Kits, that had helped first to trap her and bring her into the clutches of the rustlers. . . .

“Our Father,” whispered Kits—growing dull in thought, confused in memory—“don’t let Jake or Nat find me. Guess—guess—they want to live. So do I!—but—we—we can’t all;—it’s too far—and the snow’s deep—deep. That can’t be Jake calling me—but, if it is, Thou—Thou’lt make him give up—and—go on to the crags. It’s—it’s——”

She had fallen sideways against a rock; there was a queer singing sound in her ears—like the sigh of waves as they draw back into the deep. The snow drifted and spun in curious eddies around, but it wasn’t just the snow she was watching. There were figures looming in queer shapes around her, figures which she mistook for phantoms—such as might come to dying eyes. Cries rang high—familiar—yet strange. She could hear the drifting syllables—“Neenemooshain wee-yea! Nee—nem—ooshain—wee-yea!”

It was the old Indian refrain which she had listened to so often. These fantastic figures—with fluttering feathers and blankets—were Indians, storm-driven as themselves; but whether friends or foes she did not know, since it was impossible to distinguish the colours of their bedraggled head-dresses. In the half-light the questing savages appeared like bedraggled birds lately saved from the river.



*“Manitou!”*

“Nee—nemooshain—wee-yea!” Kits carried the lament with her into the realms of unconsciousness, only vaguely aware at the last that those weird figures were bending over her—carrying her away—through the snow—up winding paths, till they halted at the vast opening of a cave—too vast, it seemed, ever to be closed by drifted snow! Into the darkness the band of

Indians hurried, sheltered at last from the storm-blast. Outside, a second blizzard hurled itself downward from the snowy heights, whilst echoes thundered through the rocky passages like mocking phantoms shouting their mighty threats.

Impassive and silent the Indians threaded their way, till the blaze of a fire showed them other comrades gathered in warmth and safety.

Without a second glance at the girl they had carried with them, the last-comers laid Kits down beside two other bound and gagged prisoners, not even troubling to secure her before hurrying to join their companions around the fire, where welcome warmth set chilled limbs aglow and brought grim smiles of content to the stern mouths.

What matter for the storm? The “Manitous” of the red men had brought them to shelter!

To-morrow—the sun would shine.

But Kits, opening her eyes presently, shuddered in sudden terror as she awoke to consciousness and the discovery that she lay in a mountain cave, with a large party of Indian warriors—gathered around a mighty fire, the smoke from which stung her eyes and prevented her seeing clearly.

*Who* were the red men who had rescued her? And where, oh! where were Nat and Jake?

The last question was answered immediately, for Kits, raising herself on her elbow, had made the discovery that her two companions lay—secured by “prisoner strings”—beside her.

Nat and Jake, who must be freed at once!

Kits contrived to thrust a chilled hand into her pocket for a knife. The Indians were too busy to notice her movements. They were talking, singing, giving every demonstration of the fact that they had lately returned from a successful attack on enemies. Kits shuddered and leaned forward to cut the thongs which fastened Nat’s two hands.

Nat and Jake had recognized her, and their eyes spoke their welcome. But, before she could set either of them free, an angry cry came from one of the braves who rose from his place by the fire, advancing threateningly towards the place where the prisoners lay.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### CURLY EXPLAINS

“It’s no fault of mine,” grumbled Mollie Manways, dashing a tear angrily from her eyes. “It’s Rattler Bob’s orders that you should go into the prison cave at the back of the lair. He’s mad as a wet hen, is Bob, and reason too, since two of the boys rode away from the River Caves last night and Rattler can’t size up how many more will quit before Sylvester comes back.”

Jill’s arms slowly relaxed from around the curly-headed Jennie to whom she had been telling a story.

“Sylvester,” she echoed, “*will* he come back?”

“Sure!” snapped Mollie, her arms set on her hips, her manner only stormy because she wished to hide her emotion. “He’ll be back too soon with Dorrock’s boys at his heels. Then the trouble begins. Rattler Bob’s a true rattlesnake in his venom when he’s crossed. He figured to be chief of the Cherokee Boys without a mouse daring to squeak against it. But it’s turned out wrong. Silent Sylvester may be a tenderfoot dressed up for rustling, but he’s got a tongue could wile a trout out of the stream. If it weren’t for me an’ kids my man would have ridden out from the caves before now. The Rattler’s not the boss who’ll ever take the boys to a hand-up. He’s no master. For why? That’s easy! He’s a coward under all his bluff, same as Tiger. But it’s no use talking. If Silent Sylvester rides back it’ll only make a black business blacker, for they’ll never get into the caves without a fight. What’s to do I don’t know,—but you’d better come along, Jill. I daren’t keep you here a minute longer. It’s the order—that you’re to be taken to what’s called the prison cave. I only wish I could save you from it.”

Jill stood up. She was vaguely alarmed by the woman’s manner, but, though she had heard the Rattler’s threats, she hardly believed them. Even he would not dare shoot Senator Abways’ girl.

Mollie Manways was of another opinion. The Rattler was desperate—and he hadn’t spared the most popular police officer in the force when Inspector Lawrence crossed his path and purpose at Selby Creek.

But it was no use telling Jill in plain language that her danger was ugly enough. Better let her go—and take her chance if she must, though Mollie Manways would have cursed Rattler Bob had she dared.

Gentle Jill, with her blue eyes and sunny hair, had won the heart of the rustler's little wife, and she hated sending her to that lonely prison cave. All she could do she did—filling Jill's pockets with biscuits and at the last moment thrusting a knife into her unwilling hand.

“Bless you, Kid,” she whispered. “Jennie and I'll miss you sure.”

Jill followed the man who had been waiting for her along through a series of caves till they came to three steps leading upwards; at the top of the steps were two rocks with just room enough between for her to pass.

One man—a stranger—stood aside.

“In you go,” he said roughly; “and if you squeak it'll be the worse for you.”

Jill hesitated. Beyond the rocks lay darkness—she could see nothing, though she guessed this must be the prison cave—as sinister as it was well chosen.

The man was in a hurry, it seemed, for as the girl drew back, he took her by the shoulders and pushed her forward with such violence that Jill staggered for a few paces, then lurched and fell.

The fall shook her and she did not attempt to rise for some seconds. The sound of grinding rock told her what was happening. She was a prisoner behind doors her slender strength could never hope to open. And oh, the blackness of that prison, the closeness of the atmosphere! The frightened girl could not even discover if she were alone.

Crawling back to the rock entrance, she beat upon it with helpless hands. She dared not cry aloud, though she put her lips to the crevice, calling softly through for “Help! Help! Help!”

No one heard, and Jill turned back to stare into the darkness and ask a question.

“Is there—anybody there? Is there—anybody there?”

No answer was returned! The place was silent.

Jill seated herself on the floor, twining her long arms round her knees—the very picture of despair. She was a prisoner doomed to an unknown fate should any danger overtake the band of rustlers. The minutes dragged slowly by. Towards evening she fancied she heard a considerable amount of noise mingled with shouts and hurrying footsteps. Then the noise died down, all was quiet.

Sylvester could *not* be here yet.

Jill, tired of asking questions without finding answers, laid her head down wearily on her knees.

What was it the rustler's wife had said? The men were deserting—and Rattler Bob was afraid more would follow a bad example.

If so,—what would he do with her?

Jill tried to fight her fear, but it would come creeping back, strengthened by the darkness around. If *only* she could have had a light. The blackness was so intense she could imagine all sorts of horrors lurking near and could have screamed aloud when a whisper actually reached her—coming from she knew not where.

“Jill.”

She had to place her hand over her mouth to keep back the cry. Her heart beat violently. Who had spoken her name? It must be a friend. And the poor girl was suffering in the reaction from despair.

“Yes,” she muttered, “who is it?”

“Curly. St! I'm coming in,—no—not by the entrance. Sit still, Kid, and speak in a whisper. Where are you? Say 'Here,' then count ten and repeat it.”

Jill obeyed. Her voice sounded strained, breathless. She grew faint with excitement, but tried to think hard of what Kits would do were she here.

Presently she became aware that some one was creeping towards her. She heard the dragging of his feet as he crawled and knew he wore long riding-boots.

“Jill!” A hand caught hers and held it. Jill gave a gasp.

“Oh, *Curly!*” was all she said, but the lad thrilled as he heard the thankful trust in those two words.

She was welcoming him back, this little pal of his, without even asking the reason for his desertion.

Curly had to steady his own voice before he questioned.

“Kid, did you think I was a rotter? Did you believe I was in with the Rattler's bunch? Did you think I'd planned to bring you along here?”

She nestled against his shoulder, crying softly.



“I didn’t know what to think at first, Curly. I couldn’t understand. You—you’ll forgive me?”

He stooped and kissed her cheek.

“Why, little sister Jill, of course I do. It’s not another girl would have believed again so quick. You’ll trust me now, Jill?”

“Always, Curly, always. For ever and ever.”

“That’s fine! It makes me feel I’m a man, Jill,—and I guess there’ll be a man’s work for me.”

“But, Curly,—what’s to do? Are you taking me away from the River Caves?”

“If only I could, Kid! if only I could! But I’m here to see no one else takes you. We’ll have to leave the rest to that great little Kits. She’ll be working. It must have been she who sent Silent Sylvester.”

“And now—can’t we get out and escape, Curly, by the way you got in?”

Curly thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out an electric torch. Flashing the light round, he showed the torn roof of the cave far above them.

Jill caught his arm.

“You never dropped from there, Curly? Why, you must be broken—all to bits.”

He laughed as he put away the light.

“Not too bad. My ankle’s damaged. I couldn’t run away with you, Jill; but anyhow we couldn’t climb up to the roof, dear, and there’s no other road at present.”

“Poor Curly! but—your ankle?”

“Never mind that. It’ll hold me up when I want both my legs. We shall be having visitors—soon, Jill.”

“Tell me,” she entreated, “tell me all the story? I’ll not be afraid now you’ll stand by me.”

“From the beginning, Jill? Well, it was when I saw the Tiger & Co. away over by the foothills that I guessed what the game would be. They were bound to know who you were,—and it was a case of their prisoner or mine. Also, if they claimed you—they would never have allowed me to come back to the River Caves. They looked on me as one of Sylvester’s boys. So I lied.

I had to lie good and strong, though I hated myself for doing it. I saw the question in your eyes, Kid, and it made me mad. I'd have given a whole lot to shout to you that I was playing straight for you,—but it couldn't be done. So—I bluffed, and came. The Tiger suspected me. He suspects me now. They're looking for me and—if they'd caught me napping it would have been *finis*. They think I've had a hand in sending some of the boys back to the Hollow—but I didn't do that. They're half-baked goods at best. But when Rinswold and Heckton slipped off I knew what it would be. The Rattler's threatening to shoot any man he catches deserting, but—he won't find it pays—he'll have the men against him—led by the Spider,—and it's then he may be making tracks with you. So, don't you worry any, Jill, for that entrance is narrow and I've got my revolver—if it comes to that.”

Jill shuddered.

“Oh, Curly, Curly, not that! They might shoot you—they might *kill* you—I can't bear it. And the mother at home, she—she'll be waiting—— You can't fail her, boy. Oh, to think I doubted you! Curly, I'm afraid.”

She was breaking down under the long strain, growing hysterical in her terror. Curly held her close.

“No, you ain't, Kid,” he urged. “You must put stiffenin' into your backbone and it'll all come right. Don't you see, it's *this* way—the only way—I'll be able to hold my head up—and ride back. Now, Jill, you'll be brave.”

Why did the appeal ring so urgent in his tones?

Jill knew—and drew herself away, thinking hard of Kits, thinking harder still of how she must help not hinder her chum in this tight corner. For there could be no mistaking the sounds which reached them from the caves beyond.

Loud curses, shoutings, pistol-shots drifted and blended in a curiously echoing hubbub. And then—the sound for which Curly at least had been listening so intently.

Men were running along the passage which divided the prison cave from the others. One—two—possibly three men—not more! Curly rose, once more drawing out his flashlight.

“Take it, Jill,” he whispered. “Say—you can help—that way. When the rock's down—I want to see the men without them seeing me. Can you do it?”

Jill's fingers clutched the torch.

"Yes," she answered. "I'll do it. God keep you safe, chum."

He kissed her—then crawled forward, waiting.

Crash! The rock rolled back—but the men who would have entered paused—staggering a pace or two as they were confronted by that slim young figure with its raised right hand.

"Hands up!" called Curly coolly. "Hands up, you skunks, or I'll shoot you for what you are!"

There were three men. Standing where Curly had placed her behind an angle of the rocky wall, Jill flashed the light upon those grim, swarthy faces.

Rattler Bob stood foremost, the Tiger slightly crouching behind him—whilst a third man remained farther back still. The Rattler had seen who was confronting him and swore—more at his companion this time.

"Didn't I tell you to wipe the young dog out?" he asked. "Out of my way, Curly,—or I shoot first."

"No, you don't," said Curly,—and stepped aside into the shadow. "Hands up before I count three or you're a dead man, Rattler Bob."

Reluctantly the rustler raised his arms, but, as he did so, the man behind thrust his pistol over his leader's shoulder and fired at all he could see of their antagonist.

Jill heard Curly's sharp intake of breath and cried out in terror.

"The girl's there all right," said the Tiger, chuckling.

But Curly laughed—and fired. The man whose treacherous shot had grazed his shoulder dropped.

The Rattler's arms swung down, but Curly's shout came pat.

"One—two—three——"

Sullenly the rustler again raised his hands, but the Tiger had crept to his leader's side.

"Curly, Curly!" wailed Jill, "you're hurt—there's blood on your coat. You——"

"Back, Kid," cried Curly—but he did not fire this time—for the Tiger had turned, and was running back down the passage. Slowly, too, Rattler

Bob was retreating, step by step—step by step. He was turning the corner—his arms still raised, but his face evil. He was out of sight.

Jill did not wait for Curly's permission, but ran forward as her chum sank on the rock.

“Listen,” she cried, “Sylvester must have come. There's a fight going on—still. Oh, Curly, let me bandage your arm.”

He waved her aside, rising giddily and trying with vain effort to raise that heavy rock back into place.

“The brutes,” he whispered, “the curs! They—they mean——”

But there was no need to tell Jill what those rustlers meant to do, since already down the passage came creeping the most dreaded of all foes—the long white streamers of smoke followed by the crackling and spitting of dry twigs heaped no doubt in the centre of the stone passage.

The Rattler had played a winning card.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE GIFT OF THE CHIEF

Were these Arkansas warriors who had rescued them from the blizzard only to torture them to death? Kits shielded her eyes with her hand, staring towards the threatening figure which with raised knife towered over her.

Though the smoke of the fire stung her eyes she could see the streaked face with its lines of yellow war-paint, the bear-claw clasp of the mantle, and embroidered leggings. But—it was only the briefest of glances Kits had bestowed on these things, for her eyes were riveted already on the dragged feathers of the savage's head-dress. *They were blue and yellow.*

The Indian was hesitating, wondering perhaps if it were not beneath his dignity to lay prisoner bands on a pale-face woman, when Kits thrust up her wrist. Round it she wore the bracelet given her by Grey Hawk.

“Manitou!” she cried, her voice ringing husky from cold and fatigue, “Manitou! It was the Chief of the Choctaws' gift—the gift of Grey Hawk to the Yengee maid who saved his life.”

The brave stooped low, taking the girl's wrist and staring with enigmatical eyes at the closely plaited feathers; then, gently dropping it, he sprang back to his companions around the fire.

Kits waited, her cheeks flushed crimson as she knelt there protectively over her still bound comrades.

But the sight of their chief's gift was sufficient. These were no spies, stealing up in search of a hidden village so that they might have a Government reward. These were comrades, friends of the Indian.

Several of the Choctaws again approached, and this time the upraised knives had no menace in them.

With a few swift strokes, the thongs of hide were severed, and one Indian, older than the rest, addressed Kits.

“My white sister comes on a strange errand,” he said, “for she is too young and tender to climb the mountains of mystery in winter. What do she and the pale-face chief seek? Is it the yellow gold which Yengees love,—or the skins of bear and otter?”

He spoke in his native tongue, but Kits understood enough to be able to answer.

“I am the daughter of the Big Gun Chief, the friend of the Choctaws,” she replied; “I have come because there is a boon I would ask and which the Chief—Grey Hawk—has promised already to grant. We come in haste, O friend; is there a way by which we can reach the village of your people?”

The man shook his head.

“The Yengee maid has seen the snow,” he replied, “and asks a foolish question. Yet, Eagle Arrow and his comrades are friends of the Big Gun Chief. Let the Yengees come to the fire and warm themselves, let them eat deer’s flesh and maize cakes—they are no longer prisoners; whilst tomorrow, if the way is clear, we will return to the lodges of my people.”

“What does he say, Kits?” muttered Nat. “It’s some good to have those straps off, but—say! are the redskins roasting us for holiday fun?”

Kits laid her hand on Nat’s sleeve.

“These are our friends—the subjects of Grey Hawk,” she replied. “If *only* the snow melts, boys, it is all—all going to be easy. But—it’s the *time* I’m thinking of—the time.”

“And you played the coyote getting away, little Kits,” added Jake tenderly. “*When* we found you gone—gee! it doesn’t do to think about; but almost at once we saw the brown birds skipping around—and then we thought it all up. Lucky for us we didn’t fire—but our fingers were too frozen.”

Eagle Arrow was making signs to them—and it would have been unwise to refuse the friendly invitation of the Indian’s gestures. Room was made for the strangers round the fire, food pressed upon them.

Kits had recovered her strength now, though her veins seemed on fire with burning heat after the icy chill.

Soon, the glowing warmth of the cave brought a heavy drowsiness to all; one after another the dark heads drooped, hands fell idle to the savages’ sides. One by one the Indians rolled themselves in dried blankets and slept. Kits stumbled away to a farther corner of the cave, unable any longer to keep her aching eyes open. She was asleep as soon as she had lain her head on her curved arms.

It was Jake who roused her. He did it regretfully, though he knew Kits would be the first to grumble if he had failed to do so.

“The Indians have found a way,—down the river, Kid,” said he. “I was afraid they’d be givin’ us the slip. For *sure* they were mighty friendly last night, but I guess I’ve never trusted a redskin yet! So—if you’re chummy with Eagle Arrow it’s sure time to ask for a pass to his village.”

Kits rubbed her two fists into sleepy eyes. Oh, how stiff she was! She felt no one ever could have been so stiff before, but she was game even with sleep still dazing her head. Eagle Arrow, surrounded by a party of braves, was talking eagerly; he inclined his head in dignified greeting at Kits’ approach.

“The White Fawn brings good fortune to the Choctaw people,” he said. “Lo, the snows are melting, the streams are free,—we shall reach our lodges amongst the valleys before noon. A message comes from the Chief—telling us to bring the White Fawn, who will be welcomed by her brothers of the Choctaw nation.”

Good news, indeed. Kits could have clapped her hands in joy, but she steadied herself to give more suitable reply.

An Indian never loses his dignity, and is sensitive about all sorts of etiquette.



*. . . Winning through at last.*

Jake and Nat allowed broad smiles, however, to light their travel-stained faces at the news.

This was a happy ending to a grim peril. And already they had left the cave—not by the front entrance, though! for the snow lay drifted there several feet high.



One by one the Indians were climbing down over a rocky stairway leading out to where beside a turgid torrent of yellow waters and half-melted snows lay half a dozen canoes.

Kits had no fear of trusting herself to Indian paddles. Down-stream they shot at racing speed. Yet Eagle Arrow, who sat paddle in hand, never stirred in his seat. Straight and true the frail bark fled like some autumn leaf down that foaming torrent. Kits clung to the sides of the canoe, and wondered if even an Indian *could* guide such a boat down such a chasm-like fall.

Down—down—down—thundering waters roaring, ice-cold spray and snow flung drenchingly over both occupants of the canoe. Down, as it seemed, to death,—then—swept outward and onward into a sheltered valley, where brown huts and clustered groups of natives told Kits they had arrived at last at their goal.

It was Grey Hawk who welcomed those three strangers of the pale-face nation who were his friends.

In spite of Kits pleading that her errand could not wait, he insisted that she and her companions must eat first. Kits shared her meal with the chief's gentle-eyed wife Morning Star, who affectionately embraced the Yengee maid, when she heard it was she who had saved her husband's life. She also told Kits the tale of how the tribe had successfully raided the village of the Arkansas and carried off many scalps. Kits cast one fearful glance towards the latter "trophies," though she tried to conceal her horror! and was truly thankful when Grey Hawk himself arrived to ask the errand which had brought the White Fawn to claim his promise.

Kits replied briefly.

Her sister, with the golden hair, whom Grey Hawk must so well remember, was in danger from wicked men. Would Grey Hawk and his braves come to save her? If so, she, the White Fawn, would show him her scheme,—and afterwards the Big Gun Chief himself would be thanking him.

Grey Hawk listened to the eloquent address and smiled.

"The White Fawn uses many words where one is enough," was his gentle rebuke. "It is a summons Grey Hawk could not refuse. The White Fawn says 'Come'—and lo! the braves of the Choctaws stand ready on the war-path even though winter snows be on the mountain slopes."

Kits held out both hands, bowing her head over those of the Chief.

“My father, the Yengee maid thanks you,” she murmured gratefully; “it was *because* she knew Grey Hawk was a chief whose word was true that the daughter of the Big Gun Chief came across the mountains of mystery.”

“The daughter of the Big Gun Chief did well,” replied Grey Hawk. “Already the braves of the Choctaws wait upon the war-path. If the White Fawn is ready we will start at once.”

Kits drew a deep sigh of relief.

Even now, delayed though they had been, they might reach the River Caves before her father brought the rest of the band to threaten the rebel comrades who defied them from their own stronghold. Only Kits could guess how it would go to Silent Sylvester’s heart should he be obliged to raise his pistol even against Rattler Bob—the man who had most injured him!

It was a chill and adventurous journey—that one of return. The Indians used the river as far as possible, but even then there were weary hours of clambering over rocky passes and down deep, snow-covered gorges. Kits fared more easily than her comrades, since the Indians contrived a kind of hammock in which she was seated, and carried by two stalwart braves. This way of travelling had its advantages, though, as Kits felt herself swaying to and fro over some deep abyss or gloomy chasm, she felt she would rather have trusted to her own legs! But—the longest road comes to an end at last—and how Kits gripped Nat’s hand as they came once more in sight of those grey heights and jutting ledge.

Sylvester and his men had not returned—but as the Indians came down the ravine, Kits gave a cry of amaze at sight of two rustlers advancing with raised arms.

They were the men who had quitted Rattler Bob’s gang after the challenge of Sylvester—and recognizing Jake and Kits, they came hurrying up.

They brought news too: news of how Jill was shut up in the prison cave, whilst Rattler Bob had sworn to shoot her at the first attack of the Cherokee Boys.

This much Kits already knew, excepting only Jill’s place of imprisonment. She looked at Nat and Jake.

“Say,” she whispered, “shall we leave Grey Hawk and his braves to demonstrate down there—or climb up the river-bed—whilst we—find Jill?”

Jake wrinkled his brow.

“It’s a fair deal,” he agreed, “but—there are women up there, Kits,—and even though the Rattler’s bunch is bad all through, it kinda goes against a fellow to think of old chums being scalped.”

Kits flushed hotly.

“I’m no coyote, Jake,” she retorted, “and Grey Hawk has his orders. They’ll raise the war-whoop and maybe flourish a knife or two if there’s trouble, but he knows what I want. Rats are to be cleared out of the River Caves—sure—but we’ll leave the shaking of them to others. Only—there’s Jill. If the Indians don’t keep the Rattler & Co. busy somehow, we won’t get a chance, and—it’s better for the Indians to do the fighting than Sylvester’s Boys.”

Jake shook the girl’s hand.

“You’re right, Kits,” he said. “And you play the game! If the Rattler and his boys put up a fight—they get what they ask for. Somehow I’ve come to think them Choctaws ain’t as red as they’re painted, or else they’re just full up with scalps for a bit.”

“If you don’t trust them,” laughed Kits, “why, lead them up the river-bed—you know the way, chum, and—and Nat and I’ll locate Jill alone.”

So that was how they settled it.

Jake, with the Indians in tow, led the way to the front of the caves, whilst Kits, turning to the right, began her climb.

Nat followed obediently. He knew now it was no use offering to lead. Kits was too much her father’s lass,—and besides, she knew the way—that way which even Curly had not been shown. They were both thinking of Curly as they crawled—or wriggled—through the long, hole-like passage which led out close to the rear of the caves.

Curly maybe was right in front yonder, facing the Indians—defying old friends—reckless, because he was ashamed. As they stood in the passage they heard the wild war-whoop of the Choctaws.

“Kaago! Kaago! Moweemizhekain!”

Kits shook the red earth from her curls.

“What does it mean, Nat?” she asked. “I smelt smoke, *sure!*”

Nat pointed down the passage—along which white clouds were rolling. Then—the report of a pistol rang out—followed by louder shouting.

Kits and Nat were running now—running towards the smoke. Kits led again—led by a second passage which brought them out close to that cave. It was Curly who had fired the pistol, fancying enemies were coming through the fire—on a murderous errand—but he had no time for a second shot before a scream came echoing to him.

“Jill! Jill! It’s Kits! *Jill!* Jill!”

Curly dropped his pistol in sheer shock—and swung round to fling his arm about the girl who had run to him. They had failed to block the cave entrance and had been waiting—wondering whether it were worth making a final dash up the passage. Curly had caught the sound of the war-whoop, and had half guessed what was happening. Now—he had Nat’s two hands in his own, forgetful of his wounded shoulder in the mad excitement of the rescue. As to Kits—why! where *would* two kid-girls be but in each other’s arms!

But they couldn’t stay there—for it would have meant suffocation and a stopped road if they had. One by one they struggled back, choking, gasping, reeling, but winning through at last. Winning through into the cool sweet air of the valley, in time to see the remnant of Rattler Bob’s men galloping away towards the distant prairie, with the Tiger at their head, leading the retreat after having shot his own leader dead almost at the feet of advancing Indians.

And now—the River Caves was free of rats. True, the women stayed—two of them at least, with the men who were busy protesting to Jake that they had meant to beat it as soon as the first chance came.

Grey Hawk and his braves had done their part—and done it well. They would not remain, however, after the promise had been kept. Women and comrades awaited them in distant lodges. The remnant of the treacherous Arkansas might be threatening their undefended village.

So—Grey Hawk bade his friends farewell, accepting gratitude with the same calm dignity with which he offered it.

“Grey Hawk has kept his promise. The White Fawn’s enemies have fled,” was the Chief’s farewell. “The friends of the White Fawn are the friends of Grey Hawk and his people. Her enemies are theirs.”

Then, bowing gravely to his Yengee “sisters,” the Chief turned and led his braves back towards their mountain home.

And now—Jill the hostage was free, even before Silent Sylvester and his boys came to win her by force or persuasion from disobedient comrades. Rattler Bob had paid the price for treachery. His companions, sooner or later, would pay too.

It was Kits who first saw the party of horsemen riding up the valley. At their head came Silent Sylvester and Senator Abways. Behind them, Dorrock and his boys.

To Kits it was the supreme moment of her life when she rode to meet those two grey-haired men with Jill beside her—and Curly and Nat close behind.

What a meeting it was! Kits must have been out of the saddle first—but the Senator was close after her. Jill's cry—"Dad—dad——" was echoed by Senator Abways' heartfelt "Thank Heaven!"

As for Kits, she was already in Silent Sylvester's arms.

She had won—she, Kits!—she had won.

Yet she was sobbing over her victory like a baby.

## CHAPTER XXV

### CURLY GOES HOME

It seemed hard—cruelly hard after that glorious hour of welcome, reunion, and happiness—that Silent Sylvester should be obliged to return to a prison cell in Los.

Yet it was Sylvester's own decision after a brief talk with the Senator.

Sylvester was to stand his trial—just as Dorrock, Curly and the rest of the rustlers who had been loyal to their chief were to stand theirs.

But Senator Abways would not judge them.

It caused a sensation in that busy town when the news was told that the grim Senator, who had the reputation of rendering justice before mercy, would take his place in the witness-box for the defence of the prisoners.

As soon as the Court doors were open, two figures slipped quickly in on that day of trial.

They were Kits and Nat. In vain Kits had urged she was a rustler too! Her plea had been refused. But she was there to hear the charge—the defence—the sentence.

The Court was crowded to suffocation—outside in the street traffic was held up by the throng of people. Silent Sylvester's name was known throughout California—and loved more than feared. He was a popular hero with the people—though others had a less favourable opinion of the rustler chief.

And—you could have heard a pin drop when Senator Abways stood in the witness-box, with his stepdaughter beside him. He had a speech to make, that stern judge—and he made it with an eloquence none who heard ever forgot.

For, he had much to tell them of this rustler captain. Of how he came of honourable parentage, and would have lived the life of an honourable citizen had it not been for the treachery and enmity of others. How that treachery had been discovered, and how, unknown to the prisoner, repentant relatives had sought for him to restore him to his place amongst them. How, in the meantime, Silent Sylvester had become an outlaw—yet never a villain whose acts of violence brought fear on his neighbours.

Many a tale the Senator told of property restored and wrongs righted by this modern Robin Hood, till finally he came to the story of his own stepdaughter's kidnapping—and her rescue by the rustler's lass. Eloquently, the Senator told the story of Curly the rustler and Kits the rustler's daughter—and how they had risked their lives for the sunny-haired girl by his side.

Women were weeping for very sympathy, as the Senator's voice rang through the Court, asking the jury boldly to give a free pardon to these men, provided they took oath to disband and live the lives of honest citizens, restoring wherever possible stolen goods to their owners.

The jury were absent five minutes—and returned smiling.

The Senator's appeal was not in vain. Found guilty as they were, their subsequent behaviour had earned Silent Sylvester and his boys a free pardon—they might leave the Court—to go back to take up their lives again as honest men.

And—at the news of that verdict such a shout went up as rang through the grim old Court and went pealing up the streets.

Pardoned! Silent Sylvester and his boys were free!

Out into the sunlight they stepped, many of those sun-blackened, weather-beaten men crying like children at the thought of a fresh start.

Jake the Grip had found his Nellie waiting to hug him in a perfect frenzy of rejoicing, others were quickly surrounded by relations and well-wishers. It was such a scene as the town had not witnessed for many a day.

But the crowd looked in vain for Silent Sylvester, whilst in a private room of the Court Kits was clinging to her father, laughing and sobbing till she ached. It was a moment of moments upon which Senator Always forebore to intrude. When he did come in, smiling, he came straight across to the ex-rustler with hand outstretched.

"I congratulate you, Rendallen," he said, "with all my heart. Now, the car is waiting in a back street. You and Kits must come home with me as soon as I can find Jill, who insisted on congratulating that fine boy Curly—who, it appears, is going straight home to his mother."

Yes, the day had come for that at last. The day for Curly's home-going.

Silent Sylvester, as well as the grateful Senator, had been talking with him before he set out.

No matter whether the uncle still had room or no for him in that dreary office, there would be money forthcoming so that young Curly could buy his own farm close to the old home, aye! and take the mother back to it if she wished—as she was sure to wish.

Jill laughed and cried as she listened to all the tale—and had her petition to make.

“You’ll just come back and tell us, Curly. There’ll be lots to fix up with dad, and—and I want so to know if—*she* was still waiting?”

So Curly rode—rode away into the purple distances with the queerest emotions stirring at his heart.

The day he had feared would never dawn had dawned. He was going home. Yes, there was the same old orchard, the same snake fence—the same stone-built farm, with the creepers over it—though the creepers were brown and shrivelled now—the flowers were dead.

But a fire burned in the kitchen, some one was seated in the high-backed chair.

Curly was out of the saddle, tethering his horse, leaving it in the charge of faithful old Nabs as he went up the path and lifted the latch.

There was no drawn bolt to keep him out. He had opened the door—whilst some one—some one old—white-haired and dear—rose from her chair, her arms outstretched.

It was the voice he had heard in his dreams over and over again crying the words he had known he should hear.

“My boy—my boy—I knew you’d come back at last. My boy—I knew you’d come to the mother who’s waited so long.”

Then—Curly felt the old arms about him and was kneeling, somehow, beside his mother’s chair—his head on her lap.

He had come home.

It was only fair Jill should hear part at least of the story of that home-coming—and Curly told the tale simply. He was half shy of this fine young lady Jill in her grand clothes and grand home,—just as he had been altogether scared of Aunt Kezia, who could hardly bear Jill out of her sight!

But Jill wouldn’t allow that.



“Nothing will ever make any difference to us, Curly,” she urged. “We’re going to be friends always,—yes, always, Curly;—same as Kits will always be my friend—and Nat,—though Nat seems to belong to Kits more and me to you. Sylvester—he’s not Silent Sylvester now—but a big man—Sylvester Rendallen—with a dandy place of his own—in England as well as the States—is taking Kits to England—and Nat’s going too. Though I’m an English girl, I’m staying here with the best dad in the world—so you’ll be my friend, Curly, more than ever when Kits and Nat have gone.”

Curly blushed to the roots of his hair—but he promised—easily. I think he would have said more too, only Kits and Nat were coming through the verandah to where he and Jill stood by the window of a fire-lit room.

Kits was radiant—and so exactly the same Kits as ever. She even wore her leather riding-suit, looking down at it and then at Curly with a laugh.

“Guess I’ll *never* be able to wear clothes like Jill or be a dandy lady,” she cried. “Dad’s been telling me I’ll have to—but his eyes twinkled. Then Nat said so too, but who cares for Nat? Don’t you think I’m best left as plain Kits the cow-girl, Curly?”

Curly smiled.

“Sure!” he said quietly. “You’ll always be that to us who love you, Kits. Kits the cow-girl,—and Kits the girl who played heroine in a tight corner. That’s so, isn’t it, chum?”

But Kits, red in the face, wouldn’t leave it there.

“And Jill,” she retorted, “she was just as much and twice as much heroine as me. We’ll have to find a name for you, Jill, as a keepsake for always.”

Jill stretched out her two hands—giving one to Curly and the other to Kits, whilst she smiled at Nat.

“I’d rather only be—Jill the hostage,” she said.

And they, guessing the deeper meaning of the words, agreed to leave it so.

Jill the hostage—who had helped to win happiness back to those who had missed the road in life’s journey.

It was a happy title after all.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Jill the Hostage* by Mabel Winifred Knowles (as May Wynne)]