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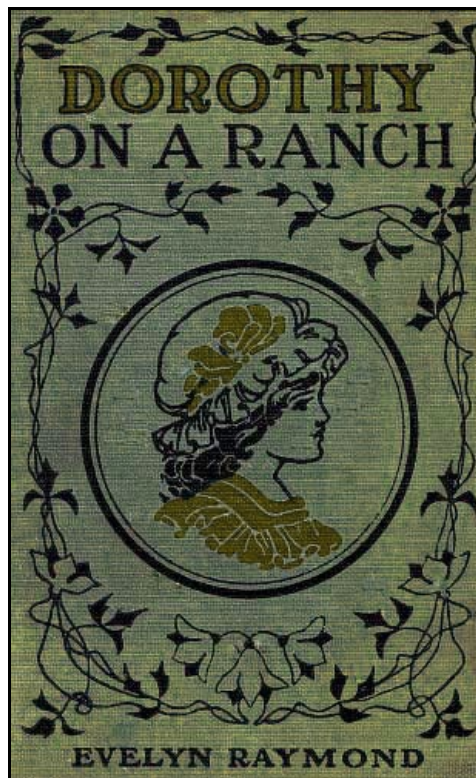
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DOROTHY ON A RANCH ***



DOROTHY ON A RANCH

By EVELYN RAYMOND

AUTHOR OF

“Dorothy,” “Dorothy at Skyrie,” “Dorothy’s
Schooling,”
“Dorothy’s Travels,” “Dorothy’s House Boat,”

"Dorothy at Oak Knowe," "Dorothy's Triumph,"
"Dorothy's Tour."



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**THE
DOROTHY BOOKS**

By EVELYN RAYMOND

These stories of an American girl by an American author have made "Dorothy" a household synonym for all that is fascinating. Truth and realism are stamped on every page. The interest never flags, and is oftentimes intense. No more happy choice can be made for gift books, so sure are they to win approval and please not only the young in years, but also "grown-ups" who are young in heart and spirit.

Dorothy
Dorothy at Skyrie
Dorothy's Schooling
Dorothy's Travels
Dorothy's House Party
Dorothy in California
Dorothy on a Ranch
Dorothy's House Boat
Dorothy at Oak Knowe
Dorothy's Triumph
Dorothy's Tour

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The great animal had now dropped from its upright position at Dolly's window and was crawling on all fours back along the wide porch. (*Frontis*) (*Dorothy on a Ranch*)

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THE TRIP IN THE ERMINIE

The "Erminie," private car of "Railway Boss, Dan Ford," stood side-tracked at Denver, and his guests within it were the happy people whom, some readers may remember, we left keeping a belated Christmas in the old adobe on the mesa, in southern California.

To Dorothy, the trip thus far had been like a wonderful dream.

"Just think, Alfie Babcock, of owning a real car, going and stopping just as you please, same's riding in a carriage with horses! Even darling Aunt Betty, who's been 'most everywhere and seen 'most everything, in her long life, never travelled 'private coaching' this way before. I hate to think it's over, that I'll have to say good-by to her so soon. Seems if I ought not. Seems if she'll be dreadful lonesome without me all summer. I'm her own folks and I—I believe I shall go home with her after all, 'stead of into the mountains to that ranch with the Gray Lady."

Alfaretta gave a vigorous tug to the shawl-strap she was fastening about a curious assortment of her personal belongings and answered: [Pg 10]

"That's enough of your 'seems-if-ing,' Dolly Doodles! It's all settled, isn't it? And when a thing's fixed—it ought to stay fixed. Mrs. Calvert don't want either of us. She said so, more 'n once, too. She's tickled to death to think there's such a good time comin' for us. She's got all that prop'ty that got itself into trouble to look after, and she's got them ladies, her old friends, that's been in San Diego all winter, to go home to New York with her. You better stop frettin' and lookin' out o' winder, and pick up your things. You've lots more 'n I have and that's sayin' consid'able. The way that Mr. Ford moves makes other folks hustle, too! Hurry up, do! He said we was all to go to a big hotel for our dinners and I'm real ready for mine. I am so! Car-cookin's well enough, but for me—give me a table that won't go wobbly-wobble all the time."

Dorothy roused from her idleness and began to collect her own "treasures." They had accumulated to a surprising degree during this journey from San Diego to Denver; for their genial host had indulged his young guests in all their whims and, at the various stops along the way, they had purchased all sorts of things, from baskets to blankets, horned toads on cards, centipedes in vials of alcohol, Indian dolls and pottery, and other "trash," as Aunt Betty considered it. In the roomy private car these had given but little trouble; now Alfaretta expressed the thought of both girls as well as of the lad, Leslie, when after a vain effort to pack an especially ugly red-clay "image," she exclaimed: [Pg 11]

"A fool and his money! That's what I was. Felt as rich as a queen, startin' out with all them earnin's and presents in my pocket-book. Now I haven't got a cent, hardly, and I'd ha' been better off if I hadn't a had them! There! that paper's busted again! Does beat the Dutch the way things act! Just plain *things*! If they was folks you could box their ears, but you can't do a thing to things, not a thing! Only—"

"Throw them away! That's what I'm going to do with my stuff!" cried Leslie, from a far corner, standing up and wiping his face, after his own bit of packing. "This old musket that that man in uniform assured me had belonged to General Custer—Dad says never saw a soldier's hands, let alone Custer's. Says he knew that all the time, even when I was dickering for it. Says—"

Dorothy looked up from her own task to ask:

"Why should he let you buy it then?"

"For experience, likely. That's the way he likes to have us learn, he claims."

"Humph! But Aunt Betty says it's wicked to waste money. One ought only to use it for some good purpose." [Pg 12]

A shout of derision came from both Alfie and Leslie, at this remark, and they pointed in high glee at a basketful of things Dorothy was vainly trying to make look a tidy bundle. She had to join in the laughter against herself and Mr. Ford came forward to lend a hand or offer advice, as need be.

"So you're up against a tough proposition, are you, youngsters? How much of all that stuff do you really want?"

"Not a scrap!" said Alfaretta, frankly.

"Good enough! Well, let me tell you. There's a poor old fellow hangs out just beyond this station who makes his scanty living selling just such 'trash.' I'll give you just five minutes to select whatever you really wish to keep, five minutes more to stow them compactly for our

long buckboard-drive, and about as much longer to make the acquaintance of my lame peddler and give him your leavings. Five seconds wasted already, staring at me! Begin, begin!"

The gentleman's face was aglow with happiness and mischief, but there was a tone in his voice which compelled instant obedience; and long before the first five minutes had passed all three young folks had heaped the most of their "things" in a pile in the center of the car. The rest was quickly strapped in the beautiful Navajo blankets which Mrs. Ford, or the "Gray Lady"—as they best loved to call her, had purchased and given them as souvenirs of this wonderful trip. Blankets that were almost priceless, as only Dorothy knew from Aunt Betty's explanation, but that Alfaretta considered far less attractive than a plain white wool one.

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A porter, laden with baskets, appeared at that moment, as if by previous instruction; and into the baskets were tossed or tumbled the odd collection, everybody working swiftly yet already half-regretfully that they hadn't kept more.

"That horned toad'll get a rush of blood to his head!" cried Leslie, as Alfaretta threw her recent "treasure" into the mess.

"Take care, boy! Don't break that alcohol bottle. That centipede mayn't be as dead as he looks! The horrid leg-gy thing! How in the world did I ever fancy it? Take care!" warned Dorothy, as Leslie dropped an uncouth Indian "image" upon the vial.

"Hi, dere! Massa Leslie! Jed'll do de res'!" cried Mr. Ford's own especial servant, coolly pushing the lad aside and rapidly making a better arrangement of the articles. Then he shouldered his baskets and left the car, Mr. Ford following, with the three young people trailing after him. At the door Alfaretta turned and rapidly surveyed the luxurious coach in which she had spent the past few days. To her it had been a veritable fairyland, and quick tears sprang to her eyes as she exclaimed:

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"I never had such a good time in all my life as I've had in this 'Erminie,' and I never expect to again! It 'most breaks my heart to say good-by to it!"

"Don't say it then! I shan't, though I feel as bad as you do. But our worst good-by is to come when Aunt Betty starts east and we west. I can't—how can I?—let her go alone?"

This was sufficient to arouse all Alf's sympathy. She promptly forgot her own regret in soothing her friend, for Dorothy's grief was most sincere. Ever since that day when she had learned that Mrs. Calvert was her own kin she had loved the lady with all her heart and had, during the past winter of Aunt Betty's lameness, felt that she must now take care of her. She did not realize that the one-time invalid was now quite well and as independent of aid as ever. Indeed, the Gray Lady had laughingly declared:

"Dear Mrs. Betty is the youngest-hearted of us all!"

After that happy day when Dorothy had helped to bring about the reunion of the long parted Fords, the "Railroad Boss" had taken his wife and son away for a little time; but they had soon returned to *El Paraiso*, that charming home in the southwestern city and had remained as members of Mrs. Calvert's household till the spring days came. Then Mr. Ford had announced his summer plans:

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"I'm going to give myself a long vacation. I own a ranch in the Colorado mountains and I'm going to take you all, each and everyone, to enjoy it with me. My wife, Erminie, claims it her turn to play hostess, so we'll all become cowboys and cowgirls, and have a wild-west show of our own, with a continuous performance for three jolly months. All in favor, say Aye!"

"Aye! Aye! Aye!" the youngsters had it, so heartily that, for a moment, nobody noticed that Aunt Betty was silent. Then, when Dorothy observed this, with a down-sinking of her own spirits, the lady made haste to explain:

"Nothing could please me better for Dorothy, and for myself if I were able to accept. But I can't. As you know, my business affairs have become tangled in some way and I must go home to really understand what is amiss. Indeed, I don't know yet where I may have to be during the warm weather and I'm delighted for my little girl, and for Alfaretta, to have such a fine chance. I fancy you'll all come east in the autumn, as brown as the Indians who'll be your neighbors, and in fine health. How soon do you leave, Mr. Ford? That I may make some arrangement about this dear old house, for I shan't want to stay in it after you're gone."

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Then it was his turn to explain:

"I have felt all along, ever since I found Erminie here with our boy, that the place should

never become again just 'a house to rent.' So I've bought it. I've found Padre Nicolas, the old priest whom the Indians love and trust, and deeded it to him in trust for them as a Home. Here Lazaro Gomez and the other ancients of his race shall dwell in comfort for the rest of their days. The only proviso is that Father Nicholas shall admit none who hasn't reached the age of discretion—say, eighty-odd years, or so! Nor shall any of his charges be compelled to tame wild beasts and sell them for a livelihood. The good old priest is ready to take possession as soon as we vacate and will put everything into what Alfie calls 'apple-pie order,' according to a red man's fancy. So, when everybody is ready—Don't hurry, please!—we'll board my car, the 'Erminie,' and take our leisurely way northward. It isn't as if we had to say good-by, you see, for we'll be all together still. As for Mrs. Calvert's plan—maybe we can persuade her to postpone business awhile for a taste of real ranch life. Eh?"

But Mistress Elisabeth Cecil-Somerset-Calvert was a matron who never said "No" when she meant "Yes;" and she smilingly kept to her own purpose, yet took good care that no shadow of a coming separation should darken her beloved Dorothy's wonderful trip in a private car. Just here we may recall to the readers' attention that this young girl's earlier experiences have been told in "Dorothy's Schooling," her "Travels" and "House Party" and best of all "In California."

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Now those happy days of travel and sightseeing had ended in the city of Denver. The "Erminie" was to be stripped and renovated and put aside to await its owner's further orders. From this point the ranchers were to proceed by a coaching tour over the long and delightful road to the distant Rockies: while Mrs. Calvert, her black "boy," Ephraim, and some women friends were to speed eastward by the fleetest "limited" express. One more short hour together, in a hotel dining-room, and the parting was due. Aunt Betty and Mrs. Ford had already been driven away to this hotel as Leslie and his girl guests followed his father from the "Erminie," and seeing the downward droop of Dorothy's lip he tried to divert her by exclaiming:

"There was never such a man as Dad! He never forgets. Never. I believe he knows every cripple between New York and San Francisco. I do, indeed. This fellow we're going to give that 'trash' to is one of his pets. I remember him now. Got hurt in a railway smash but is as independent as they make 'em. Wouldn't sue the company and wouldn't take money from it when offered. Claimed he was stealing a ride and only got what he calls his 'come-uppance' when he got hurt. Dad was so astonished when he heard about that, he said the man ought to be 'framed and put on exhibition, as the only case of his kind on record.' Then he suggested this way of earning his living. He has the 'boys' keep him fixed up in a little sort of stand just yonder and they see to it that his stock never fails. The cripple's as proud as Punch. Boasts that any honest man can do well in America if he tries. He hasn't any legs left and his arms aren't worth much but his spirit is the bravest ever. It would break his heart if he guessed that most of the stuff he sells is bought for my father by some of his employees, all on the sly. But he'll never know it. That's the best of Dad! His 'boys' love him. They think he's just rippin'! And he is. Look now. See how that man's face lights up when he hears that 'Halloo'!"

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Dorothy stopped short to exclaim:

"Bought the stuff and gave us most of it, and now will buy it over again just to throw away! I never heard anything like that!"

"Reckon you didn't, for there is only one Dan Ford! But he doesn't have it thrown away. He has it burned. He says, 'Burned toads tell no tales,' and the worst trouble the boys have is to get folks enough to buy the things for them. When they see a likely lookin' tourist edging around the stand they use him, if they can. If they can't it's a 'short day' for Cripple Andy, but that doesn't worry him. 'The fat and the lean,' he calls it. Oh! I say, he's almost as rippin' as Dad himself, he's so plucky!"

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The cripple's face did indeed light up as Mr. Ford appeared before him and shouted that gay "Halloo!"

"Well, well, well! If you ain't the best sight I've had since I saw you last. Halloo, yourself and see how you like it!" With this attempt at facetiousness, the seller of notions leaned forward over his stand and extended his best hand toward his benefactor.

"How's business, Andy?"

"Tollable, sir, fairly tollable. Been sellin' a lot o' truck, lately, to some Cookies, and there was a reduction-school-ma'am-racket that nigh cleaned me out. See that your man Jed here has got a heap more things. How'd he come by them? Must ha' cleared the country of reptiles, judgin' by them samples."

"Oh, he came by them fairly enough, Andy. These youngsters couldn't live without the

things when they first saw them, but now they'll be grateful if you'll take them off their hands. Maybe you can make something from them, maybe not. In any case they're not going to *San Leon* on a buckboard with me! Take them off our hands, lad, and do a good deed once in your life!"

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By this time Mr. Ford had placed his own two strong hands over the shrivelled one of the peddler and was pressing it warmly, while the two looked into one another's eyes with mutual respect and liking. Then when the hands unclasped there was left on Andy's palm a glittering double eagle.

Dorothy, watching, wondered at this, after hearing Leslie's boast of the cripple's independence; and there did a flush rise in his face for a moment, till Mr. Ford said:

"For Laddie, you know. If you can't use it—pass it on!"

The flush died out of the vender's cheek and a soft look came over it. "So I will, man, so I will. Thank God there's always somebody poorer than me! Good-by, and good luck, Boss! By that token I never seen you look that happy as you do this day, man alive, never!"

"I never had such reason to be glad, Andy boy! Good-by, good-by!"

Mr. Ford started off at a brisk pace, the young folks trying to equal his long strides, and Alfaretta asking:

"Is that cripple crazy? What'd he mean by sellin' things to 'Cookies' and what's a 'school-ma'am-racket'?"

Leslie laughed and answered:

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"A 'racket' of that sort has nothing to do with tennis, Miss Babcock, at your service; and 'Cookies' are just Cook's tourists. All railroaders call them that; and I suppose the 'racket' was a cheap excursion the school-ma'ams were taking. Odd, isn't it? That though all Andy's trouble came from the railroad he claims to belong to it as one of its 'boys.' He's rippin', Andy is. He told father 't he 'teached school' himself, once! But he got so tired of it that the sight of a spelling-book made him sick."

"It does me, too," said Alfie, with sympathy.

"So he 'cut and run,' and rode on trains in every direction as long as his money held out. Then he stole the ride that ended his travels right here in Denver. Hello! where's Dad?"

They had loitered along the way and he had simply outstripped them. So without even a quarter in his purse but in his most lordly air, Leslie hailed a cab to carry them to the hotel he knew was that habitually patronized by his father; and a few minutes later they rode up to the entrance in state.

An attendant hastened to the curb to assist the "young ladies" out of the cab, but the hackman laid a detaining hand upon Leslie's shoulder with the remark:

"Fares, please."

"Eh? Just settle that with Mr. Daniel Ford, inside. Here, Buttons, you find Mr. Ford and ask him to step here. It'll be all right, Jehu, and let's hurry, girls, else we'll be late for dinner."

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He started to enter the building but the cabman retained his hold on the lad's shoulder and remarked:

"No, you don't! You may be all right and so may your Mr. Ford but, as for me, I never heard tell of him and money talks. Fares, please."

Dorothy and Alfaretta clung together, really afraid of the cabman who was now growing decidedly angry. He was a stranger to that city and had just embarked in a rather losing business, his outfit of horse and cab being a second-hand one and too shabby for most patrons.

Also, "Buttons," as Leslie had called the bell-boy, now returned to say that "no name of Ford was on the register and the clerk wouldn't bother."

Here was a dilemma. The trio who had ridden in state now felt very small, indeed, and glanced at one another in dismay. Then Leslie surveyed the name over the hotel entrance and exclaimed:

"Pshaw! This isn't the place at all. That donkey of a driver has brought us to the Metropole and not the Metropolitan. I might have known Dad wouldn't put up at such a third-rate tavern as this! Now, you idiot, we'll get in again and you take us where you were bid! and

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there, it's likely, you'll make the acquaintance of Mr. Daniel Ford in a way you don't like! Get in, Dorothy—Alfy! We can't stand foolin' here!"

But the cabman closed the door of his vehicle with a bang and calmly folded his arms to wait. Dolly pulled out her little purse. It contained one nickel and two cents. She had carefully cherished these because coins smaller than a nickel are not plentiful in California; but she tendered them to Leslie who smiled and shook his head. Alfaretta discovered a dime, but it was her "luck piece," wrapped in pink tissue paper and carried thus in order that she "might always have money in her pocket," and she hated to give it up. Both she and Dolly thought regretfully of the little pocket-hoard they had begged the Gray Lady to keep for them, lest they spend it on the trip. However, neither the cabman nor Leslie accepted their offering, and the latter exclaimed:

"Ain't this rippin'? Lost in a strange city, in the middle of the day, and not a soul willing to help us out! What in the world will Dad say!"

"What, indeed! But look here, Leslie Ford, we've got enough to pay for telephoning that other hotel, if the man in here will let us use his 'phone! Then your father will send somebody after us or do something. Please try. I feel so queer with so many folks staring at us as if we'd done something bad!"

By this time the hotel clerk had become more amiable. The name of Ford had impressed him if it hadn't the hackman, and though he, too, was new to the town he bade Leslie: [Pg 24]

"Go ahead! Call him up, if there is such a man."

With a glance of angry contempt Leslie put the receiver to his ear and rang up "Dad;" only to hang it up again in disgust, as the answer came back: "Line's busy!"

CHAPTER II

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A SPILL BY THE WAY

The "line" remained busy for so long that the loungers in the hotel lobby grew amused at Leslie's impatience while the two girls became very anxious.

"It was only an hour or so, Mr. Ford said, before Aunt Betty's train would leave and I shall be too late to see her—to bid her good-by—and it's for all summer—a whole long summer! I must go, I must find her, I shall—I will!" cried poor Dorothy, her own words increasing her fear of this calamity, and with a sudden burst of tears. For an instant she tried to keep them back, then careless who might see her crying, darted outward to the curbstone and to the hackman waiting there.

In so doing she collided with a gentleman entering, who staggered backward from the impact, then quietly put his hands upon the girl's shoulders, to steady her also.

"Beg pardon, little miss! and hello! What's wrong? Did I hurt you? Beg pardon twice, in that case!"

The tone was kindly and to Dorothy it was a case of "any port in a storm."

"No, no, sir, you didn't! But I'm—we're—in dreadful trouble. Do you know—do you?—where that other hotel is, that Metropolitan?" [Pg 26]

"Surely, I know. Why?"

"Is it far? Can I run there quick? The cabman—we haven't any money—it was a mistake—and I must go, I must!"

Leslie laid a soothing hand on Dorothy's, which she had clasped imploringly before the stranger, and told their story.

The effect was surprising. This gentleman was the proprietor of this establishment and he well knew Mr. Ford, by reputation at least. With one angry glance around the lobby and at the now obsequious clerk, he wheeled about, strode to the cab, opened the door and lifted Dorothy within. Then he as promptly settled Alfaretta beside her, himself took the forward seat and motioned Leslie to follow. Then he ordered:

"Now, cabby, drive like lightning! It'll be worth your while. Straight ahead, five blocks—east two—north three! Drive, I tell you."

And “drive” the man did, as fast as his slow horse could be urged, while within the carriage the three young folks sat in anxiety, Dorothy leaning far forward, as if by that means she could reach her destination sooner.

Their new friend beamed upon her, asking a few questions which drew out a brief history of their trip and the plans for their coming summer. Then almost before the cab was halted before a big hotel he had opened its door again and taking the hands of the two girls piloted them straight into it and through some great halls to the dining room. There he halted and gave the name:

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“Mr. Daniel Ford and party.”

“At dinner, sir, private dining room. May not wish to be disturbed. I’ll send to inquire—step into the reception room please,” bowed and explained the employee the gentleman had summoned.

“That’s all right. Direct us. I’m Darby of the Metropole. These young people belong to Mr. Ford’s party.”

A moment later they had met Mr. Ford himself, issuing from his private room, vexed and anxious at their delay and starting out in their pursuit.

“Well, laggards! What does this mean? Wasting the time when there’s so little of it? Mrs. Calvert’s fretting so she can’t eat her dinner and—in with you! In with you! There’s but fifteen minutes before her train starts east!”

When a good natured man is angry he seems another person and Dorothy drew back in fear. But Alfaretta’s own temper rose and she exclaimed:

“Don’t scold us, please, Mr. Ford, it wasn’t our fault!” while Leslie vainly tried to explain: “A gentleman, a stranger, brought us here and paid our cab fare. I want a dollar, Dad, to refund him.”

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But, for once, the doting father was deaf to his son’s words. He did not even pause in his rapid stride along the corridor, fairly dragging Dorothy off her feet in his unconscious haste, and finally depositing her in an empty chair beside Aunt Betty’s, with the remark:

“Here’s your ‘bad penny’ again! She—they all—will learn some lessons up at San Leon, this summer, or I’m a mistaken man. The one thing nobody should dare lose is—time!”

Mrs. Calvert gave him a surprised look but she had also been hurt by Dorothy’s absence during the brief space that remained to them together, and she hastened to deliver the many last charges and bits of advice that seemed needful before their parting.

A waiter placed their dinner before the three young folks and Alf and Leslie fell to work upon it with hungry zeal, but Dorothy could not eat. Her eye had discovered a clock on the wall, with the hands pointing five minutes to three. At ten minutes past that hour the “Eastern Limited” would roll out of the station and she be left behind. In a sudden impulse, she threw her arms about Aunt Betty’s neck, begging:

“Take me with you! Please take me with you! I—I love you best of all the world, so why shouldn’t we keep together?”

If there were tears in Mrs. Calvert’s bright, dark eyes, she did not allow them to fall. Unclasping her darling’s arms and gently laying them down, she silently signalled to Mrs. Ford and almost as silently left the room.

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The “Gray Lady” followed and Aunt Betty whispered:

“I’m getting too old for good-bys. I’m going to slip away in the hotel stage and don’t let Dolly follow me, please, till it’s too late. She’ll be all right again, directly, and—and so shall I. Good-by to you, though, and—that’s all.”

Dolly dropped her head on the edge of the table, as Aunt Betty loosened her arms. She was bravely trying to overcome the sudden loneliness which possessed her and in this was helped by Alf’s warning:

“Dolly Doodles! Take your head out of your soup plate! Are you crazy? There goes your ribbon right into the mess!”

The head was lifted so suddenly that the ribbon flew off and fell into the dish and its owner’s tears ended in a giggle. Then her face flushed at thought of her own awkwardness and she looked down expecting a reprimand from Mrs. Calvert. When none came she lifted her eyes and found the next chair empty. This was a relief. She’d hide the ribbon before her aunt discovered it! But already the waiter had whisked that plate away and was supplying

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her with another.

Funny! Where Aunt Betty had gone! But, of course she'd merely left the room for a minute and would be back to say good-by. Then she picked at her food for a moment, wondering why Mr. Ford had also disappeared, and at the eagerness with which Leslie and Alfaretta enjoyed the good things served to them.

Gray Lady slipped back to her own place between the other two young people and began to ask them about the adventure which had delayed them. Presently they were all talking together, even Dorothy adding her comments and forgetting to look again at that warning clock.

Besides, she was listening to the grumbles of Leslie who, for once, was angry against his father and was explaining to his mother:

"I never felt so ashamed of myself. The idea of letting that stranger, and the proprietor of a rival hotel, pay our cab fare! I wish you'd hand me the cash and I'll send a boy to hunt him up and settle. I—"

Mrs. Ford stopped his further complaints by a nod of her head and the odd remark:

"They must have arrived by this time and the others must be gone. Yes, they ought to be here. I hope they'll not delay us, too, as you did. Money? No, dear, I can't give you that. Not in this case when your father has denied it. Ah! Fifteen minutes after three! Then our friends must be well out of the city by now."

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Lady Gray, as her son still loved to call her, now took her eyes from the clock she had been studying and cast a tender look upon the face of Dorothy. The girl had sprung up from her chair and had fixed her own gaze upon the time-piece while the color left her cheeks and she trembled violently. But Mrs. Ford's arm was about the slender waist and her voice was comforting:

"Your Aunt Betty thought it was the best. She shrank from the good-bys for both your sakes. She's a wonderful woman and thinks of everything that will make people happier. She said she'd just postpone the farewells till you meet again. She went away as cheerfully as possible and you must follow her example. Ah! hark!"

Dorothy's bent head lifted slightly. There was a sound of merry, youthful voices in the corridor, the genial tones of Mr. Ford mingling with them, and presently the portieres were parted and the opening was filled by a group of faces matching the voices and belonging to—Could it be? Could it!

"Molly Breckenridge! Helena! Oh! Oh! Jim—you dears!" cried the astonished Dolly, rubbing her eyes that had been so dimmed by tears, and gazing at the faces in the doorway as if she couldn't believe her own sight.

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There, too, was Alfaretta, clasping the hands of all the newcomers, fairly dancing up and down in her excitement, "hail-fellow-well-met" with them all, forgetful for once of the difference in their social positions which had used to make her shy and restrained.

"Be I awake or asleep? How in my senses have you all got away out here to this jumpin' off place of all creation? Jim Barlow, you darlin' old Jim! How's Ma Babcock? How's Pa? How's every single one the precious folks up-mounting? Oh! I could just squeeze the life out of you, I'm so terrible glad to see you!" almost screamed the girl, as she now for a moment forsook the "ristocratic" of the party to hug and kiss James Barlow.

He, poor fellow, rid himself of her clasping arms as soon as possible, reddening yet laughing, and casting an appealing look upon the lady who had risen from the table and stood smiling her welcome to them all.

"Don't mind Alf, ma'am; she always did have to be the middle of things," begged the lad, overcoming his own shyness rather than have that beautiful lady think he was a "softie" who liked kissing girls. Also, he was thankful that Dorothy had contented herself with merely holding tight to his hand and simply looking her affection.

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"Oh! that's all right. We love Alf; and this, I see, is that wonderful 'Jim' of whom I've been told so much. I—we—are delighted that you were able to take your holiday with us; and though we are not there yet, I bid you hearty welcome to San Leon," said Lady Gray, now moving forward and warmly shaking the hand of the "work boy" as Dorothy released it.

"Isn't it splendid? Is it a surprise? Didn't you know a thing about it, Dolly Doodles?" demanded pretty Molly, hugging her friend, then standing back to hold her at arm's length and study the changes which a few months' separation had made in the beloved face.

Helena Montaigne, too, was trying to clasp her in equally tender arms, and Molly reluctantly released Dorothy, while she let Mr. Ford lead her to his wife, introducing her as:

"The daughter of my old friend, Judge Breckenridge. He and I were classmates once, and come here, Leslie boy! I've heard this little lady spoken of as 'Jolly Molly,' and you must make it your business that not one day of her coming summer with us shall be anything save 'jolly.' Ah! Erminie, young people on a ranch!"

Evidently, Leslie was as much in the dark as Dorothy and Alfie had been, this visitation of so many young strangers a complete surprise to him; but he was trained to good manners and at once captivated Molly's admiration by his cordial greeting. So that, a moment later, she whispered to Dorothy:

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"Isn't he a dear! I declare he's just a heavenly handsome boy, with his blue eyes and—and his *air*! He really is too sweet for words, that boy!"

Whereat Dolly laughed and answered:

"Oh! you funny Molly! You don't change a bit! Still 'doting on boys' as much as ever! How's Melvin?"

"Melvin's a poke. The invitation included him, too, but he sets himself up stiff as stiff and said he had no time to waste visiting. He'd got to learn the business soon as he could, for his mother—Oh! a lot of bosh about his mother, and her trusting him. Even my father—"

"Never mind him, then, but tell me how in the world you happened to come just here and now?"

The two had retreated to the window and stood with arms about each other and Dorothy's eyes now free from tears. Indeed, so surprising was this whole affair that she had, for a moment, forgotten Aunt Betty's departure.

"Why, it's this way. Mr. Ford is an old friend of Papa's and when he found out that you knew us, too, he just planned the whole thing for a grand treat to you! He wrote Papa that he was under 'lifelong obligation to you' because—well, of something or other. I wasn't told what, but it doesn't matter. The thing that does matter is that we're to be together all summer long, at least for three whole months. Think of that, girlie, just think of that! He wrote Papa, too, that he'd have liked to gather the whole 'House Party' together if it had been practical, but his wife didn't think it would. I reckon she knew she'd have her hands full enough, chaperoning eight youngsters, without asking more. We came pretty near not getting Helena and Herbert, though! Mr. Montaigne fancied it was too much like an imposition to let them come, because he didn't know the Fords. Helena wrote me that, so I got Dad to send him a letter to make him stop and think! Besides, Jim—that boy is just grand! He—"

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"Of course, honey. He's a boy, you know."

"Laugh away! I'm too happy to care. I do like boys best. Why shouldn't I? They're heaps more fun than girls—except you. And to think! Helena and Jim were the real chaperons of our trip, though Helena's governess, Miss Milliken, was called such. But she's a stick! I had the time of my life, keeping her scared all the way on. Oh! I'm glad to be off that train. Mr. Ford says we're to finish our journey in wagons. I like that."

"But I don't see Miss Milliken, Molly."

"No. She knows some people here in Denver and they met her at the station and carried her off to dine with them. I wish she'd get belated and left behind. She was a regular kill-joy all the way out."

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"Poor, meek, timid woman! She used to have so little snap that Herbert nicknamed her 'The Worm.' It was horrid—"

"Well, she's 'turned,' then. Of course, we were pretty full of fun and scared her with some of our pranks. But—Ah! there she is now! You can't lose that woman! Mrs. Montaigne told her that 'the lives of her precious children were entrusted to her hands,' and the governess feels her responsibility to the full, I tell you. Even Helena—"

"Dinner for the newcomers!" called Mr. Ford, interrupting, as a fresh meal was placed upon the table and they were invited to their seats. The zeal with which they accepted and the fine appetites they displayed sent a satisfied smile to their host's lips, and he nodded merrily to his wife:

"No invalids among them! Glad of that! But youngsters, eat first, chatter afterwards! The wagons will be at the door very soon and I want to get in a good thirty miles before

bedtime!"

They tried to check their eager talk but they were all too excited for quiet, and presently rose from the table, ready for the ride, while Mr. Ford said:

"Now, Erminie, wife, you do the pairing off of the youngsters, and arrange how we shall divide. First, count noses! Eight youngsters, three oldsters, two 'boys'—thirteen passengers in all! Miss Milliken, did you ever 'cross the plains' before?" [Pg 37]

The prim little lady, who had been standing beside Mrs. Ford, appeared not to hear the gentleman's question, but turned with an air of anxiety to ask in turn:

"Madam, did I hear there were 'thirteen,' THIRTEEN?"

"Yes, Miss Milliken. Why?"

"Then I think you'll have to excuse me. I might follow you later if there were some way but I positively decline to make the thirteenth of any party."

There certainly was nothing wormlike, or undecided, about the governess, whose lips had closed in such a thin line of obstinacy as changed her whole appearance, while her would-be hostess inquired with amusement:

"Are you superstitious, Miss Milliken? Surely, with your culture and—"

Helena advanced with an air of authority:

"Milliken, this is absurd! Please get back your common sense. Remember we are guests and have no right to object to anything."

The chaperon bridled, but kept silence, till Mr. Ford explained:

"Thirteen doesn't mean the whole party. There'll be three drivers, besides. Possibly more men picked up along the road. Moreover, thirteen is my 'lucky number,' if 'luck' is anything. Well, Mrs. Ford, have you arranged the company?" [Pg 38]

"No, I cannot. I know them so slightly, as yet, and the best way is to draw lots. How many will the first buckboard carry?"

"Eight, all told. A dozen, if need be. Well, time's precious! Here's a lot of matches. The whole ones go in number one, the next lengths in wagon two, and the little ones in the last. See, I've snapped them off, and Miss Milliken, as head of the expedition, please draw first!"

The lady flushed and drew. Her lot was in the last and smallest buckboard which would carry but two more beside the driver; and it fell out that her companions would be Alfarretta and Monty Stark. The driver was known as Silent Pete, and it certainly was an odd combination which had resulted from the first "drawing."

To the leading wagon the "lots" assigned the three Fords and Jedediah, their colored "boy," with Molly, Helena and Herbert—their driver, Lem Hunt, the most talkative man at San Leon but, also, the crack whip of the ranch.

The driver of the second team was "Tenderfoot Sorrel," so called because of his red hair and his comparatively recent arrival from the east. He was less familiar with the country than the other two teamsters and had been assigned to the place in the middle of the little cavalcade, so that "he can't lose hisself afore or ahind, ary way," as Lemuel explained it. [Pg 39]

Naturally, everybody was disappointed at the result of the lots, Mrs. Ford protesting that it was inhospitable to put all her family in one vehicle, and that the best, but that "a Ford should have been in each."

"Let's change, then," begged Monty, "and let one of the girls settle it as she knows we'd like it."

But Alfy gave him such a frown that he ducked his head, avoiding an imaginary blow, while Miss Milliken as vigorously declared:

"You mustn't do that. Oh! don't do that! 'Twould be the very worst luck of all. Something would surely happen!"

"Well, if there doesn't I shall be disappointed! We're all eager for adventures, and that's why I took this long, roundabout way to the ranch. We could have gone there in next to no time, by rail, but that's too humdrum a thing. Anyhow, I bow to Miss Milliken's prejudices for the time being. We shall be in sight of each other all the time, I expect, and meet at Roderick's for our suppers and beds! All off for San Leon that's going!" cried Mr. Ford, in imitation of a steamboat steward, and taking his wife's arm led her and her guests out of

the hotel.

The trunks and heavier luggage had already gone ahead in other wagons and only suitcases and hand-bags were on hand. These were hastily bestowed in the boxes of the two less crowded buckboards, and no attention paid to their ownership, since it was expected that all would meet at "Roderick's," where every traveller could find his own.

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With a blast on his coach horn, a crack of his long whip over his four-in-hand, proud Lemuel led the way along the city street, out of the town, and into the open country beyond.

All the horses attached to the blackboards were the picked ones of the San Leon stables, with a record known as well in the far east as in that wide western land. As one spectator of this gallant start remarked:

"It goes without saying that Dan Ford will drive no second-rate horseflesh, any more 'n he will a second-class railroad. My! See 'em travel! At that gait they'll pick up the stretch 'twixt here and 'Roderick's' long before nightfall, or I'm no judge."

"Likely enough, likely enough. Only I don't like the looks of that second span—I mean the one to the middle buckboard. Them blacks. The boys up to S' Leon hadn't no right to trust a tenderfoot to drive them critters!" remarked another observer, as the fretful animals passed out of sight, following their leaders.

Even Lem Hunt looked back once or twice, as they left the city limits, and waved a warning hand toward "T. Sorrel," who merely tossed his red head and continued to draw upon the reins he should have loosened. Also, Silent Pete opened his lips for once and hallooed to the man ahead:

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"Let 'em out, you fool! Give 'em their heads, I say!"

Then he relapsed into his normal condition, attending strictly to his own business and making himself deaf to the timid shrieks of Miss Milliken, from the rear seat. He was known to "hate silly women" and felt his fate a hard one in having to escort such a one as the governess. She, accustomed only to the sedate pace of the fat Montaigne steeds, felt that the spirited animals before that wagon were simply on the road to destruction and nowhere short of it! She clung to her seat-arm with one hand and clutched Pete's coat collar with the other, frantically beseeching him:

"Do stop! Oh! you—man—just stop—and let me get my breath! I—I bump so—I—I can't even think!"

But this western jehu merely flicked her fingers off as he would a troublesome fly, while Monty coolly advised:

"Don't try, Miss Milliken. Fast? Why, they call this mere walkin' out here. I'm going to take a nap."

He settled himself sidewise on his seat, folded his arms upon its back, dropped his face upon them and tried to sleep. He was cross. He had wanted to ride in the foremost vehicle with the fine four-in-hand. He hated being put at the tail end of the procession with stupid Alfaretta Babcock, a speechless man, and a nervous, half-hysterical woman for companions. But the chuckle that escaped him a moment later proved that his slumber was only a pretended one. At a particularly rough spot in the road and a particularly shrill scream from Miss Milliken, the angry ranchman faced about and rudely ordered: "Shut up!" Then his lips closed with a click and nothing further escaped them during all that drive.

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Alfaretta giggled; then strained her eyes again to pierce the distance which she had been studying for some time. Then she laid a hand on Monty's head and shook it vigorously:

"Wake up, boy! Look ahead and see if either wagon is in sight! 'Tisn't so awful dark yet but I wish—I wish I could get a glimpse of Dolly and Jim. That fool driver might have taken the wrong road where it branched off a ways back."

Silent Pete heard and guessed this was the truth, but he ventured no reply. His business was to drive his own horses and let the tenderfoot look out for himself. But Monty roused himself enough to assure Alf:

"He wouldn't do that! Why, that road is nothing but a trail through the woods. Dark as midnight. Don't worry." Then he settled himself to sleep again.

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Now the fact was that "T. Sorrel," as his fellow ranchmen called him, had more conceit than common sense. He had heard that the branch road was a short cut to "Roderick's," but not that it was impassable for a team. A man on horseback might pass safely over it, by daylight and with a trustworthy mount. Not otherwise; and though the opening was fairly clear the

trail entered a hopeless tangle of underbrush and fallen timber but a short way further on. To go forward then became impossible, and equally so the turning back. The lively blacks resented the scratching of briars and broken branches upon their tender limbs and pranced and fretted wildly. A molly cottontail scurried across the track before them and with a mutual, frenzied impulse they shied and sprang into the air.

The buckboard flew upward, turned turtle, scattered its load in all directions, then settled into a broken heap, while the light traces yielded to the strength of the horses, and they rushed madly forward out of sight.

At that very moment it had been, that Silent Pete and his wagon had passed the entrance of that trail; and even in that dusk his trained eye had noted fresh wheel and hoof prints. But it was not his business to stop and investigate. He had been set to bring his party to "Roderick's", not to take care of a tenderfoot who ought to have a nurse, the fool!

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CHAPTER III

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THE MIDNIGHT SEARCHING PARTY

The night was growing late and there were anxious hearts at "Roderick's." The four-in-hand had arrived hours before, and Silent Pete had also brought his party safely in—to the mutual relief of himself and Miss Milliken, the latter really surprised to find she had arrived sound in body and limb. She had promptly retired to the little chamber assigned herself and Helena, only to reappear in fresh distress.

"My suit-case with my night-things! I can't find it anywhere. The one they gave me has a lot of boys' things in it—all jumbled together. I'd like my suit-case, please. I'm worn out with that awful ride and if I've got to repeat it to-morrow, I must get to rest;" but as the buxom maid to whom she appealed paid her scant attention, she turned to Helena with her wail: "Oh, Miss Helena! *Won't* you make them give me the right case?"

The emphasis put on the "won't" suggested a desperate need, but merely annoyed her young mistress, who requested:

"Don't make a nuisance of yourself, Milly. The loss of a suit-case is nothing compared to— Oh! if Dolly were only safely here!"

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"She will be, of course. Haven't I, with my nerves, lived through that ride? But, you don't understand, dear, I *want my things*. I can't wear a boy's pajamas—all mussed up, at that. I want, I want to go to bed."

"Then, for goodness' sake—go!" cried Monty Stark, who had come up to the pair. "That'll give us a rest, too."

"I shall have to sit up all night, then," still moaned the lady, "for your case isn't to be found either, Miss Helena."

Then finding no greater sympathy from her mistress than from that saucy boy, the governess betook herself out of the way. She was the only one of the party which had so gaily left Denver that now cared for anything except the appearance down the road of the missing buckboard.

Molly and Leslie, congenial spirits, had tried to laugh off their anxiety and to convince the others that everything was "all right, of course."

"Likely Dolly Doodles has discovered some new sort of flowers somewhere and has wandered off to get them. She's always doing that kind of thing," Molly assured her hostess, who had gently answered:

"We'll hope it's only that. But she'd scarcely look for wild flowers at night, nor do anything to make us anxious by her delay. Our Dorothy is a very considerate girl and I wish—they would come."

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Linking her arm within Helena's, the lady set her steps to suit the girl's and resumed the pacing up and down the long piazza. The house was a one-storied building, stretching along the roadway to a size that was unusual for such a locality. It had been added to at different periods, as need arose; each addition being either a little lower or higher than its neighbor, according to the cash in hand, but invariably with the continuance of the comfortable piazza. This now afforded a long promenade, and all the people gathered at the wayside inn

that night, were using it to walk off their impatience at the delay of "Tenderfoot Sorrel" to bring in his team.

Supper had been put back till it was spoiled, and having been telegraphed for beforehand, good Mrs. Roderick had wasted her best efforts upon it. But, at last, seeing Monty and Molly peering through the kitchen windows in a hungry sort of way, Mr. Ford ordered it served and all repaired to the dining room, feeling that the meal would be a farce, yet something with which to kill time.

However, the long ride in the keen air had given all a fine appetite and despite the landlady's laments over the "dried-up stuff," the table was nearly cleared of its food when they left it. Moreover, everyone felt better and brighter for the refreshment and so hopeful now for the speedy arrival of the laggards, that Mr. Ford suggested to the waitress:

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"Just have a few things kept warm for the others. There'll be four of them. If they aren't here within a half-hour, now, I'll go back in search of them. Something may have happened to the wagon and they left to come on a-foot."

"Dear, did you ask the man you call Silent Pete if he passed them anywhere along the road?"

"Surely, I did that the first thing. He had neither passed nor seen them, he said."

"Well, I'm going to interview him again. Come on, Miss Molly, to the stable with me," cried Leslie.

"'Molly,' without the 'Miss,' please, and I'm ready enough! It seems as if I must be doing something, for everybody is looking so worried," she answered, catching his outstretched hand and racing with him down the long porch and around to the stables in the rear.

Silent Pete had not gone to the loft where the workmen slept. He had wrapped himself in a blanket and, with another for a pillow, had settled himself in a corner of the loose box next the stalls where his team stood. He was so devoted to them that he couldn't leave them alone in a strange stable, though from the snores which already came from him he didn't seem a great protection to anything.

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But Silent Pete was wily. He had heard the voices of the pair without the building, asking a groom to tell where Pete could be found, and had resented being disturbed. He had done his day's work, he had no intention of joining in any search that might be made for the delinquents, and he promptly pretended slumber. But he hadn't reckoned upon Leslie's persistence nor his own uneasy conscience.

"Wake up there, Peter, if that's your name! I'm your boss's son, and I want a word with you. Wake up, man!"

The snores deepened. Rarely had the nose of mortal man emitted such ear-splitting sounds as now issued from the nostrils of the ranchman, as Leslie shoved aside the sliding door of the loose box and stepped within.

"Here, Molly-without-the-Miss, take the lantern and hold it so I can find the head inside that roll of blankets! Feet are big enough. Can't miss them," said the lad, stumbling over the protruding boots of the sleeper. "I'll take this pitchfork and prod him up a bit. Hello, Pete! I say, Pete, you've earned your name one way—but you hardly deserve it another. 'Silent!' You'll certainly keep the horses awake and—Wake up, I say! You shall!"

Leslie thrust the pitchfork into the boards of the floor so uncomfortably near that snoring nose that Pete hitched aside and so admitted himself awake. Molly ran into the box and held the lantern low, while the boy squatted at the teamster's head and thumped it soundly. Both were giggling, which incensed their victim still further, and he suddenly tossed off his blanket with such force that it hit Molly's face and made her jump away, while Leslie ordered:

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"Quit that! Don't you know how to treat a lady?"

There was no answer, save a frown directed toward the laughing girl, and the lad demanded:

"You're to open your lips and tell us what you think has happened to that tenderfoot driver and his team. Why doesn't he come in? They say you're the oldest driver round, know the most about the roads, or trails, and your opinion's wanted. Give it quick, because—Well, there'll be some thing doin' if you do know anything and don't tell it. I don't understand why I suspect you're hiding things but I do; unless it's that grudge I heard some men say you had against the 'Sorrel' fellow. Now, you talk. Where do you think that buckboard is?"

"Gone to smash."

Molly screamed at this cool answer, and Leslie threatened his pitchfork. But it was neither of these things which moved Pete to tersely disclose his private opinion:

"I know nothin'. I guess shortcut and destruction. Lem knows the trail. T. Sorrel ain't wuth huntin', nor them boys. Little gal—might—Talk to Lem. Clear out." [Pg 51]

Having relieved his conscience of this much information the man buried his face again in his blanket and resumed his interrupted repose. Leslie wasted one moment of indignation upon him, as a heartless human being, then hurried out of the place and to his father.

When consulted, Lem Hunt hesitated for an instant only, then advised:

"Best get right a-doin' things! No wagons, but fresh hosses and as many of 'em as want to go. Jiminy cricket! If T. Sorrel branched off where Pete thinks he did he's done for hisself an' all consarned. Let's be steppin'!"

Fortunately, there were plenty of fresh horses at "Roderick's" that night. A drove of them were corralled behind the inn, *en route* from a distant ranch to Denver, and thence eastward to market. All of them were well broken, to the saddle at least, and the best were promptly led out for Mr. Ford's selection, leaving his own beasts to rest for the next day's travel. Also, the drivers eagerly offered their own company, mounting without their saddles, which they insisted upon lending to the less experienced riders.

Excitement followed Lemuel's advice to "Be steppin'," and a very few minutes' of bustling activity saw the cavalcade lined up before the inn with him for leader. It numbered Mr. Ford, Herbert and Monty, of that party; with Noll Roderick himself and three drovers. That Leslie had not joined the riders was due to his mother's anxiety for his health, though his father had rather favored his going. The lad had been indignant at the "molly-coddling" and had hurt the tender heart of the Gray Lady by some angry words. Then he had walked away to the extreme end of the long piazza, whence he watched the disappearance of the rescuers down the moonlight road. As the horses' footfalls died in the distance, his grumblings were interrupted by a light touch on his arm. [Pg 52]

"Come around this corner, boy! Hurry up!"

He turned to find Molly Breckenridge beside him, her finger on her lip, and a wild light in her eyes. She was trembling with excitement and could scarcely wait to whisper:

"I'm going, too!"

"Girl, how can you?"

"Horseback, course. Roderick's daughter's lending me her own pony. Mattie, her name is, and she was all for going with the others but her mother can't spare her. I told her I was just crazy, thinking of my Dorothy; hurt maybe, lost anyway, and nobody but a lot of men to speak to, even if they find her. Do you s'pose I'll desert her? That I love best of all the world? I guess not. I'm a Breckenridge! Good-by!" [Pg 53]

There was mischief in her eyes as she turned to leave him and Leslie laughed:

"Course! You're thoroughbred—I saw that right away. And you're my guest! Could I, as a gentleman, let you ride off alone on a lonely road at night? Hurray! You're A 1! You're rippin'!"

Molly sped around the house. She wasn't familiar, as yet, with Leslie's "rippin'" but she knew he'd approved of her wild prank and would join her in it. She was a far better rider than he, for in her own southern home she had been reared to the saddle and was never happier than when she had a good horse at command. Mattie's pony was swift and easy, and Molly sprang to its back with the feeling that now she was "really doing something," and that very speedily she would have her arms about her missing friend and all would be well. She had also begged Mattie to get a mount for Leslie, forseeing that he would follow her—exactly as he did. Another instant, and the pair were off along a little by-path, toward the main road and the pursuit of the searching party. As they struck into the smoother going Molly touched the calico pony with her whip and called to Leslie:

"Come on! Hurry up! We'll have to ride like the wind to catch up with the rest!" [Pg 54]

"All right—I'll do my best but—but this—old nag—wait a little bit!"

Molly wheeled about and did so, but the delay made her extremely impatient, and with some contempt she remarked, as the lad came alongside:

"Why, I supposed you could ride! You looked like a boy who knew how!"

"So I do! But this thing I'm on—Call this a horse? I'd rather have a mule! How dared they give me such a thing?"

In her hurry Molly had not observed the animal which had stood saddled at the stable door, and that now seemed as ugly and tiresome a beast as her own little pony was fine. Pity then banished vexation and she exclaimed:

"You poor fellow! I don't believe Matty meant you to have that beast. But, come on, anyway. Maybe he'll warm up after a bit, and I'll take that back—that I said about your riding. I reckon you're all right. Anybody must be who can stick on the rack-o'-bones you've got. Touch him up a little—I'll set the pace."

Away she sped while the gaunt creature which Leslie bestrode planted his forefeet firmly on the ground and refused to lift them thence. Molly was fast passing around a curve in the road and would then be out of sight, and Leslie's temper rose to its height. He forgot everything except his own awkward position and the fact that his lively young guest could have the laugh on him when that night's tale was told.

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"Oh! you hateful beast! You won't go, eh? Well, go you shall! Hear me? Take that—and that—and—THAT!"

Blows rained hard and fast, till the lash of the whip gave out, and the butt took its place. Then, as if the astonished horse had just aroused to the state of things, it bolted! and the way its old heels picked up that road was the most amazing thing of all that evening's happenings.

Then, indeed, did Leslie prove himself a better horseman than he looked, and, for all time to come, his full ability to "stick." Riding ahead at a smart pace, but not her pony's best, Molly heard the footfalls behind her and swerved out of the way—not a minute too soon! Evidently, the maligned "rack-o'-bones" would otherwise have ridden her down. He passed her like a whirlwind and then—she after him. Followed, a race to be remembered! The big horse keeping the lead, the little "calico" pit-pattering along behind in a hopeless effort to get even.

Thus for what seemed an endless time, the long dusty road was desolate of any travellers except this pair of runaways. Sometimes a coyote yelped in the distance; occasionally some creeping thing barred the track before them; and a screech owl sent its blood-curdling cries into their ears. Otherwise they were alone in the wilderness and the night, and beyond speaking distance even of one another.

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The effect was to set each culprit thinking. How wild a thing they had done! How thoughtless, how selfish! What fresh anxiety they had added to the troubled hearts back there at "Roderick's," as soon as their absence was discovered! How flat their jolly adventure had fallen!

Molly had bound Mattie to secrecy, and there was that about the western girl that convinced the other that the secret would be kept. If Mrs. Roderick did guess what had become of them, and said so, it would be no comfort to Lady Gray and Helena; and the longer Molly pondered the matter, the more ashamed and terrified she felt. What would Aunt Lucretia say? And what her father—could he see his madcap at that moment?

In a bitter reaction of feeling the girl dropped her head upon the pony's neck, though still mechanically urging the willing creature to her utmost speed. Her thoughts were far away when, suddenly, she felt a check upon the rein and lifted her startled face.

"Why, Leslie! You scared me!"

"Were you asleep?"

"No."

"What then? Your head was down. The 'calico' was taking her own way. What's the matter?"

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"It's none—I mean, if you must know, I was crying."

"Oh! horrors! Why?"

"Because I've done such a dreadful thing. It was wicked. I had no right and—and—"

"Yes, I know. You were frightened. Well, I was, too."

Molly straightened her shoulders and pretended contempt, saying:

"I didn't know as gentlemen—'thoroughbreds,' you know—western thoroughbreds ever

were fr-fri-ghtened. What—was—that?”

A curious cry had reached them and Molly finished her speech in a whisper. The horses, also, had heard it and had thrust back their ears in fear.

Just there the road skirted the edge of a forest and the cry had come from its depths. They peered into the shadows but could see nothing, and edging the pony close to Beelzebub, as Leslie’s mount was named, Molly repeated her question.

“Likely a wild cat, puma, or wolf. I don’t know,” he answered.

“Have you heard it before? Was it that scared you?”

“No, I was afraid something would happen to you, left behind, alone. I fancy we’re in no danger that way—” pointing forestward. “But—”

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“‘But’—what? If you thought about me why didn’t you come back to look for me?”

“I couldn’t. Once he got in motion this beast wouldn’t stop till he—ran down like a clock.”

“Pooh! You should go to a riding school! Let’s go on, now, or else back. I can’t stop here with lions and panthers yelling at us! I—I—Oh! do come on! But keep tight hold of the pony’s rein. Don’t get away from me again.”

“I shan’t. I can’t.”

“Oh! come!”

“I tell you I can’t. We’re planted.”

Molly’s lip quivered, but she restrained her tears and tremulously entreated:

“Oh, Leslie, don’t! I can’t stand teasing now. This isn’t funny—not a bit. Shall we go back? Or try to overtake the others?”

“We can’t do either one. I tell you we’re simply stuck. Settled down and gone to housekeeping. Beelzebub has finished. He won’t take another step. Fact. We’ve got to make the best of it. If that pony of yours was as big as a decent calf we might ride double and leave this wretch to starve and think it over at his leisure. I don’t see why that girl gave me such a creature. Let’s get off and sit down on that rock and wait. Something’s bound to happen—sometime—if we live long enough. The folks’ll come back this same road, course.”

He jumped to the ground and held out his hand to her but, for a moment, she would not dismount; then as he coolly left her and walked to the rock he had pointed out, she slipped from her saddle and followed him. But she still held fast to her bridle rein and the pony offered no resistance to the leading, though the big brute of the profane name remained in the middle of the road, his forefeet pointed forward, his hind ones backward, his whole attitude one of stubborn ugliness.

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Leslie had reached a point where the ludicrous side of things appeared and he remarked:

“Looks like the potato-horses I used to make when I was a kid, with matches stuck in for legs. I wonder how long he’ll stand there!”

Molly smiled faintly. At present there were no alarming sounds from the forest and the boy’s apparent indifference to their lonely situation relieved her own fears.

“Well, it’s an ‘ill wind that blows nobody good,’ you know. That Beelzy thing is the toughest I ever rode. He’s bumped me up and down till I ache all over and this rock is actually soft in comparison. Here. I’ll put some of these big ferns for a cushion for you, and, after all, we’ll meet our folks just as soon by waiting as by going on. They must come back, you know, sure as fate. This is the only road leads to ‘Roderick’s’, I heard them say. Hello! Why—Beelzebub, good boy!”

A whim had seized the obstinate animal to approach his late rider and fawn about his feet, nibbling the scant grass which grew there, as the pony was already doing. In surprise at this change both Leslie and Molly laughed and forgot, for the time, that they were in such a desolate place at so late an hour.

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The horse’s action reminded Molly of an animal her father had once owned and she began to tell stories about him; stories that the boy matched with marvelous ones of his own. That some of these were fiction made no difference. Molly disdained to believe them but they served to pass the time as well as any better ones might have done. Indeed, fear had now left them. The rest after their hard ride was pleasant and both felt that they were simply waiting for their friends’ return.

So they sat on, as composedly as if they were safe at home, till Molly's eyes, fixed upon the distant road, suddenly grew startled again.

Leslie's latest yarn had been of an Indian outbreak, or uprising, of recent date and in this neighborhood. He had heard it that evening from the men at the inn and had not paused to consider how unlikely was such an incident so near to the city of Denver. In truth, the "boys" had invented the whole story, just for the sake of impressing the young "tenderfeet"—Monty, Herbert and Leslie; and it had satisfied the jokers that these youngsters "swallowed it hull."

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But Leslie had a gift for dramatic recital and listening to him the affair seemed very real to the girl. The scene and the hour suggested a possible repetition of the occurrence; and as there now came to her ears the sound of distant hoofbeats on the road, and presently, to her eyes the sight of a company of horsemen approaching, she gave one terrified cry and darted into the forest behind her.

"The Indians! The—Indians! They'll kill us!"

Moved by his own eloquence and still believing the story he had been told, the boy followed her flight. He did not even turn to look where she had pointed but, with a headlong rush, dashed into the wood and into a mass of briars which threw him face downward in their midst. Also, at that same instant both the deserted horses set up a continued neighing, which confirmed the fears of their riders who, both now prone upon the ground, felt that their last hour had come.

CHAPTER IV

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THE WATCHERS AT RODERICK'S

As soon as Molly and Leslie had ridden away, Mattie Roderick disappeared within her own room and became deaf to all the inquiries made outside her door. She was a high-spirited, "wild western" girl, accustomed to obeying little else than her own impulses. She had a fine record as a horsewoman and had been disappointed that she could not go with the searching party. This being the case, it was next better to lend her pony to that other lively girl who was so like herself.

But Mrs. Roderick was certain that the missing Molly and Leslie had followed the first party and could give no comfort to anxious Mrs. Ford beyond the statement:

"Things don't happen often, 'twixt here an' Denver. Been one or two hold-ups, of men known to carry money, but beyond a murder or so, ain't been no excitement this long spell."

"Murder!" cried Helena aghast, and folding her arm a bit more tightly about Gray Lady's trembling body.

"Oh! yes'm. A few has been. But nobody'd touch to harm them children. You needn't worry. They've thought it smart to take a hand in the business, that's all. Mattie won't say 'yes' nor 'no' to my askin', but the 'calico's' out of the corral and Long Jim's Belezebub ain't hitched no longer. Ha, ha, ha! If either them kids tries to ride Beelzy—Hmm. But Chiquita, now, she's little but she's great. Pa and Matt claim she's worth her weight in gold. She's likely, anyway. An' don't fret, lady. They'll all be home to breakfast, an' seein's I've got that to cook, I'll hump myself to bed and advisin' you to do the same. If not, make yourselves comfortable's you can, and good night."

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After the landlady's departure the house became strangely quiet. The men who had been talking outside sought their own rest, and the anxious watchers missed the murmur of voices and the sense of protection which the presence of even these strangers gave.

While Mrs. Ford was still restlessly pacing the long piazza, Alfy slipped within. With her keen observation of details, she had seen where the woodpile was and that the fire on the hearth in the main room of the house had about died out. This had been lighted for the guests' enjoyment, the inn folks caring nothing for it and therefore easily forgetting to replenish it. When she had gathered an armful of wood, Alfy carried it to the fireplace and lustily blew upon the embers till a little blaze started. Then she heaped the sticks upon this and presently had a roaring flame. At once the room grew cheerful, its bareness furnished, as it were, by this open fire.

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"Now, dear Lady Gray, please come right inside. You'll get your death out here in this night air, with not even your cloak on. Come, Helena, you both come in," said Alfaretta,

appearing on the porch.

But her first words had started the mother's tears.

"Lady Gray." That had been her son's pet name for her, its use still more frequent than "Mother," and with a little cry she murmured:

"Ah! my boy! Shall I ever hear you say that again!"

"I don't see why not," said practical Alfaretta, nodding to Helena to help persuade the woman to take a needed rest. "You heard that landlady tellin' how 't they'd all be home to breakfast. Well, then, she knows. She's lived here a power o' time and we've only just come. Say, Helena, let's make a pot of coffee and set the table. I can do it right on them coals, after the fire burns down a mite. If I can't there, 'twon't be the first cook stove I've tackled in my life, and I know one thing if I don't any more: that is, when those searchers and Dolly an' Jim do come they'll be so tearing hungry they could nigh eat ten-penny nails. Come on. Let's get supper for 'em. You boss the job, Mrs. Ford, and then it'll be done right. I saw a lot of chickens in a back room, as I come through, all fixed to fry. Well now, you both know I can fry chicken to the queen's taste, and I'll just lay myself out this time!"

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Her energy and cheerfulness were not to be resisted. Mrs. Ford followed the two girls inside and with a little shiver, from her exposure outside, drew a chair to the hearth and bent to its warmth. Then, as if she had been in her own home, Alfaretta whisked about, dragging small tables from the dining room into this larger one, ordering Helena to do this and that, and all with a haste that was almost as cheering as the fire.

"Now, Helena, here's the dish-closet. You set the table. My! Ain't these the heaviest plates and cups you ever saw? Ma Babcock'd admire to get some like 'em; our children break such a lot of things. But Mis' Calvert wouldn't think she could drink tea out of such. She wants her 'n to be thin as thin! and she's got one set, 't belonged to her grandmother—great-grandma, I guess it was—come over from England or somewhere—that she won't let no hands except her own touch to wash. I wish you could see Aunt Betty wash dishes! 'Twould set you laughing, fit to split, first off. It did me till I begun to see the other side of it, seems if. First, she must have a little porcelain tub, like a baby's wash-tub, sort of—then a tiny mop, doll's mop, I called it, and towels—Why, her best table napkins aren't finer than them towels be. And dainty! My heart! 'Tis the prettiest picture in the world when that 'ristocratic old lady washes her heirloom-china! But this—your hands'd get tired enough if you had to do much of this. Hurry up! Don't you know how to set a table yet, great girl like you? Well, do the best you can. I'm going into that kitchen to cook. I can't wait for this fire to get low. I surely can't, because, you see, they might be here any minute—any single minute—and nothing done yet, not even the table set. Mrs. Ford, you better cut the bread. Here's a lot of it in a tin box, and a knife with it, sharp enough to cut a feller's head off. You best not touch it, Helena, you're so sort of clumsy with things. Now I'm off to boil 'tatoes and fry chicken!"

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It was impossible to retain gloomy forebodings while Alf's cheerful tongue was running on at this rate, and as she left the living-room for the kitchen at the rear both Lady Gray and Helena were laughing, partly at their own awkwardness at the tasks assigned them as well as at her glib remarks.

"I never set a table in my life!" cried Helena, in glee.

"And I never sliced a loaf of bread!" said Gray Lady; "though I'll admit it is time I learned. Indeed, I've never had a home, you know, and I'm looking forward to my housekeeping as eagerly as a child to her playhouse."

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"I'm wondering what the landlady will say, when she finds how we've invaded her pantry," continued Helena, carefully arranging the coarse stone-china upon the oilcloth covered tables. She had begun very reluctantly but found that the labor was a delightful relief from worry, and, with the good sense she possessed, now went on with it as painstakingly as if she expected a fashionable and critical company. Indeed, her first table-setting, copied, as near as she could remember, from the careful appointments of her own mother's board, was to be an object lesson to others besides herself.

For presently there was the sound of voices in the kitchen; Alfaretta's, of course, with another equally gay and girlish.

Mattie Roderick had slept lightly. She had been excited over the arrival of the Ford party in the first place, and doubly so from the later events of the night. So as she lay sleepless and listening, she heard the rattle of cooking things in the kitchen below and soon the odor of frying. With a little grumble she got up and put on the few garments she had discarded.

"It can't be near morning yet. I don't see what's set Ma to cooking, 'less they're on the road back and nigh starved. One thing I know! I shan't marry no tavern-keeper! It's nothin' but fry, roast, bake, an' bile, the hull endurin' time. I'm goin' to quit and go east fur as Denver, anyhow, soon's I get my age. I'd like to look same's them girls do, and they ain't no prettier 'n me. It's only their clothes makes 'em look it, and as for that Molly, they call her, that's rid off on Chiquita, she's just as plain and folksy as get out! So's the red-headed one with the high-falutin' name, out of that song Pa sings about the 'blue Juniata' and 'bright Alfaretta,' or some such trash. Them boys—Well, they hain't took no notice o' me yet—but I can show 'em a thing or two. I bet I can shoot better than any of 'em. I bet, if they don't hurry off too early to-morrow, I'll get up a match and teach 'em how a Colorado girl can hit the bull's-eye every time!"

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With these ambitious reflections the inn-keeper's daughter arrived at the kitchen and the presence of the red-headed girl in it, instead of the portly form of her mother.

"What on earth does it mean?" demanded Mattie, scarcely believing her own eyes.

It didn't take Alfie long to explain, and she added the warning:

"You keep it up! Don't you let on to Mrs. Ford that there's the least misdoubt in your mind but what them searchers will be back, right to once, same's I'm pretending! Oh! I hope they do! I hope they do! I hope it so much I dassent hardly think and just have to keep talking to stop it. If I had hold that Molly Breckenridge I'd shake her well! The dear flighty little thing! To go addin' another scare to a big enough one before, and now about that Leslie. He's a real nice boy—Leslie is—if you let him do exactly what he wants and don't try to make him different. His ma just sets all her store by him. I never got the rights of it, exactly, Aunt Betty Calvert—she 't I've been hired out to—she never approved of gossip. She said that folks quarrellin' was just plain makin' fools of themselves, or words to that effect. The Fords had done it and now, course, they was thicker 'n blueberries again and didn't want to hear nothing about the time they wasn't. Don't leave them 'tatoes in that water so long! Why, child o' grace, don't you know yet, and you keepin' tavern, that soon's a potato is cooked it ought to be snatched out the pot and set to steamin', to get dry? Soggy potatoes gives you the dyspepsy and that's a disease I ain't sufferin' to catch. It makes folks so cross."

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By this time Mattie had entered into the spirit of the thing and had never been happier in her life. This Alfaretta was so jolly, so friendly, so full of talk. So wholly satisfied in her conscience, too, now that "one of the family" was beside her to share the risk she had assumed of using other people's provisions so recklessly.

But in that she had misjudged her genial hosts. Nothing was too good for their guests, these or any others, and if the chickens meant for breakfast were pre-empted for this midnight meal, why there were plenty more in the hennery.

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So, secure in her better knowledge of the elder Rodericks, Miss Mattie sped about, flew in and out of the sitting-room, to tend the fire or add some delicacy to Helena's daintily set table; the same that made her stare at its difference from ordinary. Didn't seem possible that the mere arrangement of cups and saucers, of knives and forks, could give such an "air" to the whole place.

"Like brook trout, Mis' Ford?" asked the girl, upon one entrance. "You men-folks like 'em, too?"

Assured that they were considered a great treat, Mattie advised:

"Well, you just wait! I know where there's a lot, in a basket in the pool. Pa caught 'em to have 'em ready and I'll hike after 'em to onct. You like to go along, Helena?"

Stately Helena smiled at the free masonry of the westerner and glanced at Mrs. Ford, in inquiry:

"Yes, dear, go with her. I shan't be lonely, with Alfaretta left, flying in and out busily. I declare, those kitchen odors *are* savory! I hope the wanderers will soon be here, that this new meal won't be kept till spoiled, as Mrs. Roderick complained of the other."

Helena noticed that the lady expressed no further doubt about the safety of the absentees and thus encouraged she gladly accepted Mattie's invitation. Indeed, this whole trip was full of delightful novelty and all the affectations which had once made Helena Montaigne disagreeable to sensible people had been discarded, or outgrown.

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Mattie's first preparation was to take off her shoes and stockings and she advised the other girl to do the same. "Else you'll get 'em all dirt going through the swamp to the pool. We don't have none too much water hereabouts but what we have got is *wet!*"

"I couldn't go barefooted. My feet would hurt so. I'll have to risk the shoes. I have others in my suit-case, wherever it is."

"Well, come on then. You can step light through the ma'sh and 'twon't be so bad. Wait till I fetch a lantern."

"A lantern, in this moonlight?"

"Sure. 'Twon't shine into the woods. The trees are awful thick and though I could go straight there and back, without stumbling once, you're new to the way an' the light's for you. I don't want you to get hurt just goin' for a mess o' fish!"

"Thank you, Mattie. That is very considerate of you. Shall I carry it?"

Mattie was pleased by the other girl's "thank you." Such small courtesies were almost unknown to her, but she determined to remember how "good" it had made her feel and to experiment with it upon somebody else, sometime. Even as Helena's table-setting had also been a lesson in neatness; and with her eagerness to learn she felt that she had been amply repaid for giving up her sleep. Chattering as if she had always known the stranger she led the way safely to the pool, deep in the woods; and Helena never forgot that scene. Except for the slight illumination of the lantern the blackness of the forest was intense, and the rustling of wild things among the tree-tops startled her.

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Mattie looked up and saw her fear, then laughed hilariously:

"Two 'fraid-cats together, you an' the birds! Likely, they never saw a lantern before and hate to be disturbed even more 'n I did, listenin' to Alfaretta in the kitchen. But don't you like it? Ain't it awful solemn in such woods in the night-time? Makes a body think of all the hateful things she's done and sort of wish she hadn't done 'em. But there ain't no livin' thing in these woods'll hurt you, nowadays, though onct they was chock full o' grizzlies an' such. Now I guess that's enough. Don't suppose your folks'd eat a bigger mess 'n that, do you? 'Cause I could take a few more if you say so."

Helena looked at the big basket of trout and laughed, then shivered at the echo of her own laughter in that place, which seemed full as "solemn" to her as it did to the more accustomed Mattie.

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They were soon back at the inn, Mattie at once proceeding to show Alfaretta that she could do some fine cooking herself; and between them they made Mrs. Roderick's larder suffer, so eager was each to outdo the other and to suggest some further delicacy for that wonderful meal.

Mrs. Ford paced in and out of the living-room, watchful and still anxious, though greatly amused at the doings of the three girls, and wondering, as well, how the landlady could sleep through all that din and chatter. For Helena, too, had gone into the kitchen and seizing a pitcher of cream Mattie was carrying to the table, demanded a chance to "whip" it.

"It's such an improvement, or will be for that good coffee you've made, and Herbert likes it so much."

Mattie put her arms akimbo and stared; then demanded, in turn:

"Can't you do anything sensibler than 'whip' cream? As if it was bad. You make me laugh, though I don't know what you mean."

Helena soon showed her, even with a two-tined steel fork beating the rich cream into a heaped-up, foamy mass, which Mattie declared was the "wonderfulest thing" she had ever seen. They were still discussing the matter, and each sampling the delicacy with relish, when Mrs. Ford's excited voice was heard, calling:

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"They're coming! Oh! they're coming at last! Away down the road! I can hear them—beyond the turn of the road. Only it seems that they come slowly. Is it so? Or is it my own impatience?"

Only Alfaretta stopped to push the pans and pots to the cool, safe end of the great stove, now glowing red in front from the hot fire they had made. The other girls rushed outward to see for themselves, and Alfie reached the piazza just in time to hear Mattie remark:

"Yes, they do travel powerful slow. They ain't in no hurry to get here. Somethin's happened. You can just believe me—somethin's happened!"

THE CALL OF THE MOUNTAINS

As the approaching company came around the bend of the road into sight of the inn, a "calico" pony detached itself from the group of riders and before those watching on the porch could hear her words, Molly was shouting to them:

"We're all right! Everybody is all right—except the one that isn't! And he—Wait, I'm coming!"

The three girls ran down the road to meet her, and even Lady Gray walked swiftly after, and in a moment more they had encircled the truant with their loving arms, forgetting that she had given them a needless anxiety.

"They weren't Indians at all. They were just our own folks, but Leslie and I were frightened half to death! I don't know what would have become of us except the pony told our story. And he's only smashed up a little some way. They had to hold him on the horse—"

"What! Leslie, my Leslie, my boy!" gasped Mrs. Ford.

"Leslie? No, indeed! Nothing the matter with him only riding the rack-o'-bones. The 'Tenderfoot' man, and the cowboys say it served him right. Only he got off too easy with just a broken collar bone, and a sprained ankle, and some teeth gone—and a few other trifles like that. He—" [Pg 76]

"You can get off Chiquita now, Molly. I want to rub her down. Ain't she the best ever?" said Mattie, calmly lifting the rider down from the saddle.

"Indeed she is! And how strong you are, to lift a big girl like me!" cried Molly, eagerly. "I do believe your little Chiquita saved our lives, Leslie's and mine."

"Tell me what you mean, child. Where is Leslie?" demanded the Gray Lady, placing her hand on Molly's shoulder and peering into her eyes.

"Why—I mean, what I say, course, Mrs. Ford. But Leslie's all right now. He's scratched with the briars and torn his clothes and has had to ride double with a cowboy, or drover, because he couldn't stand Beelzebub again. Mr. Roderick is riding that creature and—Here, here they are!"

Once in sight of the house most of the party came up at a canter, Mr. Ford cheerfully saluting his wife, and the others waving their hats and showing off a few tricks of their steeds—while Dorothy was handed down from riding-pillion behind her host. Everybody's tongue was loosened at once and such a hubbub arose that Mrs. Ford clapped her hands to her ears, then caught hold of Leslie as he slid to the ground and ran like a girl to the house. She wanted a chance to kiss him before the rest came in and had learned long before this that her boy "hated coddling." [Pg 77]

However, he submitted to a little of it that night with a better grace than usual, understanding that he had given his mother anxiety; and told her as briefly as possible the whole story.

"You see, Lady Gray, that 'Sorrel Tenderfoot' was too smart, so came to grief."

"A good lesson to remember, son."

"Course. Well, he drove into a road, a trail, and got stuck. The horses bolted, the wagon went to smash and he was hurt. Pretty bad, I guess. The others weren't at all, only frightened and sort of stunned. They were in a tight fix. So dark in there they didn't know which way was out and made up their minds to stay till daylight. That Jim Barlow—I tell you he's great!—he fixed a bed with the wagon cushions and laid 'Sorrel' on it. Then he felt the man all over and saw his legs and arms were sound. After that he got the box of the buckboard right side up and made Dorothy get into that and lie down. He covered her with the robes and made Manuel promise to stay right beside her while he went back for help. Dorothy wouldn't let him go, at first, till he made her ashamed thinking about the 'Tenderfoot.'" [Pg 78]

"He made his way back all that distance to the main road, just by noticing the branches that had been broken by their driving in. He was going to walk back to Denver for help, thinking that was the quickest way, but when he got out of the woods he couldn't go any further. He'd hurt his arm some way—Dad says it's broken—and the pain made him faint. We found him there—I mean the searchers did, and when he came to be told them the rest.

"Lem Hunt and Roderick knew exactly where to look. They found the runaway blacks and captured them, or some of the cowboys did, and they made a litter of the wagon box, covered it with branches and carried him out of the woods. They've brought him all the way here for he insisted on coming. Said he'd be better cared for by Mrs. Roderick than at any hospital in Denver. He was sort of crazy and they didn't dare oppose him. That's why they are so slow. But they'll be here soon and he'll be put to bed. Lemuel says the man'll take a blazed trail the rest of his life, and will have time to get over his smartness while his bones heal. But I think it's too bad. I'm sorry for him, and so is Dad. Now, come. They're going to table and I'm hungry as a bear. Isn't it fine of Mrs. Roderick to get a meal this time of night, or day, or whatever hour it is?"

"It wasn't Mrs. Roderick. Alfie was the moving spirit and the other girls helped. But not one mouthful shall you have till you confess your own fault. Why did you, Leslie, run away into all that danger against my wishes?" [Pg 79]

"Why, Molly—" began the lad, then checked himself for shame. "Why, Lady Gray, I couldn't let a girl like Molly ride away alone, could I? And she would go—just would. And the funny part was—we heard 'lions' or 'panthers', or something in the woods behind us. We'd stopped to rest and we thought so. Then we saw the searchers coming back and thought they were Indians! and the way we took to the woods would make you laugh. That's how I got to look like this. We might have been in them yet if little Chiquita hadn't stood like a post right beside the rock where we'd been sitting. Her being there, and Molly's hat and jacket that she'd taken off because she was too warm, told the truth. Dorothy saw the hat and knew it at once. So when Roderick came up and recognized Chiquita they made another search and found—us. But I tell you, Lady Gray, I've had all the lecturing I need just now from the other head of the family. I think Dad would have liked me to ride with him, at first, but he gave me his opinion of a boy who would 'sneak' off and 'leave his mother unprotected in a strange house at night.' Just forgive me this once, motherkin, and I'll be good in future; or till next time, any way. Now, come." [Pg 80]

Such a meal as followed had rarely been eaten even in that land of hungry people, where the clear air so sharpens appetite; and in the midst of it came the landlady herself, not even showing surprise, and certainly not offence, at the liberties which had been taken in her house. Fortunately, Jim's arm had been bruised and strained, only; not broken as Mr. Ford had feared.

Then to bed and a few hours of sleep; another breakfast, as good as the first; after which buckboards were driven round and horses saddled; Herbert, Jim, and Manuel electing to ride while Monty was to travel in the wagon with Silent Pete, as driver. He was the better suited thus because Mr. Ford and Leslie were to be his companions, the gentlemen having arranged matters this time without any casting of lots.

Lemuel drove the four-in-hand as on the day before, having as passengers Mrs. Ford and Miss Milliken—who had slept soundly through all the events of the night—with the four girls. Jedediah, Mr. Ford's colored "boy" also rode beside the driver, for the greater protection of the feminine travelers, should any need arise.

But nothing did. All the untoward incidents of this journey to the Rockies had happened during its first stage. "Tenderfoot Sorrel" was left behind, of course, but he did not greatly regret that. He felt that he could more easily endure physical pain than the chaffing of his fellows at San Leon. [Pg 81]

As before, the start was made with a flourish of whip and horn, amid good wishes and farewells from the hosts of the Wayside Inn, and a sure promise to "come again!" Then a day's journey steadily onward and upward, through river-fed valleys and rocky ravines, with a mid-day stop at another little hostel, for a change of horses and a plain dinner.

Then on again, following the sun till it sank behind a mountain range and they had climbed well nigh to the top. Here Mr. Ford ordered a brief halt, that the travellers might look behind them at the glorious landscape. When they had done so, till the scene was impressed upon their memories forever, again the order came:

"Eyes front! but shut! No peeping till I say—Look!"

Laughing, finding it ever so difficult to obey, but eager, indeed, the last ascent was made. Then the wheels seemed to have found a level stretch of smoother travelling and again came Mr. Ford's cry:

"All eyes front and—open! Welcome to San Leon!"

Open they did. Upon one of the loveliest homes they had ever beheld. A long, low, roomy building, modelled in the Mission style that Lady Gray so greatly admired; whose spacious [Pg 82]

verandas and cloistered walks invited to delightful days out of doors; while everywhere were flowers in bloom, fountains playing, vine-clad arbors and countless cosy nooks, shadowed by magnificent trees. A lawn as smooth as velvet, dotted here and there by electric light poles whose radiance could turn night into day.

For a moment nobody spoke; then admiration broke forth in wondering exclamations, while the host helped his wife to alight, asking:

"Well, Erminie, does it suit you?"

"Suit? Dear, I never dreamed of anything better than a plain shack on a mountain side. That's what you called it—but this—this is no shack. It's more like a palace!"

"Well, the main thing is to make it a home."

"Is it as good as the 'cabin,' father?" asked Leslie, coming up and laying his hand on Mr. Ford's shoulder.

"Let us hope it will be! If the first inmates are peace and good will. Peace and good will," he repeated, gravely. Then his accustomed gayety replaced his seriousness and he waved his hand toward the entrance, saying:

"Queen Erminie, enter in and possess your kingdom! Your maids of honor with you!"

"My heart!" cried Alfaretta, following her hostess, like a girl in a dream. "I thought 'twould be just another up-mounting sort of place, not near so nice as Deerhurst or the Towers, but it's splendid more 'n they are, either one or both together."

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"Wonderful, what money can do in this land of the free!" remarked Herbert, critically estimating the establishment. "Think of a man having his own electric light plant away up here! Why, if it weren't for the mountains yonder one could fancy this is Newport or Long Branch."

"Without the sea, Bert. Even money can't bring the sea to the mountain-tops," said Helena, though her own face was aglow with admiration.

"It can do the next best thing to it. Look yonder," said Monty, pointing where a glimmer of sunset-tinted water showed through a hedge of trees.

"Let's go there. It certainly is water," urged Jim Barlow.

"Well, Leslie told me there was a strange waterfall near San Leon and I suppose the same money has pressed that into service. To think! That 'Railroad Boss' earned his first quarter selling papers on the train! He was talking about the 'cabin' as we came along. It had two rooms and he lived in it alone with his mother. By his talk they hadn't always been so poor and she belonged to an old family, as 'families go in America.' That was the way he put it, and it was his ambition to see his mother able to take 'the place where she belonged.' That's how he began; and now, look at this!"

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All the young people had now gathered around the pond, or lake, that had been made in a natural basin on the mountain side, for thinking that their host and hostess would better like to enter their new home with no strangers about them, Dorothy had suggested:

"Let's follow the boys! Jim's arm ought to be looked after, first thing, and I'll remind him of it. He'd no business to come on horseback all that long way, but he never would take care of himself."

"Has Leslie ever been here before?" asked Molly Breckenridge.

"No. It is as much a surprise to him as to his mother. But he's mighty proud of his father," answered Dorothy. "Look, here he comes now."

He came running across the sward and down the rocky path to the edge of the lake and clapped a hand on the shoulders of Herbert and Montmorency. He did not mean to be less cordial to Jim Barlow but he was. For two reasons: one that Dorothy had extolled her humble friend till he seemed a paragon of all the virtues; and secondly what he had learned of Jim's eagerness for knowledge had made him ashamed of his own indifference to it. Even that day, his father had commended the poorer boy for his keen observation of everything and read him a portion of a letter received from Dr. Sterling, the clergyman with whom James lived and studied.

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The Doctor had written that the lad was already well versed in natural history and that his interest in geology was as great as the writer's own. He felt that this invitation to his beloved protégé was a wonderful thing for the student, and that Mr. Ford might feel he was having a hand in the formation of a great scientist.

There had been more of the same sort of praise and Leslie had looked with simple amazement at the tall, awkward youth, who had arrived in Denver with the rest of his young guests.

"That fellow smart? Clever? Brainy? Well, he doesn't look it. If ever I saw a regular clodhopper, he's the chap. But that Herbert Montaigne, now, is rippin'! He has the right 'air,' and so has the shorty, the fat Monty, only his figure is against him," he had remarked to Mateo, who had instantly agreed with him. Indeed, the Mexican *never* disagreed with his "gracious excellency, Señor Leslie."

Mateo's service was an easy one and his salary good. Besides, he was really fond of his young master and formed all his opinions in accordance. So then he, too, cast a supercilious glance at Jim, and had caused that shy lad's color to rise, though beyond that he took no notice. [Pg 86]

Already as they stood there gazing over the lake, crimson with the last rays of the sun, Jim was studying the rocks upon the farther side and squinting his eyes at something moving among them. It was with a startled return to his surroundings that he heard Leslie now say:

"My father wants to have you come in, Mr.—I mean James. The doctor is going to properly dress your arm."

"The doctor? Is there a doctor here?" asked Dorothy, slipping her hand under Jim's uninjured arm, and conveying by that action her sympathy with his feeling of an alien.

But he coolly drew aside. He wasn't going to be humiliated by any girl's cossetting, not even hers. He had never realized his poverty so bitterly, nor been more ashamed of that fact. Just because some richer boys looked down upon him was no reason he should look down upon himself. Also, it angered him that he really needed surgical attention. He had suffered intensely during the ride hither but he had kept that to himself. He meant to keep it to himself whatever happened, and to join in what was going on as if he were physically sound as the other boys.

"It's only my left arm, anyway. I'd be a poor stick of a thing if I couldn't manage with the other," he had thought, bravely, despite the pain. Now here was he being made the object of everybody's notice; and, being Jim—he hated it! There was a surly look in his eyes as he replied to Leslie's message: [Pg 87]

"I guess not. I mean—there isn't any need—I'm all right. I'm all right, I say. I'm—Shucks! I'm bully!"

It was Dorothy who blushed this time, she was so mortified by the rudeness of her "paragon." Whenever had he used such an expression? She flashed an indignant glance upon him, then coolly commanded him:

"You come right straight along, James Barlow. You're Mr. Ford's guest now and must do what he wants, just the same as if he were Dr. Sterling. Besides, I know we all ought to be freshening ourselves before supper. Lady Gray hates untidy people. Come on."

Again she linked her arm in Jim's and led the way up the slope toward the house, while at the mention of supper all the others fell into line behind her. And now Jim was already ashamed of his petulance with her. After all, she was the prettiest girl of them all; and, so far as he knew, the richest. She was "thoroughbred;" her family one of the oldest in its native State; and though the poorhouse boy had no family pride of his own he was loyal to old Maryland and his earliest friend. What had not Dolly been to him? His first teacher, his loving companion, and the means of all that was good coming into his life. [Pg 88]

"Say, Dolly, I'm sorry I said that and shamed you. Sorry I'm such a conceited donkey as to hate being looked down on. You just keep me posted on what's what, little girl, and I'll try to behave myself. But it beats creation, to find such a place as this up here on the Rockies and to know one man's done it. Kind of takes a feller's breath away, don't it?"

They were a little ahead of the rest of the party and able to talk freely, so Dorothy improved the chance to give "her boy Jim" a little lecture; suggesting that he must never stop short of accomplishing just as much as Daniel Ford had done.

"What one poor lad can do, another can—if he will! *If he will*, James Barlow! It's just the *will*, you see. There was a copy in my old writing-book: 'What man has done, man can do.'"

"Shucks! I'm ambitious enough, but 'tain't along no money lines. What I want is learnin'—just plain knowledge. I wrote a copy once, too, and 'twas that 'Knowledge is Power.' I made them capitals the best I could so 't I never would forget 'em."

"Huh! For such a wise young man you talk pretty common. There's no need, Jim Barlow, for

you to go back into all the bad grammar and chipped-off words just because you're talking to—me. I notice you are very particular and careful when you speak to our hosts. Oh, Jim! isn't this going to be just a glorious summer? Except when I think about Aunt Betty I'm almost too happy to breathe."

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Jim had stumbled along beside her, unseeing the objects that were nearest—the lovely shrubbery, beautiful flowers, and quaint little furnishings of that grand lawn—but with his eyes fixed on a distant mountain peak, bare of verdure, and seemingly but a mass of varicolored rock; and he now remarked:

"I wonder how much of this country that Dan Ford owns! I wonder if he's got a claim on the peaks yonder!"

"Come back to earth, boy! Can't you think anything, see anything but—stones? Here we are at the door and I fancy this gentleman is the doctor. Good evening, sir."

"Is this the lad with the injured arm?" asked the gentleman meeting the pair, and glancing toward Jim's bandaged arm, with the coat sleeve hanging loose above it.

"Yes, sir, but it's nothing. It doesn't need any attention," said Jim, ungraciously.

"Behave yourself, Jim. Yes, Doctor—I suppose you're that?—he is so badly hurt that he's cross. But it's wonderful to find a doctor away up here," said Dorothy. Her odd little air of authority over the great, loutish lad, and her gay smile to himself, instantly won the stranger's liking, and he answered warmly:

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"Wonderful, maybe, but no more so than all of Dan Ford's doings. Step this way, my son, and Miss, I fancy you'd best not follow just yet. Nurse Melton will assist me, if I need assistance."

"A nurse, too? How odd!" said Dorothy turning to join her mates.

She did not see Jim Barlow again that night. When the examination was made the doctor found the injured arm in bad shape, swollen and inflamed to a degree that made great care a necessity unless much worse were to follow.

So, for the first time in his healthy life, Jim found himself an invalid; sent to bed and ministered to by a frail, sweet-faced woman in a white uniform, whose presence on that far away ranch was a puzzle to him. Until, seeing his evident curiosity, she satisfied it by the explanation:

"Oh! I'm merely another of Mr. Ford's beneficiaries. My brother is an engineer on one of his railroads, and he heard that I was threatened with consumption. So he had me sent to Denver for a time, till San Leon was ready. Then I came here. I'm on hand to attend any sick folks who may need me, though you're the first patient yet. I can tell you that you're fortunate to number Daniel Ford among your friends. He's the grandest man in the world."

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Jim lay quiet for a time, till his supper was brought in. But he could not taste that. The dressing of his wounded arm had been painful in extreme, though he had borne the pain without a groan, and for that been greatly admired by both the surgeon and the nurse. He was now feverish and discontented. The "happy summer" of which Dorothy had boasted was beginning anything but happily for him. He was angry against his own weakness and disappointed that he could not at once begin his work of studying the rocks of this region. To do so had been his chief reason for accepting Mr. Ford's genial invitation, for his shyness shrank from meeting strangers and accepting favors from them. Dr. Sterling had talked him "out of his nonsense" for the time being, but he now wished himself back in his familiar room at Deerhurst lodge, with Hans and Griselda Roemer. They were humble folk and so was he. He had no business in this rich man's "shack" that was, in reality, a palace; where pleasure was the rule and work the exception. Well—things might happen! He'd take care they should! He was among the mountains—for that part he was glad; only regretful of the debt to another which had brought him there.

The hum of voices in and about the big house ceased. Even the barking dogs were silent at last, and the music from the men's quarters, stopped. There was where he, Jim belonged, by right. Out in some of the many buildings at the rear; so many, in fact, that they were like a village. He guessed he'd go there. Yes. In the morning, maybe the Boss would give him a job, and he could work to pay his keep. His thoughts grew wilder and more disordered, his head ached.

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The nurse was sitting silent in an adjoining room. Actual watching was unnecessary and she understood her patient's mood, that her presence in his chamber worried him. It was his time—now or never. He crept from his bed and stepped out of the low window upon the wide porch.

Even in his delirious confusion it struck him that he had never seen such wonderful moonlight, nor such a big, inviting world. The vagary of thought altered. He would not seek the workmen's quarters, after all. The mountains were better. They called him. They did not seem far away. He would not feel so hot and then so shivery if he could lie down on their cool tops, with only the sky above him. Aye, they called him; and blindly answering to their silent summons the sick boy went. The things he prophesied had surely begun to "happen."

CHAPTER VI

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A MARTINET OF THE ROCKIES

San Leon ranch was a large one. The dwelling house and many outbuildings were upon a rich plateau topping a spur from the great mountain beyond. On one side, the land sloped to the valley of the Mismit, utilized for the sheep farming; and across the river, or run, rose grassy fields, climbing one above another till they ended in rocky, verdureless soil. Here were the cattle ranges, and here the herds of horses lived their free life. The extent of the property amazed the newcomers, even Lady Gray herself.

She was exploring the premises escorted by Leslie and her young guests, and piloted by the talkative Lem Hunt. For once he had attentive listeners. There was no fellow ranchmen to ridicule his oft-told tales, but eager ears to which they were new; and eyes as eager to behold the scenes of these same marvellous stories.

All began and ended with "The Boss, he." Evidently, for old Lem, there existed but one man worth knowing and that was the "Boss, he."

"I s'pose, Ma'am, you know how the Boss, he come to buy S' Leon. No? You don't? By the Great Horned Spoon! Ain't that great? Just like him. The Boss, he never brags of his doin's, that's why I have to do it for him. Well, Ma'am, I can't help sayin' 'twas a deed o' charity. Just a clean, simon-pure piece of charity. Yes, Ma'am, that's what it was, and you can bite that off an' chew it."

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Mrs. Ford smiled. She was always delighted to hear of her husband's generous deeds but rarely heard of them from himself. Also, she had supposed that the purchase of San Leon had been a recent one and was amazed now to learn it had been owned by Mr. Ford for several years. Not as it then was, for no improvements had been made to the home-piece till after he had found her that last winter in San Diego. Then, at once, preparations had been made for this home-coming, with the result of all the beauty that now greeted her eyes.

"Tell us, Lemuel. I'm anxious to hear."

Lem switched some hay from a wagon seat, that stood upon the ground, and motioned the lady to be seated. The youngsters grouped about her, Lem cut off a fresh "chaw," rubbed his hands and began. He stood with legs far apart, arms folded, an old sombrero pushed back on his head, a riding crop in hand, and an air of a king. Was he not a free-born American citizen, as good as could be found in all the country? Lemuel adored his "Boss" but he had not learned the manners which that "Boss" would have approved in the presence of the Gray Lady; who, by the way, was never more truly the "Lady" than in her intercourse then, and always, with the toilers at San Leon.

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"Well, sir, Ma'am, I mean—'twas really a deed o' gift. There was another railroader, rich once, done somethin' he hadn't ought to. I don't rightly know what that was. The Boss never told, course, and it never leaked out otherwise. That's no more here nor there. But he, the other feller, had his bottom dollar into S' Leon, and some dollars 't wasn't his 'n. He was countin' on this range bein' chock full o' silver an' he'd wheedled the rest to takin' his word for it. Silver? Not on your life. The sheriffs got after him. He hadn't a friend in the world. He lit out a-foot and got as far as Denver city an' aboard a train. Leastwise, under a baggage car, stealin' a ride. Course he got hurt. Happened the Boss, he was on hand. He's a way of bein' when other folks is in trouble. Heard the feller's story. Had knowed him out east and 'lowed he was more fool than knave. Long-short was—S' Leon swapped owners. The first named had had to take his medicine an' I've been told he took it like a little man. The Boss paid in full, on condition 't all hands round got their level dues. Atterwards, the Boss made this a dumpin'-ground for all the down-in-the-world unfortunates he knew.

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"The doctor's one. He was just dyin' back yonder, same as Miss Melton. Doc, he took the place o' book-keeper, sort o' manager—I claim to be that myself—but to do anything

needed. The's always somebody gettin' broke, legs, an' arms, and such. But as for ginerall sickness, why there ain't never been none o' that to San Leon. No wonder that Dan Ford's a prosperous man! He lives his religion—he ain't no preachin'-no-practice-sky-pilot, the Boss, he ain't.

"Ma'am? Like to see where the boys hang out? Well, come along. If things ain't the way I'd like to have 'em, you c'n allow 't I'm the only one's been in the ranks. Yes, Ma'am. I have that. Used to belong to a crack comp'ny out home and was one the picked men to shoot at Seagirt, New Jarsey. The National Rifle Range, Ma'am, as maybe you know. I've scored highest, more 'n once. That's how I come to sort o' set up in business out here. Shootin' an' hosses; them's my business; and every tenderfoot strikes S' Leon comes under my teachin' first or last."

With that remark he cast a critical eye upon the assembled young folks and noted the kindling gleam of seven pairs of eyes. Only Jim Barlow's blue orbs were missing; but, of course, that nurse or doctor had made him stay in bed, which was a shame, the others thought, and Dorothy loyally expressed:

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"Course! That's one the things we're all wild to do—learn to handle a rifle. But don't let's begin till Jim gets well."

A curious expression passed over Mrs. Ford's face. She was the only one present who knew of Jim's midnight escape. The knowledge had almost miraculously been kept from Lemuel and by the master's express orders. Whatever that talkative ranchman knew, all the world knew, as fast as his tongue could tell it.

All had been so quiet in the sick room that the nurse had supposed her patient fallen asleep; and it was not till daybreak that she discovered his absence. She had immediately informed Dr. Jones, and he, in turn, the "Boss," who understanding the shy nature of the truant and knowing how he would dislike to be talked about, had instituted a quiet but thorough search. Only the trustiest men had been set upon this search, Mr. Ford taking the most active part in it. By his request the matter had been kept from his young guests, also; and they were to be made as happy as possible in their ignorance. As he said to Lady Gray, before leaving her:

"Of course, we shall find him in a very little while. He can't have gone far afield, and we'll have him back in bed before any of those youngsters get wind of his performance. Nurse says he was flighty and feverish and I don't wonder. Doctor claims he'd rather have had a clean, sharp break to mend than all those bruised and torn ligaments. However, don't you worry. This party is going to be a success—don't doubt. Sorry to leave you with seven young folks on your hands—a little world in themselves, of varying ideas and wills. They can easily spend this first half-day in inspecting the ranch and, if they're as healthy and happy as they seem, will be too interested to give much thought to Master James. Good-by, don't worry."

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However, although they felt it would be well to wait for the injured Jim before beginning their lessons in shooting, Lemuel himself took the matter out of their hands, explaining:

"I've lived long enough to know there ain't never but one time to do one thing, an' that if a feller don't snatch it then, afore it gets out o' reach, he'll be sorry forever atterwards. We'll go inspect the boys' quarters first hand. That's a part o' my business, anyway. Makes 'em mad, sometimes, but it's for their good. Nothin' like the army for trainin' folks right, an' so I tell 'em. Get jawed for it a pretty consid'able, but Lemuel G. W. Hunt—I'm named for the Father of my Country, Ma'am—Lemuel G. W. Hunt always does his duty, let come what follers atterwards. Right this way, Ma'am. Hep, hep, hep, right face!"

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The odd fellow led off with a military step and catching his humor the boys did likewise. Then, the girls laughed and marched, Herbert gallantly escorting Mrs. Ford, as the eighth of the little "Company A," as Leslie immediately named the new "awkward squad."

"And I say, Lem, it'll be just rippin' if you'll drill us in regular 'tactics.' Once a day, anyhow. I'll get Dad to furnish the uniforms and it'll be a help because, you know, I'm bound for West Point sometime," cried Leslie.

Lady Gray's face resumed its look of anxiety that had passed for a moment, listening to Lemuel's talk. This West Point ambition of her son's was a sore subject with her, though his great desire for a military life had never been hidden from her.

"If I can pass the physical exam., and the book one—either," he added, with a grimace.

"Well, you'll have to know a power more 'n you do now, if you get into that place," said truthful Alf. "I've heard Mis' Judge Satterlee, up-mounting, tell 't her boy near studied his

head off, an' then got shut out. It's a terrible fine thing, though, if a body could. Why, up-mounting, we can hear the bands playin', guns firin', and Dolly there, she's seen 'em drill. Seen the battery-drill, she called it, and didn't guess how in the world them gray-coated boys could hop on-an'-off their gun wagons like they did. When I get home, I mean to go over to the Point myself and see 'em. If you should be there I'd take you something to eat."

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Leslie was now much more interested in hearing about the place of his dreams than in the present inspection of San Leon; and encouraged by this Alfaretta made Dolly tell how she and Molly had once visited the Academy and Molly's cadet cousin, Tom Hungerford.

Molly interrupted the narrative with frequent comments and they all paused at the entrance to the Barracks, as Lemuel had named the long building of the workmen, while the story was told. Lemuel and Leslie were the most eager listeners, both faces alight with enthusiasm, as the two girls described their day at the military school.

"Tom got leave off, to show us around, and Aunt Betty with Mrs. Hungerford—"

"That's Aunt Lucretia, Tom's mother," explained Molly.

"You tell it, Molly. You can do it better," urged Dorothy.

"All right. I'd rather. Well, we went down in the morning early, on the boat, to be in time for early drill. It was summer time and the darling cadets were all in their white uniforms, fresh as daisies. Do you know those poor lambs have to change their white suits every day? Some oftener, if they get a single speck of dirt on them. Their laundry bills are something terrible. Terrible! poor dears!"

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Lady Gray laughed at the girl's sympathy with the afflicted young soldiers, and Dolly took up the tale again:

"Well, they needn't worry. The Government pays for it, really. They just get a little salary each month and their expenses come out of that. Whatever else they have their own people give them. But, anyway, it was just lovely. If I were a boy and didn't want to be a great scientist, like Jim does, or a banker like Monty, or—or anything else, I'd be an army man."

"Bother what you'd be, Dolly. You're only a girl. Go on with the story," said impatient Leslie, while Lemuel nodded his head in satisfaction. Talk of soldiering touched the warmest spot in the old sharpshooter's heart. "Do hurry up."

"Why, after all, there isn't much to tell—"

"But there is," cried Molly. "About the luncheon in the church. Listen. We went everywhere about the grounds, saw the riding-school, the mess-room, the dancing-hall and all, a lot of places. Oh! yes, the library, too. Then it got noon and hungry-time and we'd brought an elegant lunch. Cold chicken and sardines and sandwiches and early peaches—the nicest we could get, and Tom's 'leave' gave him a chance to eat it with us. We asked him where we could and he thought a minute, then said in the church. Aunt Lu thought that was dreadful, to eat in a church! But Tom said it was the only place on the Point where we wouldn't be stared at by others. Folks were everywhere else; cadets and visitors—and oh! It was so pretty. All the white tents on the campus and the darling boys walking about in their white—"

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"Nighties?" suggested Monty, maliciously. It had been an ambition of his own to enter the Academy; but his being under age, his size—and several other good reasons, including his utter want of fitness in the matter of book learning—had prevented the realization of this fine dream. His failure had rendered him skeptical of the charms of the famous institution, and he now always mentioned it as a place quite beneath his own notice.

The story promised to be a long one and Lemuel thoughtfully produced a chair and placed it for Mrs. Ford's use. Her eyes were on Leslie's interested face and she would gladly have postponed the recital; for, even more than the disgruntled Monty, she disliked the very name of West Point. However, in this matter, as in many future ones, her own fancy was to be set aside by the eagerness of her young guests. So Dorothy went on:

"There wasn't anybody else in the church except ourselves. A few visitors came to the door and peeped in, to see a famous painting over the chancel, but finding us there went away again. That old church is so interesting! Tablets to famous generals everywhere—"

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"This isn't a history lesson! Go on with the story!" cried Herbert, who was so familiar with West Point that he desired no fresh description.

Molly made him a little mocking face and herself took up the tale:

"Well, we had our dinners there, sitting in some of the front pews, and the way Tom walked

into that fried chicken and things would make you open your eyes. We were all hungry, course, after so early a breakfast, and the sail down, and all; but Tom was simply ravenous. He was so hungry he took away our own appetites, just watching. When he'd eaten all he could there was still a lot of stuff left; and Mrs. Calvert asked him if he knew any place where we could dispose of it; a garbage can, she meant, or some waste-box.

"Tom said yes he did, and if she'd excuse him he'd show her. It was what he called 'slumgudgeon day.' 'Slumgudgeon' is a kind of stew made up of the leavings of lots of other meals and the poor, darling cadets just hate it. He said 'cold victuals' never came in as handy as ours did then. So he unbuttoned his jacket, that fitted him as if he'd been melted into it, and began to pad himself out with the leavings. Cake and chickens, pickles and sardines, boiled eggs and fruit—you never saw such a mess! And the way he packed it in, so as to keep an even sort of front, was a caution. You know the poor dears have no pockets in their uniforms. Not allowed. So that was the only way he could take it. He wanted to share it with his cronies after we'd gone and told Aunty Lu that it would have been a perfectly wicked shame to have thrown it away, when it would do him so much good. Oh! we had a glorious time. I do just love West Point—"

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"The cadets, you mean! I never saw a girl that liked the boys so well as you do, Molly Breckenridge. But I s'pose you can't help it. If 't wasn't for that you'd be just splendid, and *they* don't seem to mind—much—anyway," remarked Alfaretta, beaming upon pretty Molly with loving smiles. Molly's liking for "boys" seemed to honest, sensible Alf the one flaw in an otherwise lovely character.

But Molly tossed her sunny head and laughed. Also, she flashed a mischievous glance into all the boyish faces turned toward her and on every one she saw a similar liking and admiration of herself. She was quite satisfied, was Jolly Molly.

"Now, if we are to 'inspect' the 'Barracks,' isn't it time? So that we can get back to the house by the time James Barlow is ready to see us. I suppose the doctor won't keep him in bed all day; do you, Mrs. Ford?" said Helena Montaigne.

She had already learned that the Gray Lady was bitterly opposed to Leslie's plans for the future and wanted to put aside the unfortunate subject of West Point. To her surprise, instead of lightening, the lady's face grew still more troubled, as she turned to scan the landscape behind her with a piercing gaze.

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"That story was just rippin'! When I get to the Point the first place I shall go to see will be that church! Hear me, Dorothy Doodles?" demanded Leslie, catching her hand and swinging it lightly as he led her forward into the first room Lemuel had opened. "Will you come over there and bring me just another such a luncheon, girlie?"

"Well, yes. I don't like to promise things but I guess this is safe enough. When you get there—*when you get there*—I'll come, and you shall have the finest dinner Alf and I can cook. We'll do it all by ourselves—*when you get there to eat it!*"

"Oh! I'll be there, never fear. My! isn't this rippin'? How does the old soldier make the men keep such order, I wonder! Lem Hunt must be as great a martinet as he is talker. Look at him."

The ranchman was in his element. He had long before marshalled the entire working force of San Leon into a "regiment." Any newcomer who declined to join it was promptly "left out in the cold." The "soldiers" were jolly company for themselves and none at all for any outsider who refused to obey the unwritten laws which honest old Lem had laid down for their benefit. "Captain Lem" was the neatest man of all, but he required the rest to come as near his standard as the disadvantages of previous bad training permitted.

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Now, in imitation of that West Point discipline he admired, he had pulled from his pocket a white linen handkerchief and was passing it gently but firmly over the few simple furnishings of this first apartment in the long row. It belonged to Silent Pete, just then engaged breaking to harness a spirited colt, exercising it around and around the smooth driveways of the "home piece." He was not so far away that he could not perfectly see what was going on at the "Barracks," and even at that distance his grizzled cheek flushed. He had risen late and been remiss in his room-cleaning. He hoped old Lem would forget to mention who was the occupant of that cell-like place, and, for once, he did.

There was dust on the chest of drawers which held Peter's belongings, the cot was just as he had crawled out of it at daybreak, a horsewhip and blankets littered the floor, and the "Martinet" was so ashamed of the whole appearance of things that, after one hasty test with the handkerchief, he withdrew carrying the company with him. Yet, before leaving, he had drawn a piece of chalk from the band of his sombrero and made a big cross upon the dusty chest. Silent Pete would know what that meant: mounting guard for three nights to

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come! and a grim smile twisted Lemuel's lips, reflecting what that meant to one of his "Squad."

The visitors had smiled, too, but with amusement at this odd old ranchman's discipline; and Monty had whispered:

"What makes 'em put up with it? What right has he to order them around?"

But Leslie, the young master of San Leon, was as much in the dark as any other stranger, and could only answer:

"Suppose it's because he's a leader. Born that way, just as my father was, though it's a different way, of course. Otherwise, I can't guess. But I'm wild to get at the shooting lessons. I hope the rest of you are, too. The first step to becoming a real 'wild westerner' is to know how to handle the 'irons.' He's rippin', Lem is. But come on. He's getting away from us. I wish poor old Jim was here. It's a pity anybody has to be sick in such a place as this. I tell you, boys, I was never so proud of Dad as I am now, when I look around and see what a ranch he's got—earned—right out of his own head-piece! I don't see where he is! I wish he was here. I'd ask him about those uniforms and I'd get him to let old Lem off every other duty, just to teach us. Dad's a sort of sharpshooter himself. Once he—No matter. That story'll keep. Lady Gray is calling us."

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They had lingered to inspect some of the ranchmen's belongings, as they passed from room to room, Lady Gray and the girls going forward in Lemuel's company. She was beckoning her son and asked, as he came running up:

"Please go across the lawn and ask Miss Milliken to join us. She went to her room to write letters, immediately after breakfast, but I see she's come out now and I don't want her to feel lonely nor neglected."

Leslie darted away, but returned again to say:

"She doesn't want to come, just now. She wants Jim Barlow. Says she went to his room but the nurse said he wasn't in. Jim knows about some books she wants to send for, when the mail-bag is sent out. Do you know where he is? Or father? 'Tisn't half-fun, this inspection of San Leon without Dad here to tell us things. I haven't seen him this morning, any more than I have Jim. Do you know where they are?"

Poor Lady Gray was not much better at keeping secrets than old Lemuel was. She had had to put a great constraint upon herself not to reveal the anxiety which consumed her. Hours had now passed since Mr. Ford had ridden away, with a couple of men attending him. All the other men not absolutely required to look after the place had been despatched to search on foot. Their long-delayed return seemed to prove the matter of the sick boy's disappearance a more serious one than at first imagined. Her answer was a sudden wringing of her white hands and the tremulous cry:

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"No, no, I don't. Pray God, no tragedy marks the opening of our home!"

CHAPTER VII

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A RIFLE PRACTICE

"Mother, what do you mean? Don't turn so white and do speak! What 'tragedy' could have happened up here in this lovely place?" demanded Leslie, putting his arm around the lady's shoulders and wondering if she had suddenly become ill. She was slender but had never complained of any weakness, nor shown the least fatigue during her long care of him at San Diego. Since then, she had been like a happy girl with him and his father but something was amiss with her now.

In a moment she had calmed herself and was already blaming herself for her disobedience to her husband's request for silence. However, this last matter was a small one; for, if the missing lad was not soon found, all would have to know it. Indeed, it might be better that they did so now. They knew him better than his hosts did and possibly might give a clue to his whereabouts. So she told them all she knew, and the surmise that he had wandered away in a fit of delirium. The very telling restored her own courage, and, as yet, there was little fear showing upon the faces of her young guests.

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Except on Dorothy's. Her brown eyes were staring wide and all the pretty color of her cheeks had faded. As if she saw a vision the others could not she stood clasping and

unclasping her hands, and utterly sick at heart for the loss of her early friend. Longer than she had known any of these here about her she had known poor Jim. He had saved her life, or she believed so, in her childhood that now seemed far away. But for Jim, the poorhouse boy, she had never escaped from Mrs. Stott's truck-farm when she had been kidnapped and hidden there. He had stood by her in all her little troubles, had praised and scolded her, and known her through and through. It was her talk about him which had made Mr. Ford invite him to San Leon—to his death, maybe.

That thought was too much. Clinching her small hands and stamping her little foot she defied even death to hurt poor Jim, good Jim, brainy Jim, who was to astonish the world some day by his wisdom!

"Oh! If you'd only have told me before! I would have had him found long, long ago! To think of that poor fellow wandering around alone, sick, crazy, suffering—not knowing where he was or what he was doing! And we strolling around, looking at old 'Barracks' and things, and telling silly stories of silly picnics! It was cruel, cruel! Come, Alf. You like him, too. You don't look down on my poor boy—you come and help me find him!"

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She seized her old friend's hand and ran toward the house, which now looked anything save beautiful in her sight; and, turning, she saw the lake, gleaming in the noonday sun as it gleamed in the red rays of sunset with Jim there to admire it.

"The lake! He's drowned! That's where he is, our Jim! In the bottom of that horrible lake!"

Catching Alfaretta's hand more firmly she drew that frightened girl along with her to the edge of the pond and to a little boat that was moored there. Both lake and boat were merely toylike in proportion and the bottom of the pond was pebble-strewn and plainly visible through the clear, shallow water.

"He ain't—he—ain't—he can't—you could see—him—He isn't—Oh! Dolly, Dolly Doodles! I'm sick! It makes me feel terrible queer!" wailed Alfaretta. "But Jim can't—Jim can't be drowned! *He can't!*"

"Yes he can, too. Shut up. Help me untie that rope. Get in. Take an oar. Row—row, I tell you," snapped Dorothy, distraught.

"I can't. I dassent! I never touched to row an oar in my life. Not in my whole life long, and—I—I shan't do it now!" retorted the mountaineer with equal crispness.

But she had no need to try. The whole party had followed Dorothy to the water's edge and had divined her intent. Not one believed that Jim was drowned, though they could have given no good reason for this disbelief. Only that was too horrible. Such a thing would not have been permitted! Yet Herbert, as the best oarsman there and also as the loyal friend of the missing lad, assumed the place Alf would not take. Without a word he did what Dorothy desired. He slipped the painter from its post, helped the girl to take her seat in the little "Dorothy," even smiling as he observed that it had been named for her, and quietly pushed out from shore.

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It was just as Alf had said: the bottom of the lake was clearly visible everywhere, and no frightful object marred its beauty. Dorothy was utterly quiet now but her searching gaze never lifted from the water, as Herbert patiently rowed around and around. The group on the bank waited also in silence, though certain after that first circuit of the pond that Jim was not there.

When they had gone around several times, and had crossed and criss-crossed in obedience to Dorothy's nod, Herbert brought the boat back to the little landing and helped Dorothy out.

"He isn't there, Gray Lady. May I go to the doctor?"

"Surely. I'll go with you. And don't look so tragic, darling. The boy will certainly be found. There will nothing else be done at San Leon until he is. Both my husband and myself agree on that point—that Jim Barlow's safety is our first consideration. He will probably be found near at hand, although—"

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"Hasn't he been looked for 'near at hand,' then, dear Gray Lady?"

"Certainly. At the beginning. We didn't think he could have wandered far, yet when they failed to find him on the home-grounds, the searchers spread out in all directions. Here is the doctor coming now, if you wish to speak with him."

"Thank you, I do."

The gentleman came toward them and Dorothy ran to meet him.

"Oh! sir, have you found him?"

A negative shake of the head answered her. Then she plied him with all sorts of questions: how long could a sick boy live exposed to the night air, as Jim had been; without food or medicine; and couldn't he think of some place that nobody else had searched, so she might go and try it?

He laid his hand upon her head and gently asked:

"Was he your brother, little girl?"

"No. I haven't any brother. I haven't anybody but Jim, that has known me always, seems if, and—and dear Doctor, won't you please, please find him?"

Clasping her hands about his arm she looked up piteously into his face, and his own grew pitiful as he answered: [Pg 115]

"I will do my utmost. What I hope is that he will wander back, of his own will, just as he wandered away. Be sure I shall keep a sharp lookout, but it is Mr. Ford's wish that I do not leave the home-place till—at present. If he is found, I mean *when* he is found, he will need my care and it wouldn't do for me to be away then. Else I should have gone out with one of the searching parties."

That "when he is found" was reassuring. Evidently, the doctor expected the speedy return of the lad and all were relieved, even Dorothy. Alfaretta expressed her own feeling by saying:

"Out here in this Colorado, seems if there wasn't anything but folks gettin' lost and other folks searching for 'em. I never heard anything like it," she finished with a sigh.

The sigh was echoed by all the rest; then Mrs. Ford suggested:

"Let us have luncheon now, then call on Lemuel to give us our first lesson in rifle-firing." She assumed a cheerfulness she did not really feel, but felt that the happiness of so many should not be spoiled by the absence of one.

"Oh! Lady Gray, will you practice with us?" asked Leslie, eagerly.

"To be sure. I'm going to 'play pretend,' as children say, that I'm just as young as any of you. In my busy life I've not had much time for 'playing' but I mean to make up for lost time. Come, I'm sure that Wun Sing has made something nice for us. He—" [Pg 116]

"Wun Sing! *Wun Sing?* Why that was the name of Aunt Betty's cook at *El Paraiso*! How odd that yours should have the same name!" exclaimed Dorothy, forgetting her troubles for the moment.

"Not so odd, dearie, because it is the same man. He came to Mr. Ford one day while we were still in San Diego and confessed his regret for his behavior at Mrs. Calvert's home. And my good Daniel can never turn his back upon any penitent; so the result is the Chinaman reigns in our kitchen here. Doubtless he'll be pleased to see Alfaretta who taught him so many fine dishes."

"Oh! good! May we go see him, Mrs. Ford?" demanded that young person, eager not only to see Wun Sing because he was one more familiar acquaintance but because she wished to settle a few old scores. "I'm so glad! I'll make him toe the mark here, see if I don't. Come on, Dolly Doodles, he's an old friend of yours, too."

Alfy's eagerness infected even anxious Dorothy and gave an agreeable turn to the thoughts of all. So, at a nod of consent, the girls sped along the cloister, seeking the great kitchen and the salaaming grinning Chinaman within it. [Pg 117]

"Oh! how good you look, Wunny! Same old purple sack! same old shoes; same old twisted cue around your same old shiny black head! Same old nasty messes cooking! and same old Alfaretta to get after you with a sharp stick!" cried Leslie bursting in with all the others.

Even Dorothy was laughing now, Jim quite forgot, while the cook held such a reception as had never been his before. Leslie went through some formal introductions, beginning with the lady of the mansion and ending with Miss Milliken, who had followed unseen till now.

Wun Sing's back must have ached, so often and so low he bowed, while his tongue mumbled compliments to the most gracious and honorable visitors; but a look of real delight was on his swarthy face and one of great affection for smiling Alfaretta.

"My heart! Ain't it just grand to find an old friend up here on the mountains! I declare, it does beat the Dutch!" and to this, her expression of greatest wonderment, Leslie added his

own:

“Just downright rippin’! He’s worth all he costs just to make our Dolly forget that horrid Jim Barlow. I can’t forgive him for running away and stirring up all this mess, sending Dad off on a tiresome ride and spoiling sport this way. He was good enough, I’d have treated him decent, all right, but I wish now he’d never been heard of.”

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But the most of this was whispered in his mother’s ear, as he stood beside her, his hand upon her shoulder, in that familiar, loving attitude which always made her so happy.

Then she demanded of the proud *chef* how soon he could have lunch ready, and he replied with another gesture of profound respect:

“Light away, this instlant! By my honorable forefathers it is fitte for the most bleautiful!”

Then he bowed them out of the place and they wandered to the pretty room where the meal would be served, and which because of its simple, cloister-like effect, Helena at once named “The Refectory.”

It had been a trifling incident, but it had had a happy effect. All tongues were talking now, planning, anticipating, wondering over the things they meant to do and to learn; while a man was sent across to the “Barracks” to tell Lemuel that they would like to begin their rifle lessons that afternoon.

Mrs. Ford suggested naps for everybody, on account of their previous long journeys but none wished to sleep just then.

“How can anybody be tired in this glorious air?” asked Helena, burying her nose in a beautiful bunch of wild flowers somebody had placed beside her plate.

Even Miss Milliken was wide awake now and as happy as she ever could be anywhere. Her one complaint was that it was “so far from civilization.”

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“But you knew that, Milly, before you came. Mamma stated everything to you as plainly as could be. You knew you were going to an isolated ranch on a mountain, so how could you expect daily papers, visitors, and such things? You’ve always said you loved quiet and, now you’ve got it, do be satisfied,” begged Helena. She was really fond of the nervous little governess but sometimes lost patience with her.

“Yes, dear, but suppose—suppose something happened? Illness at home, or something serious.”

Lady Gray gently interposed, and made, also, her little speech. It was her first and last advice, or request, to her guests and most of them were impressed by it.

“Dear Miss Milliken, don’t be troubled by ‘being so far from civilization.’ You aren’t that, at all. My husband has brought civilization with him. I am amazed at all he has accomplished. We have a telegraph line—that he found necessary for his business, but that can be used by any of us. Bad news travels fast. Be sure if ‘anything happens’ we shall hear of it all too soon. And now I have but one suggestion to make for our life together, and I mean to apply it to myself first of all. It is: Let us put everything unpleasant under our feet, as far as possible, and each do his and her share to make this a wholly joyous summer. I’m inclined to ‘worry’ and it’s a most unfortunate inclination. This is the first time I have had a chance to make a ‘home’ for Daniel and Leslie and I want it to be perfect. Will you all help me? Will you all take my dear husband’s words for a summer text and make life at this dear San Leon a synonym of ‘Peace and Good Will’?”

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Lady Gray’s beautiful face was very earnest, there was even a suspicion of tears in her long-lashed eyes, but they did not fall, and, after a moment’s silence, Leslie sprang to his feet with a:

“Hip, hip, hurra, for the Gray Lady and her maiden speech! All in favor of following her lead, say ‘Aye!’”

All the company rose and the deafening “Ayes” which those young throats emitted were as flattering as confusing to the “speech” maker. Then she waved them back to their chairs and Wun Sing’s perfection lunch was served.

Of course they all missed their jolly host, and their hearts were still troubled because of the missing Jim; but each strove with the other to keep these feelings out of sight. This was hardest for Dorothy, who guessed that the lady’s suggestion was meant for her most of all; yet she bravely tried to smile at every witticism made by her mates and to respond in sort as far as she could. They had been a little company of eight and because one was away should the seven be made to suffer? She would try not, and contented herself with one final

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question, as the hostess rose from the table and, the others hurrying "Barracks"-ward, she could whisper:

"Even if they don't find my poor boy right away, you won't let them give up looking, will you, dearest Gray Lady?"

Mrs. Ford drew the child close into her arms and kissed her tenderly:

"Don't fear that, for a moment, darling. As if James Barlow were our own Leslie, the search for him would never be given up till he were found. Scouts will be looking for him everywhere; though, of course he's sure to be found near home and soon. Now, my dear little girl, shorten up that long face and trust to older heads to do the right thing. Your business now, as it has always seemed to be, is to make your playmates happy. Jim shall be found; and soon—I do believe. You've heard the men say that whatever 'Dan Ford, Railroad Boss' undertook he accomplished. Now let's put that matter aside and learn how to handle a rifle."

"Captain Lem" had made great preparations for his "shooting school." He had called upon his own company, as far as he could find it, to help him. Most of the "boys" had gone searching, but the few who were left soon had a row of benches set out, a target placed, and the finest guns available stacked in readiness. It was really a very business like arrangement and the would-be students soon found Lemuel's rule was business only. For the boys he had placed arm-rests and they were to fire from the ground, aided by these slight supports.

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"The females can stand and shoot, on account o' their petticoats worryin' 'em, lyin'. An' as I can't do nothin' unless it's by rule an' rod, I lay it this way: Mrs. Ford, bein' she's the eldest—though she don't look it, Ma'am!—she'll begin. Nobody can have more 'n two tries to a round. Then Number Two takes it. The schoolma'am next, an' mebbe I mistook in that matter of age. But that's not here nor there. Mrs. Ford, Number One; the schoolma'am, Two; the rest the females follerin' in order. Then the boys. One, two, three—attention! Step right here, lady, and I'll show you the first position—how to hold your rifle."

Captain Lem had put on a rusty uniform, a relic of former grandeur "back home," and carried his bent shoulders with a military precision that quite transformed him. He gave Gray Lady a salute, moved forward and placed her "in position" and handed her the rifle.

"Hold it just this way, scholar, and sight your bull's-eye. Keep your eye on that, allowin' for a little play in the carryin', and now—pull your trigger—let her go!"

Mrs. Ford obeyed, or thought she did. The result was that the gun kicked, she screamed, and threw it as far from her as she could. What became of the bullet she never knew, but she firmly declined any further lessons in the fine art of sharpshooting.

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"Look at Lem's face!" whispered Herbert to Molly who giggled and returned:

"Wait till it comes my turn, I'll show him something!"

The Captain, as they henceforth called him tried to hide his look of disgust by turning his back upon the group, and asking in a sarcastic tone:

"Any more females want to take a try? The schoolma'am lady, for instance?"

She ignored his question and sat down by her hostess to soothe that now abashed person for her failure. Captain Lem had withered even the lady of the ranch by his contempt.

"Helena next!" cried Molly, fairly dancing about in her impatience.

So Helena tried and made out fairly well. That is she succeeded in keeping the rifle in hand, she did not scream at the discharge, and she came within a hundred feet of the target. The lads applauded, noisily, and she mocked back at their pretended admiration, though she made one effort only and subsided on the bench beside the ladies.

"All the same it's wonderfully exciting! And I mean to try again, to-morrow, if they'll let me," she remarked.

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"Let some of the boys try before we do, so we can see how it's done. Or you, Captain Hunt, you show us!" begged Molly.

This was what he had waited for. With a strut he marched across the space between them and the target and carried that much further back. He longed for a target bearing an arrangement of letters that he could hit and cause to disappear, as at his boasted Seagirt, instead of a plain affair such as this he had to use.

Strutting back to them he lay down, wriggled himself into position, muttered something

about the sun in his eyes, hemmed and hawed, took final aim and—let her go!

But she didn't go—not in the least. All unconsciously, he had taken an unloaded piece!

There was no strut left in him as he rose to his feet, rather slowly, and faced his laughing audience; but he rallied after a moment and good-naturedly joined in the laugh against himself.

However, discipline was over for that lesson. Without regard to any rules the youngsters rushed to the stack and took whatever gun was fancied. Then began an indiscriminate firing till Mrs. Ford grew frightened and implored them to stop. They did so, all but Alfaretta and Molly, who had both been fascinated by the sport and felt sure that they could hit the bull's-eye—which nobody else had done. [Pg 125]

"Come on, Alf! Let's get down on our tummy, same's all marksmen do, let's!"

Down they flung themselves and now, as eager for their success as they were, old Lem handed each a fresh rifle and sang out:

"Let her go! A silver dollar to the gal that wins!"

They fired—and the unexpected happened. Alfaretta's untaught hands succeeded where greater skill had failed. Her bullet went straight into the bull's-eye, into its very centre.

"By the Great Horned Spoon! What an eye you've got, child of mortality! Why I couldn't ha' done better myself! Glory be!" shouted the excited ranchman, fairly dancing in his pride and glee. Then he helped Alf up from the ground, where she still lay, wondering at the excitement about her, and peered critically into her blue orbs.

"However could you see it? That fur away?"

"Why—why, I didn't see it at all. I got scared and shut my eyes when I pulled that thing on it!"

Captain Lem staggered as if he had been hit instead of the target and softly marvelled:

"Such—dum—luck! She done it—with her eyes—shut! She—done—it—with—her—eyes—shut! Somebody take me out and lay me down. I'm beat."

His ludicrous manner amused the others but frightened the too successful Alfaretta. Also, her attention was claimed by Molly's expression. That ambitious young person was looking very white about the lips, and was clasping and unclasping her hands in evident distress. [Pg 126]

"Molly, what's the matter?" cried Alf, shaking her partner in the affair.

Molly lifted one shaking finger and pointed into the distance:

"I—I hit something, too!"

Other eyes than Alf's followed the pointing finger and a groan of horror burst from more than one throat.

Indeed, and all too surely, Molly had "hit something, too!"

CHAPTER VIII

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A CONCERT IN THE MOONLIGHT

Night fell on San Leon; and the searching party which had gone out in the morning, sure of prompt success, returned tired and dispirited. But their places were immediately taken by fresh recruits, Mr. Ford announcing that the matter would not be dropped, night or day, until all hope had to be given up.

Except that Jim's clothes had been left in his room it might have seemed that the lad had run away, feeling himself out of place at San Leon. But the folded garments placed on the chair beside his empty bed told a different tale.

"No, he has wandered off unknowing what he did. Well, when he comes back he shall find his place ready for him and the warmest of welcomes waiting. While we have tried—and will still—to visit every cabin and ranch within reasonable reach, there are many such little shacks dropped here and there among the mountains; and we have probably overlooked the one in which he is sheltered. Open hospitality is a feature of the west. Anybody who comes [Pg 128]

across the boy will be good to him. Now, let's have a little music and then to bed. A whole day in the saddle tires me, though I'm bound to get used to it yet, and so shall all of you. Come, Erminie, give me a song; and Dorothy dear, get out your violin."

Thus said Mr. Ford, when their evening dinner had been enjoyed and they had all gone out to sit upon the wide veranda, the moonlight flooding the beautiful grounds, and the soft spring air playing about them.

Dorothy felt that she could not play a note, and even Alfaretta was quietly crying in the retired corner she had sought, in the shadow of a pillar. But Mrs. Ford at once obeyed her husband's wish, and as her wonderful voice floated over them it banished every thought save the delight of listening.

The "boys" came over from their "Barracks" and sprawled on the grass, entranced. Hitherto, their life on the ranch had been one of toil, lightened by sports almost as rough, with the evening diversion of swopping stories over their pipes. They hadn't been greatly pleased at the prospect of a lot of strangers living so near them, but already all that was changed; and though they didn't know, till Lemuel informed them, and this singer was one of a few famous *artistes*, they were moved and touched by the marvellous beauty of her voice.

"You know, boys, it'd be worth ten dollars a ticket—gallery seats, at that—just to get into an opery house an' hark to yonder lady. An' now you're just gettin' it for nothin', free, clear gratis, take it or leave it, ary one. Fact. The 'Boss's' lady is an A 1 singer if she is a—I mean, a poor show at a rifle." [Pg 129]

The songs went on till the Gray Lady dared sing no more. Like all trained singers she was careful of her throat and unused, as yet, to the air of this region at night. But when she laughingly declared:

"No more this time; not if I'm to sing again," there was a murmur of dissatisfaction from the group of men about the fountain; and old Captain Lem begged, in their name:

"Just one more, lady, to sleep on. That kind o' music makes a feller hungry for more and sort-of-kind-of sets him thinkin' 'bout things back home."

But Mr. Ford interposed:

"No, Captain, not to-night! I want to have a lot of just such concerts so we mustn't put the *prima donna* out of condition. But I've a little girl here with a fiddle and I tell you she can just make it talk! Come farther forward, Dolly dear, and stand close to me. Then 'rosin your bow' and get to work. Show these cowboys what a little girl-tenderfoot can do. Maybe, too, who knows? Maybe our Jim will hear it wherever he is and hurry back. At it, child, and call him!" [Pg 130]

Lady Gray feared this was a trifle unkind to the girl, who she wished might wholly forget the boy, but the master felt it not so. He knew that nothing would more thoroughly inspire her than this possibility.

"Oh! do you think so? Then I'll play as I never did before—I will, I will!"

She stepped out from the veranda upon the broad walk before it, and with the moonlight pouring down upon her white-clad little figure, her face uplifted to the sky, and her precious violin beneath her chin, she played, indeed, "as she had never done before."

On and on she played; one ranchman after another softly suggesting some desired melody, and her eager little fingers rendering it upon the instant. The men ceased sprawling and sat up. If they had found the Gray Lady's voice a marvel, here was a greater. That any child—a despised "female" child—could evoke such music seemed past belief; and when, at length, Mr. Ford bade her render the beloved "Home, Sweet Home" as a finale, there was a reluctant rising of the audience to its feet, ordered to it by the Captain who, in rather husky tones, stated:

"Ladies and gentlemen, and mostly the little gal, I give the sentiments o' my regiment, to a man, when I say all you tenderfoots is welcome to S' Leon. We wasn't very tickled before, thinkin' all our free livin's an' doin's was to be interfered with, but we are now. Three cheers for the company an' the treat they've give us, more especial for the Little One, and—Long may she wave! Hip, hip, hurrar!" [Pg 131]

The cheer was given with a will, and then again came the Captain's order:

"Fall into line. Right about face. March! hep, hep, hep—hep!"

But as they filed away Dorothy had another inspiration and, acting upon it, sent the

delighted cowboys marching to the lively air of "Yankee, Doodle, Doodle Doo."

"And now to bed!" advised the hostess. So within a very few moments all were in their rooms, tired and happy despite the worries of the day, and sure that all would come right at last.

The four girls shared two rooms, facing one another and with two dainty beds in each. Milliken's chamber was at the end of the long passage beyond theirs, and those of the rest of the household across a wide hall which cut this wing of the house in two. In structure the building was very like *El Paraiso*, which the Gray Lady had admired and where the happiness of reunion had come to her; and it seemed to those who had wintered in the old adobe that they had but stepped into another home. [Pg 132]

Of course, sleep did not come at once. Four girls, even if together all day long, find much to chatter about at night, and this had been a day of "happenings" indeed.

Dolly and Alfie came across to sit on Helena's bed and watch her dainty, slow preparations for retiring. Molly was already perched in the middle of her own white bed, hugging her knees and proclaiming for the twentieth time, at least:

"Oh! I am such a thankful girl! After I fired that rifle and saw that purple mass of stuff lying on the ground I thought I was a murderer! I did so. Yet I was mad, too, to think Wun Sing had been such an idiot as to go between me and the target."

"Herbert claims the safest place for others, when a girl shoots, is right behind the target. But it wasn't when Alfie hit the bull's-eye. How did you do it, child? It was wonderful and at that distance—which Captain Lemuel fixed for himself!" said Helena, brushing out her hair preparatory to loosely braiding it.

"Oh! Nell, you're lovely that way! In that soft nightie—you do have such lovely, lacey things. I wish Aunt Betty would buy me some like them, but she won't. She's too sensible, and oh! dear! I wish I had my arms around her neck this minute!"

"Put them around mine, Dolly Doodles, and quit wishin' for things you can't get. Do you s'pose I'll ever do it again?" asked Alfaretta, drawing one of Dorothy's arms about her own shoulder. [Pg 133]

"Do what again, child?"

"Child, yourself. I mean fire right into the middle of the thing, and 'honest Injun', I did do it with my eyes shut. I wonder if that ain't the rightest way to sharpshoot, anyway. The rest of you couldn't hit it anywheres near, with your eyes open. What say?"

Molly yawned and stretched herself luxuriously, and Helena remarked:

"Molly, you make me think of a Persian kitten! She does just that when she feels particularly good."

"Well, I ought to feel good. I didn't kill Wun Sing. I just made a hole in his old purple blouse and I can give him another new one. If I can find one like it, and have money enough, and—and other things. If I had shot him instead of his clothes what would they have done to me? Would I have been hung by the neck till you are dead and the Lord have mercy on your soul? Would I?"

"Oh! Molly, how horrible and how wicked! That's swearing!" cried indignant Dorothy.

"Well, I like that! I mean I don't! I never swore a swore in my life and you're horrid, just horrid, Dorothy Calvert, to say so," retorted Molly, suddenly sitting up and flashing a look of scorn at her beloved chum.

"It was really swearing, you know, though you didn't mean it." [Pg 134]

"It's what the Judge says—my poor father's one—when a man is condemned to death."

"Aunt Betty says that any taking of the Lord's name *in vain* is swearing and—"

Foreseeing a childish squabble, due to over-excitement and fatigue, Helena gently interposed:

"That's enough. Neither of you knows what she is talking about. They don't hang people nowadays, they electrocute them, and Wun Sing wasn't hurt. He was only badly scared and will keep a good distance from our rifle-range hereafter. Alfie did hit the bull's-eye, no matter whether she meant to do it or not. We've had a perfectly lovely evening and a perfectly lovely summer is before us. I mean to get up, to-morrow, and see the sun rise, so—off with you, girls. Molly and I are sleepy. Good night to both of you. What friends we

shall be before this summer ends!"

"Why, I thought we was now. I'm sure I don't feel much above any of you, even if I can shoot better 'n the rest," said practical Alfaretta, moving slowly toward the door.

A shout of laughter greeted her words and Molly indignantly retorted:

"You aren't one bit smarter than I am. You only hit an old target and I hit a man, and we didn't either of us mean to do it. But good night, good night. Wake early, 'cause Leslie says we've a great doin's before us, to-morrow. Something better than waking up to see the sun rise. Helena'll get over that, though. Such fine resolutions don't last."

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"You'll see. I—I think I shall keep a diary. Take notes of what happens up here on the Rockies. If I succeed I may—I *may* write a book, sometime," said Helena.

Molly and Dolly stared, seized with sudden awe of this ambitious young person, and Alfie stared, too; but she was not impressed and her comment was a not unkindly but perfectly sincere remark:

"Why, Nell, you couldn't do that. It takes brains to—"

"Young ladies! I am amazed at your disturbing the house like this, after retiring hours! Lights out, or off, silence at once!" ordered Miss Milliken, appearing in their midst. And at this apparition silence did follow.

Back in their own room, Dorothy and Alfaretta pushed their little beds close together and knelt down to say their prayers. In the heart of each was an earnest petition for "poor Jim," Dolly's ending with the words: "And let me see his face the first thing in the morning."

But Alfie reproved this.

"We haven't any right to set times for things to be done and prayers to be answered, Dolly Doodles, and don't say no more. It's sort of saucy seems if, to ask for things and then keep thinkin' in your insides that they won't be give. You've asked and the Lord's heard you—now get up and go to bed."

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"Oh! Alfie! I wish you had—had—a little more spiritually!" wailed Dorothy, rather stumbling over the long word but obediently rising from her knees and creeping between the snowy sheets. "And I don't feel as if there was any use going to bed, any way. I know I shan't sleep a wink."

"Fiddlesticks! You just do beat the Dutch! As if great Jim Barlow hadn't a decent head on his shoulders and needed the use o' your 'n! He wouldn't thank you for makin' him out such a fool. Good night. I'm goin' to sleep."

Dorothy felt that this was simply heartless and sighed:

"I wish I could! But I can't!"

Then she drew the covers about her shoulders, stared through the open window at the moonlit ground, felt the scene a trifle dazzling, and closed her lids just to rest her eyes a minute.

When she opened them again Alfaretta's bed was empty and neatly spread. Except her own belongings the room was in perfect order for the day, the sun shone where the moonlight had been, and the cathedral clock on the cloister wall was striking—

"Oh! Oh! It's morning! It's *late* morning, too, that's six, seven, nine o'clock! Oh! how could I sleep so? I never did before in all my life—except—well, sometimes, but I'm ashamed, I'm awfully ashamed of myself."

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As she sprang to her feet there was a tap at the door and a white-capped, white-aproned maid appeared, saying:

"Good morning, Señorita. The Señora sent me to serve you and help you about your bath. It is ready, yes, and the other señoritas have breakfasted and gone out, *si*. By my Lady's orders you were not to be awakened till you roused yourself."

"Oh! but I am sorry. I didn't mean to do this, for I know one of Mr. Ford's rules is early rising. I found that out at *El Paraiso* and—yes, yes, please do help me. But tell me, what shall I call you?"

"Anita, niña. Anita Mantez I am, from the dear City of the Angels, *si*. This way, *carita*, do not fear displeasure. They are all beloved, the fair young things, but you are nearest, dearest, so my Lady tells. For you will never be blamed, believe me."

Dorothy made short work of her toilet and felt so refreshed by her night of sound sleep and her delightful morning bath, that the world outside seemed even lovelier than she remembered it. Also, she was hungry—so hungry! It was quite as Mr. Ford had said; that the mountain air made people almost ravenous, at first. Afterwards, one's appetite sank to the normal and to be out and doing was the one great desire of life.

Anita led her to the refectory and served her with a dainty breakfast, disposed on exquisite "individual" dishes, and oddly enough, bearing the initial "D." Dolly lifted a cup and stared at it, wondering while Anita glibly explained in her patois of Spanish-English, that yes, indeed, it was the Señorita's own. [Pg 138]

Dorothy's heart was touched and grateful. Charming as her hosts were to all their guests, in many little ways they had singled her out as in this; and she understood without explanation from them that it was because of the part she had played in bringing together the once divided family. Very humbly and gravely she accepted these attentions, thankful in her deepest heart that she had been "inspired," on that past winter day, to lead the father and son across the mesa to the little cabin where Gray Lady dwelt alone. It had been a daring thing to do—an "assisting Providence"—such as wise Aunt Betty wholly disapproved; but that time it had been a fortunate one for all concerned.

Now as the girl sipped her cocoa, turning the egg-shell like cup to catch the light, she wondered what she could still do to help her dear Gray Lady and to prove her own love. Then her dreaming was cut short by a hubbub of merry voices without, and, a moment later, a crowd of young folks tumbled through the big window, laughing, teasing, exhorting:

"Lazy girl! Just eating breakfast and it's nearly time for lunch, seems if!" [Pg 139]

"Oh! The loveliest thing in the world!" cried Molly, clapping her hands.

"Thank you," said Dolly, demurely, lifting her face for the other to kiss.

"Oh! not you, Miss Vanity, but a beautiful thing on four legs!"

"We're to take our choice and the white one's *mine*, for—" declared Alfaretta.

"No white one for me! Dad says we're to do our own grooming and white ones have to be washed just like a poodle dog and—" began Leslie.

"I had one once. His name was 'Goodenough,' and he was good enough, too. Could walk on its hind legs—" interrupted Herbert.

"Oh, Dorothy! If you aren't going to finish that buttered toast, do give it to me! I never was so hungry in all my life. I simply can't get filled up, and—"

"Montmorency Vavasour-Stark! You ought to be ashamed! After eating four chops, three boiled eggs, five helpings of potato, to say nothing of coffee enough for the regiment, and strawberries—"

"Well, Mistress Molly Breckenridge, I don't know who set you to keep tally on my appetite! and I hate to see good things wasted. Want the rest of those berries, girlie? I know you don't. You're real unselfish, you are; and you wouldn't eat all the nice-ripe-red-strawberries-raised-under-glass-ripe-red-strawberries and give your neighbor none. And give your neighbor none, you-shan't-have-any-of-my-nice-ripe-red-strawberries-who-gives-his-neighbor—Molly, give it back! Aw, now, Molly! You wouldn't eat all the nice-ripe—Hold on! Bert Montaigne, that's a beastly shame! After I had to warble in that dulcet way for a plate of poor, left-over, second-hand strawberries, to have 'em grabbed by you and Molly—that's too much. Just one drop too much to fill my bucket, but I say, 'Little One,' I wish you'd get up late every morning, and have just such a superfine breakfast as this saved for you, and not be hungry at all yourself, but save it for a poor starved little boy who hasn't had a mouthful in an hour—" [Pg 140]

Monty was running on in this absurd way, yet holding his own in a three cornered scramble for possession of a dish of berries he had pre-empted from Dorothy's table; till, without saying anything, Helena calmly walked up, took the disputed dish from the contestants and, shoving Dolly aside to give up half her chair, sat down and began to eat them herself.

"Two spoons with but a single dish! How touching!" cried Herbert, posing in pretended admiration of the pair, yet covertly watching his chance to add a third spoon to the two and get his own taste of the luxury.

Not but that all had been served likewise, at the regular meal earlier in the day, and Monty's boasted appetite was but a part of the happy foolishness of their youth and high spirits. [Pg 141]

For they were all evidently greatly excited over something, and the talk fell back upon "choice" and "points" and "colors" with a comparison of manes and tails, till Dorothy sprang up, clapped her hands over her ears, and demanded:

"One at a time! One at a time! Do tell me what you're all jabbering about and be quick! Just because I was lazy—I admit it, all right—I don't want to miss all the fun! Tell me!"

But her answer did not come from any of the lively group about her. A shadow fell across the floor and Captain Lem appeared at the window. Leaning his elbows on the low sill he surveyed the interior with a quizzical smile, then observed:

"If everybody's et all they can and has got time for somethin' elst, please to step over to the corral behind the Barracks. Time there was somethin' doin'! Come on, Little One. I'd like to have you head the procesh, for 'twas the Boss's orders, first pick for you. Hep, hep, hep—march!"

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 142]

A MODERN HORSE FAIR

They departed as they had entered, by way of the window, Dorothy lifted through it by her admiring Captain Lem, whose heart she had wholly won by her music the night before, and by the deference she paid to his talk. She was eager to find out the cause of all this excitement and placed herself alongside him, as he led off with a military tread and tensely squared shoulders. It wasn't for him to admit that rheumatism commonly bowed those same shoulders, when he was "off duty" and secure in the shelter of his own room.

"Hep, hep, hep,—hep," said the Captain marking time, and scowling at the irregular pace of the excited youngsters behind her. At which Dorothy promptly echoed his "Hep, hep, hep," and the others took the hint, pairing off into a compact little company and following their leader like soldiers on parade.

Captain Lemuel smiled and nodded:

"Good, Little One! 'Tis you has the head of sense, and fingers for the fiddle bow. The boys are all just proud to have you up at S' Leon, and anything you want done—say the word! All I want is to see you shoot well as you can fiddle. Ride, eh? Can you ride a horse, Little One?"

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"My name is Dorothy, Captain Lemuel, and I can—a little. Helena, too, is fine on horseback. She's the yellow-haired girl, you know. But why? What makes you ask?"

They had come across the grass as far as the end of the Barracks, and still drilling his "awkward squad," the old ranchman wheeled about and ordered:

"Halt! About—face!"

Alfy giggled, but seeing the faces of all the rest, especially Dorothy's, sober and set in imitation of the Captain's, she stopped laughing and applied herself to the business in hand.

"Hep, hep, hep—March!"

They might have been veterans, instead of an awkward squad, so perfectly they now kept step and so fully they entered into the old man's whim. For only a whim they supposed this drilling to be, though in reality he had taken note of all their figures and, with the exception of Herbert's and Dorothy's, saw that each could be improved. Especially was there need of this in Leslie's case; and having been told of the lad's delicacy by his beloved "Boss," he had conceived this scheme of drill.

"You see, Boss, I can easy enough cure that boy by 'whipping him over the others' shoulders,' so to speak. You've heard tell of that before, I 'low. He's all right. He's a real likely, well-growed lad; and that West Point 't he's hankerin' for'd be the best thing ever happened to him. Exceptin' course 't it would nigh break his mother's heart, so he told me. Well, that's no more here nor there. A little drillin' in this Colorady air'll do 'em all good and set him up to a dandy shape. Yes, siree! You or your lady best just drop the hint to that there little fiddler-girl, 't seems to lead the rest of 'em round by the nose—though they like it, they like it an' her too! Couldn't help it, you see. Nobody could; eh, what?"

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"Indeed not! A daughter of our own could scarcely be dearer than little Dorothy. I'll have Mrs. Ford speak to her, and I'll make it worth your while, Captain, to do your utmost for

Leslie's improvement. He has lost his cough; he does seem to be well, now; but—there is still enough delicacy about his appearance to make us anxious. You do your best, Lem, and so will I."

The captain had drawn himself up with a little pride, but with an adoring look in his old eyes, and had answered:

"Drop that, Boss, drop it! Of all the unfortunate, down-on-their-luck fellers 't this S' Leon ranch shelters now, I was the downdest! I ain't never forgot what you done for me, takin' me out the gutter, so to speak, and settin' me on my pins again. And if there's a single mortal thing 't I can do for you—that debt's paid an' overpaid, a hundred thousand times. A hundred thousand times, sir, yes, sir."

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"A hundred thousand is a sizable number, Lem—but we understand each other. Shake hands and—God speed your efforts!"

This little talk had taken place on the night before, and Lady Gray had taken an opportunity to relate it to Dorothy. This was why she so eagerly fell in with Captain Lemuel's idea, though she forebore to mention it to any of the other young folks at San Leon. Lady Gray had warned her:

"I would rather Leslie did not himself know, and if the others did he'd be sure to find it out. It would make him conspicuous, maybe worry him and set him brooding over himself, so I'm trusting you to keep it secret. And, in any case, what better amusement could you have? The regular exercise in this perfect air will be as good for you girls as for the boys."

Now as Dorothy fell into step with the Captain, she realized that here was one thing, however slight, that she could do to prove her love for sweet Lady Gray. She could use her influence to keep up what the others considered a temporary game, entered into merely to gratify the vanity of an ex-sharpshooter; and as she now marched along by his side, she begged:

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"Do please, Captain, set a regular hour for this drill, and make us stick to it, just as in the regular army. I promise I'll not oversleep again—I'll try not, I mean. Will you?"

"Sure, Little One, and I'll app'int you First Lieutenant, Company B, San Leon Life Guards. Halt!"

He stopped and faced his followers:

"It has been proposed 't we make this a regular company, same as Company A, of the boys. I second the proposition. I'd be proud to train ye, if so be you'll hold up your end the musket. I mean, no shirkin' duty and bein' marched to the guard house, or sentinel work, for bad behavior. Put on your thinkin' caps and keep 'em on a minute. Down to West Point, where some of us is hankerin' to be, they don't allow no lyin'. A broken promise is the worst kind of a lie. So before you pledge your word, gals and boys alike, you—*think*. Think hard, think deep. I'll time ye. When one minute is up, to the second, I'll call for your answer. Everybody turn their eyes inside themselves and—*think*."

With that the wise and shrewd old fellow pulled his silver time-piece from his pocket and placed it in the hollow of his hand. Then he fixed his eyes upon its white face and stood motionless, watching the second hand make its little circuit. When the sixty seconds had been counted, he held up his hand with profound gravity and called:

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"All in favor of forming a new Company, say 'Aye!' Contrary 'No!'"

Every hand went up—but Leslie's. Every voice uttered an earnest "Aye!" save his, and Dorothy flashed an indignant, as well as disappointed glance upon him, exclaiming:

"Oh! What a mean—I mean, what a rude boy! When all your guests are just suffering to be soldiers, you go and spoil the whole business. Why do you do that?"

The lad flushed. He had been duly instructed by both parents in the duties of a host, even a young one; and he knew it was his business to see that all his guests were helped to enjoy themselves as they, not he, desired. It was the first time that he had had any responsibility of this sort and it didn't greatly please him. Now when he found they were all looking at him in that aggrieved way he tossed his head, thrust his hands into his pockets, and answered:

"I know I proposed it and thought I'd like it, but I've changed my mind and now think it would get to be a confounded nuisance. I've never done anything, regularly, as you talk about, and I don't see any use in beginning at this late day when—"

"When you're getting so old and infirm, poor dear!" said Molly, interrupting. In reality she

cared little what they did at San Leon, so long as they were all together and having a good time. But she saw on Dorothy's expressive face a keener disappointment than the affair seemed to warrant and loyally placed herself in support of her chum.

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Leslie went on as if she hadn't spoken, though he glanced her way with a promise in his eyes to "get even" with her for that mockery:

"We're up here on the mountains for a summer holiday. What's the use of making it a work day, then? It would be work—sure enough. There'd be lots of mornings when every one of us would hate it. Oh! you needn't look that way. You all would, sure. What's fun when you feel like it is quite the other thing when you don't. And nine o'clock comes pretty early in the morning. Doesn't it, Miss Dorothy?"

The laugh was upon her and she joined in it. Yet she hadn't one whit abandoned her plan of helping Leslie against himself. But there was no use in arguing, and, small woman that she was, she tried strategy instead.

"Well, Leslie, you make me think of Mr. Seth Winter's story about the eleven contrary jurymen. All 'contrary' except the one who couldn't get his own way. No matter, nobody wants to force you into hard work. Though I suppose you'll be willing, we, your guests, shall do as we please?"

"Certainly," he replied with an absurdly profound bow, to which Dorothy merrily returned a sweeping courtesy.

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"Then the rest of us who have given our word will keep it. We will be on hand every morning, Captain, to be drilled in the noble tactics of the soldier. Aunt Betty says everybody always finds use for all the knowledge he possesses. Aunt Betty knows. She's lived almost as long as all our ages put together, and she's the very happiest person I ever saw. I don't know anything about soldiering yet but I'm going to learn what I can with this splendid teacher to instruct me—" here she made another profound obeisance to Captain Lem, who returned the courtesy by his finest military salute, mentally appraising the earnest little girl as the best of them all.

"So that I shall have one more thing to put in my knowledge-box, ready to use if I ever need it. And while we are drilling you can amuse yourself otherwise, Leslie dear. Now, Captain, can't we go on and find out what wonderful thing is hidden in that corral behind these Barracks?"

"Sure. Forward, march!"

He faced forward again and even Leslie fell into step behind the others, willing to join in such "foolishness" as a temporary amusement.

In fine order they reached the further end of the long building, marched around its rear, and came upon what Dorothy thought was a most beautiful sight. Within the wide paddock, or corral, as these westerners called it, was a small herd of young, thoroughbred horses. From a little stand outside the paling, Mr. and Mrs. Ford were watching the handsome creatures and talking with the grooms that attended them, concerning their good, and possibly, bad qualities.

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But at the sound of the approaching "squad" Lady Gray turned an eager face and called out, reprovingly:

"Oh! my dears, how slow you have been! If I were your age and had been promised a horse for my very own, I shouldn't have tarried on the way!"

"Our very own? What do you mean, dear Mrs. Ford?" asked Dorothy, hastening to bid her tardy "Good morning," before she more than glanced across the fence.

"Just what I say, dear. Mr. Ford has had eight horses brought in for you young folks to use. Each is to make a choice for herself or himself, subject to change if any necessity for it. Your choice is to be your own property and I hope will give you lots of pleasure. Captain Lem and some of the other good horsemen will teach you anything you need to know. Why, my dears! How astonished you look! Didn't you understand? Didn't Leslie tell you?"

For, indeed, surprise had kept them silent. None had guessed of having a horse of her "own," supposing from Leslie's words that they were only to have the loan of an animal during their stay at San Leon. Alfaretta broke the silence, explaining:

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"No, he didn't say any such thing. He said we was to come choose horses to ride, and when he said one was white I picked that out at once. I—can't really believe you mean it, Mrs. Ford, though—course—Ma Babcock—I never heard o' such folks—never—never—in my life. It certainly does beat the Dutch. I—Alfy Babcock—Dolly Doodles—Jolly Molly—Helena—to

have horses of our own—it makes me cry! I, Alfie Babcock, ownin' a whole horse! Oh! My!"

"Then I shall be very, very sorry the idea ever entered my husband's mind, of making such a gift. We don't want tears—we just want happiness, perfect happiness, up here at San Leon!" said beautiful Gray Lady, smiling, and looking fairer than ever in this new delight of making gifts, as freely as she wished. Her own life had grown so much happier, these last months, that she longed only to "pass on" happiness to all whom she knew. Alfie's tears really hurt her, for a moment, till Dolly explained, with an arm about the weeper's waist:

"I reckon these must be what I've heard of as 'happy tears,' dear Lady Gray. Alfie is too pleased to do anything else—even to say 'thank you'—yet."

Queer little Alfie had dropped her head on Dorothy's shoulder and was repeating in a low tone: [Pg 152]

"A whole horse of my own! Mine, Alfie Babcock's! A whole horse—a whole—livin'—horse—A—whole—horse!"

"Well, you wouldn't want a half one, would you, Miss Babcock? Nor one that wasn't living?" demanded Monty, laughing. "Quit crying and let's choose, for that's what Leslie said we were to do. Is that correct, Mr. Ford?"

"Entirely. But—see to it that your choice falls each on a different animal! Suppose you begin, alphabetically. Alfaretta first."

Such a group of radiant faces as now peered over the paling! while without a second's hesitation, Alfaretta announced:

"I choose that pure white one for mine!"

"All right. Captain Lem, lead out Blanca and put on her side saddle," directed Mr. Ford.

A passage was opened in the paling and the beautiful Blanca was led forth, amid a murmur of admiration from everybody, except the girl herself. She could only stand, clasping and unclasping her hands, and gazing with dim eyes at this wonderful possession. The handsome saddle cloth was marked Blanca, and Mr. Ford explained that each animal was registered and its name had been chosen by its breeder. Most of these names were Spanish and suited well; as that Blanca meant "white," which the gentle little mare certainly was. To another corner of the saddle cloth, Captain Lem slowly attached the initial "A," as mark of ownership, then beckoned to Alfie that she should mount. [Pg 153]

All her mates watched her curiously, expecting to see her timid and reluctant. She treated them to a fine surprise; first by running to Lady Gray and rapturously kissing her hand, then returning to Lemuel, and letting him swing her up to the saddle, without an instant's hesitation. Dorothy stared, amazed; but she needn't have done so: Alfie was "her mother's daughter" as the saying goes, and inherited that good woman's love of horseflesh and fearlessness; and as she settled herself and received the bridle reins she kept murmuring the marvellous fact:

"A whole horse—mine! And Ma Babcock's only got Barnaby!"

"Who is 'Barnaby,' Alfie?" asked Leslie, going round to her side and critically inspecting her treasure.

"Oh—he—Why, he's a mule!"

A shout of laughter greeted this announcement and Lemuel moved away. He was disappointed that the beautiful Blanca had not fallen to Dorothy's share, for he believed the white filly to be the best as well as the handsomest creature in the corral. However, her turn was next, and he listened anxiously to hear what it might be. He wished she wouldn't be so over-generous in offering the choice to her mates, and in saying that if she disappointed them she wanted to change. [Pg 154]

"All are so fine. It can't make a bit of difference to me."

"Choose! Choose! You dear old slow-poke, for I'm just dying to do so, too. I can't wait—do choose!" cried impatient Molly, skipping about and trying to cut short Dorothy's hesitation.

"All right, then. I choose the 'calico'. She's so like another Portia that I used to ride 'back home.'"

"Zaraza, for Dolly. A Spanish title, too, dear, and means 'chintz'—a 'calico', if you please. Lead her out, Lem!"

The pretty creature was brought out, arching her graceful neck and lifting her dainty hoofs

as if she were dancing to music, as she was now to the clapping of hands and lusty cheers of healthy young throats. Then she was saddled, a decorative "D" attached to her saddle-cloth, Dorothy put upon her back, to take her stand beside Alfaretta on Blanca, while the others chose and were mounted.

"It has been a real ceremony and a delightful one! Here's to the health and happiness of our young equestrians! Hip, hip, hurra!" cried the master of the ranch, with a boyish heartiness that sent the hats of the ranchmen from their heads and their voices echoing the gay "Hip, hip, hurra!"

But, despite her happiness, Dorothy's face was thoughtful. There had been eight horses in the corral, as there had been, at first, eight young guests at San Leon. To Helena had been allotted a fine bay, big and powerful as well as comely, by name Benito; to Herbert a black, chosen by him for its resemblance to his own "Bucephalus," "back home" where Portia was, and from a sentiment similar to Dolly's. Then Lady Gray was asked to choose for the absent James Barlow, and did so as calmly as if he had but stepped around the corner and had deputed her to act for him. [Pg 155]

But it was noticeable that of all the splendid thoroughbreds within the paddock one was by far the finest. That was a dappled gray, perfect in every point, and looking as if he were king of that four-footed company.

"For Jim, I choose Azul, the Gray! You all know I love gray in color and I love the 'blue,' as his Spanish owners named him. Captain Lemuel, please saddle Azul for Jim Barlow, and, Daniel, will you use him, please, till Jim comes back?"

Dorothy flashed a grateful look upon her hostess, then glanced at Alfaretta, sure of finding sympathy in that girl's honest eyes. But Alfie nodded, well pleased, and Mr. Ford rode to the head of the little cavalcade and took his place at Dorothy's side, while the others followed, two by two, to make a circuit of the grounds and test their mounts.

The men cheered again and again as the procession started, Mr. Ford and Dorothy leading; then Leslie on the sorrel, Cæsar, with Alfie on Blanca; Helena on Benito, with Monty on the chestnut, Juan—a mount well suited to his stature and requirements. Last rode Molly on Juana, another chestnut, and a perfect match for her brother—Monty's Juan; while Herbert's Blackamoor finished the caravan, last but by no means least in the creature's own proud estimation. [Pg 156]

They paced and they cantered, they trotted and they galloped, even the most inexperienced without fear, because of the vigilant attendants who raced beside them, as well as the high spirits of the others. Around and around the spacious grounds they rode, Captain Lem pointing out several fences and hedges he would have them leap, later on, and finally bringing up before the stately front of the house to dismount.

As they did so Dorothy noticed a queerly dressed little boy sitting beside the fountain holding a basket in his hand and eagerly watching the cavalcade. Nobody else seemed to observe him, amid all the clatter and laughter. He looked to the sympathetic girl as if he were very tired and, leaving the rest, she crossed to him and asked:

"Who are you, little boy? Do you want something?"

Instantly, he offered her the basket, and as instantly vanished.

CHAPTER X

AN UNEXPECTED DEPARTURE

Dorothy looked after the fleeing little figure as it disappeared behind a clump of shrubbery in the direction of the laundry. [Pg 157]

"A child of one of the workmen, I suppose, but such an odd, quaint looking child," she thought, and rejoined her mates. They were still standing beside the cloistered walk, talking, planning the wonderful trips which would be open to them now that they owned horses; comparing notes upon the points of each that they fancied they had already learned, while Mr. Ford declared:

"This really is the most wonderful affair! Not that you have the horses, but that you show no jealousy about them. So far as I can see each of you is perfectly satisfied with his own choice and sure it was the wisest. I only hope our good James Barlow will like his Azul as

well. Heigho, Dolly Doodles! What a quaint little basket! An Indian one and fine. Where did you get that?"

"A little boy gave it to me. I suppose it is for Lady Gray, and here she comes."

The lady had walked across from the Barracks, slowly, sauntering over the beautiful grounds, so fully in accord with them and the glorious day that she was humming an aria from pure lightness of heart. She had not forgotten the missing lad for whom she had chosen the best horse in the herd, but it did not seem now that anything could be really amiss. He would surely soon be back, safe and well, and oh! how good life was! How dear the world, and how gracious that tender Providence which had crowned her life with joy! In this mood she came up to the group awaiting her and Dorothy put the basket into her hands.

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She hadn't expected anything of weight and nearly dropped it.

"Why, dearie, what an exquisite basket! But how heavy it is! What—here—why? See how oddly it's fastened with rushes or something like them. I'll sit right here while one of you open it."

She seated herself upon a carved bench beside a sun-dial and Leslie cut the rushes which were bound tightly about the basket. As he did so a plaintive little wail issued from it, and Lady Gray and he both jumped.

"A baby! A foundling!" laughed Mr. Ford, pretending to be greatly frightened.

"Open it, open it quick, please! I can't wait!" cried Molly.

At the slightest touch now the lid fell off and there, lying on a mat of softest grass, was a tiny, new-born lamb. Ohs! and Ahs! and laughter greeted it, to which the small creature answered by another feeble "Ma-a-a!" then curled itself to sleep.

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"What a pretty present! Who could have sent it?" wondered Lady Gray.

"One of the shepherds, likely; sheep herders they call them here. And it's the first time I ever saw a lamb 'snow white.' The comparison, 'white as a lamb' is generally wrong, for they're a dirty gray. This one has been washed within an inch of its life—literally. Some of you girls better take it to the dairy and give it some milk," said Mr. Ford.

"Maybe there somebody will know about it or we'll find the little boy again. He was so cute! Like a small Indian, he looked."

"He might easily be one, Dorothy. There are still many bands of them roaming the mountains. Quite often, the 'boys' say, some come to San Leon. A peaceable lot, though, mostly, unless they get hold of liquor. But liquor turns even cultivated white men into brutes. Not likely we shall see any of them at this time of year, when life in the forest is pleasant."

"Oh! Daniel, don't talk of Indians at all! I don't like them," protested Mrs. Ford, with a little shudder. "I hope that child wasn't one."

"Well, we don't know that he was. There are many people belonging to San Leon and other neighboring ranches and a child more or less isn't enough to set us worrying. Hmm. Here comes the operator with a telegram. I was in hopes that I might escape them for a few weeks. News, Mr. Robson?"

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The clerk's face was grave and the young folks walked away; Dorothy carrying the basket with the lamb, the others following—with mischievous Molly prodding the little creature with her forefinger "to make it talk."

But the boys were not interested in "young mutton" as Monty called it, and sought the ranchmen at their quarters to learn when they could go fishing, or what was better, hunting.

"I don't see what you want to kill things for!" pouted Molly, while Helena answered:

"Because they are—just boys! I only hope they won't be allowed to handle firearms, except for rifle practice under the trainer's care. So this is the dairy! What a fine one and away up here, where Milliken said there was 'no civilization!' Do you know, Papa is getting quite anxious for a stock farm? We think it's so queer for a man who knows nothing but banking, but some doctor told him it would be fine for his health. If he has cattle, I suppose we'll have a dairy. I mean now to find out all I can about such things because I know whatever Mr. Ford does will be the best possible. Odd! up here the dairymaids are dairymen! How spotlessly clean that one yonder looks, in his white uniform! I'm going to ask what he is

doing now.”

She left the other girls to do so and from another worker in this up-to-date, sweet-smelling place, Dorothy begged a basin of milk for their new pet. It still remained in the basket, which was so soft and of such exquisite fineness that it could be folded like a cloth.

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Alfaretta still held the soft cover, which had slipped off when Leslie cut the rushes binding it on, turning it idly in her hands. Suddenly she stopped and stared at its inner side, then excitedly stooped where Dorothy was feeding the lamb and pointed, exclaiming:

“For the land sakes, Dolly Doodles, look at that!”

“Take care, Alfy! You’re scaring this timid little thing so it won’t drink. It hardly knows how, anyway. What? What do you say?”

“I say look a there! *Jim! Jim!*”

Dorothy snatched the cover from Alfy’s hand and there, surely enough, was the letter D done in the curious handwriting which James Barlow had acquired; quite different both girls knew from that of any other they had ever seen. Then they stared at one another, not knowing whether to be glad or sorry.

“What does it mean?” cried Dorothy at last, while Molly drew near to learn what had happened to surprise them. For answer Alfaretta handed her the cover and fairly gasped out:

“Jim—our Jim—wrote that—or painted it—or—or—It’s Jim, true as preachin’!”

“Huh! then all I can say is that this paragon of a Jim has a mighty poor style of writing. Looks more as if that lamb had bumped its itsy—witsy—heady—and made it bleed. That’s some Indian ‘mark’ that the maker of the basket put on it. Don’t try to get up any excitement over that.”

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Alfy shook her head but Dorothy did not look up. She was searching the soft, wilted grass that lined the basket; and, in the bottom, tied to a bunch of faded flowers was a little glistening stone. The pebble was marked by another D, traced in the red juice of some plant.

The basket went one way, the lamb another as Dorothy sprang to her feet and danced for very joy.

“Yes, it’s from Jim—it’s from Jim! And he’s alive—somewhere he is alive! Oh! I am so glad, so glad!”

Alfy was glad, too, of this reminder of the lad’s existence, but she was also ashamed of him.

“Huh! I don’t see what there’s to be so tickled over, for my part! Jim Barlow’s actin’ like a regular simpleton. And he’s mean, too. He’s meaner ‘n pussley, makin’ everybody such a lot of trouble. Folks ridin’ night and day to hunt for him—some out scourin’ round this very minute—and him just stayin’ away ‘cause—‘cause—”

“‘Cause what, Alfaretta Babcock?” demanded Molly sternly. As always she was loyal to her beloved Dorothy whose joy Alfy was rapidly spoiling by her contempt for the truant.

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“‘Cause, I s’pose he hasn’t any decent clothes to come home in. He didn’t take his with him and clothes don’t grow on trees, even in Colorado. But—if I knew where he was I’d take ‘em to him and give him a piece o’ my mind along with ‘em.”

“Give it to me, instead, missy. I’m kind of sort of hungry for it!” said a familiar voice behind them, and there was Captain Lem leaning on the sill of the dairy window and looking at them with that amused expression of his. He seemed to find a lot of young folks the most entertaining company in the world. He had hated their coming and had instantly veered around to be thankful for it. Already his mates were teasing him about it and prophesying that Lem had done his last job on the ranch. Hereafter, if he was missed, all the “boys” would have to do would be to hunt up Dorothy, or her chums, and find him.

“What’s a doin’, younkers? Hope your ridin’ round didn’t tire ye none. Hello! Gone to raisin’ sheep, have ye? Mighty pretty little creatur’, that one is. Where’d you find it?”

Even Helena left off learning dairy work and hurried with the others to the window to learn his opinion.

He took the cover and the stone and carefully studied the inscriptions on them. Cocked his head sidewise, put on his spectacles, screwed up his eyebrows and his lips, and ejaculated:

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"That's a poor fist—whoever done it!"

"Maybe it is; but both Alfaretta and I recognized it at once. You see poor Jim almost taught himself to write. He'd begun that even before I first saw him and it's hard to unlearn things, you know. Else, Jim's so smart he'd have written better than any of us by this time. Yes, indeed! Poor Jim is very, very clever!" said Dolly warmly.

Captain Lemuel shook his head, and remarked:

"I 'low you call him that by way o' compliment. But back home when we called a feller 'clever' it meant he hadn't much sense. I've seen that sort, 'clever' souls 't scurcely knew enough to come in out the rain. This here one 'peared the same to me. Course, I hadn't been acquainted with him longer 'n next to no time but if he was so smart, as I s'pose you're meanin' to state, he hid it amazin' well. Hmm. But—but—if this is a handwrite o' his 'n, our business is to take it straight to the 'Boss.' What you goin' to name your lamb, Little One?"

Dorothy lifted the little animal and gave it to him through the window. He caressed it tenderly enough in his strong hands, for he loved all animals, though horses best.

"Why, I hadn't thought. I mean we hadn't. And it isn't ours, anyway, if it was sent to the Gray Lady."

"Your Gray Lady's name don't begin with a D. It's plain as the nose on your face who it's meant for," he answered, promptly. [Pg 165]

"Then if it is really mine—how lovely!—I'll just call it Snowball."

"Pshaw, Dolly Doodles! If I had a lamb sent to me by a poor lost feller like Jim, I'd name it after him and not so silly like that. Do call it Jim, junior," argued Alfy.

"Yes, sissy, but—but it ain't that kind of a lamb," observed the Captain, siding with his favorite at once.

Molly giggled and even Helena smiled, but Alfy simply pouted.

"Huh! Well, then if Jim won't do, call her Jiminetta—that'd be after me and him, too, same's I'm Alfaretta."

Dorothy laughed, too, now, and stopped studying the rude letters traced on the cover and the stone. They but deepened the mystery of Jim's disappearance and present whereabouts. She remarked:

"We don't often enough take time to say your whole name, child. It's generally 'Alfy.' Let's compromise and call our lamb Netty."

"Good enough! And if the little creatur' takes after most Colorady folks or flocks, she won't care a mite what name she has so she ain't called late to dinner. Haw, haw, haw!"

Laughing at his own ancient witticism, Captain Lem started houseward with "Netty" in his arms, the little thing nestling down in them as if it knew it had found a friend. But his face was troubled. He didn't like this secret signal from the missing James and he liked less the fact that the lad's messenger had been a small Indian. However, this seemed a small matter to what was awaiting him, as Mr. Ford came toward him, walking rapidly, and, apparently, in deep thought. [Pg 166]

"Lem, do you think you can run San Leon without me for a few days?"

Captain saluted his "chief" and replied, a trifle testily: "That's what I have been doin' for a purty consid'able spell, ain't it, Boss?"

"Yes, but you hadn't eight youngsters on your hands then, to keep happy and out of mischief. Boys you know, Lem—"

"I know. I've been one. Wish 't I was again. What's up, Boss?"

The girls had followed the Captain, slowly, and eagerly discussing Jim's message—if it was such—and its probable meaning; but they paused at a little distance, not wishing to interrupt the men's interview which, from the expression of their faces, was a serious one.

But Mr. Ford saw them and beckoned them to come up; and then explained to them as well as to the old ranchman:

"We have had telegrams that call us east. Away east, as far as New York. I feel that we must leave you young folks—for a few days—as few as we can possibly make them. It isn't business or I'd depute somebody else to act for me. It's this: A wireless dispatch has been [Pg 167]

received that a very old lady, an aunt of Erminie's, will arrive in that city on the steamer which is due in just three days. She has lived abroad for many years and is now very feeble, helpless, in fact, from paralysis or something of that nature. She brought Erminie up and has been the best and truest friend my wife ever had. We owe her everything, and feel that we cannot leave her to land in a strange city, broken in mind and body, without her 'daughter' to care for her. We must go, for I don't want Lady Gray to take the trip and responsibility without me. If all goes well, we should be back in less than a fortnight—could be much sooner except that Lady Gray wants to bring Aunt Rachel to San Leon; and we will have to make the return journey by very easy stages, as her strength will allow. It is trying, too, that, having learned of our trip east, Miss Milliken insists upon returning with us. She hasn't been happy here and I find she's worrying about her heart. The altitude of San Leon is bad for her, she thinks, and since she puts it on that ground neither Erminie nor I can urge her to remain. But—"

"'But,' don't you worry a minute, dear Uncle Dan!" cried Dorothy, clasping her hands around his arm and using the title he had asked for many times, though she had rarely done so before. All along, despite his great generosity and kindness, she had stood just a little in awe of the "Railroad Boss," and he had been simply "Mr. Ford" to her as well as to all his other young guests. But it needed only one look of anxiety on his noble face to rouse all her loving sympathy. She repeated: "Don't you, nor sweet Lady Gray, worry one single minute about us or things up here at San Leon. We'll be as good as good! Helena, here, is a better caretaker than poor Miss Milly. Between ourselves, we're glad she's going. She's been a burden to Nell, all the time, instead of a help. I'm sorry about her heart but—I'm glad she's going. Now—when do you start? Isn't there something I—we—can do to help you off? Do let us help!"

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The gentleman's face had lightened. His girl guests had accepted the situation beautifully, and he could but hope as much for the lads. In any case he must go; and, indeed, at once. He was so pressed for time that they disliked to trouble him with the message the lamb had brought, and watched him walk swiftly away without a further word.

"Huh! He needn't be afraid we'll do anything we oughtn't! And I don't see as we're going to be so much alone, after all. There's the trained nurse, and though the doctor's gone to Denver he'll come back."

"She's sick herself, this last day or so, Alf. We mustn't count on her nor on Dr. Jones. But there's Mr. Robson, Captain Lem, Anita, Wun Sing—and lots of ranchmen left. Oh! we'll be all right!" said Dorothy. "But the Captain has walked off with 'Netty'—forgotten all about her, I guess."

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"Well, I must go to poor Milly. She never can keep her head when anything happens suddenly, like this. She has complained, incessantly, that she could hardly breathe up here and I'm glad she has the chance to go now. But I can fancy my dear mother's face, when Milly walks into the Towers without me!" said Helena, hurrying away.

A half-hour of activity followed, the girls taking Lady Gray's simple packing out of her hands, although that much-travelled *prima donna* was never disturbed by sudden changes from place to place. Indeed, she was happy over this coming trip, under her husband's escort, and to meet her dearly loved Aunt Rachel.

Jedediah had his master's suit-case ready in even shorter time and it was only Miss Milliken who delayed matters by her fussiness.

However, the buckboard came around, Silent Pete holding the reins over the four-in-hand, and Captain Lem rather jealously regarding him; until his eye fell upon his "awkward squad" and he remembered the greater responsibility placed upon himself. Then he was reconciled to see another man drive his horses, reflecting:

"Well, I needn't grumble, I'm the one Boss trusted most. Seven youngsters in hand and one in the bush—land knows where!—is a bigger job 'n just drivin' a four-footed team. I ain't no call to feel lonesome but just to feel sot up. Funny, ain't it, Lem! You a regular, dyed-in-the-wool old bach to find yourself suddenly playin' daddy to seven strappin' boys an' gals! Seven an' there'd ought to be eight. Ought to be—*must be*—that's what it spells to Captain Lemuel Hunt. For if—if—as I reasonably suspicion—that there Jim Barlow, poor writer, has fell into the hands of a passel of Injuns, his cake's dough, lessen I can rake it out their oven into mine."

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The departure of the buckboard, with solemn Silent Pete in charge, had a depressing effect upon the group left watching it. Everything would go on just as usual, of course. Why should there be any difference? But—how lonesome it was! How they would miss Lady Gray's sweet voice and presence, and the "Boss's" jokes and laughter!

The thought was too much for tender-hearted Alf, and after a spluttering, and sniffing to stem her own grief, she burst into an audible boo-hoo, that promptly started Molly's tears, though she shed them silently. All, indeed, were very sober and Leslie's face was pale. He hadn't realized till now how necessary his mother had become to his happiness, and he felt sorely inclined to follow the example of the weeping girls though rather indignant against them. It wasn't their Lady Gray who had left, nor their beloved Dad. He exclaimed, testily:

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"Girls, quit that! I'm your host now and I say—no crying! What I propose is—do something. Let's ride to Bald Eagle Peak—or Rock. You'll need clear eyes to follow that trail, but there'll be just time enough to do it before bedtime. Hurray for 'Boots and Saddles!'"

Captain Lem answered quickly:

"Lad, you can't do that! You mustn't take that road till you know more about ridin' 'n you do now, nor unless you start by daybreak. I wouldn't try it myself, old mountaineer as I am, at this hour, lessen it was a case of life and death. No, you can't go."

Leslie's temper rose and he retorted:

"I'm 'Boss' here now and don't you dare say 'mustn't' to me!"

The sharpshooter laughed ironically; and this enraged the boy still further. His riding whip was in his hand and, with a furious look at the Captain, he lifted it and brought it down upon the old man's head—who staggered backward, then fell to the ground as if he were dead.

"Leslie! Leslie!" shrieked the onlookers, "what have you done?"

"Killed him—I—guess!" he gasped and threw himself beside the prostrate ranchman.

CHAPTER XI

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THE SHEEP HERDER'S CABIN

When, in the delirium of fever, Jim Barlow strayed from his room at San Leon, the one idea in his mind was that the mountains called him. One distant peak, in especial, seemed imbued with life, using human speech and gesture—warning him to come, and come at once, lest some terrible thing befall him. He must obey! He must—he must!

He set off at a run, his bare feet unconsciously seeking the smooth driveway of the home-piece, and following it at breakneck speed till it ended in the road below the mesa. There the rougher going hindered him somewhat, but not greatly, and he kept to the highway till it reached a river and a bridge.

Beyond the bridge the road divided into three forks, the northern one ascending steadily toward the peak to which his fancy still fixed itself and he struck off upon this. How long he travelled he did not know, though his unnatural strength due to his fever must have lasted for hours. Gradually, that fierce, inward excitement that drove him on gave place to a sudden weariness, and he dropped like a stone on the spot where it overcame him.

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As the morning rose, clear and bright, a company of horsemen, riding in single file toward a distant pass, came upon a prostrate, nearly naked figure lying in their path. The horsemen were Ute Indians, and like many of their white brothers, were prospecting for gold. All sorts of precious metals were to be found in these Rocky mountains, and were their own rightful inheritance. They were peaceably inclined to share and share alike with the pale faces. For years there had been friendship between them and the red men had learned many things from the white. Not the least had been this craving for gold; and where once they would have toiled only in the chase, to shoot and kill the game with which the mountains abounded, they now longed for the glittering stones hidden within them.

But they were in no haste. The gold was hidden—it would keep, and they had ridden all night long. So, at sight of poor Jim, lying motionless, they dismounted and discussed him.

"He is dead," said the foremost, in his own tongue which, of course, the lad would not have understood, even if he had heard.

Another stooped down and turned the boy's face upward. It was scratched with the underbrush through which he had made his way and the light garments he wore were in shreds. His feet were swollen and bruised and the bandages had been torn from his arm.

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"Not dead. Might as well be. Heap bad," said another Indian, gravely shaking his head.

There were four in the party and one of them filled a cup at a nearby spring and dashed the water over the lad's face. His fit of exhaustion was about over, anyway, and the shock of the ice-cold water revived him, so that he opened his eyes and looked into the dark face bent above him.

But there was no intelligence in this look and presently his lids drooped and he was once more oblivious to all about him.

The Indians held a consultation. Three were for going on, after they had breakfasted, and leaving the vagrant to his fate. One was for giving help and, being the leader of the party as well as a red-skinned "Good Samaritan," his counsel prevailed.

When they resumed the trail, Jim Barlow was carried with them, very much like a sack of meal across a saddle bow. But carried—not left to die.

When he again opened his eyes, and this time with consciousness in them, he was in a small shanty, rude in the extreme; and his bed a pile of hemlock boughs spread with a woollen blanket. He lay for some time trying to think where he was and what had happened to him, and idly watching the bent figure of a man sitting just outside the doorway of the hut. The man was smoking and a little boy was playing in the sand at his feet. [Pg 175]

Jim couldn't see anything interesting in these two strangers nor in the cabin itself and, with a feeling of great weakness, closed his eyes once more, and for many hours of sound, refreshing sleep. When for the third time he awoke his senses had returned and only the weakness remained. He tried to speak and after several efforts succeeded in asking, audibly:

"Where am I?"

At sound of his voice the man outside rose and came to the boy, nodding his head in satisfaction but in silence.

"Where—am—I?" asked Jim, again.

The man shook his head. By his appearance he was Mexican, but he wore an Indian costume of buckskin, once gaily decorated and fringed but now worn and very dirty. His straight black hair hung low over his forehead and his hands looked as if they had never seen water. His face was not ugly, neither was it kind; and he seemed more stolid than stupid.

"Where—am—I? Who are you?" again demanded Jim, trying to get up, but instantly sinking back from utter weakness.

There was no answer; but, after a long contemplation of his guest, the Mexican crossed to a little stove, wherein a few sticks were burning. From a rusty coffee pot which stood upon it, he poured some liquid into a tin cup and brought it to the lad. [Pg 176]

Jim tried to sit up and take the cup into his own hand but he could not; so, with unexpected gentleness, the man slipped his arm under his patient's shoulders and raised him to a half-sitting posture. Then he held the cup to Jim's lips, who drank eagerly, the muddy coffee seeming like nectar to his dry, parched throat.

The drink refreshed him but he was still too weak to rise, or even care to do so. Dozing and waking, wondering a little over his situation yet mostly indifferent to everything, the hours passed.

Jim's interest was next aroused by the man's dressing of his arm. He did this with real skill, removing the big leaves of some healing plant, with which it had been bound, and replacing these with fresh ones, confining them in place by long strips of split reeds.

The soft, cool leaves were wonderfully comforting and with the easing of the pain serious thoughts came. To the injured lad everything now seemed a blank from the evening meal at San Leon, after his arrival there, until now. Why he had left that ranch and why he had come to this queer place he could not imagine; but the picture of the beautiful, mission-like house was distinct, and of Dorothy walking across its lawn beside him.

Dorothy! It seemed a long time since he had seen her or heard her sweet voice chide him for his misdoings. Why—now he remembered—he hadn't said good-night to Dorothy, his first faithful friend. But it is needless to follow the gropings of Jim's mind back to the realization of his present situation. Yet the first and strongest feeling which possessed him was that he must tell Dorothy where he was. Dolly was such a hand to worry, silly Dolly! And she was his best, earliest friend. [Pg 177]

The Mexican brought him his breakfast of bacon and corn bread, with another cup of that coffee which always stood upon the stove. A child came with the man and gazed at Jim with solemn, wondering eyes.

Jim returned the stare with interest. This was the first small Indian he had ever seen and to judge by the little fellow's face he might have been an old, old man—he was so grave and dignified.

"How are you, sonny?" said Jim.

The midget simply blinked.

"Can't you talk, kid?" again questioned the stranger, holding out his hand.

The little boy did not answer, save by placing his own chubby, extremely dirty hand on Jim's extended palm.

"Good. You're friendly, if you are dumb. Sort of needs washin', don't it? Water. Can you bring me some water? I'm thirsty."

The child walked to a big tank, or half-barrel, outside the door and dipped the tin coffee cup within it. But he was too short to reach the low supply and giving himself an extra hitch upwards, over the edge, the better to obtain the draught, he lost his balance and fell in head first. [Pg 178]

Jim's low bed commanded a view of this and he started to rescue the youngster, but the man was before him. He treated the accident as if it were an ordinary occurrence, pulling the child out by the seat of his leather breeches, shaking him as one might a wet puppy, and setting him on his feet without a word. Indeed, words seemed the most precious commodity in that queer shanty, so rarely were they used. But the father, if such he were, himself filled the cup with the stale water and gave it to the child, who carried it to Jim as calmly as if no trouble had attended his getting it.

"Thank you, boy. What's your name?"

"Name—José," said the man answering for him. He pronounced it "Ho-say," and Jim was pleased. Knowing that he might meet people who spoke Spanish, in this trip west, the studious lad had brought a Spanish grammar along with him on the train and had glanced into it whenever he had a chance. Of course, he could not speak it himself, nor understand it well, nor was the dialect here in use very much like the correct language of the grammar.

"José, where is this place?"

The child stared. Then suddenly went out of doors and returned with a baby lamb in his arms. He plumped this down upon Jim's breast and smiled for the first time. The lamb was his latest, greatest treasure and, in his childish sympathy, he offered it to the "hurt man." With his good arm, Jim made the little animal more comfortable, while José vanished without again. This time he returned with a fine basket of Indian workmanship, and this was filled in part by glittering stones and in part by flowers. All these he deposited on the bed beside the lamb, and folded his arms behind him in profound satisfaction. He had done his very best. He had given the sick one all his things. If that didn't cure him it would be no further business of José's. [Pg 179]

The man of the house had now seated himself beside the stove. He placed an earthen pan beside him on the clay floor and laid a bundle of rushes beside it. Also, he took down from a peg in the wall an unfinished basket, and reseating himself, proceeded to weave upon it. He used only the finest of splits, torn from the reeds, almost like thread in their delicacy and he worked very slowly. From time to time he held the basket from him, studying its appearance with half-closed eyes, as an artist studies a picture. Frequently, he lifted the coffee pot to his lips and drank from its spout.

Jim watched him in silent admiration of his deftness with the weaving and in disgust at his use of the coffee pot—thinking he would want no more draughts from it himself. All the time his mind grew clearer and he began to form plans for telling Dorothy where he was—though he didn't know that, himself; but, at least, of letting her know he was alive. She would have to guess at the rest and she would surely trust him to come back when he could. [Pg 180]

When the weaver looked up again Jim beckoned him to approach. Rather reluctantly, he did so. For his own part he was getting tired of this helpless lad, left in his hut by White Feather, his Ute brother-in-law. If Moon Face were living, the Ute maiden who had been his wife and little José's mother, it wouldn't have mattered. To her would have fallen the care. Nothing had gone right with him, Alaric, the sheep herder, since Moon Face fell ill and

died, though he went often to that far place in the forest where her body had been secretly buried in the crevice of a great rock. Moon Face had left him for a few days' visit to a camp of her relatives and there had taken the small-pox and died, despite the fact that she had been treated by the wisest medicine men and immersed in the sweat-box, the Indian cure for all ills. If he had been near enough to such a thing, or had had energy enough to prepare it up here at his home, Alaric would promptly have subjected poor Jim to similar treatment.

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As it was, the isolation of Alaric's hut and his laziness saved the wanderer from this. Now, as he obeyed the boy's summons, he was brooding over his misfortunes and was more grim even than usual.

"Well, young man?"

Jim was surprised. The man had been so silent, hitherto, that he imagined they two had no language in common.

"So you speak English! That makes it easy. I want to send a message to the place I—I left. Will you take it?"

Alaric shook his head, firmly declining.

"Don't get ugly. If you won't go, will you send somebody?"

The Mexican pretended that his English did not go so far as this. He obstinately would not understand.

Then followed a long argument which greatly wearied Jim and simply failed of its object. At last, he named "San Leon" and Alaric's expression brightened. That was the place where there was plenty of money and the sheep herder loved money. He had been there. It was not far away, by a road he knew, yet he did not care to go there again, himself. There had been a transaction of horses that wasn't pleasant to remember. Old Lem Hunt had accused him of being a thief, once on a time, when some thoroughbreds had been missing from the San Leon corrals, and Alaric had had hard work to prove his innocence. He had been obliged to prove it because, in Colorado, men were still sometimes inclined to take justice in their own hands and not wait for the law to do it for them.

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The truth was that the sheep herder had not, personally, taken a single steed from San Leon. He had merely "assisted" some of his Indian friends to do so. He had even carefully kept all knowledge of the affair from the ears of his brother-in-law, White Feather; a man who indeed loved fine horseflesh, as all the Utes did, but preferred to increase his herds by legitimate trading.

The other Indians, whom Alaric had "assisted," had paid their assistant in honest gold—he wouldn't take any other sort of payment—and there had been more gold changing hands in order to secure the real thieves. And because he loved the gold Alaric had thus assisted both sides and received double pay. Also, he had left an unsavory memory of himself at San Leon as well as offended his Ute relatives; and White Feather not only prevented harm being done to his Mexican brother-in-law, but also used the occasion to make Alaric subject to himself. Thus it was that he had made the sheep herder take in the sick lad he had found on the trail and swear to be kind to him.

"San Lean? *Si... En verdad.* Well, señor?"

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If this injured, half-naked youth had hailed from that rich man's ranch it might be worth while to hearken to what he wished.

"I want to tell a girl there that I am not dead. I want to send just that message, till I can go there myself. Do this for me and I will—will pay you—when I can."

Alaric considered. From present appearances there seemed small chance of Jim's ever paying anybody for any service. Yet—there was White Feather to please and there was possible payment at San Leon. He nodded acquiescence.

"Then get me somethin' to write on!" begged Jim, vastly excited by this chance to set himself right with his friends.

He might as well have asked for the moon. Writing was not an accomplishment of Alaric's and he had never owned a scrap of paper fit for such use. Yet the longer he pondered the matter the more willing the man became. Finally, he took José upon his knee, and, emphasizing each word of instruction by a stern forefinger and a threat of fearful punishment for disobedience, he instilled into the little fellow's mind the fact that he was to go to San Leon ranch; to find there a pretty girl in a white dress; a girl with big brown eyes and dark curly hair. A girl who was always laughing and who always wore a red bow on her

head. He, Alaric, would go with his son as far as the cypress hedge, bordering the west side of the lake. There he would wait for the child to do his errand and return, and would himself be out of sight of that old sharpshooter, whom he feared.

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He had another inspiration—of generosity and greed commingled. That lamb of José's. He could afford to give that away because it wasn't his own, nor even really the little one's. It belonged to the rich ranch owner whose sheep he herded, up here on the lonely mountain. The girl for whom this sick boy wished a message might like the lamb and give the papoose money for it. Money would be far better for José than any pet.

After this course of silent reasoning, Alaric bestirred himself to action. He had often had to make his "mark" upon some paper of agreement, the nearest to writing that he could come. He understood that Jim wished to make his own now. So, selecting a bit of glittering stone that was fairly smooth, he handed it to the lad, and afterward crushed the stem of a plant which exuded a red juice. With this other sharp pointed bit of stone dipped in this juice, anybody might make as many "marks" as he chose upon the flat stone.

Jim was quick to understand the suggestion but real writing was out of the question. The best he could accomplish was that D which was in his peculiar hand. By signs, more than words, Alaric expressed the whole matter; and Jim eagerly caught at the suggestion. The lamb would be a pretty gift for Dorothy and would tell her better than words that he remembered her and was safe. Only—the little animal was like everything else seen in this cabin—so dirty! He couldn't send it to dainty Dorothy in such condition. In a few words he explained to the shepherd his ideas about it and was amused by the infinite contempt shown on Alaric's face.

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However, he made short work of that matter. He was now impatient to be off, the sooner to get that possible payment of gold; and remembered that White Feather had commanded him to serve the sick stranger to the best of his ability. With a flippant gesture he seized the lamb and carried it to the tank outside the door; and sousing it up and down till its dusty fleece was white and itself nearly drowned, he threw it on Jim's bed to dry.

José found his voice and jabbered in a mixture of Spanish and Indian, expressing his pity for his pet; then brought handfuls of grass and leaves to rub it with. This vigorous attention, in which Jim used his own sound arm, soon restored the lambkin to a beauty that surprised them all. More grass and flowers were put in the bottom of the basket with the marked stone, the lamb upon this cushion, and the cover fastened on.

Alaric informed Jim that such a basket was worth a great deal of money. He had learned the art of making such from Moon Face, who had travelled sometimes to the distant railway line and sold them to tourists. It was so tightly woven it would hold water; and in his pride over his handiwork the weaver would have poured a dipper of it into the basket to prove his statement.

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"No, no! The poor little thing has had more than its share of water! Best save the rest for yourself!" protested Jim, with a feeble attempt at a joke.

Alaric desisted then, hung the dipper back on the tank, seized the basket in one hand and José in the other and strode away. The last glimpse Jim had of them showed poor little José's fat legs being swung along, touching the ground only now and then, as they utterly failed to keep up with his father's pace.

Left alone, Jim lay still a long time, idly fingering some bits of rock which the child had scattered upon his blanket. He felt very cold; and again, in another moment, he seemed to be burning up. He thought of the water in the tank. He was desperately thirsty, his throat growing dry, his lips swelling; and alternately he longed to dip his head in that barrel and drink—drink—drink! then shivered with disgust remembering the various uses the stale fluid had been put to. Finally, sleep, or unconsciousness, overcame him and for many days he knew no more.

CHAPTER XII

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PLAY THAT WAS WORK AND WORK THAT WAS PLAY

The silence that followed Leslie's frightened cry, as he hurled himself to the ground beside the old man he had struck, lasted but an instant. Then, recovering their scattered wits, Herbert and Monty stooped and lifted the Captain's head.

The movement roused him and he opened his eyes, drawing a long breath as he did so and trying to speak. But he couldn't do that yet; nor, indeed, till Dorothy had come back with a glass of water, for which she had instantly run to the house as Captain Lemuel fell.

Dipping her fingers in the water she moistened his lips, and when he parted them as if demanding more, she gently dropped some between them. He swallowed with an effort but, presently, his strength returned and he tried to rise. The lads helped him and were overjoyed when he said, quite clearly and with a touch of his native humor:

"Ain't so tough as I thought. Eh, what? Lessen a little tenderfoot like—Why, what's he down for? Tried it on himself?"

At the sound of his victim's voice an infinite relief surged through Leslie's heart and he lifted a very white face to look at the ranchman. [Pg 188]

"Oh, Captain Lem! I—I was wild to do that! I beg your pardon—please forgive me—if you can!"

The petition ended with a sob, that was really a gasp for breath, due to the excitement of his rage, and the anger of his mates changed to pity for him.

"His weak heart! How ill he has made himself!" thought Helena, compassionately putting her hand under his arm and helping him to his feet, where he stood trembling and still breathing with much difficulty.

Dorothy had told her of this weakness of the lad's and that his parents had been somewhat doubtful if he could endure the rarefied air of that high region. If he could it would cure that other weakness of his lungs and they hoped for the best. She was frightened by his appearance and inwardly resolved to oppose any sort of fun which might bring on a return of this attack. She had already heard her brother and Monty proposing a bear hunt on the more distant peaks of the mountains and decided that it should never take place.

But Captain Lem was answering the boy and she listened to his words:

"Course, sonny, I shan't lay it up again' you. An' I allow 't there's one thing decent about you: if you're quick to get r'iled you're just as quick to own yourself in fault. I'm willin' to wash the slate all clean now, an' start over again with any little problems we may meet, same's when I was a little shaver, an' 'tended deestric school an' got my sums wrong, the teacher made me do. I'm no hand to lay up malice just 'cause a feller's got more 'n his share o' temper, specially not again' your father's son. Anybody 't spells his name Ford can do most as he's a mind to with Lemuel Hunt. Only—*don't you dast to do it again*; 'cause I'm some on the temper myself, an' I ain't much used to bein' struck. So—so—just don't show off any more o' that there little playfulness again. That's all." [Pg 189]

Too proud to show how really shaken and miserable he felt, the sharpshooter retired to his own quarters at the Barracks and was seen no more that night: but he sent word to Dorothy, the "Little One," that Netty, the lamb, had been given a soft bed close to his own and would be carefully attended.

The hours passed quietly till bedtime, which all the young strangers at San Leon felt inclined to make early that night. Seven young people, with all the means of enjoyment at hand which these had, should have been very merry, but these were not. The absence of their hosts made the great house seem very empty. Nobody had heart for any music, though Dorothy bravely brought out her violin and Helena took her place at the piano, ready to accompany. But, unfortunately, the first melody which came to Dolly's mind was one that Father John, Aunt Betty, and poor Jim had each loved best—"Auld Lang Syne." [Pg 190]

She mastered a few strains and the tears rose to her eyes. She suddenly felt lonely and helpless, so far from all who had hitherto made her happy world. So, rather than break down completely and let the tears fall, she nodded to Helena and put her beloved Cremona "to bed," as she called its placing in its case.

"Let's play 'Authors,'" suggested Molly.

"'Authors' is the dullest game going," objected Monty.

"That's because you're not well read. If you knew as much about books as Jim Barlow—" she retorted, teasing, then stopped abruptly. That was an unfortunate reference, for who, alas! could tell if that too studious youth were alive or dead?

Alfaretta hurried to cover this mention by demanding:

"Let's sing 'rounds,' 'Scotland's burning,' or 'Three Blind Mice.' Now don't stop to object or say nothin' but *just begin*. I will, and Nell, you follow. Then the boys, if any of 'em can sing

a note. Sometimes their voices go 'way up in Q and sometimes 'way down sullen. But they can try. Now—here she goes: 'Three Blind Mice—Three Blind Mice—For mercy's sake, Helena Montaigne, why don't you take it up? I sing one line, you know, then you sing the same one over—and we each do it three times then change to 'They—all—run—after—the—butcher's—wife—who—cut—off—their—tails—with—a—carving—kni-i-ife!—You—never—see—such—a—sight—in—your—life—as—Three—Blind Mice!' By that time Dolly'll be ready, over cryin'. She can sing real nice if she's a mind to. Listen! Everybody do it real solemn, no giggling, no forgettin' your parts, where you go in and come out at and doin' that part about the butcher's wife and the tails just as fast as you can speak it and the end—as—s-l-o-w—a-s—s-l-o-w. Begin!"

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Alfy's rich, though untrained voice, started the song and Helena followed on time, singing very sweetly, indeed, until she came to that tragic part about the tails, when she burst out in a giggle and a vain effort to race along as rapidly as Alfie had done.

Herbert could sing well. He helped Alfaretta carry the thing through to a triumphant finale, they two alone; for all the others had laughed themselves out of place and tune, with Monty interspersing the melody by outrageous cat calls and screechings of "Maria Maouw, come and catch these Three Blind Mice!"

"Maria! Maria! Pussy, pussy cat Maria—Come to supper!" echoed Leslie, laughing as he rarely laughed. To him this company of young people was wholly delightful—except when he felt it his duty to entertain them. When they were thus willing to entertain him everything was all right. He had had so few young intimates in his life that each of these youngsters seemed wonderful to him. Their nonsense and good natured chaffing of one another kept him amused at all times and was doubly pleasant to him that night.

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For, like Dorothy, he felt oddly forlorn and deserted in this great beautiful home that was practically his own; and he wished as he had done before that he might step into that cottage of the Babcock's, "up-mounting" where Alfaretta belonged and where she said everyone was as jolly as the day was long. He hadn't liked Alfie at first and he still rather looked down upon her. She wasn't of his station in life, she *would* not see that money made such a great difference, whether one had it or had not. She was greatly lacking in delicacy of speech, but she was honest to a fault. Not honester than Dolly, perhaps, but in another way. She hadn't hesitated to give him one of those generous "pieces of her mind" with which she regaled anyone she considered at fault; and the "piece" she had cut for him that day had been:

"Well, Leslie Ford, if bein' rich as Croesus—whoever he was—or havin' all creation to wait on you can't make you no better 'n a coward—I pity you. Yes, I do. That was the lowest-down, orneriest trick to hit an old man like Captain Lem, without givin' him a chance to help himself. Why, a boy that hadn't a cent, an' never looked to have, couldn't ha' been no meaner. An' just sayin' 'Forgive me' don't undo that job. Worst is, you raised a bigger welt on your own insides, on that thing Mr. Winters calls your conscience, 'n you did on his old head, an' it won't heal so quick, neither. I sure was ashamed of you, I sure was."

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This lecture had been in response to his appeal, as they chanced to stand together in the cloistered walk, waiting for supper:

"You don't think very badly of me, do you, Alfaretta, for getting so angry?"

The lad was very unhappy and very ashamed. He hoped to recover his own self-respect by hearing his mates declare the recent affair had been "nothing." Herbert had gone so far, indeed, as to say that he, too, would have resented being told "must" and "mustn't" by a mere hired man, but Leslie knew that Herbert would never have struck anybody under any provocation; and Monty had simply remarked: "Well, if you really liked to soil your hands that way, all right."

Alfy was the first of the girls he had interviewed, though he had gratefully recognized Helena's compassion and Dorothy's distress—for himself. Molly—he guessed he wouldn't question Molly. That young person had a flippant tongue and she was always inclined to "call a spade a spade." He couldn't imagine her calling a coward a hero—and his own heart told him he had not been that. But Alfie was poor and intensely grateful for all his parents were doing for her. She would be the one to soothe his self-esteem and overlook the episode, he thought, and so he appealed to her.

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Alfy's opening remark had been:

"I can't say I think very well. You might ha' done worse, course, you might have used that pistol I saw you cocking round, this morning, if you'd had it handy; and that you've got no more use for than a cat for two tails. You beat the Dutch, Leslie Ford. You're feelin' mean as pussley and you're coaxin' me to contradict you."

Then had followed that larger "slice" of the girl's opinion, recorded above. It hadn't left a very pleasant "taste" in the lad's "mouth."

Summons to supper was an agreeable sound, just then, and nobody referred to the event again. Yet, as has been told, the evening was a dull one for most of the party, the singing of the "rounds" its greatest amusement. Just as this ended, Dr. Jones appeared to read family prayers.

Mrs. Ford had instituted this on her arrival at San Leon, and Mr. Ford had conducted the little service with a dignified sincerity which could not fail to impress his young guests. On leaving, he had requested the doctor to take his place, saying:

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"No ceremony that will help to bring a blessing on our home must be omitted just because I am away."

But, to-night, they missed the master's earnest voice and Gray Lady's wonderful singing of just the familiar, common hymn which everybody knew. The house-servants, and such of the ranchmen as would, filed into the spacious music-room and took their seats in reverent quiet. This was new business to most of those rough westerners and they came partly from curiosity, partly from admiration of "Dan Ford, Railroad Boss"; so great a man in their opinion that whatever he did they felt must have some merit in it.

Helena took her place at the piano and the other girls stood beside her; and Herbert, obeying a nod from Dorothy also came forward. Monty and Leslie reluctantly followed. They had grouped themselves thus when the master was present but had hesitated now from a foolish shame before these untutored workmen.

Dorothy's face lighted with gratitude and between the lines of the hymn Molly murmured, "Good boys," while Alfie sang with even greater vim than her beloved "rounds."

Then swift good nights and rest. It had been a busy, an exciting day; and Dorothy was soon asleep, though again her mind had been full of wonder concerning absent Jim and she had meant to lie awake and, as Alfie expressed it: "Cipher out where he could be."

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But still she could not worry greatly. The arrival of the lamb with his message assured her that he was alive and, she argued, must be well since he had not forgotten her.

But in one room there was no desire for sleep. Leslie was still restless and excited. His heart bothered him. He missed his parents more than he would acknowledge even to himself. He was fractious and tried Mateo's patience sorely.

"No, Mateo, I shan't go to bed till I get ready. No matter if my mother did say ten o'clock, it was because she didn't understand. You can't go, either. I want you to talk."

"Certainly, señor."

But when silence followed Leslie impatiently inquired:

"Well, why don't you?"

Poor Mateo sighed. Commonly his tongue would run so fast that his young master would order him to be quiet. Now, when requested, the valet could find no word to say. He stood behind his master's chair, idly turning with his foot the corners of a mighty bear skin which lay upon the floor. It was the skin of an enormous grizzly, that had been shot by Captain Lem and another *caballero*, or horse trainer and had been mounted by themselves with infinite care, as a gift to their employer. The head was stuffed to the contour of life, and the paws outspread and perfect. It was, indeed, a most valuable skin and Leslie had admired it so greatly that it had been spread as a rug upon his floor. It annoyed him now to see Mateo toying with it and he bade him stop.

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The Mexican flushed and sighed:

"It is that *el señor* is not well, *si?*" he suggested, suavely.

"Yes, I am well, too," retorted the boy, who felt wretched, with a curious oppression on his chest.

"Imagine, Señor Leslie, what it must be to kill, to slaughter such a monster!"

"Ah! a monster, indeed! But I shall kill just such another, you'll see. What's the use of a ranch on the Rockies and not go bear hunting? They can't keep me done up in cotton wool just because I used to cough a little."

"Certainly not, señor."

"Oh! shut up with your everlasting 'certainly nots!' You're as tiresome as an old woman. I wish you'd stayed in San Diego, where you belong."

Mateo was amazed. He was really devoted to Leslie and they had rarely disagreed. He scarcely knew the lad in such a mood as this and realized that something must be done to give a pleasanter turn to things. A bear hunt? Was that what the young señor had set his heart upon and been denied? An inspiration came to him.

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"*Caramba!* Behold! I have a fine thought, me. Will it please *el señor* to listen?"

"Of course. That's what I said to do—to talk."

Then Mateo did talk. For five, ten minutes, with many a gesture and mixture of Spanish and English, till his listener's face grew radiant and he sprang from his chair with a hip, hip, hurra! All his crossness was over and he now allowed Manuel to settle him for the night with a good nature not to be exceeded by anybody.

The morning found all the young folks happier than they had been on the night before; and, nobody was late for breakfast. It had been explained to them that each one should attend the grooming of his or her own horse. There would be men to wait upon them, of course, and for the girls but little labor. Yet Mr. Ford believed that they would all be benefited in health by this pleasant task and that the intimacy which should exist between horse and rider would be thus furthered.

Breakfast was scarcely over when Captain Lem appeared on the porch. He looked older than usual and uncommonly pale under his weather toughened skin, and he had put on his "specs," which he disliked. However, his manner was as gay as ever and he began:

"You cert'nly are the laziest set o' youngsters I've met sence I was knee-high to a hop-toad. Reckon if anybody'd give me a horse when I was your ages I'd ha' beat the sun a-risin' to see if 't had lived over night. The boys is waiting in the stables, and gettin' pretty cross. Some on 'em sort-of-kind-of feel 's if they was playin' nurse to you kids, and the notion don't go down none too good even to oblige Dan Ford, Boss. They've lived in the open, most of the boys has, and are better used to roundin' up stock than to tendin' tenderfeet youngsters. Eh, Little One? Ain't you nowise curious to hear how Netty passed the night?"

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One thing was evident to them all—the sharpshooter's ready tongue had suffered no hurt from the unhappy incident of the day before.

Dorothy ran to put her hand in his, exclaiming:

"How dreadful of me! I had forgotten that darling thing. Actually forgotten. How could I when she came from Jim?"

Away she sped toward the Barracks, her white frock and scarlet ribbons making a pretty spot of color on the wide shaven lawn; but practical Alfaretta remarked:

"If that ain't just like Dolly Doodles! Make her think she's neglected somebody and off she flies, forgettin' things better worth rememberin'! The idea! She'll go right to cleanin' that calico filly, Zaraza, an' never think a mite about her clean clothes. Not till she gets 'em dirty—then nothing'll do but she must put on fresh. White frocks ain't so easy did up, either, so I'll go get our high aprons, that Mrs. Calvert had made for us to dust the house in, at Paradise. We've got quite a lot of 'em and, girls, if you'd like, I'll bring a couple for you, too."

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"You dear, thoughtful little caretaker! I'll be ever so obliged for the loan till I can make one for myself," answered Helena gratefully, giving her mate a smile that made Alfy happy.

Eager to see their horses but not so pleased with the idea of grooming them, the lads sauntered toward the stables and corral, Leslie intimating that he thought "a quarter judiciously applied would be better than soiling himself by stable-work."

Neither Herbert nor Monty knew Leslie well enough yet to understand this shirking of what they anticipated as a delightful task. Herbert had always been used to horses, and to fine ones. He loved his own Bucephalus, "back home," as a dear friend, and looked forward to equal enjoyment in his new Blackamoor. With a little laugh he glanced at his young host and remarked:

"If I could help it I would never let another hand than mine touch that superb animal your father gave me. I hardly realize it yet, that it is truly my own. Why, I mean to train him to hurdles and high jumps, and when I go back east, this autumn, I'll get myself proposed for the Highland Valley Hunt and—elected, if I can. I say, this is just a glorious chance to learn what I couldn't at home, where houses are thick and farmers so stubborn they will object to one's riding to hounds across their property. Howev—"

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Monty interrupted, rather jealously:

"Oh! Quit that riding-to-hounds talk! I don't know a thing about horses—except a saw-horse, that my mother insisted I should work on to reduce my—"

"Too, too solid flesh!" broke in Leslie, laughing now and eager to watch the inexperienced "fat boy" make his first attempt at grooming a spirited beast.

But they were apt to break in thus upon each other's remarks and no offence taken, and they were soon at the stables, where the girls were already assembled. One glance at his sister, covered from neck to foot by a brown gingham apron, reminded the fastidious Herbert that he was not fixed for dirty work, and he promptly begged a set of overalls from the nearest workman. The other lads followed his example, discarding jackets and vests, and beginning on their new tasks with a zeal that was almost too eager.

Even Leslie had done the same, willing for once to try this new game and see if there was any fun in it, as Herbert seemed to think. But his fingers shrank from handling the curry comb and brushes, absolutely new and clean though they were, and the best he accomplished was a roughening of Cæsar's coat which disgusted him as well as the horse. At last, with a remark that "looking on was good enough for him," he tossed his brushes aside and signalled an attendant to finish the task so badly begun. To his amazement, the hostler declined:

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"Sorry, Master Leslie, but the Boss's express orders was—have you do it yourself."

Leslie's eyes flashed. This was insubordination, indeed! Wasn't he master at San Leon, now? Then Captain Lem drew near, to pick up the brush and explain in a matter-of-fact way:

"Best never rub anything—nor anybody—the wrong way, lad! This sorrel, here, 'd be sp'iled in next to no time if his hair ain't smoothed the way natur' meant it should lie. There. That's how. See how it shines? And just look at Herbert and his black! By the great horned spoon! Them two is cronies a'ready—hand-in-glove, pals! And let me say right here an' now; there ain't no comfortabler love nowhere in this world than that 'twixt a horse and his owner—if the last has got sense. Now pitch in, sonny, and don't let nobody get ahead of you on that line. No, siree! What'd the Boss say?" Then turning toward Monty, valiantly struggling with this new business, he inquired in real kindness: "Want me to lend a hand, youngster?"

Poor Monty would have given many "quarters" to say "yes." But he was too plucky. His face was streaming with perspiration, he had worried the chestnut, Juan, till the creature threatened to kick, and he ached from head to foot. But he had glanced across to that open space where four girls were making a frolic of this "horrible mess" and manliness held him to his duty. But he couldn't refrain from a snappy:

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"No, I don't! And how long at a time does a fellow keep at it? How tell whether a horse is groomed or isn't?"

"Ginger! Do you know when your shirt's buttoned or when it ain't? Just look at Herbert's piece o' work an' do accordin'. But keep cool, Monty. Don't get r'iled an' don't rile your nag. You'll do all right—you've got the makin' of a horseman in ye!"

Thus encouraged, Montmorency Vavasour-Stark renewed his efforts, though with less force and better judgment. There is always a right and a wrong way to everything and the worried lad had, at last, fallen upon the right. He "would be a horseman!" Hurray! That opinion from such a source was worth lots!

Well, that first lesson was over at last. Seven tired youngsters stripped off aprons and overalls and proceeded to mount the horses they had groomed and most of them were happy. It had been worth while, after all, to get thus familiar with the animals; and the girls, at least, remembered that their hosts had spoken of how beneficial it would be for their beloved son to be with such creatures as much as possible. Like the rifle practice, it was all for Leslie and Leslie's health; and they would have been willing enough to help this good work along, even if they had not got all the fun out of it for themselves, which they did.

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They rode "off bounds," that morning; following Captain Lem, with a couple of trained horsemen riding at their rear. Perhaps of all the company, Herbert and Molly were happiest. They were as much at home in the saddle as any cowboy of them all, and their high spirits spread to their mates, so that even they regretted the order that the leader gave:

"Right about, face! Rifle practice—nine o'clock, sharp!"

They hadn't a minute to lose; yet when the "awkward squad" repaired to the Barracks only the four girls answered to roll call. The lads came straggling up, later, their heads close together, an air of profound mischief and mystery about them, and Dorothy heard the words "Bear Hunt" escape from one of them.

Her heart sank. Leslie was, indeed, coming to take the place he had declined in the "ranks," rather going with the crowd than be left out alone; but there was something in his manner that Dolly did not like. Were the three boys planning to steal off by themselves, despite Captain Lemuel's warnings?

CHAPTER XIII

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THE HEN OF WUN SING

But whatever wild schemes were hatching in the heads of the three lads nothing seemed to come of them.

Days followed one another in such peaceful routine that Dorothy felt ashamed of her fears, as well as ashamed of her composure regarding Jim Barlow. The longer he was absent the less they spoke of him. That he was alive, somewhere, all were sure, and that he would return sometime or "when he gets good and ready," as Alfaretta coolly observed.

"He seemed like a very odd chap, the little I saw of him," said Leslie, and did not regret the stranger's absence.

Herbert was loyal and insisted that "Jim was a royal chap—once he shook off his awkward shyness a bit. Why, the yarns Jim Barlow could spin about woodsy things and habits of wild creatures would make you sit right up and take notice. Oh, Jim's all right—only bashful."

"That's so. Why, that fellow, don't you know, that fellow really plans to go sometime, to Africa, or some other place and live with monkeys just to hear them talk. He—" [Pg 206]

"He might have stayed right here with us—or you, Monty dear," said Molly, sweetly.

Monty merely frowned at her but continued:

"There is a man did that. True. Went into the woods and lived in a cage—"

"All that trouble and expense for nothing," again remarked Molly; and this time Monty changed the subject, asking:

"Have you heard about Wun Sing and his hen?"

"Oh! never mind hens. What do you say, folks? Suppose we get old Lem to go with us into the mountains yonder and look for Jim?" said Herbert.

"You needn't do that. You'd not find him. He's hidden himself on purpose, I believe, and only sent back Netty to let us know he was alive and well. Even Molly thinks that," said Helena; "and I, for one don't care to hunt up boys who don't want to be found. I think Jim's shyness is at the bottom of the matter. It's kindness to let him alone and—"

Dolly looked serious and shook her head while Monty again demanded:

"Have you heard about Wun Sing's hen?"

"I wonder what he's going to give us for supper! I'm nearly starved. There never was such a place for appetites—eating doesn't stop that hollow, all-gone feeling a bit!" calmly stated Alf, with a tragic air. [Pg 207]

"Alfy, you little pig! It isn't more than an hour since we finished dinner," reproved Molly, laughing.

"Well, I can't help that. I wish 'twas supper-time. Let's go in the kitchen and ask for a piece—like the children home do, bless 'em!"

"I say, you better not! Wun Sing's hen—"

"Monty—quit! Let's all go ask for a 'piece'!" cried Leslie, throwing his arm around the "fat boy's" shoulder and forcing him along with the others.

Herbert pulled out a jew's-harp—procured nobody knew where—and headed the procession with a vain attempt to render "Yankee Doodle" so that it could be recognized for itself.

Then all fell into line, with the laughter and nonsense natural to a company of care free “youngsters” as they were now known all over the premises.

But as they passed a room just beyond Leslie’s own, he poked his head through the window, to demand of Mateo, lying within:

“Any better, boy?”

“*Gracias*, Señor Leslie. Much better. Only, the hen of Wun Sing; the omelette—Ah! I suffer, *si*. I groan—I am on fire. The heathen creature and his foul fowl!”

“What’s the matter, Les? Is that your pert valet laid up in yon? What’s up?”

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“Rather—what’s down? The boy hasn’t been well, or says he hasn’t these three days. That’s why I had to put off the bear—”

“Mum! Dorothy’s just behind us and she has ears all round her head! But we’ll do it, yet; either with or without him. It’ll be rippin’ fun, but if that girl gets wind of it she’ll stop it, sure.”

“I wonder if we’ll see Wun Sing’s hen!” said Monty again.

“Stark! I tell you if you mention that fowl again I’ll stuff her down your throat!” cried Herbert, dropping his jew’s-harp and engaging with Monty. But the latter was round and easily slipped through Bert’s fingers, and the scrimmage was playful, anyway.

Resuming their march they entered the great kitchen, now wholly deserted save by the Chinaman, who cowered in a corner, praying lustily to his honorable forefathers and burning some sort of stuff before a little image on the floor beside him. Like a good many others of his race, Wun Sing was “good Chlistian” when it suited him to be, but a much better devotee of his ancient gods when real trouble overtook him.

Wun Sing was in trouble now. Bottomless trouble, he feared, and so wholly engaged in his devotions that he didn’t take any notice of the noisy youngsters foraging his stores. Until, from the corner of his eye, he saw Alfy poking into a little wall-cupboard that was his own property and used to shelter his dearest treasures.

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“No, no, Missee Alfaletta! No, no. Wun Sing’s chalm no wolkee if lill gels meddle!”

He rose from his prostration on the floor and fairly flew to the girl’s side, pushing her hand aside from the key she had almost turned, his whole manner expressing great agitation.

Of course, she desisted at once, even apologized for her action, but her old co-worker in Mrs. Calvert’s kitchen begged pardon in his own turn and after his foreign fashion. In his broken English he eagerly explained that he and his belongings had been *bewitched*.

His hen—the so beloved hen of Wun Sing, that he had brought from far away California, along with some garden seeds and roots, the hen had been entered by an evil spirit and the days of Wun Sing were numbered. Already he felt the dread sickness stealing over him, as it had already stolen upon his old neighbor of San Diego—the so afflicted Mateo. He had been praying and offering gifts to his little clay god but so far no good had come. Within the cupboard on the wall he had placed a “charm”—a terrible charm, in his opinion and if that failed not only he but all at San Leon were doomed. Would that he had never heard of the place, even for the extra big wages the rich owner had offered. He—

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When he had reached this point, Alfy shook him demanding:

“What makes you such a fool, Wunny? That little old image on the floor is enough to make you sick, course, it’s so filthy dirty. I hope you’ll scrub your hands good with soap before you touch any food for other folks to eat. What’s the matter with the hen, anyway?”

Having put this question, Alfaretta walked to the sink and turned the spigot over her own hand, which suddenly felt soiled by contact with the Chinaman’s shoulder. Then she remarked:

“We’re all hungry. Tell us where we can find something to eat.”

The cook shook his head and Alfy foraged for herself: presently securing from the pantry a box of crackers and a jar of cheese. Armed with these refreshments she felt she would be sustained until the regular supper time, and invited her mates to accompany her on a visit to this wonderful hen whose name was in everybody’s mouth.

Wun Sing protested; but when they were determined, he tremblingly presented each of the youngsters with a bit of red paper, inscribed in black with a few Chinese characters. Laughingly, they pinned these on and so protected from “evil chalms” sought the little wire

enclosure which the Chinaman had made for his petted fowl, upon his first coming to San Leon. [Pg 211]

The hen had been the gift of his opulent kinsman, Der Doo, and was far too precious to its new owner to be allowed with the other poultry. It had lived in state within its little wire-covered yard, supplied with fresh grass each day and fattening upon the best of food. For its night accommodation, Wun Sing had constructed a tiny pagoda-like house imitating a temple of his native land. Here the pampered fowl slept luxuriously, and for a time had been the delight of its owner's eyes.

"Let's sit down on the grass and watch it awhile. We can eat our crackers here, first rate, 'cause if we get thirsty we can drink out of the spigot o' running water that cooky has fixed for the hen," suggested Alfie.

So they ranged themselves in a semi-circle, with the crackers and cheese in the centre and awaited developments.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" crowed Herbert, in excellent imitation of a rooster.

"Oh! hush! Hens don't do *that*; they just say—cut-cut-cut-cut—cut-tarket!" corrected Molly.

Immediately the rest took up the mocking cries, to the evident distress of poor Wun Sing, who stood in the background, his face yellower than common and his hands clasping and unclasping nervously.

But neither cat-calls, crowings, nor cacklings, coaxed the invisible fowl from her palace-like retreat. So, soon tiring of this, they fell to talking of other things and forgot the creature; till, suddenly, from within the temple came a crow that beat even Herbert's noisy ones. It was so loud and so sudden, and was so closely followed by a jubilant cackle, that all of them were a trifle startled while Wun Sing threw himself down in real terror. [Pg 212]

The cackling continued a longer time than is usual and ended in another masculine crow. Then there solemnly stalked into the little yard a very handsome fowl, of the Plymouth Rock species, who strutted about as if she were the queen of all hens.

"Huh! Nothing the matter with that biddy, Wun Sing! I wish 't Ma Babcock had her in our hennery, up-mounting. What's wrong with her, you think, Wunny?"

"Misse Alfletta—*eggs!*"

"Well, what's a hen's business in life but to lay eggs?" demanded Herbert, laughing at the Chinaman's curious expression.

Then it came out. That hen did lay eggs—such eggs! She was a big hen and her eggs so small, and so many! Ah! she was bewitched. She was bewitching Wun Sing. She had already bewitched Mateo, yes. It began the very day the master left. On that sorrowful, august occasion that pent up, solitary fowl deposited two eggs in her softly lined nest.

"That might be. Ma's hens do that, sometimes, good breeds," said Alfie, in answer to the Chinaman's impressive statement. [Pg 213]

With all this company of doubters around him Wun Sing felt secure enough to go on and state that on the day following there had been four eggs! Then one—then again seven—the mystic number. Latterly there had been eight, nine, as high as ten! All in one twenty-four hours! Could a fowl, free from an evil spirit, so conduct itself? No. No, indeed. Wun Sing knew what he knew. Disaster was coming. There was trouble on the wing. It would light upon San Leon. They were doomed—doomed—doomed!

"I don't believe it!" declared Leslie. "But a hen of that character *ought* to crow as well as cackle. How much'll you take for her, cooky? I'll buy and start a hennery to stump the world. Anybody want to go in with me on this deal? San Leon Chinese Poultry—Warranted to Make Possessors Rich! The Egg Trust of San Leon! I say, boys, the thing's just rippin'!"

"Undo that little gate, Wunny. I'm going in to collect the eggs. Come on, Alfie, or anybody," cried Dorothy, laughing. "That empty cracker box to hold them in. By the way, Wunny, when did you empty the nest?"

He assured her that he had done so the last thing before retiring on the night before. He had already taken two from it this day. Now by the cackle—there must be—Ah! he finished his speech with a wild flourish of his hands, then put them before his eyes to shield them from an uncanny sight. [Pg 214]

Those outside the little poultry yard waited in curiosity for the others to come back. The two girls within it had their heads close together peering into the hen-temple, while Monty

had squeezed his plump body through its little door with the cracker box in hand.

"Oh! I say, come out of there! How many have you found?" called Herbert. "Hurry up! Nell and Molly are getting scared. Fact!"

"I'm not," denied Molly, but Helena said nothing. It was absurd, but she was actually catching some of the Chinaman's nervousness over this most uncanny fowl. And a moment later, she was relieved to see the egg-hunters turn around and Monty emerge from that "heathen temple," the cracker box held tightly in his hand. He carried it as if it were heavy and his face was almost as solemn as the Chinaman's. The box contained eleven eggs!

Wun Sing gave one glance and fled, and trying to take the box into his own hands, Leslie dropped it—with the natural result.

"Well, they may be bewitched eggs but they can break 'altee samee!' I'm sorry, Wun Sing, but I'll pay for them! And say, did anybody ever hear of such a thing before?" asked Leslie, astonished. [Pg 215]

Nobody had; and seeing Dr. Jones crossing the grounds at a little distance they ran to him with the marvellous tale. He listened attentively and even walked back with them to see the hen for himself. His decision put bewitchment out of the question.

"The bird is a freak of nature. I have read of such before, but they are rare. Either that—or—are you quite sure that no practical joke has been played by any of the boys—or by yourselves?"

His keen study of their faces revealed nothing mischievous on any. They were all as honestly surprised as himself, and he then made a close inspection of the little place. The pagoda stood exactly in the centre of the yard, so far from the wire-netting on every side that no arm would be long enough to reach it and drop eggs into the nest at the back. Wun Sing always kept the key of the Chinese padlock on the wire gate and entrance through it without his consent could not be made.

"It doesn't look like a hoax, and it's not to be wondered at that the Chinaman was scared. We all are—at the unusual and unexplainable. But this is simple. It is a freak of nature and the hen will probably die soon, of exhaustion."

The Doctor walked away and Molly made a funny little face behind his back.

"I call that real mean, to take the mystery out of it in that way! I've been getting delightfully goose-fleshy and creepy, just to find the spook is nothing but a silly old hen that's outdone herself. I hate to be disappointed like that. I wish something would happen, real hair-raising, as Indians, or bears, or even a few catamounts!" [Pg 216]

"If they did, I'd like to be on the spot. I bet you, Molly Breckenridge, you'd run faster than anybody if those things did happen," teased Monty.

Saying that, he exchanged an odd glance with Leslie, who nodded and said:

"Come along, boys, let's visit Mateo in a body. Force of numbers you know. He lays it to eggs—Wunny's bewitched eggs, but I lay it to cowardice. There's nothing the matter with my valiant valet but downright scare. After proposing the thing, too, and being the best figure of all to do it. Ta, ta, ladies! We shall meet again—at feeding time. Eh, Alf? I mean Miss Babcock!"

"Huh! Don't you think I didn't notice 't you ate more 'n anybody else of the crackers and cheese. Good-by!"

They separated, the girls to their own rooms to freshen themselves for the evening and for a long talk over the delights of this wonderful summer; yet in all their happiness, a deep regret was in their warm hearts for Jim Barlow's absence and the wish that they might know where he was and that he was well.

The lads sought Mateo in his room, and though the valet pretended slumber he was promptly roused by the energetic attentions of his visitors. [Pg 217]

"Look here, Mateo, we know you're shamming. The fact is that after getting us all wrought up to this bear business and agreeing to take the chief part, you're afraid. Either you think the 'boys'll' get lively with their shooting-irons and hunt the bear too well, or else—I don't know what else. Only this, you can't pretend to be hoodooed or 'bewitched' with any of Wun Sing's omelettes. That's all up. The doctor's taken a hand in that and I know it isn't indigestion you're bewitched with—it's plain sneak. Now, boy, get up!"

After Leslie's long speech, that ended in the terse command, Mateo raised himself on elbow

and protested:

“But it is of the illness, I, señor, *en verdad*. The omelette of Wun Sing—”

“May have been a little too rich for you, Matty lad, but don’t worry. That wonderful fowl has shortened her life by her own ambition. I suppose she had a certain number of eggs to lay during her earthly career and she concluded to get the job over with. She’s an all right Chinese hen, but *she’s* the one that’ll die, not you nor Wunny Sing. Doctor Jones said so. We’ve interviewed him on the subject. Doctors know a lot. So, be decent! Get up and practise a bit.”

Thus adjured by Herbert, for whom the valet had a great admiration, Mateo threw off the light covers and rose to his feet—fully dressed. He had only lain down, professing himself ill, whenever there was danger of his young master appearing. [Pg 218]

With a swift change of front, he now fell in with the lads’ notions, and thereafter followed an hour of “practice,” accompanied by curious sounds and growlings. All this behind locked door and tightly shuttered windows—something almost unknown at peaceful San Leon.

At supper time there was a subdued air of mystery about the three lads, which Dorothy noticed, if none of the other girls did. Also, they were so extremely courteous and thoughtful that it was rather overdone. However, politeness was agreeable, and there followed the happiest evening the young guests had spent since the departure of Gray Lady for the east.

The fading moonlight was now supplemented by the electric lights, making the wide lawns brilliant as day, save where the deep shadows fell, black in contrast. At midnight, Dorothy awoke. Something had startled her and she sat up in bed, shivering in fear. How queer! she thought and peered through the window as if expecting some unwelcome sight. There was nothing unusual visible and, except for a curious creeping sound, as of some large body moving stealthily on the veranda floor, nothing to hear. [Pg 219]

Strange that brave Dorothy’s heart should beat so fast and she turn so cold. She wished Alf would awake. She wanted to hear somebody speak. Then she scorned herself for her foolishness, wondering if she, too, had caught the Chinaman’s terror of “bewitchment.” Oh! this was horrid! Alf would go right to sleep again, even if she were awakened, and she must, she must hear somebody human!

She opened her trembling lips to call: “Alf! Alf dear, please wake up!”

But the words were never uttered. Something had come into view at her open window which froze them on her lips.

CHAPTER XIV

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THE GRIZZLY AND THE INDIANS

For a moment Dorothy sat still in bed, afraid to move or cry out while the great animal at the window remained equally motionless. Then she was able to shriek:

“Alf! Helena! Somebody—help—help! HELP!”

Alf leapt from her little bed with an answering cry, frightened by Dorothy’s screech, and hurriedly demanding: “Why—why—what?” then rubbed her eyes and stood transfixed with horror.

A moment later the whole house was in an uproar. The lads came running from their rooms, yelling in sympathy with the cries of the girls, the doctor rushed from his office-bedroom clad only in pajamas; the nurse forsook her sick bed—which she had not left before since first stricken with a chest attack; Anita—Wun Sing—kitchen boy—all the household gathered in the great corridor upon which the girls’ rooms opened.

Such an uproar had never been heard at peaceful San Leon since its foundation stone was laid; and the sounds carrying clearly in that night air, out from the Barracks rushed a horde of cowboys and workmen with Captain Lem in lead. [Pg 221]

“A bear!”

“The Grizzly! The Grizzly!”

A grizzly it was sure enough. All the feminine portion of the household retreated to the empty chamber of Miss Milliken, slammed down its window and locked themselves within; then from curiosity opened the door a little way, to peek through the crack.

“Oh! Oh! It’s coming this way—why doesn’t somebody shoot it!” cried Helena, running back to look through the window panes.

The great animal had now dropped from its upright position at Dolly’s window and was crawling on all fours back along the wide porch. It certainly was coming that way but—it couldn’t get in!

“Could it? Can bears—open—open—things?” gasped Molly, retreating to a wardrobe and hiding within it, whence she demanded in a torrent of questions information of all sorts concerning bears and why nobody killed it before it killed them!

Oddly enough, nobody had interfered with the creature’s movements thus far, though some of the men had run back to the Barracks for firearms, and just then unlucky Wun Sing came round the corner of the building and met it face to face. He had run at top speed in the opposite direction from that the beast seemed taking when he had first espied it, issuing from his room beyond the kitchen. Seeing it headed that way he had instinctively chosen the other, not reckoning that even bears can change routes.

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Then the yell that rose belittled all which had gone before.

Grizzly uprose on his hind feet and rushed to meet poor Wunny, squeezing him in a terrible embrace that checked the Chinaman’s yell instantly. Until a touch of Bruin’s teeth upon his thinly clad shoulder and a bite of sharp teeth awoke it again. A clutch of his queue from the great paw brought forth greater shrieks and seemed to give the victim an extraordinary strength. By some means he wrenched himself free and escaped, the grizzly pursuing on all fours again—and both headed toward the lake.

Whether Wun Sing’s purpose was to throw himself within it he didn’t know himself, but the road toward it was the clearest and offered his best chance. Half way to the water his feet caught in his long night blouse and he tripped. Instantly the grizzly was upon him. The great furry creature sprawled over the prostrate cook, growling and snapping his teeth but as yet inflicting no further injury, and the man underneath no longer knowing anything, for his terrified senses had taken leave of his quivering body.

Slowly the bear got upright again and, for a moment towered above his helpless victim. Then seeming to have satisfied his rage in that direction, he resumed his natural position and moved back toward the house. He kept his great head well lowered, wagging it from side to side and, altogether, conducting himself like a half-blind or greatly bewildered bear.

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By this time the men from the Barracks had reappeared, well armed; but as the grizzly climbed upon the veranda floor again they hesitated to fire because the low windows opening upon it were full of peeping faces. Silent Pete, alone, dared approach the creature as near as the other end of the veranda. This man had been a mighty hunter in his youth, when Colorado was an almost unknown country with few settlers and big game plentiful. His old blood had warmed to the conflict now, though he was silent as ever and paid no heed to the warnings called to him by his ranch mates. Creeping stealthily forward toward the encounter he watched his grizzly enemy with exultation, his thought being:

“He’s tough! He’s an old one! His hide’s thick—I must make no mistake. When I get nigh enough to hit him through the heart—wish he’d rise up again—queerest actin’ grizzly I ever met—likely my last one—so anxious to meet me he come a-visitin’—he, he, he! Ah! he’s risin’—I’ll—”

Out on the electric lighted grounds the men were grouped with their rifles, all anxious to fire and all eager to delay till the last moment, watching this wild beast so uncommonly near at hand. Why, from its movements it might almost have been a tame animal escaped from some menagerie. Besides, the trophy belonged to Silent Pete. He was first and hardiest to face the brute and only if his famously sure shot failed would they fire to the rescue. Yes, the bear was the old hunter’s legitimate prize—they’d wait, guns ready—

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“Don’t shoot! Oh! men, don’t shoot! DON’T SHOOT!”

To the utter amazement of everyone, up flew Dorothy’s window and out she leaped, so close behind the creeping grizzly that she almost touched him: she was gesticulating wildly and her repeated cries of “Don’t shoot!” startled old Captain Lem almost to numbness.

What was that she was saying?

“He isn’t a bear! I see his feet! Bears don’t wear—SHOES!”

Alas! Her cry came too late. As bruin reared himself old Peter's shot rang out. An instant later, with such a cry as never issued from the throat of any bear, he dropped to the veranda floor and lay there motionless. The great bear hunt was over.

Five minutes later the grizzly rug was back on the floor of Leslie's room and the lad who had masqueraded in it to frighten a few girls, the over-zealous Mateo, lay on his own little bed with Doctor Jones probing for the bullet which had entered his shoulder.

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Fortunately, it had not lodged there but passed straight through leaving a clean flesh wound which would promptly heal, the doctor said, but that would keep unhappy Mateo in bed for a few days. He had feigned sickness when there was none, dreading to act the part he had just so unfortunately done. But the young master's will had been too strong and the suggestion had been Mateo's own.

"The punishment, for once, has fallen upon the guilty person. You'll have time to reflect, Mateo, that frightening timid people is scarcely a manly pastime. I trust there'll be no more skylarking till Mr. Ford is home. You will be kept upon a rigid diet till I order otherwise, and good night."

So said the doctor, leaving his patient to his own thoughts and assuring himself that all the young folks had retired to their rooms again. He had administered no further reproofs—nor needed to do so. It was an exceedingly crest-fallen trio of lads who disappeared from view, when once the extent of Mateo's injury was learned, and a very quiet one.

But the excited girls were not so quiet. They had to talk it over, simply had to!

"I thought it was queer all the boys were in their day clothes," said Helena, with her arm about Molly, who was still shaking with fright, now and then, despite the fact that the affair was all over.

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"I noticed, too, but I thought they'd just dressed awful quick. But suppose it *had* been a real one—would it have eaten us up?" she begged to know.

To which Alfy replied from her own room:

"No, Molly Breckenridge, don't be a goose. *We'd* have eaten *him* up, course. We'd have had bear steak for breakfast—Some say it's good. Don't s'pose with all them men around they'd have let it live very long? No, indeedy. But Matty did it real cute, after all, didn't he? Must ha' been terrible hot, trampin' around under all that skin. Well, we ought to go to sleep, but seems if I'd never catch another wink. I wonder what became of Wunny! Last I saw him he was lyin' flat on the ground—thinkin' he was et up, I guess. Dolly—My heart! Dolly Doodles is asleep a'ready. Did you ever see such a sleepy head, Nell?"

There was no answer from the room across the hall, so Alfy curled down among her pillows and composed herself to sleep. But her mind wasn't at rest. She kept seeing, in her fancy, the prostrate figure of Wun Sing, and hoped some of the men from the Barracks had looked after him. She felt as if she must get up again and go to see for herself. But—out of doors at night didn't seem quite the same, even to this sensible girl, as it had done before the bear scare. Besides—something really was the matter with her eyes. They felt as if they were full of sand—she'd just shut them a minute to—

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She was asleep at once. A body simply could not stay awake after bedtime, in that Colorado air! And it was well she could not. Else, the warm-hearted girl would have suffered fresh alarm.

It was a belated household which struggled out of heavy slumber the next day, and as Dorothy lazily yawned and stretched her arms above her head it seemed as if all the exciting events of the night must be part of her dreams. Alfy woke, too, as reluctantly as her mate and just as Helena appeared from her own room, looking a little heavy-eyed but fully dressed. She bade them good morning, but waited for no response before she added:

"The house seems unusually still, and I don't smell coffee. I generally do, the first thing. I sometimes think it's the odor of that wakes me. I wonder if Wun Sing's fright and his worry about his poor hen has made him ill! I'll go and see; and if the boys aren't up I'll call them."

The lads answered sleepily to Helena's summons, yet were not long in appearing on the porch, where the other girls promptly joined them. As if by common consent nobody mentioned the escapade of the night, though it was in the minds of all and all were really longing to discuss it. The boys because they wished to "explain," and the girls thinking that to treat the "joke" with silent contempt would be their severest punishment. Nobody even mentioned unlucky Mateo, who had lent himself to the furtherance of the affair, only to be the one to suffer most from it.

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"Hmm. Isn't it past breakfast time?" asked Monty, at last.

Herbert looked at his watch, and exclaimed:

"Ten minutes to nine! Who'd have believed it? Horses to be groomed before drill, and time up already. I wonder—But here's Nell. She's coming from the kitchen and looks important. What's up, Sis?"

"Several things. First, the hen of Wun Sing lies dead in her coop."

"O-oh!" "Ah!" "Unwise, ambitious hen!" were the exclamations which responded; and Molly added:

"That isn't all. There's something worse on Helena's mind than the death of a bewitched hen! Out with it, child! After—I mean—my nerves won't stand any more."

"Didn't know you had nerves," laughed Alf. "What's happened, Helena?"

"Wun Sing has disappeared."

"W-h-a-t?"

"It is true. He has gone, nobody knows where. There's a man from the Barracks, the one who does the cooking over there, getting breakfast. Captain Lem is flying around in a terrible state of mind. He's angry with you boys, says there'll be neither drill nor rifle practice to-day, but the horses *must* be groomed just as soon as we get our breakfasts. He's sent a half-dozen men looking for the cook, now, and they expect to find him soon."

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"So they did Jim! Seems if there wasn't anything doing on this ranch but just getting lost," wailed Alf, turning a little pale; while Molly nervously begged:

"Somebody tie me fast! Tie me fast! It'll break my father's heart if I get lost, too!"

Captain Lem came up at that moment. He looked so stern and unlike himself that the young folks were all of them awed by his manner. Even light hearted Monty slunk back, "shaking in his shoes," while Leslie dropped his eyes and lost all his bravado.

"Hark to me, Squad! Every mortal son an' gal of ye! I'm riled—I'm mad. Here am I left in charge, so to speak, of your doin's, and of the work on the ranch, anyways. Your smart-aleck work has turned everything topsy-turvy. Men took from their reg'lar jobs to go hunt worthless Chinamen, and take his place a-cookin'. Hens dyin' to right an' left—pizen'd by some your doses, likely—"

"Oh, no! Captain, I'm sure nobody would do such a cruel thing as poison helpless creatures!" protested Dorothy, running to clasp his hand.

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He had on his "specs," which they had already learned he used mostly when he was angry, and they were very glittering just then. But Dorothy would not be put aside. She clung to him till his mood softened and removing the menacing "specs," dropped them in his blouse pocket. Then he smiled upon her, rather shamefacedly, though he felt that he still had good cause for offence.

"Well, Little One, you've got ways to win a feller, 'spite of himself. If they was all as good as you—"

"Oh! they are, and even lots better! 'Twas just lads' foolishness that they mistook for smartness. And they, we, all of us will do all we can to help. Where can we look for Wunny? He's the first one to be thought of. And I'm sorry he was so scared. Also, he'll be sorry himself over the poor hen. What can I do?"

"Go along an' eat what breakfast you can get. Then tend to your horses. Likely, they're hungrier 'n you are and I'll go see 't they're fed. But hear me! Not another mite o' foolin' with serious things till Dan Ford gets back an' takes the reins into his own hands. 'Twas the mercy of Providence—nothin' else—that that jabberin' shallow-pate Mateo wasn't killed plumb out. Silent Pete's used to grizzlies. He's used to *killin'* 'em. It's his trade, a deal more 'n 'tis to tend horseflesh. I wouldn't like to stand as nigh hand to his gun as that Greaser did last night. Now, hurry up and eat. Then report for duty. I'm off to mine."

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"Where do you suppose Wun Sing is?" asked Helena, of anybody who chose to answer.

Nobody did: it may be stated right here that he was never again seen at San Leon. The "bewitched dead fowl" was duly buried in her own courtyard, the little gate to this locked, and its key hung up in the cook's wall-cupboard. But Wun Sing came no more. Everything belonging to him was left as if he meant to return at any minute, but he did not come.

They searched the pebbly bottom of the lake, thinking he might have drowned himself in his superstitious fear, but he was not there: and after days had been wasted in the fruitless search, Captain Lem had his belongings packed together and sent to his relative, Der Doo, in San Diego. Whence, at the very end of the summer word came back that he had reappeared in that city, a wreck of himself, but it was hoped that with time and good Chinese cooking he would recover his scattered wits and his own culinary skill.

Meanwhile, many messages came from the travellers in the east. The expected old aunt had duly arrived but in no fit condition to travel further for the present. Gray Lady sent dearest love and hoped all her big, new family would find San Leon the happiest place in the world, and the most peaceful. She had lived long enough to understand that peace and harmony were the most precious things in life. She longed to be with them and would be as soon as it was right. Meanwhile, let all be patient as possible over her enforced absence and just feel that she was with them in spirit all the time.

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“Odd, isn’t it? That she who so longed to have this home and so enjoyed it should have to leave it to us, a lot of strange youngsters, to use instead?” said Helena, one evening some time later, as they all had gathered about the fountain in the soft sunset light, to talk over happenings and plan things for the coming day.

Since the escapade of the false bear hunt there had been a notable absence of pranks. An ominous peace had settled over the whole young company, remarked by the astute Captain Lem as the “‘ca’m before a storm.’ ‘Tain’t in natur’ for ‘em to be so demure an’ tractable. No siree. They’ve ‘tended to their groomin’ like reg’lar saints, an’ they’ve learned to drill amazin’ well. They don’t shoot none to hurt, yet, ‘ceptin’ that Leslie himself. Sence he’s waked up an’ took an interest he’s done fine. He’s the best o’ the lot and his knowin’ that is what inspires him to do better yet. That, an’ hopin’ to please the Boss. But—I hope the storm’ll blow over—the one they’re brewin’. And I wonder what in creation ever did become o’ that first boy, or of Wunny.”

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For as yet no news had come of the latter and the former had almost dropped out of thought—save now and then in Alfy’s, and always in faithful Dorothy’s.

Now that they were better riders and had become what their teacher called “pals” with their horses, they were daily given larger liberty. In company with him, and sometimes without him, they rode long distances over the roads, the narrow trails, and the almost imperceptible paths which led over the mountains and through the forests.

The wild flowers of Colorado are innumerable, almost, and most of them were new to Dorothy, the flower-lover. In search of these she was tireless and many hours were spent after her return from her rides, in pressing her “specimens” and preparing herbariums. In this delightful work she had the company and help of Dr. Jones, himself a well-read and enthusiastic botanist.

Helena spent hours over her journal: “taking notes” for future literary labors. Alfy and Molly were content to do nothing save be happy. As Alfy expressed it:

“I never was so lazy and I likely never will have a chance to be again. I can work when I have to and I can play just as hard.”

The lads fished, rode, hunted small game, and tried various feats of horsemanship, lariat casting, and even—when they were especially energetic, played ball. There was a fairly good team among the ranchmen and they entered into the sport with vim. Only Leslie found the exercise too violent and was content to lounge and watch the rest.

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This evening, sitting together so cosily, the peace of the beautiful scene gradually soothed them all to quiet. They had settled the plans for the morrow and were as happy as such care-free children could be. Helena picked up her guitar and played soft melodies upon it, the others humming them under their breaths—not to disturb the player, only Alfy presuming to fit real words to the music but not interfering with it.

Suddenly Dorothy raised her eyes from the playing fountain, on which she had been dreamily gazing and thinking of lost Jim. A sound, faint, of horses’ footfalls had entered her dream. With a silent gesture of alarm she sprang to her feet, staring with wide eyes at a company of Indians ascending the hill. They avoided the hard driveway, their horses treading with velvety softness upon the shaven lawn. They were many in number, twenty perhaps, and they were in gala dress. Head-dresses of eagles’ feathers, gaily colored, hung from their crowns over the sides of their mounts, to the length of a man’s height. They uttered no sounds, looked neither to the right nor left, but like a dreadful, phantom procession moved straight forward toward the fountain.

A TRIP TO BALD EAGLE ROCK

Molly gave one glance and screamed. Then flung herself to her knees and buried her face in Helena's lap, who pityingly drew her light skirt over the child's head. Nobody else moved nor spoke. All felt their last hour had come.

"An Indian raid!"

This was their thought and then of their helplessness. This company was only the forerunner of more!

"Massacre! Oh! to die like this!"

Even the lads' faces blanched, but resolution flashed from their observant eyes, and these beheld a strange spectacle.

The superbly mounted Indians, in their gaudiest attire, bead-decked shirts and fringed leggings, their supple feet clad in embroidered moccasins, outshone even the most magnificent of "Wild West" shows; and without a spoken word each understood the desire of their Chief. They rode to the semi-circle of concrete before the main entrance to the great house and ranged themselves around it, the Chief in front, alone, and as the last hoof fell into position where the rider wished, they became as rigid as a company of warriors carved in stone.

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"What will they do next!" was the wonder in all the observers' minds, as they gazed in fascination at this curious sight.

What they would do next seemed long in coming. Though it was but a few moments it seemed like ages while the redskins waited, stolid, immovable before the doorway of the mansion. But, at last, the spell was broken.

Across from the Barracks, around the corner, through the cloistered walk, came Captain Lemuel, whistling. He was in good spirits; ready to join his "Squad" beside the fountain and have an evening's "gabble" with the youngsters. They had been abnormally good that day. Wholly obedient to his restrictions in the length of their rides, eager to improve in their shooting—which was so far removed from "sharp"; and in every respect so "decent" that he puzzled his brain to find the best story to tell them of old days in Colorado and of his own prowess therein.

But, as he passed the corner, his whistling ceased. The story was told! And a far better one than any his memory could furnish.

The young watchers caught their breath. Poor Captain Lem! Rushing thus to his own undoing! But still they had to gaze and gaze—they could not turn their eyes away; and gazing they beheld a stranger thing than any which had gone before.

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That was the jolly Captain clapping his hands as if in glee, bowing before the silent Chief, almost prostrating himself, in fact. Afterward a brief clasping of hands between the two and the Captain beginning a long harangue in a strange tongue, interrupted now and then by grunts and gutturals from the attentive Indians. Then giving the Chief his finest military salute, the Captain "right faced" and silently marched away. The Indians as silently followed him, the Chief first, and the others in single file, till they all disappeared toward the Barracks, and the youngsters were left gasping in amazement.

A sigh of relief rose from them in unison and, hearing it, Molly lifted her face. She only had seen nothing of the pantomime, or such it seemed which had been enacted, though she had heard through her terror the whistling of the Captain and its abrupt ceasing.

"Is—is—he—dead?" she whispered.

"He's the liveliest dead man I ever saw. Come on, boys! That's the sight of our lives! Who's afraid?" cried Herbert, springing up and eager.

But his sister clutched his arm. "No, no, Bert! You mustn't! You shan't!"

"I shall and will! So should you—all! Whoever they are they're friendly. Else old Lem wouldn't have seemed so pleased and led 'em off with his best 'hep, hep, hep,' that way. I'll bet they're Utes, good neighbors of the white ranchers, but they're genuine Indians all the same and I'm going to see them. My! But I did feel mighty weak in the knees for a minute! I thought it was all up with yours truly. Come on, I say!"

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He really wished to follow but, evidently, he also wished to have his courage bolstered by the presence of his mates.

Oddly enough it was Monty who first joined Herbert. He was still half afraid, yet also wild with curiosity. His was the least war-like spirit there, but he couldn't withstand this knowledge at first hand of real, live Indians.

One after another they all followed. In any case they would be safer among the ranchmen than here in this lonelier spot, and Lemuel's manner had been quite different from fear.

As they slowly passed around the house, whose corner hid the Barracks front view, they were wholly reassured. The lawn was wide and a good distance was still between them and the red-skinned visitors, but they could see all that was going on. The Indians had all dismounted, a lot of the cowboys had come forward to meet them, and the fine horses they rode were being led off to a still more distant and disused corral. Here the animals were turned loose, their blankets and trappings removed, and the ranchmen themselves at once setting to work to rub the fine creatures down and to supply them with ample fodder for the night. A big trough in the corral, through which running water was always piped furnished them with drink; and the entrance being secured, the attendants went back to the Barracks' porch, that extended from one end to the other of the long, low building.

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Upon the porch floor the blankets were spread and the Utes squatted on them, greatly pleased at their reception. Pipes were lighted and smoked, Captain Lem and several others joining in what looked to be a ceremony of welcome. A few of the ranchmen hurried to the Barracks' kitchen and prepared supper for the visitors, and after this was eaten by the strange guests, sitting where they were under the porch roof, the discarded pipes were again resumed and some sort of palaver followed.

In this talk Silent Peter took the leading part. He was escorted by Captain Lem to the side of the Chief, none other than White Feather, and placed upon another blanket, handed a fresh pipe, and left to do the honors of the occasion. Meantime Captain Lem sent a messenger across to the watching youngsters, that they should come quietly to his own room at the Barracks and observe matters from that nearer point.

"But—is it safe? What does it all mean?" demanded Leslie of the man.

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"Safe as can be. Why, that's White Feather, Chief of a band of Utes and one of the best friends your father has. Fact. He's awful disappointed, too, to find the Boss away. Came on a visit of ceremony, with the finest bucks in his band, to get acquainted and do a little horse-trading. That's all. Silent Pete can talk Injun and has travelled not a little with this crowd, afore he settled at San Leon. Huh! Did you think they was from the Plains?"

"What's the difference? An Indian is an Indian, isn't he? Not to be trusted, any of them. I don't think my father would like to have the boys treat those fellows as they're doing. You men ought to arm yourselves and drive them off the ranch."

The young ranchman regarded Leslie with a look of amused contempt, then retorted:

"Well, you may be a rich man's son but what you don't know about your own country'd fill books! All the rest afraid, too? 'Cause if you are, you'd better get out o' sight. Captain Lem has asked White Feather to let him bring you over to meet him an' the old feller's said yes. He said it as if he hated to but was willin' for Lem's sake to do you the honor. Great Scott! Why, you young idiot, White Feather's a great Chief, a king among his people, feels he ranks with our President, or the Czar of all the Russias! Well,—well, I'm beat. I thought 't they had schools back east where you tenderfeet come from. I supposed you'd learned that there's more 'n one kind of Indian in this big country. Why, sir, the difference 'twixt the Arapahoes, or the Cheyennes, and them peaceable Utes yonder—humph! Well, are you comin' or not?"

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Leslie had resented the talkative ranchman's comments on his own ignorance but had the grace to conceal it. He had even jested a little at his own expense and said that he must "read up on Indians." Then he led off his party toward the Barracks and, arrived there, found Captain Lem vastly relieved. It was greatly to Mr. Ford's advantage to be on cordial terms with all his neighbors, in that isolated region, and the loyal Captain realized this. Both he and Silent Pete had to regret the fact that, at present and in their employer's absence, they could not venture on the trading; but at the old hunter's suggestion they had assumed the responsibility of giving White Feather the finest horse in stock. This was a magnificent black stallion which had never been broken to harness and with a temper that threatened ill to any man who undertook the task.

The youngsters came up and filed before White Feather, standing now, and gravely accepting their timidly proffered hands, as the name of each was mentioned. His own

response was a friendly grunt but he was evidently bored by the affair and passed the girls over with the slightest notice. His eye lingered a bit longer upon the lads and it seemed that he was measuring their heights with his eye. But he let them go, almost as soon as he had the girls, and as Molly exclaimed when they had retreated to Captain Lem's room:

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"I never felt I was such a litty-bitty-no-account creature in all my life! I wouldn't be an Indian squaw for anything! But wasn't he just grand—and hideous?"

Then Captain signalled to them that they would better return to the house. The Chief evidently considered the presence of females an intrusion and that of such slender, white-faced lads but little better. Upon Leslie, as son of the ranch owner, he bestowed several grave stares but no more speech than on the others.

So from the unlighted music-room they watched for a time in silence; till everything grew quiet at the Barracks, all lights out, and the strange guests asleep on their blankets upon the porch. Then they, too, went to bed, greatly stirred by the fact of such uncommon acquaintances so close at hand, and with entirely new ideas of Colorado red men.

By daylight the visitors had gone, so silently that nobody in the house itself had heard their departure. With them, too, had gone Rob Roy, the black stallion; and, what seemed valueless to the givers some old garments of the ranchmen. From one a coat, another a sombrero, a blanket, shoes, underwear, and from Silent Pete himself a complete hunter's outfit.

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All his comrades were surprised at this, for he kept the buckskin suit as a souvenir of earlier days, when he was as free to roam the forests as any Indian of them all and the blood still ran hot and wild in his veins. He was an old man now. He pondered much on the past and he spoke little to any man. But he talked with the Chief in that warrior's own tongue and in tones not to be overheard by any others. When that bit of talk was over he had brought out the precious suit, neatly folded and bound about with a marvellous lariat—also another dear possession—and had placed them in White Feather's hands.

Then he relapsed into his usual quiet and the life at San Leon resumed its usual routine. The visit of the Indians became as a dream, but news of the early return of the absent hosts sent new life and ambition into the minds of all their young guests.

Drills no longer were irksome. Were they not to show Mr. Ford how well they could carry themselves? As for rifle practice, there was such prolonged and continual popping of guns that Dr. Jones lamented his disturbed quiet and Nurse Melton had often to seek the most remote quarters to escape the startling sounds.

Riding, also, was kept up with great zest. It had proved true that the more one learned of his horse, the better he loved it, the greater the silent understanding between it and himself. They now had races of all sorts and daily. Hurdles had given place to great hedges and ditches, which most of the animals distinguished themselves in leaping. Monty was still the hindmost in everything, yet showed his pluck in sticking to his saddle at all risks, and sometimes with startling success.

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So well, indeed, had they learned horsemanship that on a certain glorious morning before sunrise, the seven youngsters were already in saddle, alert for the long-coveted ride to Bald Eagle Rock, under the guidance of Captain Lem himself, with Silent Pete and another ranchman to carry the luncheon upon two soberer steeds. It was to be an all-day's outing and a goodly little company which would enjoy it. As soon as possible after arrival in New York Mrs. Ford had procured and sent back to San Leon, readymade habits and riding clothes for her girls and boys, not forgetting to include one for absent Jim, which Dorothy had carefully placed along with his other belongings in his own room; so that now arrayed in these gifts they all looked fine and fit.

"We might be going for a ride in the Park instead of a climb through woods and over rocks! I do hope we won't tear our clothes!" said careful Helena; while Molly returned with native carelessness:

"Well, I think a ride to the top of the Rockies is worth at least one habit!"

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"I shan't spoil mine, not 'nless I get tumbled off Blanca, someway. I've got dozens of safety-pins and I shall pin my skirt—I mean drawers—whatever they call these 'divided' things—so tight they can't get torn. I never had a habit before. Course not. I never even had a horse," said Alfaretta.

"Well, without the horse you wouldn't have needed the habit, dearie. But I do like this riding astride, as Lady Gray thought best we should do on hard trips. And aren't we happy? Only—only—if poor Jim was here!" answered Dorothy, with a little cry of delight that ended

rather drearily.

But now they were off! And no further thought of anything or anybody except the pleasure of the moment rose in any mind.

Captain Lem had not over-rated the difficulties of that trip. The beginning was fairly easy, the road or trail wide enough for two to ride side by side, and one had leisure to admire the surroundings. But when they came to that same turn of the roads, beyond the river, and took the route which unhappy James had followed in his delirium, they could no longer travel in pairs.

And now was proved the good judgment of Captain Lem in training them to a familiar knowledge of their horses and in their close friendship.

"Guide 'em—point out the way you want 'em to go—then trust the creatur's to do the best for them and you!" advised the old sharpshooter, halting at the top of the first steep climb, to breathe his own horse and let the stragglers come up. "More 'n that you can't maybe all follow just the same track. Blanca there, is goin' to pick her way, cautious an' careful as a gal in a nice new white frock, like them the Little One wears. She ain't goin' to tear her white dress, Alfaretty, so don't you get scared if she falls a good ways behind the rest. She's a sociable beast, is Blanca, and she'll get to the top all right, give her time. But Dolly's calico'll nigh bust herself to be first. More 'n that she's the keenest nose for a shortcut of any horse in the batch. She's little and she's light, and she'll trust herself in places 't no bigger creatur' would tackle. All right, everybody? Girths tight? Stirrups to suit? Then—trust your horses' wits and—let her go!" [Pg 246]

It had been planned to have lunch on the Rock itself, and to be back at San Leon in time for a late supper. An early breakfast had been taken, of course, but not with the usual heartiness, for they were all too excited to eat. Bald Eagle Rock was the highest point in that region and it would be a fine thing to remember if they held out to reach its summit.

Meanwhile the road thither lay through a deep forest; down and along ravines; steep climbs of slippery rocks; and over masses of ferns and underbrush. After Captain Lem's halt and harangue they all became silent. They had all they could do to keep in their saddles, and, as he had prophesied, the animals they rode chose each a slightly diverging route. [Pg 247]

However, they frequently called out to one another, their gay halloos and yodels echoing along the mountain side, to the glad assurance of themselves and the affright of the forest wildings. But the lads who had hoped to sight some big game, preferably a live grizzly and had brought their guns with them, were disappointed in that. Nothing fiercer than a coyote crossed their path. It was as if the forest had anticipated their invasion and put itself on guard.

Dorothy obeyed Captain Lem's advice implicitly. She did not try to guide Zaraza but let the pretty creature follow her own will, so long as that will pointed straight upward. This gave the girl time to study the flowers and ferns along the way and sometimes she slipped from her saddle to gather and closely inspect them. She did not herself call out but contented herself with listening to the shouts of the others, and, for some reason, her thoughts were more upon the missing Jim than they had been of late.

"Oh! how that boy would like this ride! How he'd pull out his little hammer and peg away at these wonderful rocks! What specimens he'd collect! and how his sharp eyes would see every little bird and beast that moves through this wilderness! Oh! I hope, I hope, he is still alive and safe. If I could only see him!" [Pg 248]

Suddenly, the forest seemed strangely still. Zaraza stopped to breathe and Dorothy listened keenly for the halloo of her mates. Hearing none she ventured on a little shout herself which, low as it was, awoke a thousand deafening echoes all about her. Or so it seemed. With a thrill of horror, she remembered how Molly had once been lost in a far away Nova Scotian wood, and the girl's description of her terror. She wished she hadn't thought of that tale now. But, of course, this was quite different. They were many in this company, ten all told, and somebody must be very near. It would all come right. She mustn't be a goose and get frightened just because, for a moment, she heard nobody. Yet, Alf's words rang in her head:

"Seems if there was nothing happens but somebody gets lost up here at San Leon!" and Molly's absurd appeal: "Tie me tight!"

After a moment when Zaraza seemed rested she urged the docile creature forward, and now the "calico" had certainly discovered a smooth and easy way. That was good. It must be a well-traveled road, though it was still but a "trail" to her eyes. Probably this was the final stretch of the trip, and in a moment she would come face to face with the gigantic

Rock.

Instead, the way grew smoother all the time and now quite level. A little way farther she could see a wide plain, or mesa, with sheep grazing. How odd! that anybody should feed sheep upon a mountain that looked all rock and forest, seen from below. The sun was hot. It must be noon. She hoped she wouldn't be late for that famous lunch they had talked about so much.

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Zaraza trotted around a last clump of trees, as if she knew her task was ended, and her own feeding time at hand.

Then Dorothy brought her up with a sharp, silent tug upon the reins. Yonder in that open space was a small hut, or cabin; and sitting on the ground before it was an Indian, with a little Indian child beside him. Evidently, they also were having a mid-day meal, for she saw the child lift a tin dipper to his lips and drink.

Zaraza whinnied. She was thirsty and scented water, and at that sound the man sprang up and turned around. For one astonished moment he gazed at that girlish apparition and Dorothy at him. Then with a cry of ecstasy she sprang to the ground and sped toward him.

"Jim! O Jim!"

"Why—Dorothy!"

CHAPTER XVI

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PROSPERITY AND PARTING

They were both so excited that at first they couldn't talk, but could only stare at each other in speechless delight. Jim was trembling, for he was still weak from his long illness, and he steadied himself by attentions to Zaraza and by bidding José in Spanish to bring the stranger a drink.

Dorothy dropped down upon the stones where they had been sitting and watched the child.

He did not now dip water from the tank at the cabin door but from a nearby spring, which Jim had found and cleared of rubbish. The spring had always been there; but it had been easier for lazy Alaric, the herder, to fill the barrel now and then—or let the rain do it for him—and use from that till the supply failed. He did not yet understand how the stagnant water had had anything to do with his own fever, that had followed on Jim's partial recovery.

Children are quick witted. José came running back with the dipper, after having carefully rinsed and filled it at the spring, as Jim had taught him. His eyes were bright and there was a winning smile on his chubby face, now clean. He recognized Dorothy as the girl to whom he had given his pet lamb and promptly demanded:

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"El cordero? Donde?"

Dorothy stared at him, then put her hands on each side his chubby face and kissed him. The child screamed with delight and repeated his question. At which the girl also laughed and turned to Jim, asking:

"What does he say? What does he want?"

"I reckon he wants his lamb. He's asking you where it is," answered the lad, gladly using this chance to air his own new knowledge.

That broke the spell of not knowing how to begin and their loosened tongues wagged fast enough after that. Dorothy forgot all about her lost company and seizing a piece of the coarse bread her old friend had been eating devoured it as if it had been a great delicacy.

Jim laughed, glad to see her so hungry and so eager, and obeyed her command:

"Now begin just as we used to do at home at Deerhurst. 'I went from here' and don't you miss a single thing until you come to 'and here I am.' I'll help you start. You went from San Leon the very night you got there. Now why?"

"I shall never know why, girlie. I was crazy with fever, I guess. I hadn't been real well before I came west and that was one reason Dr. Sterling made me come. He thought the change would cure me. It didn't. I must have got out the window but I don't really know,

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only I half remember that. Then the next thing I did know I was in Alaric's cabin yonder with him and little José here. I was pretty sick. I couldn't write but I was wild to tell you where I was and not to worry nor think me terrible mean. I didn't want to act that way, you know, even though I did find myself in the wrong box with those other rich boys—"

"No such thing, Jim Barlow! That was all your own self-consciousness. They're the nicest boys in the world and the friendliest. And it seems you can remember some things—bad ones—even if not how you ran away and got away up here to this peak. Jim, I'm ashamed of you. I certainly am!"

But the way in which she reached out and clasped his hand in both of hers disarmed the words of all offence. Jim threw back his head and laughed as he hadn't done in many a day. It was just glorious to be scolded again by his old comrade! It was so homelike that he felt "more himself" than any softer speech would have made him.

"Well, go on! Do go on!"

"Alaric isn't half bad. I reckon I'd have died but for him. An old Indian chief, of the Utes, White Feather Alaric called him—his brother-in-law—"

"Oh! I'm well acquainted with him. Don't stop to tell that part, but just do go on."

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Jim stared and retorted:

"Oh! you are, eh? But I've got to tell about him 'cause it was he who found me and brought me here. Picked me up on the road somewhere. I've had a suspicion—just a suspicion, don't you know?—that Alaric wasn't any too glad to see me. It's a mighty little house and he's a mighty lazy man. But he had to do it. He's afraid of White Feather, though I tell you, Dolly Doodles, he's a splendid Indian. If all red men were like him—"

"I don't care at all about Indians. Go on."

"Alaric dressed my arm with leaves and stuff and fed me the best he could, but after I'd got that basket sent to you with the lamb and the stones—Did you get it? Did you understand?"

"Yes, I understood—part. I knew that only Jim Barlow could make such a curious D as was on the stone and the basket. I supposed you were alive somewhere and I tried to think you were all right. By the way, the lambkin is thriving and we've named it after you—Netty!"

"What? Why Netty, if you please?"

Dorothy laughed and explained. She was ready now to laugh at anything and so was he: she made him finish his story, which he promptly did.

After he had sent the basket-message he had grown worse. He was delirious and did not know what went on about him. He thought it was the bad water from the old tank that increased his fever, and was sure it was that which had made the sheep herder himself fall ill. So before his strength came back he had to turn nurse himself and attend upon Alaric. He had now recovered enough to go away to his employer's ranch for a few days. Meanwhile Jim was keeping the sheep for his host with little José for company.

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Dorothy listened, asking questions now and then, and finally inquired:

"Is this Alaric an Indian?"

"No. A Mexican, a Greaser. He married an Indian princess, the sister of White Feather."

"How came you by that Indian rig? costume, I mean."

Jim laughed. "White Feather again. At first I hadn't anything to wear but a ragged pair of trousers which Alaric lent me, though he hated to, and a blanket for a coat. But a few days ago White Feather and his braves came this way again. He brought quite a collection of old duds and gave 'em to Alaric. That paid him for what he'd lent me, I guess. And some of White Feather's folks have always given little José his Indian fixings, too. Else—Well, he wouldn't have had much to wear. Ain't he cute?"

"Indeed, he is. Looks exactly like a tiny White Feather himself. The dear!" answered Dorothy, helping herself to another piece of bread and breaking it in bits to feed the child, who smiled and swallowed in great glee. "But your suit? You haven't told about that yet."

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"Isn't it fine? I begin to feel like a red man myself, wearing it. White Feather gave this to me with his own hands. It looks as if it had been worn a long time but it's a mighty comfortable rig, especially after a fellow's had—nothing at all."

Then Dorothy talked, her words fairly tumbling over each other in her haste to tell all that

had happened at San Leon while he was gone. She ended with the question:

"Will you go back with me now, Jim? or with all of us, when we find them! My heart! How glad, how glad they'll be!"

Jim shook his head.

"I can't, Dolly, not yet. I've got to stay till Alaric comes. Nobody knows when that'll be, he's so lazy; and so sure now that I'll do his work for him. Besides—I've got something on my mind. Even if—even if—Well, I shan't go back to San Leon till I take a peace offering with me. I think—anyway I hope—I've—No matter. Where are the others, do you think? How did you get so far away from 'em, alone?"

"I don't know. But I wish—I wish they'd come. Ah! Hark!"

Dorothy stood up and listened. They could hear a horse moving somewhere, the dull thud of hoofs on soft ground, and a whinny of recognition to Zaraza feeding near. A moment later Silent Pete came into sight, and in another moment had dismounted beside them. [Pg 256]

He hadn't a word to say but stared at Jim with what would seem reproach except for a kindly gleam in his blue eyes. Up and down the lad's tall form the old man's eyes roved many times and then he gave one of his rare laughs.

"Fits good, hey?"

"First class! Did you ever wear an Indian costume?" asked Jim.

"Huh! I've wore that one more years 'n you're old," said the ex-hunter, and sitting down helped himself to the bread.

Perhaps the man had never talked so freely as he did now. Of hunting, of savage fights, and of mining—of anything and everything connected with Colorado's past as he had known it. Because he had never had such interested listeners. Jim's eyes shone, and when the subject touched on mining, he got up and went into the shack, coming back a moment later with some bits of stones lying on his palm. He held these out to Silent Pete who accepted them with sudden interest. Until he finally exclaimed:

"Glory! Where?"

Jim walked a little distance from that point of the mesa and the others followed him wondering. Then digging away some earth from the small hillock where he had paused, pointed downward. [Pg 257]

Silent Pete gazed without speaking for a full moment. Then he stooped and gathered a few fragments of insignificant stone, while Dorothy watched him wondering. Presently the hunter looked up—his face transformed—the brilliancy of youth restored to his faded eyes.

"Silver! by gum! And—and—*all the land this side that shack belongs to San Leon!* Of all the dum luck—Let's go home! Let's go home!"

He couldn't move fast enough. The youngsters followed him at an equal pace so excited that they scarcely knew what they were doing. Jim had found silver! Jim had discovered a mine! This meant untold wealth to their beloved host!

There was no thought in their minds of a possible mistake. It could not be. It was all as clear as daylight to Dorothy, whose reverent heart always traced "leadings" in that chain of events which we call life.

Jim had been "led" to all and through all that had happened. If he hadn't wandered here—no use thinking about that. He *had* wandered, he *had* found the silver, it *had* been ordered, even the pain and suffering and grief. Oh! to get back to where they could send the good news flying to the absent owner of San Leon!

"Let's go home!" cried the girl, running to the Zaraza's side and trying to saddle her. [Pg 258]

But Jim would not let her do that, though he did not seek to hinder her from going, and when she had sprung to her seat upon the filly's back, he held out his hand, saying:

"I'll come soon's I can, Dolly Doodles! This is a big day for me!"

"Why—why—aren't you coming too? You can ride part of the way and I part."

"No, girlie. I promised Alaric I'd take care of José and the sheep. I've got to—duty, you know."

"Oh! Duty! I hate duty! Oh! Jim, you ought to be the one, the very one to carry the good

news straight to 'Boss Dan!' It should be you to send this glorious message!"

But Jim shook his stubborn head.

"I'd like to—shucks! But I ain't never seen how neglectin' the duty 't lies to hand helps a fellow to do the one 't is further off. It's all right, Dolly. You speed the good word and watch out for Jim. He'll be coming—sure. Good-by—good-by."

Meanwhile Peter had placed the lunch baskets on the ground, leaving them for Jim and the child.

Not until they had passed out of sight and were well on the downward trail did Dorothy remember her absent mates and to ask how Silent Pete had chanced to find her. He scarcely paused to reply; for though he spoke no word, except to answer her questions, he was fairly quivering with excitement. It isn't every day one stumbles on a silver mine, even in Colorado!

[Pg 259]

"Oh! I saw where you'd passed by the trompled brush. I knew the calico's tread. I saw 't you was off the line an' I blazed that so's the rest'd see and not get scared. We shan't see no more o' them till nightfall, only you an' me—we must get home. Don't waste breath talkin'—*just travel.*"

Travel they did and, their own dispatches sent from San Leon, another came flashing back—crossed each other on the way, so to speak.

"Reach the ranch to-morrow. D. F."

Well, this story is about told. Such a wonderful home-coming that was! Messengers had been quickly sent to the sheep herder's hut to act as substitutes for Jim in his "duty" and to bring him and José "home," where he found himself welcomed as a hero—he who had thought himself despised.

Thus was discovered the famous "Bygum Mine," so named for the first words uttered by Silent Pete, when Jim showed him the site. Those who remember the energy of "Dan Ford, Railroad Boss" will understand how promptly matters were set in motion for the opening of "Bygum;" and those who know his generosity will guess how he made each young guest a sharer, to some degree, in this fresh prosperity. All except Jim Barlow: for that too independent youth promptly refused any further benefit from his great discovery than a simple "Thank you." How that refusal affected the lad's pursuit of "knowledge" will be told in another story of "Dorothy's House Boat," upon which, a few weeks later, he had to "work his passage."

[Pg 260]

But now, with Lady Gray's dear presence among them and the master's hand at the helm, there was nothing but happiness for all at San Leon: until, all suddenly it seemed, the three months of their stay had passed and the parting came. If there was sadness in their hearts that morning, when they mounted the buckboards for their journey back to Denver, there was also anticipation and delight; for, to quote the words of their genial host:

"The world is but a little place. We have met and loved each other—we shall meet and love again."

THE END

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Minor changes have been made to correct typesetters' errors; otherwise, every effort has been made to remain true to the author's words and intent.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DOROTHY ON A RANCH ***

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