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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JANET HARDY IN RADIO CITY \*\*\*

## JANET HARDY IN RADIO CITY

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### JANET HARDY IN RADIO CITY

BY  
Ruthe S. Wheeler

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CHICAGO

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## Janet Hardy in Radio City

13

### JANET GETS THE LEAD

#### *Chapter One*

Janet Hardy stirred sleepily as the alarm clock sounded its lusty summons and it was only after a real effort that she managed to reach out and shut off the insistent clock.

It was so early that shadows of the night still lurked in the corners and Janet squinted at the clock through sleep-clogged eyes. It was four-forty a.m.

Sitting up in bed she looked across the room where Helen Thorne was deep in sleep, oblivious to the strident summons of the alarm which had echoed through their bedroom.

Janet, now thoroughly awake, tossed her pillow at the slumbering Helen. She scored a perfect hit and Helen, sputtering and wondering what it was all about, popped up in bed.

"Come on, sleepy head. It's time to be up and dressing if we're going to get to the studio in time for that six o'clock call," warned Janet.

"I'll beat you to the shower," promised Helen. She jumped out of bed and grabbed the dressing gown on a nearby chair. There was a rush of feet padding down the hall and Helen made good her promise, reaching the shower room two jumps ahead of Janet.

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Fifteen minutes later, after brisk showers and thorough towelings, they were dressed. From the kitchen had come waftings of delicious bacon and eggs and they knew that George, the colored cook, was getting breakfast.

When they reached the dining room they were surprised to find Helen's father there, a morning paper propped in front of him.

Henry Thorne, world famous as the star director of motion pictures for the Ace Motion Picture Corp., looked up.

"An early call?" he asked.

"Billy Fenstow is starting to shoot his new western, 'Water Hole,' and we don't want to be late the first morning," explained Helen, slipping into her chair while Janet sat down opposite her. George, smiling a greeting, brought in a large platter of bacon and eggs. Then there were tall glasses of cold milk and thin, deliciously buttered toast.

"I didn't think you'd be up so early, Dad," said Helen, between mouthfuls of bacon.

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"Guess I went to bed too early," smiled her father. "I've been awake an hour."

"You were all tired out after finishing 'Kings of the Air,'" went on Helen and her father nodded his agreement.

Janet, on the other side of the table, said nothing, but thought a great deal. She had never quite gotten over the thrill of coming to Hollywood and the manner in which it had been accomplished. It seemed too much like a dream and at times she went around pinching herself to make sure she wasn't asleep.

Classmates back in the medium-sized city of Clarion in the middle west, Janet and Helen had been fast friends and their families had been neighbors for years. Then Henry Thorne had made a success as a director of motion pictures, but Helen and Mrs. Thorne had remained in the family home in Clarion. Back for Helen's graduation, he had been impressed by the acting ability of Janet and Helen, as well as their charm, and their graduation presents had been round trip airplane tickets from Clarion to Hollywood. Mrs. Thorne had come along to chaperon the party and they had taken a comfortable, rambling bungalow on a side street in Hollywood where they could be assured of privacy.

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Janet could recall so vividly their first day. Pictures, interviews, attendance at a premiere in gowns designed by the famous designer who created all of the gowns for the stars of the Ace company. Then a chance to work in a western in the production unit headed by rotund little Billy Fenstow and after that small parts in "Kings of the Air," which Henry Thorne had directed as one of the outstanding pictures on his company's production program.

"What are you mooning about?" asked Helen, for Janet, her mind running back over the events of

the last crowded weeks, had ceased eating.

Janet flushed. "Just thinking of all the wonderful things that have happened since we graduated."

"I hope you won't remember the unpleasant ones you experienced while we were making 'Kings of the Air,'" said Helen's father. He was well-built, with a touch of grey hair at his temples and a smile that inspired confidence and an almost instant feeling of friendliness. 17

"I was pretty scared at the time," confessed Janet, "but now that the picture's safely completed, it's all over."

"What do you think about 'Kings'?" Helen asked her father.

He leaned back in his chair and Janet thought she saw a touch of weariness in his face.

"I don't know," he said softly. "It should be a good picture, but whether it will be a great picture is something else again. We can only wait until it's out of the cutting room."

Janet, although in a comparatively minor rôle, had been a key figure in the making of "Kings of the Air," for a rival company, attempting to hinder the progress of the picture, had hired an actress in the company, blonde Bertie Jackson, and two renegade airmen, to make every effort to slow up production. Janet had been kidnaped and held prisoner overnight while the ghost town, where the company was located, was burned and a big set on the desert bombed. But the resourcefulness of Curt Newsom, cowboy star who had a rôle in the picture, had helped expose the sabotage and Janet had been speedily released. As a result she had been promoted to Bertie Jackson's rôle and had handled it like a veteran trouper. 18

Just then George, the cook, looked in to see if more bacon and eggs were needed, and Helen's mother, in a dressing gown, joined them.

"Someone should have called me," she said.

"But you don't have to report on the lot and we do," Helen reminded her mother.

It was 5:30 o'clock when they finished breakfast.

"I'll drive you over to the lot," said Henry Thorne. "Mother, you dress while I'm away and we'll take a long drive into the mountains and stop someplace for lunch. We'll sort of have a day's vacation for ourselves."

Then they were away, speeding toward the studio in an open car. It was a glorious morning and the cool air was invigorating. Later in the day it would be uncomfortably hot.

Billy Fenstow, director of western pictures, was on stage nine, well to the back of the Ace lot.

There were few around the rambling studio at that hour, for production was past its peak and only two or three of the huge sound stages would be in use that day. 19

The director, who had only a fringe of hair around his shining pate, greeted them cordially.

"Have you read over the script of 'Water Hole'?" he asked.

Janet nodded. "I like it better than 'Broad Valley,'" she smiled.

Billy Fenstow fairly beamed. "Good. I wrote it myself. The other was only partly mine."

Helen laughed and turned to Janet. "What are you trying to do, compliment Mr. Fenstow so he'll give you the leading rôle?"

It was the director's turn to chuckle. "She doesn't have to," he said. "Janet is playing opposite Curt Newsom in the lead right now."

## *Chapter Two*

### SHOOTING ON LOCATION 20

Janet stared hard at the chubby director. It was hard to believe that Billy Fenstow would joke with her now. That would be too cruel.

"Don't you believe me, Janet?" he asked.

"It can't be possible," she murmured. "Why, I'm an unknown. You wouldn't put me into the leading rôle."

Just then Curt Newsom, the western star arrived.

"How's the new leading lady?" he asked.

"I—I don't know," gasped Janet. "I'm not sure. Everything seems to be in kind of a whirl. I guess I'll sit down."

Janet dropped into a nearby chair, oblivious of the fact that it was the cherished property of the director.

"It's grand, Janet, simply grand," exclaimed Helen. "My, but I'm proud of you."

Billy Fenstow came over to Janet.

"You needn't be so surprised," he said. 21

"Only don't let this go to your head. It doesn't take a whole lot of acting ability to be a leading lady in a western. All you've got to have is a fair amount of beauty, some brains, and the ability to keep on top of a horse."

Janet, recalling her experiences in "Broad Valley," the first picture they had appeared in, smiled a little ruefully.

"I don't know whether I'll even be able to stay on a horse," she admitted.

"Then we'll glue you into the saddle," smiled the director.

Others in the company came up. Most of them had been in the earlier picture and without exception they congratulated Janet on winning the leading rôle.

The weather was ideal and Billy Fenstow intended to make the most of it by shooting all of the exteriors possible.

Promptly at seven o'clock a large bus rolled onto the lot and the entire company, numbering some thirty-three, including the technicians, boarded the big vehicle.

Their destination was a ranch well into the foothills and it was after noon before they arrived. This particular outfit had never before been used for film purposes for it was well away from the usual run of traffic and harder to reach than some of the layouts nearer the studio.

The ranchhouse was large and comfortable and arrangements were made for all of the girls in the company to stay there while the men would be quartered in the bunkhouse with the exception of the director, who planned to drive back and forth from the nearest town.

A truck loaded with camera and sound equipment had preceded the bus and the technicians went to work to assemble their materials. The pole corral was crowded with horses and the assistant director, "Skeets" Irwin, took over the task of assigning horses to the various members of the company.

Curt Newsom had his own string, which had been brought by truck, but the others were to ride ranch horses. Janet drew a beautiful sorrel while Helen was mounted on a black with only one white foot.

There was a gorgeous sunset and Billy Fenstow, always on the alert for a good background shot, had his cameras catch some typical ranch scenes. They might not fit in with the present picture but he knew some day the footage would come in handy.

After dinner in the ranchhouse that night, Janet and Helen retired to the room they shared and studied the scripts which had been handed out.

"Water Hole" was a typical Billy Fenstow western with lots of hard riding and plenty of scenery. It was the story of Curt Newsom's defense of his small ranch with its valuable water hole against a larger cattle outfit.

Janet played the rôle of a school teacher while Helen was a waitress in the one restaurant in the little cow town to which the cowboys migrated every Saturday night. The girls were to have an important part in solving the plot to get Curt's ranch and all in all they were greatly pleased with their parts.

Janet sat down and wrote a long letter home, telling of their good fortune and of her own in particular. She paused a moment and closed her eyes. Perhaps her mother would show the letter to Pete Benda, the city editor of the *Clarion Times*. And Pete, of course, would make a story. Perhaps he would put it in the front page under a heading, "Clarion Girl Gets Leading Rôle in Western Picture." She smiled a little. That would be rather nice.

Then she awoke from her reverie and finished the letter. After that it was bedtime for there was an early call.

They were out the next morning shortly after dawn for Billy Fenstow worked his companies long and hard.

Janet was in several shots that day riding to and from the ranch to the schoolhouse and in the afternoon they went to the schoolhouse where a dozen youngsters had been gathered. Most of them were actual pupils of the little school and the cameras ground away as Janet dismissed them from a make-believe class and watched them hurry away from school toward their homes, some of them afoot and others on sturdy little cow ponies.

Helen had little to do that day, but followed every action of the company with interest.

"What do you think of it?" she asked Janet that night as they lounged on the broad verandah of the ranchhouse.

"I like it a lot," said Janet whole-heartedly. "Of course I realize I'm no actress, but the picture's good and clean and it's a consolation to be in something like that."

Helen was silent for a time.

"What do you think about our future in the movies?" she asked.

Janet pondered the question before answering, for she, too, had been wondering that very thing.

"If you want to know the truth, I think we're just about where we belong. I know I'm not a real actress. I can get by in a picture like this or in some minor rôle, but I'd never make a really top-notch actress and it would be rather heart-breaking to stay here and do this year in and year out."

"Then that means you'll go back to Clarion when summer's over?" Helen asked the question with a touch of desperate anxiety in her voice.

"I suppose so," replied Janet slowly, "for I know that I won't be especially happy here. It's been glorious fun and it still is, but it can't last forever and I'm not fooling myself about that for a minute."

They were silent for a time, wondering if the coming fall would bring an end to their close companionship. If Janet went back to Clarion, it would be only logical that Helen would stay on in Hollywood with her father and mother. The thought of parting was not a pleasant prospect to either girl.

They went to bed later without discussing the matter further, but as the shooting of "Water Hole" progressed and August drew to a close, it was constantly in their minds.

Helen's father and mother came out to visit them on location several times, but neither one of them mentioned any plans for Helen.

"Two more days of work and we'll have the picture in the can," Billy Fenstow told the company one morning. "We're right on schedule and I want to finish that way, but we've got some hard riding scenes to get out of the way."

The director turned to Janet.

"We've got to shoot that scene of your ride from town to the ranch to warn Curt that his enemies are riding to wipe out his ranch," he said. "Are you ready?"

Janet nodded and swung into the saddle of the rangy sorrel.

Billy Fenstow climbed onto the light truck which carried the cameras and Janet's horse trotted along behind as the vehicle rolled away across the valley in which the ranch was located. They went for perhaps two miles through the hills to a hamlet along a branch line railroad which had served as the cow town for the picture's locale. It was here that Janet began her ride, but before she started she looked to the cinches.

She remounted and sat easily in the saddle, waiting for the signal to start.

Billy Fenstow waved his hand and the truck started swiftly away, Janet riding hard after it. She rode with a natural litheness of her body. The light felt hat which had been crushed over her brown hair came off. She clutched at it instinctively, but missed, and kept on riding, her golden hair streaming away from her shoulders. Janet smiled to herself. At least that would give a realistic effect.

She watched the director covertly and when he motioned again she sent the sorrel racing away from the camera truck at an angle so the cameras could get a side shot. Then the truck moved ahead of her.

It was hot and dry, and anything but an easy task to ride a horse pounding along as hard as the big sorrel. Finally they topped the last hill and swept down into the valley and Janet braced herself for the last bit of action.

Curt, near the water hole, looked up when he heard the pounding hoofs and Janet hurled herself from the saddle and ran to him.

"Quick, Curt, they're riding hard behind me. You've got to get out of here. I'll stay and watch the ranch."

But Curt refused and the action was cut there.

Janet was dusty and sweaty and she walked to the pump and drank deeply of the cool, sweet water.

"I can imagine there might have been a fight over this ranch in the early days," she said.

"There was," grinned Curt, "but it wasn't nearly as big a one as we're putting into the picture."

Janet's hardest scene for the day was over and Helen was in only one or two minor shots so they passed part of the afternoon packing up their things in preparation for the departure the next afternoon.

It was nearly dinner time when a dust covered car rolled into the valley and approached the ranchhouse.

Janet and Helen, sitting on the front steps, watched it with interest which deepened as they saw an Iowa license plate on the front of the car.

"That almost looks like home," said Helen. "Why, the number's from our home county. Maybe it's someone we know."

But the sun was flashing off the windshield, effectively shielding the passengers in the car.

The machine swung to a stop a few feet away and Janet and Helen, when they saw the passengers, recognized them with mixed emotions.

### *Chapter Three*

#### SURPRISE CALLERS

The newcomers were Cora Dean and Margie Blake, classmates from Clarion, who had been Janet and Helen's chief rivals for almost every honor during their last four years in school.

"What under the sun do you suppose they want here?" asked Helen under her breath.

"We'll soon find out," retorted Janet, rising and advancing to greet Cora and Margie.

Cora was dark like Helen, while Margie's hair was almost as golden blonde as Janet's, the

difference being that Margie used drug store coloring, and Janet depended on the natural shade. "Hello Cora, hello Margie. This is a surprise," said Janet as she greeted them and Helen echoed the sentiment a minute later.

"We've been touring through the west. When we learned a company was shooting a picture out here we came on over. We didn't know until we stopped in the village that it was the company you're with." It was Cora, her tongue as sharp as ever, making the explanation. 31

Margie was taking in everything and fairly gaping at the cowboys who in their picturesque garb, were lounging nearby waiting for the gong to call them to supper.

Billy Fenstow came by and Janet called to him, introducing Cora and Margie.

"Have them stay for dinner and meet the company," said the director, who, with the film on schedule, felt particularly hospitable.

"Oh, we'd love that," gurgled Cora. "We've always wanted to see a picture being taken."

Billy Fenstow scratched his head.

"Well, we're all through for today, but if Janet and Helen could bunk double and give you one of the beds in their room, you could stay over and see the final shooting tomorrow."

"Why, that would be grand," put in Margie, "and I'm sure Janet and Helen won't mind doubling up."

There was little Janet or Helen could say, except to agree, and they helped Cora and Margie get their bags out of the car and escorted them up to the room which they occupied. 32

At dinner that night they introduced the girls to all of the members of the company who ate at the ranchhouse and Janet noted that Cora could hardly keep her eyes off tall, handsome Curt Newsom. Curt was nice to them, as he was to everybody, explaining carefully all of the questions they asked.

That night Cora asked a question that had kept her on edge all evening.

"Do you suppose we could get in one of the scenes tomorrow?" she asked Janet. "Surely you or Helen could get the director to use us just a little bit."

Janet was dubious. It was the last day at the ranch and there would be much to be done. Billy Fenstow would be in no mood for trifles such as working friends into scenes.

"If it wasn't the last day I think it could be arranged," put in Helen, "but I'd hate to ask Mr. Fenstow to do it under the circumstances."

Margie pouted visibly and Cora, always arrogant, flared up.

"Oh, of course you won't. Just because your father's a director and they have to put you in pictures you won't say a good word for anyone else. How do we know you're even in this company?" 33

"You'll have to take our word for it until you see the picture on the screen," retorted Helen.

Janet could understand the tremendous desire of Cora and Margie to appear in a scene. It was the most natural thing in the world and she felt just a little sorry for them.

"I'll speak to Mr. Fenstow in the morning," she promised. "If he's in a good mood he may find a spot for you, but if he's grouchy he'll probably order you away from the place."

"How do you know when he's grouchy?" asked Margie.

"You don't until after you've asked him," replied Janet, with a thin smile.

Cora and Margie exhibited a tremendous curiosity, asking questions about everything and from almost everyone, Cora especially plaguing Curt Newsom, until the tall cowboy star finally found an excuse to escape from her constant barrage.

It was late when they went to bed and Janet and Helen, sleeping in a narrow, single bed, did not rest well. They were awake at dawn, both of them feeling tired and worn. 34

Cora and Margie, imbued with the excitement of actually being with a movie company, appeared as vivacious as ever.

At breakfast Billy Fenstow outlined plans for the final day's shooting.

"We've got one more scene to take in the village," he explained. "It's a shot of a group of townspeople watching the arrival of Curt and the rustlers he has captured."

Impetuous Cora Dean broke in.

"May Margie and I get in the crowd scene?" she asked eagerly.

A frown appeared on Billy Fenstow's usually bland face, for he disliked greatly being interrupted when he was outlining his plans to his company.

"We'll see about it later," he said curtly, and continued with his explanation.

After breakfast Cora faced Janet.

"Too bad you couldn't have said a good word for us with your director," she flared.

"There wasn't a real good chance," replied Janet. "I warned you last night not to bother him if he wasn't in a good mood."

"But how was I to know?" complained Cora. 35

"Well, you do now," said Janet, and it was hard to keep from smiling. But she could realize how much it would mean to Cora and Margie and it would be mean of her not to help them just a little

so later she spoke to "Skeets" Irwin, the assistant director, and "Skeets" promised to get Cora and Margie into the crowd scene.

Janet and Helen were in the same scene and they changed into their costumes, Janet into a dusty riding habit and Helen into a gingham dress and the apron that was her badge as a waitress in the village's one restaurant.

The girls rode down to the village, Cora and Margie following in their own car. "Skeets" had provided them with appropriate costumes and they were so excited they could hardly talk.

Billy Fenstow was back giving instructions to the riders who were to sweep down into the village while "Skeets" handled the scene at the village.

"Don't stand around like a bunch of wooden Indians," said the assistant director. "Show some interest when those horsemen come over the hills. I want plenty of action in this scene." 36

"Keep close to us," Janet advised Cora and Margie. "All you have to do is look excited."

"That's going to be easy," smiled Margie. "I'm so nervous now I can't stay still a minute."

Final instructions were given and the cameras started grinding as a massed body of riders swept over the crest of the hills and galloped madly toward the village.

The girls, who had been in the restaurant, rushed into the street and joined the other members of the company and the villagers who had been pressed into service as extras.

It was action and good action. Janet thrilled at the magnificent riding of Curt Newsom, who rode with consummate skill and grace. He was a part of the horse he was astride and it was no effort to Janet to register extreme excitement.

The mounted men, a band of captives in the center of the group, reined in before the astonished villagers and Curt, dismounting, pulled one of the captives from his saddle and strode toward the door which was marked sheriff's office. Curt pulled the protesting rider after him, disappearing into the sheriff's office. That finished the sequence and the cameras stopped clicking. 37

It was the last of the big scenes and the rest of the day was to be spent in picking up shots to fill out the story.

"Do you suppose we looked all right?" asked Cora, who had been fitted out in a housedress and sunbonnet. Margie was similarly attired.

"I'm sure you looked your parts," Janet assured them, "but don't be too disappointed when you see the picture. There'll only be a flash of this action on the screen and the 'mob' scene won't last more than a few seconds."

"We'll see that one of the theaters at home books it," declared Margie firmly, "and maybe Pete Benda will run a story about us."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he did," agreed Janet.

They went back to the ranchhouse for lunch and Billy Fenstow beamed.

"We're ahead of schedule now. Another two hours and we'll be ready to start for the studio where we can finish up the interiors in a couple more days."

The bus which had brought them from Hollywood rolled into the valley and several of the cowboys started loading baggage and equipment aboard it. 38

Janet and Helen went upstairs, followed by Cora and Margie. Both of the latter had been hinting that they would like an invitation to stay for a time in Hollywood, but they had been so mean and small during their high school days that neither Janet nor Helen could bear the thought of entertaining them.

"Coming back to Clarion this fall?" asked Cora, her dark eyes fairly snapping as she waited eagerly for the answer to her question.

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Janet, quite truthfully.

"How about you, Helen?" It was Margie asking this time.

Helen shook her head. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Can't you stay on in pictures?" asked Cora, a tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

That nettled Janet. "If we want to," she retorted, "but neither one of us can see much of a future in being actresses in western films."

"With all of the influence your father has, you ought to be able to get into better pictures," Margie told Helen, and it was her turn to feel a mounting flood of color in her cheeks. 39

"You can leave Dad out of this. He gave us an introduction, but we've won our parts," snapped Helen.

The girls finished packing in silence and were ready to go down stairs when "Skeets" stuck his head in the door.

"Bus is all ready to start back for the city," he said, picking up Janet's and Helen's bags.

Cora and Margie took their own luggage and followed them down stairs.

"Do you think we ought to invite them to Hollywood with us?" whispered Helen.

"That's up to you," replied Janet, "for they would have to be entertained in your home."

"Well, what do you honestly think?"

Janet didn't answer at once, but as they reached the bus, she said, "I think I've had about all of

the insinuations I can stand from either one of them.”

Helen smiled. “That’s a help, for I feel the same way.” She turned toward the other girls, who were putting their baggage in their car.

“We may see you in Clarion before college starts this fall,” she said.

“Thanks for all your help,” flipped Cora, seating herself behind the wheel. “I’m sure we’ll enjoy ourselves in Hollywood. We may run into you someplace.”

She threw in the gears and the car lurched away along the dusty road that wound through the hills to the main highway some miles away.

“Wasn’t she nice and cordial?” smiled Helen as she turned back to Janet.

“Cora hasn’t changed a bit and I don’t suppose she will. What fun she could have if she’d only be a little less selfish,” said Janet.

#### *Chapter Four*

#### HIGH PRAISE

By the time everything was loaded into the bus, the sun was well down toward the western hills and the ranch was bathed in the soft, warm light of the late afternoon.

Curt Newsom, who had finished superintending the loading of his own horses into his private truck, walked over to join the girls, his spurs jingling as he walked.

“Glad it’s all over?” he asked.

Janet shook her head.

“Hardly. I’ve enjoyed it so much I really didn’t want it to end, but I guess that all good things come to an end.”

“You did a splendid job as leading woman,” smiled Curt. “I wish all of them were like you. Every once in a while the girls they assign to this unit get it into their heads that they are real actresses and they go temperamental on us. But you two worked like real troupers and took all of the bumps as they came.”

“And they came, too,” grinned Helen, rubbing her right leg, for she had slipped and fallen from a horse two days before and her leg was black and blue.

Curt was silent for a few moments, smiling at the efforts of “Skeets” to round up the last members of the company and get them aboard the big bus.

“Are you going to stay with us?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” replied Helen. “Fall’s almost here and that means college time. We’re both awfully young to stay on in pictures.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I’ve known girls younger than either one of you to make a success.”

“But they didn’t last long,” countered Janet.

“Perhaps you’re right on that,” agreed Curt. “Are you going to school?”

“I expect we’ll decide that when we get back to Hollywood and have a long talk with mother and dad,” replied Helen.

Just then Billy Fenstow hurried up, puffing and exceedingly warm.

“Everybody accounted for?” he asked his harried assistant.

“All here,” replied the red-faced “Skeets.”

“Sit down in the back seat with me,” the director told the girls. “I want to talk with you on the way back to the city.”

The last members of the company were herded aboard the bus and the girls, Curt Newsom and the director were the last to get aboard.

They sat down on the broad back seat which had been reserved for the director. The bus lurched into motion and rolled away from the ranchhouse.

Billy Fenstow mopped his perspiring brow and leaned back to enjoy the ride.

The dusty road wound through the hills, golden clouds of dust marking the passing of the bus.

They were halfway to the main highway when the motor started to cough and the big vehicle slowed to a stop.

The driver buried himself under the hood and tinkered with the engine for a few minutes. Then he climbed back into his seat and started the motor again.

They progressed for several hundred yards and finally groaned to a stop.

“Looks like we may be late in getting to dinner,” said Curt. “Sounded like serious trouble under the hood that time.”

The lanky cowboy uncoiled his legs and went out to see if he could be of any assistance to the bus driver.

Billy Fenstow, taking advantage of the stop, spoke to Janet and Helen, his voice so low that it was



doubtful if he could be overheard by any other member of the company.

"What about staying in the company for my next picture?" he asked.

"When will it start?" Janet countered.

The director mopped his brow again and grinned.

"Just as soon as I can hash together a good enough story. Two weeks, maybe three, or it might even be a month. Why?"

"We're not certain what we want to do," explained Helen. "You see, college starts next month."

"My heavens," exclaimed the director. "What under the sun do you want to go to college for? You're smart enough right now."

"That's just it; we aren't," replied Janet. "And we're terribly young, if the truth were known."

Billy Fenstow looked at them critically.

"Yep, you're young enough," he conceded, "but what's that got to do with it?"

"Well, we're nothing sensational as actresses," replied Janet, "and neither one of us would want to go along playing minor rôles for years. If we ever hope to do more than that we've got to have more of a background in education and college seems to be the easiest and surest way to attain that."

Billy Fenstow nodded in agreement.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted, "but you could stay on with me at one hundred or one hundred and fifty dollars a week for a long time."

"But how many weeks a year would we work at that rate? There wouldn't be more than twenty-five or thirty at the most and our expenses of staying on in Hollywood would become heavier."

"Now that you put it that way, you're probably right. But when you do get through college, don't forget to come back and we'll see how things go then."

The director started to get up, then sank back on the cushions.

"You helped doctor the script of 'Kings of the Air,' didn't you?" he asked Janet.

"I made a suggestion or two," she admitted.

"I heard it was a little more than that," smiled the director. "Why don't you see what you could do with a western script for me. I haven't got an idea and if I turn it over to the studio writers, I'll probably get another stereotyped plot."

"Are you serious?" demanded Janet.

"Very much so. You might be able to put together something with a new angle. Mind you, it must be simple in action, for I've got to operate on a slim budget, but we must have a satisfactory love angle and a plausible plot. Think you can do anything with it?"

"I'll try; I'll do my best," promised Janet.

"Then I guess I'll take a little vacation when we get back to Hollywood. I'll need the story in about ten days, or at least a complete outline by that time."

The tubby little director lifted himself off the seat and ambled down the aisle to learn how much longer they would be detained and Janet watched him go with a strange elation in her heart.

## *Chapter Five*

### DEADLY FANGS

Helen looked at her companion through smiling, quizzical eyes.

"Well, what do you make of that?" she asked.

"I'm a little bit dizzy, but I guess Mr. Fenstow meant what he said. Do you suppose I can really turn out an acceptable story for a western picture?" Janet turned and shot the question squarely at Helen.

"I'm sure you can. That is," she amended, "if you don't let the thought of it scare you."

"I'll give it a lot of time and thought before I start writing the story."

"There isn't much time," warned Helen, and Janet knew that her companion was right.

Ten days—sometimes it seemed like an endless length of time; then again it vanished like magic and she had a feeling that this might be the case.

Some members of the company left the bus and walked around to stretch their legs; the others remained quietly in their seats, only a few of them talking for they were glad the strain of making the picture was at an end.

Janet sniffed the late afternoon air. There seemed to be a faint odor of smoke, but she decided some of the men in the company must be smoking nearby.

The heat abated somewhat as they waited for the driver to repair the engine and a sharp breeze swept down out of the hills sending little swirls of dust dancing along the winding road ahead of them.

Helen leaned close to her companion.

"Smell smoke?" she asked.

"Not now, but I thought I did a few minutes ago," replied Janet.

"I'm sure I can now," went on Helen, sniffing intently.

Janet thought she caught another whiff of smoke, but she couldn't be sure.

Curt Newsom, who had been trying to help repair the engine, came back along the bus. His face was smudged with grime and dirt and his hands were covered with grease. He raised one of them and motioned for Janet and Helen to join him. The girls left their seats and walked down the bus, Curt meeting them at the doorway.

"Come on," he said sharply and in a manner that was little like his own.

He strode away through the dry grass, which crackled like tinder under his boots. He was a good fifty yards away from the bus and far beyond earshot when he stopped and faced the girls.

"It will be hours before that bus can be repaired," he told them. "Someone will have to go back to the ranch or the nearest village and phone for another vehicle to come out from the city."

The freshening breeze stirred up a cloud of dust which enveloped them for a moment. Curt sneezed heavily and then sniffed.

"Smell anything?" There was desperate intentness in his question.

Janet and Helen wrinkled their noses and sniffed eagerly.

Helen shook her head.

"Not now, but a while ago I thought I smelled smoke."

"So did I," added Janet. "It was kind of like tobacco smoke and then it wasn't."

Curt shook his head. "I'm afraid it isn't tobacco smoke. I've been getting whiffs of it right along. Smells like a brush fire to me, but I can't locate any sign of smoke."

"What do you mean by brush fire?" asked Janet.

Curt looked at her sharply and then his eyes swept the rugged countryside where the sparse grass was brown and the brush as brittle as glass.

"It's like a prairie fire—only worse. It's even worse than a forest fire. It spreads more rapidly. Once a fire gets started in this dry, combustible stuff, it's almost impossible to stop it. Either a good rain comes along or the blamed thing just burns itself out."

"But I should think you could dodge a brush fire," put in Helen.

"Maybe you could if you knew which way it was going to jump. But it moves almost like lightning and it's on you before you know it."

The cowboy star cast an anxious eye over the rolling hills, but there was no sign of smoke, no spear of flame to flash a warning of impending trouble.

"Keep your nose busy and your eyes and ears on the job. You might even stir around in the hills a bit. If you see anything that looks like it might spell trouble, let me know. I'm going back to try and help the driver. We'll give you plenty of time to get back before we start on if we just happen to find the trouble."

Curt, his spurs jingling musically, strode away, and Janet and Helen watched him go with mingled feelings. His words had aroused a very definite sense of alarm in their minds and they were a little white as they faced each other.

"I'm sure I smell smoke now," said Helen, sniffing intently. Janet did likewise, but she couldn't be sure, and the breeze was getting sharper.

"We'll scout around these hills. Let's try that one," Janet pointed to a ragged outcropping of rock that towered above the rest.

"It's going to be hard to climb," cautioned Helen.

"I know, but once we're on top we'll be able to see all over this country. If there's any sign of a brush fire, we'll be able to see it from there."

"I suppose you're right. Wish I had left my heavy boots on. These shoes aren't made for this kind of walking," and Helen looked down at the low-heeled, comfortable oxfords she wore. They were all right for street wear, but when it came to climbing about over thin, rocky soil, they provided only a minimum of protection.

The outcropping Janet had selected was even steeper than they had anticipated and as they climbed, the outline of the bus in the valley became smaller. They stopped several times to rest and on the last occasion Janet sat down on a flat, sun-baked rock. There was a certain fetid odor about it but she thought nothing of it until Helen, who was about to sit down beside her, screamed.

Without thinking and so swiftly it must have been a reflex action, she hurled herself away from the rock.

She dropped in a twisting, rolling fall and as she turned she glimpsed a venomous head with lashing fangs which flashed out once from the rock and then disappeared.

Janet fell heavily, turning over several times before she finally came to rest against a clump of dry brush.

Helen was at her side almost instantly, her face drawn and tense.

"Did it strike you?" she asked, deep anxiety marking her words.

Janet, still dazed by the shock of hurling herself to the ground, looked up and managed a wan smile. She shook her head and with Helen giving her a hand, got to her feet.

"No, I'm all right. Just scared a little. It was so sudden."

"The snake was coiled up on the back of the rock. I saw it just as you sat down. For a second I was speechless; then I seemed to explode into a scream," explained Helen.

"It's a good thing for me that you did," said Janet. "I don't think the snake missed it more than inches. We'd better get some stout clubs if we're going to do any more climbing around these rocks."

"One thing, we're not going to sit down on any of them," declared Helen, who was watching the pile of rocks with open suspicion. There was still that fetid smell in the air, but no sign of any snakes.

They looked about for sticks which could be used for clubs and Helen found several sizeable sticks which would serve that purpose.

The incident had unnerved them more than they cared to confess and they sat down to rest on the sandy soil, taking care that nothing was near them which would conceal a snake.

The afternoon deepened and the sun was about to sink over the western hills when they roused themselves and started on toward the summit of the promontory they had been climbing.

Janet stopped and sniffed the air. The odor of smoke seemed stronger now, yet there was no visible sign of it.

Helen also smelled it, for the wind, if anything, was sharper now.

"If there's a fire burning somewhere near here, it might be bad for us," she said. "This dry grass and underbrush would burn like tinder."

"That's what Curt fears," added Janet.

They stopped to rest once more before they started the final ascent to the rocky outcropping from which they hoped to be able to survey the entire surrounding country.

As they started up the final slope, the smell of the smoke became stronger. Looking back into the valley where the bus was stalled, Janet could see the men in the company all grouped around the front end. It was evident that the trouble had not been repaired. Some distance from the bus a lone figure was striding along the trail, evidently bound for the nearest ranch or village where he could telephone for another bus and a repair crew.

They toiled up the last few yards to the summit of the promontory and reached it only to drop down in an open space, gasping for breath, for the last part of the climb had been arduous.

A sharp cry from Helen drew Janet's attention away from the bus, which now seemed far down in the valley.

"There's fire burning in that further valley," cried Helen, an involuntary note of alarm in her voice.

Janet turned quickly and gazed in the direction Helen was pointing. Her companion was right. There was fire in one of the distant valleys. From their elevation they could see a low, creeping wave of smoke shot through with an occasional tongue of flame.

The wind, riffling past them now, was sweeping the fire in their direction at a steady pace, but it was at least two miles away, perhaps even further, estimated Janet.

"Does it look serious?" asked Helen.

"I should say it does," replied Janet quickly. "One of us must get back to the bus at once and warn Curt. This is what he's feared."

"I'll stay," said Helen, but Janet noted that her companion's face paled at the thought of staying on top of the ridge and watching the fire sweep toward her.

"No you won't. If there's any staying to be done up here, I'll be the one," decided Janet. "Besides, I can run faster than you and your shoes are in no condition to go racing over this rough ground. You start down now and tell Curt exactly what's happening. Tell him the fire is moving steadily in our direction and I can't see that anyone is in front of it attempting to beat it out or to build barriers to halt it."

"But I hate to leave you here alone," protested Helen.

"Never mind that. You get back to the bus. Hurry!" There was an anxious note of appeal in Janet's last words and Helen flung down the stick she had been carrying and started back down the slope.

Janet watched her for a time as she darted around outcroppings of rock. Then she turned and gazed at the low wall of smoke which was being whipped along by the wind.

From that distance it was hard to imagine that the advancing smoke and fire could be such a deadly thing—that it could lay waste to everything in its path, leaving, where it had passed, only a sear and desolate landscape.

The wind seemed to be strengthening with the passing of each minute. The crest of the advancing fire topped the ridge of another valley and started down the near slope, but it was still better than a mile and a half away. Occasionally a jet of flame rose higher than the others, as though some madman had tossed a torch high into the air at his exhilaration over the destruction the flames were causing.

The afternoon was waning rapidly and in the valleys between Janet and the flames the light was fading. She turned and gazed back down the long slope. Helen was almost at the bus, making every effort at speed and Janet felt sorry for her for she knew Helen must be suffering intense pain from her too-thin shoes for the rocks would bruise her feet badly.

Janet saw Helen reach the bus and the men turned their attention from the stalled motor to the newcomer. Janet thought she could distinguish Curt Newsom looming above the others but she couldn't be sure.

In less than a minute a solitary figure detached itself from the group around the bus and started up the slope toward Janet. From the long stride and the graceful carriage of the body she knew it was the cowboy star, coming up to get a first-hand glimpse of the advancing fire.

Someone down at the bus turned on the headlights, and twin beams of light flashed through the gathering purple of the evening.

Janet heard a scurrying up the other slope and a jack rabbit, scenting the danger of the approaching wall of smoke and fire, dashed past her. She knew that later there would be an onrush of the smaller animals seeking to evade the danger. But for some reason Janet felt strangely calm.

The fire was still more than a mile away. True, it was advancing steadily, but the thought of being trapped by flames had never really entered her mind and she refused to be stampeded now.

She turned back to watch the progress of Curt Newsom as he raced up the slope. It was almost dusk now where she was standing but she could see him coming steadily toward her. He would be beside her in another minute.

The cowboy star, puffing heavily from the race up the rocky slope, reached Janet's side.

The smell of smoke was stronger now and the flames were brighter as though they were eating their way through heavier underbrush.

Curt's features were plainly visible in the half light of the early evening and Janet could see the lines of worry on his face.

"It's worse than I thought from what Helen told us," he said, shielding his eyes and looking across the intervening valleys to the ridge down which the fire was now racing.

"Is it serious?" asked Janet. "Are we in danger?"

Curt stared at her hard, wondering just how much he dared to tell her. Then he decided she might as well know the truth and he spoke frankly.

"The wind's rising all the time and this fire's spreading rapidly. We've got to get out of here within the next few minutes or we may never leave these valleys alive."

## *Chapter Seven*

### RACING FLAMES

Janet felt an inward surge of terror sweep over her, chilling her mind and body. But it lasted for only an instant. She was too calm, too sensible to become panic stricken now. They might be in a tight spot but she had confidence that the angular, capable cowboy would be able to pull them through.

"We've got to get back to the bus and warn them of the danger. Maybe the boys will have the engine fixed by the time we're back."

Curt turned for a final look at the advancing wall of smoke and flame.

A steady procession of small animals, driven from their homes, was racing through the underbrush and an occasional frightened rabbit would almost bump into them in its blind haste to find safety.

"Come on!" said Curt. He held out his hand and Janet grasped it. With the cowboy leading the way, they plunged down the slope. It was risky business, going at that speed, but speed was essential and they dared a twisted ankle to reach the bus with the least possible delay.

Janet dropped the stick she had been carrying and grasped Curt's strong wrist with both of her own hands. They were fairly flying down the incline, Janet's legs working mechanically as she followed the lead of the cowboy star.

They crashed through a low fringe of underbrush and reached the twisting roadway. Half a hundred feet away was the bus, its lights glowing, but no other sign of animation coming from the mechanical monster.

The smoke was not yet thick in this valley and for this Janet was thankful for the other members of the company obviously had not become panicky.

Billy Fenstow saw them first.

"What about the fire?" he asked.

"It's bad. We've got to get out of here and without losing any time. How about the bus?"

"It won't even cough," moaned the director.

"Any word from the man you sent for help?"

"Not yet. What'll we do?" There was an anxious note in Billy Fenstow's voice.

"I don't know yet, but we'll do something."

Curt strode forward to the front end of the bus where the male members of the company were grouped.

"Any chance of getting going within the next five or ten minutes?" he asked the director, who was almost buried under the hood.

"Afraid not," came the smothered reply. "I've found the trouble but it's going to take about half an hour to get it fixed."

Curt turned and faced Bill Fenstow.

"That's too long," he warned the director. "The wind's getting worse and that fire's coming fast now. In another half hour this valley will be an inferno. It will be impossible for anyone to live in it."

"Then we'd better start back for the ranch afoot," said the director.

Curt's laugh was hard and thin and Janet, hearing it, thought it was a desperate laugh.

"The fire would overtake us before we could get near the ranch," said Curt. "We've got to make a stand and we might as well make it here."

"What can we do?" It was the director asking the question.

"We can start a backfire and burn off as much ground around here as possible. While some of us are doing that the others can see what they can do in getting the bus fixed. If it's done in time, we'll run for it; if it isn't this is as good a place as any."

Helen came close to Janet.

"Is it that bad?" she whispered.

"I'm afraid it is," admitted Janet. "Scared?"

"Scared to death," confessed Helen.

"So am I," admitted Janet. "But maybe there is something we can do to help the men."

Every member of the company was anxious and willing to do whatever they could and Curt Newsom snapped directions at them. Most of the men raced out into the brush and almost instantly small fires sprang up. They ate their way rapidly through the undergrowth and as they neared the bus itself were beaten out, the men using coats, blankets or whatever article they could find in the bus. In less than ten minutes there was a growing blackened area around the stalled vehicle. Their object was to create a large enough burned over area so that the main wall of the advancing fire would move around them.

Curt told them frankly that the heat would be bad, almost unbearable, but they could live through it.

The ridge from which Janet and Helen had discovered the fire was outlined against a sky shot with crimson for it was quite dark now. Small animals, scurrying before the red menace, were racing past almost constantly.

The fires which had been started around the bus were spreading out in a great circle, eating their way hungrily along the parched ground. In the light from them Janet could see Curt stalking here and there, directing one group and then another, and pausing now to beat down some flame with his blanket.

Both girls felt particularly helpless, for there seemed to be nothing they could do, and Helen, her light shoes torn and thin, was particularly wretched, for her feet were sore and bruised.

A sharp cry came from one of the men who had remained with the driver in an effort to get the bus repaired. Someone leaped into the seat, there was the whir of the starter and the heavy vehicle shook as its powerful motor thundered into motion.

The driver slid out from under the hood. His face was a smear of grease and his shirt was badly torn, for he had been working in close quarters. He stumbled, reeling from fatigue, but someone caught him and lifted him into the bus. Another man sounded the horn and the fire-builders, led by Curt and Billy Fenstow, returned to the bus.

"Think the motor will hold up?" Curt snapped at the driver.

"It ought to, but I can't be sure," was the tired reply.

"What do you want to do?" The cowboy fired the question at the director.

"Get out of here and get out quick!" cried the director.

"Where'll you go?" Curt snapped the question back.

Billy Fenstow stared at him for just a moment.

"Hollywood, of course. Everybody in!"

But Curt laid a restraining hand on the director.

"The road ahead curves back directly into the path of the flame. If we swing around this promontory, we'll be cut off ahead and before we can get back the flames will be over this section of the road. We can only go back."

"Then back to the ranch we go," decided the director, and again he called, "Everybody in!"

Members of the company jammed their way into the bus and Curt took the wheel for the driver was too exhausted to handle the heavy vehicle.

The smoke was thick now and the first flames were licking their way over the crest of the ridge far above them.

With the motor roaring heavily, Curt threw in the gears and swung the big vehicle about in a sharp circle. Then, with the headlights vainly trying to bore through the almost stifling smoke, they raced back down the road.

It was dangerous going, for Curt's vision was cut down to less than three rods, but speed was essential now and they plunged through the smoky night at a reckless pace.

## *Chapter Eight*

### THE LINE GOES DEAD

Lights in the interior of the bus were out now for Curt didn't dare run the risk that they might interfere with his vision. The heavy vehicle swayed from side to side as they bounced over the winding road and Janet and Helen clung to each other for protection.

Smoke was swirling across the road and the acrid fumes swept through the open windows of the bus, but there was no time now to close them.

They raced out of the valley they had been in, shot up over a slight rise, and descended into another valley, the glare of the flames being lost to view for the time.

"Think we'll make it?" gasped Helen, clinging tightly to Janet's right arm.

"We've got to," replied Janet. "The last shots for the picture are in the bus."

"I'm not worrying about the picture; it's us," retorted Helen. "My eyes hurt; so do my feet."

Janet couldn't help smiling for Helen was very much matter of fact.

There was a sharp report under the bus, like a gunshot or the backfire of the exhaust. But it was neither and the girls were thrown heavily against the side of the bus as the left rear tire let go.

The heavy machine swayed dangerously with Curt fighting for control. The brakes screamed as they ground to a stop and Curt leaped out to survey the damage. The driver followed him and then Billy Fenstow followed.

The driver turned on his flashlight and Janet could hear Curt's muttered exclamation of disgust.

"We can change; we've got a spare," the driver said.

"We've got to and we'll have to work fast," snapped Curt.

Under the lashing directions of the cowboy star, other members of the company turned to and lent a hand. Tools were taken out, a big jack was placed under the rear axle, and the work started.

From somewhere behind came the ominous roar of the fire and the sky behind the ridge they had just topped crimsoned. Helen, her thin oxfords badly cut, shifted miserably from one foot to another and longed for a hot bath in which to soak her aching feet.

While Curt and several assistants wrestled with the task of getting the flat tire off, the driver managed to get the spare wheel down from its rack at the rear.

"Not much air in it," he grumbled.

"There never is," snapped Curt, "but you know how to use a pump."

Billy Fenstow seized the pump, fastened the hose to the valve on the tire, and bent his tired body to the task of increasing the air pressure in the big tire.

It was a tedious, wracking job, and the men alternated, working at top speed for a minute, then giving way to another fresher one.

Curt, scanning the horizon above the ridge, urged them to greater haste.

"Fire's getting close," he warned. "We've got to get under way."

Billy Fenstow unfastened the pump and Curt seized the big steel wheel with its huge casing. Other willing hands helped him get it on the axle. Anxious fingers sped the bolts into place and they tightened them as rapidly as possible.

"Get going!" Curt yelled at the driver.

"How about the jack?"

"Never mind that. Throw her in gear and she'll come off. That fire's coming fast now."

As though in answer to Curt's warning, the flames shot over the top of the nearest ridge and started down. They seemed to be racing now with the speed of a greyhound, leaping from thicket to thicket with unbelievable rapidity.

Janet and Helen, clinging together on the back seat, watched it with fascinated eyes. The fire was a living, advancing thing that might surround and swallow them in its flaming greed. The thought sent a deadening chill through Janet and for a moment she closed her eyes to the red spectacle.

The motor of the bus roared again as Curt trod heavily on the starter. The big vehicle pulsed with power and there was the crash of gears as they lurched ahead and the left rear wheel dropped off the jack.

Like a frightened elephant the bus leaped forward, its headlights once more boring through the smoke-laden night air.

Curt drove with reckless abandon, tramping the accelerator down almost to the floor boards. His passengers were flung from one side of the lunging vehicle to another, but they knew that only in speed now lay their hope for salvation and none of them cried out as their bruised bodies were flung back and forth.

Janet and Helen managed to wedge themselves in a corner where, by clinging together, they could escape with only a minimum of bouncing about.

Suddenly the road straightened out and the smoke thinned. Janet recognized where they were. It was the last half mile which led back to the ranch where they had completed shooting the new picture only that afternoon.

They had outdistanced the racing flames and Curt reduced the wild speed of the bus. In less than five minutes they swung into the broad yard of the ranch, but there were no lights in the house nor in the bunkhouse.

Curt blasted sharply on the horn, but there was no sign or sound of life anywhere.

"Looks like everyone's sound asleep," said Billy Fenstow, who was rubbing his bruises gingerly.

"They've probably taken to the hills," replied Curt.

They unloaded and entered the ranchhouse. Curt lighted a lamp and it was evident from the disorder in the rooms that the owners had fled hastily. The corrals were open and all of the stock had been turned loose.

Janet and Helen stopped beside the water tank. Their throats were dry and tasted heavily of smoke so they drank deeply of the cool, fresh water.

Curt, pausing for a moment, stuck his whole head in the tank, and then drank from the cup the girls offered him. As he gulped down the water he watched the crimson horizon northwest of the ranch.

"Looks like we're going to be safe here unless the wind swings around a little more," he observed.

"I'm worried about the folks. They know what time we were going to start back and they'll be frantic when they hear about the fire," said Helen.

"Phone line may still be up," said Curt. "Go in the house and see if you can get a call through."

Helen turned and hastened toward the house while Curt rejoined the men, who were staying near the bus. The driver was buried under the hood again, making sure that there would be no recurrence of their previous engine trouble.

Janet followed Helen into the ranchhouse. The phone, an old-fashioned wall instrument, was in the dining room. There was a large plate of cookies, evidently left from supper, on the table, and neither girl could resist helping herself to several. Helen munched them as she cranked the telephone and listened for an answer from the operator in the nearest town. At last the response came.

Helen, talking rapidly, gave her father's address and phone number in Hollywood. In less than five minutes the call was through and she heard her father's voice on the other end of the wire.

"Hello, Dad. This is Helen."

"Where are we? Back at the ranch. No, we're safe enough. The bus broke down and we had to turn back when the fire cut us off."

"Now don't worry, Dad. Curt Newsom says he thinks the fire will swing around us. If it doesn't, we can take to the hills back of the ranch. We'll come through all right. Tell Mother not to worry."

"What's that—?"

Helen repeated the question, then looked blankly at Janet.

"See if you can hear him," she urged and Janet took the receiver.

"Hello, Mr. Thorne," she said. But there was no answer. She repeated the question and this time when there was no answer mechanically hung up the receiver.

"The line's dead," she told Helen. "The fire must have brought down the poles."

The girls stared hard at each other through smoke-rimmed eyes. The telephone had given them a sense of security, a feeling of contact with the outside world. Now they were cut off with the flames behind them and only the rugged hills ahead.

## THE FIRE SWEEPS ON

When Janet and Helen returned to the spacious ranch yard, they found the men in the company gathered in a council of war near the bus. They were debating whether to risk remaining at the ranch or attempt to push on into the hills and onto higher ground.

Billy Fenstow felt the ranch would be safe and was loath to attempt to go any further, but Curt Newsom, who had been watching the shifting clouds of crimson, was wary.

"A little more and the wind will shift enough to bring the fire down into this valley. Once it's here it will travel like a race horse and we'll never reach safety," he warned.

The director pointed to several heavy steel containers which held the last of the shots for "Water Hole."

"Who's going to lug those through the hills?" he demanded.

"We could take turns," retorted Curt. "Here's a better one. Are those cans watertight?" He shot the question at one of the cameramen.

"They're safe enough, all right," he replied.

"Then let's fasten wires to the handles and lower them into the well here. If we have to run for it, we'll not be bothered with these heavy containers and we'll know the last shots are safe."

Billy Fenstow agreed that Curt's suggestion was an excellent one and they scattered in search of a coil of wire. One was found near the bunkhouse. It was fastened to one of the containers and the heavy steel receptacle was lowered into the well. The wire was cut and the upper end securely fastened to a timber. Then the operation was repeated, the second can being lowered until it reached the bottom of the well. Curt snipped the wire with a pair of pliers and fastened the end with the first one.

Janet had been watching the skyline intently. Perhaps she was simply over-wrought, but she felt sure that the crimson glow had brightened as though the fire was nearer their own valley.

"Watch the skyline," she urged Helen. "See if the glow is brightening."

Helen peered through the half-light. Then she shook her head.

"I can't be sure, but I think the fire must be nearer," she said. "Had we better tell Curt?"

"Yes. He'll want to know."

The girls called the lanky cowboy aside and Janet confided her fears to him.

Curt spun on his heels and stared into the flame-rent sky.

"Maybe I'm imagining things, but it looks bad," he muttered. Then he called Billy Fenstow over to him and the rotund little director agreed that the fire must be getting nearer.

Curt sniffed the smoke. "It's getting thicker. We'd better get out of here."

"What about the bus?" demanded the director.

"We'll use that as far as we can. There's a trail that goes at least a mile back in the hills. After that we'll have to go on afoot."

Orders snapped from Curt's lips. Back into the bus piled the company, Janet and Helen were among the last and they stopped long enough beside the well for deep drinks of the cool water. It might be many an hour before they would have such an opportunity again.

Curt took the wheel for he knew the trail into the hills. The motor roared with a heavy song of power and they were away once more, fleeing before the ever-hungry flames.

Janet and Helen sank back on the cushions of the rear seat. The trail was soft and sandy and although the bus lurched heavily at times, they had an opportunity to relax a little.

Helen slipped off her oxfords and rubbed her aching feet.

"Oh, for a good, hot bath," she moaned. "My feet will never be the same again."

"Mine ache a little even with my boots on," admitted Janet. She would have liked to have slipped out of her boots and wriggled her toes but they were too hard to lace up again.

Curt was driving with a desperate intentness as the going became more difficult. The trail had faded into two thin tracks and it was rougher now.

Sharp rocks protruded and at any moment a tire might give way. But they kept on boring into the hills. The engine was working hard now as they ascended a grade and Janet looked back through the broad, rear window of the bus.

The valley they had just left was plainly visible and topping the ridge above the ranchhouse were the first racing tongues of flame. They had started just in time.

Helen turned around and together the girls watched the fire skip down the slope. When the scene was finally shut off by their own descent into another valley, the fire was almost to the ranchhouse and Janet felt sick at heart as she thought of the destruction which was inevitable for the friendly, rambling old structure.

The trail they had been following faded completely away and Curt brought the bus to a stop.

"Want to get out and walk or shall we go on in the bus?"

The director's reply came quickly.



"Where can we go?"

Curt shrugged his shoulder.

"You know as well as I do. We've got to go someplace; anywhere to stay ahead of the fire."

"Then jam the bus along as far as it will go," ordered the director.

"Who's going to pay for the damage?" demanded the driver.

"Never mind that," snapped Curt. "The first thing is to save our own necks. Then we'll worry about the bus."

"But I'll have to report what happened to the company."

"You'll be lucky to get back and make a report," retorted the cowboy.

They lurched into motion once more, traveling almost blindly now, and much slower.

Curt felt his way around clumps of underbrush and outcroppings of rock. The wind, swirling along with them, carried a heavy curtain of smoke.

They were rolling down a long slope when a front tire let go with an explosion like that from a young cannon and Curt twisted desperately at the wheel, fighting for control of the big vehicle. The driver jumped to help him and between the two of them they brought it to a halt without an upset.

Curt jumped out to survey the damage and returned almost at once.

"No chance of repairing the tire even if there was time," he announced. "We'll see how much further we can go."

With both Curt and the bus driver clinging to the wheel, they started on, though traveling at a painfully slow pace.

At the bottom of the valley they stopped, a thin ribbon of a stream blocking their way.

Once more the cowboy lunged out into the smoke-filled night to stamp through the shallow waters of the stream. The bottom seemed fairly firm and Curt returned and took the wheel.

"We'll try to go through, but everyone unload. No use to carry any excess weight."

The entire company piled out of the bus and watched Curt start across the stream. He made good progress, the front wheels climbing out on the other bank and for a moment it looked like he was going across. Then the sand gave way and the back wheels churned up a spray of sand and dirty water.

Curt snapped off the ignition and jumped out of the bus.

"We're stalled for keeps," he informed them, "but this is about as good a place as we'll find. We'll start backfires and then when it gets bad, we can get under a bank along this creek. There'll be water to help us here."

Under Curt's dynamic orders, half a dozen backfires were started, the men working like mad to clear away the underbrush and destroy all inflammable material near the creek bank where they had decided to make their stand.

There was little that Janet and Helen could do, but they insisted on seizing old coats, wetting them in the stream, and using them to beat out the flames of the backfires when they had spread far enough.

The burned area widened rapidly, but Curt spurred his workers on with renewed pleas and cajoling. One of the cameramen, slipping away to the bus for a minute, trained his camera on the scene and started grinding away. The crest of the hill above them was now outlined in a strong, crimson and the shadowy forms of the workers were visible as they hastened from one backfire to another. Janet saw the cameraman working, but she knew their work had progressed far enough so the absence of one man would not make a great deal of difference. Then, too, she knew that he might get some shots which would be invaluable in some film needing good fire sequences.

Fortunately the bank they had selected had been heavily undercut by the stream and would afford them protection. Curt set several of the men to the task of digging further into the bank and they worked with improvised tools taken from the bus.

Janet and Helen soaked the coats they had been using again and returned to the task of beating down the backfires. Curt joined them for a minute.

"Better get back under the bank. This thing is going to come down this slope like a hurricane," he warned.

"We'll wait until the others start down," said Janet, but he took their coats and shoved them toward the creek.

"Get going," he ordered, and his voice was firm.

They obeyed, for already the fire was starting down the slope and the girls hastened to the creek bed.

The water was shallow, not more than six inches deep in any place and the bottom was sandy. Helen slipped off her torn shoes and wiggled her toes in the cool luxury of the water. Just then she forgot to worry all about the fire in the pleasant delight of having her feet comfortable if even for the moment.

Men who had been working on the backfires came tumbling over the bank, falling and splashing into the water, but no one minded being dirty or wet.

Janet could hear a roaring that sounded like the beat of scores of kettle drums—a roaring that was increasing in intensity and furor.

Splashing along the sandy bottom, she came to a lower place in the bank where she could look up the slope.

A solid wall of flame topped the crest, then swept down with an amazing rapidity. The air was hot and searing like a blast from an over-heated furnace.

A handful of men were still grouped around Curt, working until the last moment to spread the backfire as far as possible.

Helen, padding through the shallow water, joined Janet and they watched the awesome scene together. The roar of the onrushing fire increased and waves of heat beat against their faces. Janet knew that it must be terrific out on the slope and she wondered when Curt would lead his men in.

One of them, gasping and choking, ran toward the creek, lunged past them, and hurled himself face downward in the water.

Seconds later Janet heard Curt's cry and the rest of the men, with Curt and Billy Fenstow bringing up the rear, ran toward the creek bank.

The director stumbled and fell heavily and the cowboy bent down and picked him up. Carrying the director in his arms, Curt, staggering under the extra burden, ran on. One of the men leaped over the bank to help and together they eased the little director into the water.

Curt turned instantly and watched the rushing flames. The roar was so loud now that it was impossible to communicate with one another except by shouting and Curt ran from one to another, shouting and pounding them down under the bank where they would get the utmost protection.

Reaching out he jerked Janet and Helen sharply and jostled them under the bank.

"Get under there and stay under. Put a wet cloth to your nose and mouth. Don't breathe any more than you have to."

Neither one of them possessed handkerchiefs, for these articles had gone astray long before. One sleeve of Janet's dress had been ripped and she tore the whole thing out, ripped it again, and gave Helen one half of it. They dipped the cloth in the creek, squeezed a little of the water out, and applied the makeshift mask to their faces.

Burning brands, carried along by the wind, were dropping in the creek now, hissing and sputtering as they struck the water where they soon became blackened embers.

Janet, turning toward the opposite bank, saw a clump of underbrush burst into flame. The fire, whipped by the rising wind, spread out rapidly. Venturing a peep above the creek bank, a searing blast of heat struck her forehead and she could feel her hair curl. One glance was enough, for a towering wall of flame seemed to be rising straight into the sky.

Janet ducked back under the protection of the bank and dipped the cloth into the water again. She straightened up again and glanced toward the bus. The cameraman who had been grinding away steadily had deserted the bus and was dragging his camera with him. He reached the shelter of the bank and other willing hands helped him set up the machine in a position that was well protected.

It was impossible to hear now and Janet felt Helen crowding close toward her. They looked at each other through staring eyes—eyes that reflected the inward fear that gripped their hearts. The heat was stifling now. The cloths they had soaked with water were drying with incredible rapidity and Janet remembered Curt's warning to breathe as lightly as possible. Helen, shoeless, was standing in the water. A hot ember dropped beside them and struck one of Helen's legs before it had cooled. She winced at the pain, but there was no escape.

It seemed as though the entire opposite slope of the valley suddenly burst into flame and the intensity of the heat redoubled. Janet held her breath and dipped down into the stream to wet the cloth again. Helen did likewise a moment later and they gained some relief.

Billy Fenstow and Curt Newsom were crouched beside the cameraman who was still grinding away at the red terror.

Again the cloths on their faces dried and their breaths came in great choking gasps. Janet felt as though her heat-seared lungs would burst. She wanted to cry, but the tears were whipped away by the hot blasts.

The flame on the opposite slope seemed to reach a new peak of intensity and the water at their feet ran crimson. Then the roar lessened, the peak of the fire was past.

Janet, through smoke-rimmed eyes, saw it sweep over the far crest of the valley. Scattered fires were left burning in its wake, but the main advance of the fire had rushed on seeking new conquests.

As the red glow ebbed, they crept out from under the bank and dropped with abandon into the shallow waters. It mattered little that embers, some of them still hot, were drifting in the stream, or that the water itself was now lukewarm—it was a haven from the horror that had just passed.

Janet couldn't even guess how many minutes they rested on the stream bed with the water washing away the aches in their weary bodies. As usual, Curt took the initiative when he had regained a portion of the abundant vitality that flowed through his veins.

The cowboy sat up and surveyed the scene. A dozen fires were still burning in the valley and the horizon ahead of them, tinged in crimson, marked the passing of the fire demon.

Billy Fenstow, digging sand out of his ears and sputtering heartily, was the first to speak.

"Curt, how in thunder are we ever going to get out of here?"

The cowboy shook his head.

"Walk," he moaned, looking down at the once fancy boots which had never been intended for the heavy work in which they had been used that night.

Billy Fenstow groaned in anguish.

"Then I guess I'll just settle down and wait for a flood to come along and wash me down the valley or until I come to some culvert where I'll stick."

The cameraman who had ground away steadily through the thick of the raging flames crept over to his machine. It had been subject to terrific heat and there was only a small chance that the negative had come through without serious damage.

"How many feet did you shoot?" asked the director.

The photographer squinted at the footage indicator on the camera, but there was not enough light to note the figures.

"If the film isn't ruined they'll be the best scenes of a blaze like this that have ever been filmed," he predicted.

Janet struggled into a sitting position and looked around. Her eyes sought the bus, with only faint hopes that the vehicle had come through unscathed. If it had, it would offer their one hope of escape for she felt that repairs might be made to the tires and if not, maybe they could limp along.

But her hopes were doomed to disappointment. The bus was a glowing mass of steel. Fire had swept over it, igniting the upholstery and burning out the entire interior of the bus. It was a hollow shell with gaping windows.

Curt Newsom stood up.

"There's no use sitting around here wondering what we'll do," he said. "If a couple of the boys will come along, I'll start back to the trail and we'll keep going until we find someone or can reach a telephone."

Two other cowboys joined Curt.

"The rest of you might follow us and get back as far as the ranch. Maybe there'll be a little drinking water left in that well," advised Curt as he started up the trail, hobbling painfully on his twisted boots.

Helen looked at her oxfords. They were in even worse shape than Curt's boots.

"I guess I'll have to stay here," she said, half to herself and half to Janet. "I'd never make it back to the ranch."

Janet picked up the water soaked piece of cloth she had used as a mask to shield her face.

"Wrap this around one foot and use your piece for your other foot. Then slip your oxford on loosely. That ought to ease the pain."

Helen looked grateful and tried the suggestion at once. She wrapped the damp cloth around as tightly as possible and then pulled on her shoes. It was a snug fit, but there was a soft cushion for her bruised feet to rest upon. She stood up and tried walking.

"That's much better. Thanks a lot, Janet."

Billy Fenstow took charge then.

"We'll start for the ranch and go as far as we can," he decided. "There may be some shelter there and we're in no condition to stay out any longer than necessary."

With the director in the van, the singed and tired band started back for the ranch. After a short distance they struck the trail. It was faint, but they managed to follow it without too much difficulty.

Hot blasts of air seemed to sweep down from all sides and breathing became a painful exercise again. Janet wished that she might have just one cool, sweet breath of air—just one.

Helen stumbled and Janet reached out and caught her companion before she fell.

"All right?" asked Janet anxiously, for Helen was not of as sturdy stock as she.

"I'll make it," replied Helen, the words coming from tight-set lips.

But Janet was not so sure that Helen could do it. They fell further and further behind the others, but at last they topped the final ridge and looked down in the valley where the ranch had been, where they had filmed so many scenes of "Water Hole," the new picture.

It was too dark to see the outlines of the ranchhouse but Janet could discern several large,

glowing piles of embers and she knew that even the buildings at the ranch had been destroyed by the fire. Perhaps the well was still filled with pure sweet water. Her throat seemed drier at the thought and she turned her full attention to Helen, who needed a supporting arm for the final, down hill lap of their journey.

The cowboys were the first to reach the ranchyard and Janet could hear them ripping the cover off the well. There was a shout ahead of them.

"The water's okay. Hurry up!" It was one of the cowboys, and the news gave them the courage to quicken their lagging steps.

Billy Fenstow handed Janet a blackened dipper, but she insisted that Helen take the first drink. There was plenty of water and they all drank their fill while Billy Fenstow scrambled around the timbers above the well hunting for the wires which had been fastened to the film containers they had lowered into the well. He found them at last, but decided they were safer in the water than any place else.

"What about going on?" asked one of the cowboys.

"No use in that. Someone had used the dipper before we got here, so that means Curt is up ahead of us and he's traveling much faster than we could. We'll do better to wait right here where they'll find us. Try and make yourselves comfortable."

But the director's last words were of little help. The air was still dry and searing and there was no shelter anywhere. Fires still glowed all over the valley and little clouds of smoke swept around them.

Janet and Helen walked over to the ranchhouse, but the embers were glowing so brightly that it was impossible to get very close.

"I ache all over," confessed Helen. "When I finally get into bed I'm going to sleep the clock around."

"Count me in on that program," nodded Janet. "Well, we might as well sit down and keep as comfortable as possible."

But they went back to the well for another drink before trying to relax on the ground.

The men were gathered a short distance away, talking in low voices about their harrowing escape. They conversed in monotones that soon lulled the girls' tired minds and before she knew it Janet found herself dozing. They were fitful little naps, broken with sudden thoughts of the fire. Then she would snap to complete wakefulness, only to have her fatigue overcome her again. She had dozed perhaps half a dozen times when the increasing chill of the air awakened her.

Helen, curled up on the ground, was breathing steadily and deeply and had not noticed the change in the atmosphere.

Janet scanned the horizon. There was no scarlet in the northwest now—only a dense blackness that seemed to be growing thicker. The southeastern sky was still vividly flame seared.

The men had ceased their talking, but an occasional glow of a cigarette marked the dark huddle where they had gathered. A slight snore could be heard and Janet attributed it to their tubby little director. A flash of lightning illumined the mounting clouds and Janet shivered at the thought of a storm sweeping down on them after the fire.

Helen must have felt the shiver run through Janet's body for she stirred sleepily.

"I'll sleep another hour," she mumbled, and Janet knew her companion thought they were back home. There was no need to awaken Helen now. She might just as well get as much relaxation as possible.

Helen slipped back into a deep sleep and Janet kept a lone vigil. The clouds swept higher and a distant rumble of thunder came down from the hills.

The men were moving restlessly now and Janet could hear Billy Fenstow berating the weather. But there was nothing they could do about it except complain a little and then hope that someone would reach them before the coming storm broke.

Janet wondered how far Curt and the two cowboys who had gone with him had been able to travel. Perhaps their aching feet had forced them to stop. But, knowing Curt, she had a feeling that he would get through and bring help to them as soon as possible.

Helen sat up, rubbing her blood-shot eyes.

"More fire?" she asked as the rumble of the thunder smote her ears.

"Well, not quite that bad. Just a thunderstorm."

Helen shivered. "We'll catch our death of cold," she groaned, and Janet had to admit that Helen's fears were not unwarranted. After the heat of the fire and the fatigue, they would be excellent candidates for severe colds or anything else that happened along.

Several of the men who had been hunting around the ranchyard returned to the well.

"Can't even find half a board," one of them reported. "The fire swept everything clean."

Billy Fenstow turned to Janet and explained.

"I had a couple of the boys out looking for some boards or anything we could use to build a shelter for you girls."

"That was thoughtful," replied Janet, "but we'll get along all right."

Billy grumbled to himself. He wasn't so sure. The girls had stood a lot already and there was a

limit to their endurance.

A patter of rain struck them, the drops sizzling as they came down on the remains of the ranchhouse.

Janet's spirits dropped and for the first time in weeks she felt like having a good, old-fashioned crying spell, but there wasn't any pillow where she could bury her head and she didn't want to cry in front of the men in the company.

The valley was hushed for a moment. Even the thunder was silent in the breathless pause that often comes just before a mid-summer storm vents its fury.

It was during this pause that Helen, watching the hills below the storm clouds, caught a flash of light. It was too low for lightning and she gripped Janet's right arm.

"There's a car coming!" she cried.

Janet turned hopefully and looked in the direction Helen pointed, but there was no sign of light and she heard an involuntary sob escape from Helen.

Then it came again, two twin beams of light cutting around a hill. Helen was right! A car was coming and Janet, unashamed, felt the tears flowing freely down her cheeks.

Billy Fenstow was talking to himself.

"I knew that lanky cowboy would do it," he said, repeating it over and over as though he were a human talking machine, stuck on a single note.

A horn sounded a warning note as the oncoming vehicle swung into the ranchyard just as the sky opened and the first sweep of rain struck the valley. Forgetting all else, they ran toward the machine, which proved to be a hulking truck, with a covered top.

Janet and Helen reached the rear. Someone reached down and pulled them under the shelter of the top. A flashlight blazed into their faces and a strong arm encircled Janet's shoulder. It was Helen's father and they knew that their worries for that eventful night were over.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### NEW PLANS

The sky seemed to open wide and a great torrent of rain descended on the heat-ridden earth, but Janet and Helen, in the shelter of the truck, were safe.

"All right, honey?" demanded Helen's father, and, assured that his daughter was no more than bruised and weary, he turned to Janet.

"How about you, Janet?" he asked.

"Tired and dirty—that's all," she managed to smile.

"Here's blankets," he said, picking two off a pile on the floor of the truck. "Throw these around your shoulders."

The air was chill now and the girls obeyed without hesitation for their own clothes were in a bad state of disrepair.

"How did you find us?" asked Helen when they were seated on the floor of the truck, and bouncing along toward the main highway which would take them back to Hollywood.

"Curt Newsom got through. We were frantic after the line went dead when you were talking to us from the ranchhouse. We were coming in the truck and met Curt and the other two cowboys along the trail. From what they told us we knew that none of you could stand it to be out in the storm and we made all possible speed."

"How's mother?" asked Helen.

"Terribly worried." He turned toward Janet. "We'll phone your folks as soon as we get home. The fact that a film company was caught in the center of the fire was broadcast over a national chain and I'm afraid they may be gravely alarmed."

"I'll call them at once," agreed Janet.

They talked at length of their experiences and at last Helen's father turned to Fenstow.

"Lose all of your last-day takes?" he asked.

"Don't believe we lost a one," replied the other director. "We put the film cans in the well. One of my boys shot some swell scenes of the fire if the camera didn't get too hot and ruin the negative."

"Then I suppose you'll use a fire in your next western?" chuckled Henry Thorne.

"Can't say," replied Billy Fenstow. "That will be up to Janet."

"Why Janet?"

"She's going to do my next scenario."

"You're not joking?"

"Of course not. I've gone kind of stale and I thought she could inject some fresh material. At least she's going to get a fair chance to see just what kind of a film story she can turn out."

"Then I'm predicting that she'll do a good job if it's anything like the caliber of her usual work,"

replied Helen's father.

"Don't count on me too much," cautioned Janet. "This is a new field and I may get in so deep I'll never get anything creditable."

The truck swung around a sharp curve. Ahead of them was a blaze of light from the headlights of a score of cars which were parked along the paved road. Raucous squawks of horns greeted the approaching truck.

It was still raining hard, but a trim figure, clad in a raincoat, detached itself from a group in front of one of the cars and hurried toward the truck.

"Hello mother. Here I am," called Helen. "Both of us are all right."

She jumped from the truck and into her mother's arms. After a brief embrace, her mother spoke quickly.

"We mustn't stand here. You'll catch cold. Here, get under my coat and we'll hurry to the car. Janet, you stay in the truck until we can pull along here."

Henry Thorne looked down at Janet.

"Pretty tired?"

"Just about all in," she confessed and she found it hard to muster a smile.

"Had enough of Hollywood?" he asked quietly.

Janet looked up quickly.

"I don't know, honestly I don't. The way I feel right now all I want is sleep and lots of it."

He nodded understandingly and just then the car drove up beside the truck and they jumped down and entered it.

Henry Thorne took the wheel while his wife and the girls made themselves comfortable in the back seat. Mrs Thorne very wisely made no effort to ask them about the events of the night, but tucked them in with blankets and before the car had gone half a mile both girls were sound asleep.

The next thing Janet knew someone was shaking her shoulder. It was Mrs. Thorne.

"We're home and you can be in bed in five minutes," she said. Janet rubbed a little of the sleep from her tired eyes—just enough so she could see to get into the house.

Helen, walking ahead of her, moaned now at every step, for her feet had been badly bruised by the stones.

Mrs. Thorne hurried ahead to run a tub of hot water while her husband drove the car around to the garage. With Mrs. Thorne helping them, the girls were soon in fresh pajamas.

Janet decided on a warm shower and Helen followed her under the spray. Then Mrs. Thorne treated the bruises on Helen's feet and both girls piled into bed.

"Sleep as long as you want to," she said as she snapped off the light.

Janet didn't even hear the click of the switch. She dropped into a deep slumber, one so heavy that there were no dreams of fires and storms.

When she finally awoke it was broad daylight. Fresh, sweet air filled their room. There was no smell of smoke, no threat of storm, and she wondered, for a moment, if she could have been dreaming about the night before. It was just possible that it had been a nightmare. Then she stretched and the aching muscles of her legs told her that indeed it had not been a nightmare.

Janet looked over to Helen's bed. Her friend was still sleeping heavily so Janet slipped out of bed quietly, donned her dressing gown, and went down to the bathroom.

Mrs. Thorne heard her moving about and looked in for a minute.

"We telephoned your folks last night," she said. "They'd heard the radio broadcast and were greatly relieved when we told them both of you were safe."

"Oh, thanks so much. I was so sleepy I forgot all about it," confessed Janet.

"Helen getting up?" asked Mrs. Thorne.

"No, she's sleeping soundly."

"Then come in to lunch without going back to dress," said Helen's mother.

"You mean breakfast?" asked Janet.

Mrs. Thorne smiled. "No, I mean lunch, and a very late lunch at that. It's well after two o'clock now."

Janet, finishing her shower, rubbed her body briskly with a heavy towel, and slipped the dressing gown on over her pajamas. Then she joined Mrs. Thorne in the dining room.

"The morning papers made quite a story of it," said Mrs. Thorne, handing Janet a copy.

A bold headline was blazoned across the entire top of the front page:

"MOVIE COMPANY ESCAPES FIRE!"

Then, in terse, action sentences, the story told of the narrow escape of Billy Fenstow's western unit. Janet found Helen's name and her own mentioned. She was glad that the story gave Curt Newsom full credit for the cool-headed work which had saved their lives. Curt deserved every word of it.

Helen joined them a few minutes later, limping a little for her feet were still aching from the bruises.

The girls passed the remainder of the afternoon resting and at dinner that night became involved in a serious discussion with Helen's father and mother.

After the dessert, Henry Thorne pushed back his chair and looked at them quizzically.

"Summer's about over," was his opening remark and Janet knew that he had something on his mind. She had a hunch that she could guess what the trend of the conversation was to be.

"You girls made up your minds what you want to do?"

He seemed to have his eyes fixed on Janet, as though looking to her for the decision which would guide Helen.

"First of all I want to try to do the story Billy Fenstow asked me to do," retorted Janet. "After that I think I'll have had enough of Hollywood."

"Getting tired of being an actress?"

"Not at all, I'm just realizing my limitations and after all, I do want more education—the type of broadening education that I can get in a university."

Henry Thorne swung toward his own daughter.

"What do you think, Helen?"

"Why, I haven't made up my mind yet, Dad. I like Hollywood, I've been having a grand time, but I guess I've never really thought of staying on here definitely. It was understood from the first that this was just a glorious vacation and that when summer ended Mother and I would go back to Clarion and I'd go to college."

"I expect that's right," nodded her father. "It did start out to be just a vacation proposition and you girls can make it that if you want, but I've a new plan that may appeal to you. How would you like to go to Radio City in New York for several weeks?"

## *Chapter Twelve*

### THE PREVIEW

The girls stared hard at Henry Thorne. It was so like him to toss off an important statement in an off-hand manner that it left them almost gasping for breath.

"Why, Dad, what do you mean?" demanded Helen.

"Just what I said," smiled her father. "How would you and Janet like to go to Radio City for several weeks?"

"I'd like it fine," put in Janet quickly and Helen chorused her own agreement.

"Now tell us what it's all about," insisted Helen.

"I'm a little vague on it myself," admitted her father, "except that the studio is planning an extensive promotion stunt to boost my last picture, 'Kings of the Air,' and the general manager, Mr. Rexler, is going to send a part of the cast to New York City where they'll put on a radio drama based on the action in the new picture. The whole idea is to whet the appetites of the film fans by giving them just enough of the story over the air to make them rush to the nearest theater and see the actual picture."

"But where do we come in?" asked Janet. "We were only very minor members of the cast."

"True enough, but some of the principals are now working on other pictures and it would be impractical to release them and send them east for a promotional stunt so some of the lesser members of the company will make the trip."

"Maybe we're lucky to be lesser members," smiled Helen. "When do we start?"

"I don't know exactly. The release date for 'Kings' is next month, so I expect you'll leave here in a few weeks."

"That will give me just time enough to try the scenario for Billy Fenstow," said Janet. "Maybe I'd better start work on it tonight."

"You look pretty tired. Better wait until morning when you'll be thoroughly rested," advised Helen's father.

They adjourned to the living room where they gathered around a large table and discussed possible story plots that Janet could use. She made several notes and then, with Helen, retired early.

A second night of sleep found the girls feeling greatly refreshed. Henry Thorne loaned Janet his own portable typewriter and she set it on a low table beside the swimming pool, found some yellow copy paper in the house, rolled a fresh sheet into the typewriter, and sat down waiting for an idea to pop into her head.

"Hello, author!" said someone from behind her and she swung about to face Curt Newsom, who had walked up unheralded.

"Hello, Curt. Sit down. My, but I'm glad to see you. Are you all right after the fire?"

The cowboy smiled. "As right as I'll ever be. I was scared half to death that night. Say, I saw Billy Fenstow this morning. The picture's all together now and they're going to screen it at the Bijou down the street after the regular feature. Better be there tonight."

"I'll be there in fear and trembling," smiled Janet.

"Oh, I wouldn't feel that way about it. I think you did a lot better than most of the girls I've had in the company."

"Thanks, Curt. That was nice of you to say that, but I realize I have very definite limitations as an actress."

"Well, I'm not so hot as an actor," he admitted. "About all I have to do is stick on a horse and shoot a gun loaded with blank cartridges."

"That isn't all and you know it," reproved Janet.

Curt looked at the typewriter and the blank sheet of paper.

"I'm keeping you from your work. I only dropped in to tell you about the preview tonight. I've got to get along."

"I'm supposed to be generating ideas for Mr. Fenstow's next script," confessed Janet, "but the mental generator seems to have gone on a strike."

"What's the story going to be about?"

"You guess," smiled Janet.

"Well, why don't you have a young heiress, pretty much spoiled, who owns a ranch. She's never seen it so she goes west for a trip and while there learns that most of her fortune has been wiped out through the declining value of securities and by embezzlement of some of her trustees. About all she has left is the ranch and a brother who is pretty much worthless."

"It's a grand idea," exulted Janet. "Then of course we could have a cattle war, some rustling, maybe a vein of gold found on the ranch, and plenty of action."

"You're supposed to write the story," chided Curt. "Well, I must get along."

"Thanks for the help. I'll make you coauthor," called Janet as Curt strode toward the street.

Curt's suggestion gave her the nucleus of her story. It would be a little different treatment of the western theme. Janet started working, her fingers flowing rhythmically over the keys. She wrote simply. All that was required of her was a good, comprehensive outline of the story. The studio writers would put in the dialogue.

But Janet's interest grew as the story progressed and she found herself putting in conversation and bits of description of the characters. She was so absorbed that Helen came and stood beside her for several minutes before she was aware of her presence.

"Going strong?" she asked.

Janet, barely interrupting the smooth flow of her story, nodded.

"Preview's tonight at the Bijou after the regular feature. Curt Newsom stopped to tell us."

"Then you'd better stop writing now. You've been at it steadily for more than hour. You want to feel peppy tonight when we go to see the preview."

Janet finished the paragraph and pulled the sheet of copy from the machine. She had written eight pages and the top and bottom margins were narrow. She wanted to keep on writing, but knew that Helen's advice was sound. She wanted to be rested enough to enjoy "Water Hole," to see herself, for probably the only time in her life, as the leading lady of a motion picture.

They met Billy Fenstow at the box office and he handed them tickets for a few seats which had been reserved for his friends.

"Nervous?" he asked Janet.

"A little. How is it?"

"Wait and see. Here comes Mr. Rexler."

The girls turned in time to see the taciturn general manager of the Ace studio stride into the lobby. Close behind him was Helen's father. Janet felt her heart sink. Here was the chief of the studio on hand to pronounce final judgment on the picture. But Bill Fenstow seemed unperturbed and she forced herself to be calm.

They all went in together. The feature was a south sea love drama produced by a rival studio and it was typical program picture with nothing to make it outstanding in interest.

Then the picture they had been waiting for flashed on the screen. "'Water Hole,' directed by Billy Fenstow, starring Curt Newsom and produced by the Ace Motion Picture Corp." Then came the credits for the story, photography, etc., and finally the cast of characters with Curt's name at the top. Janet felt her heart stop for one breathless moment. Her name—*Janet Hardy*—was the second in the cast and directly under that was Helen's.

Then the picture zoomed away to a fast start with the action that always characterized a Billy Fenstow production. Janet tried to be critical, but she couldn't help enjoying the picture and her voice didn't sound so terribly bad as it came out of the loudspeakers.

The picture ended all too suddenly. The house lights came up and Janet found herself staring at the others, waiting for their verdict.

Rexler was the first to speak. He leaned over and tapped Billy Fenstow on the shoulder.



"Nice show, Billy. Got the girl signed up?"

Billy turned to Janet.

"How about it; want to sign a contract to stay with my unit?"

Suddenly Janet knew that she didn't. It had been a wonderful summer, climaxed in the picture she had just seen with herself as leading lady, but now she was just a little homesick. Then, too, there was the trip to Radio City.

"Not right now," she told the director. "Later, perhaps, but not now."

The general manager looked at her strangely.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it is the smartest thing you could do. If you change your mind, let me know."

He stood up and stalked down the aisle, but Janet knew now that she would never change her mind.

### *Chapter Thirteen*

#### JANET TURNS AUTHOR

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Early the next morning Janet returned to the task of writing the story for Billy Fenstow's next picture. The story developed rapidly and she found plenty of opportunities to provide the hard-riding action for which Curt Newsom was famous.

She worked steadily until mid-forenoon when Helen joined her in the garden.

"How is it going?" she asked.

"It's lots of fun, and I think I have a fairly good idea. Whether I'm getting it across is another thing," smiled Janet. "I suspect the regular studio writers will think it pretty much a mess when they get their hands on it."

"I wouldn't care much what they think as long as Mr. Fenstow likes it. After all, he's the one who will accept or reject it and the check you get will depend on his approval."

Janet leaned back in her chair and gazed at the scudding white clouds far overhead.

"How much do you suppose they'll pay if they accept the story?" she mused.

"Sometimes they pay thousands of dollars," said Helen.

"But only for outstanding books or plays. I mean for little stories like this; the kind that perhaps have an idea in them that can be developed further by the studio staff."

"Maybe a thousand dollars," ventured Helen.

"That would be enough," said Janet, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Now just what do you mean by that?" Helen wanted to know.

"A thousand dollars would go a long ways toward guaranteeing me a college education. Why, with what I've saved out of our salaries this summer, I'd have nearly two thousand dollars and I could make that go a long ways toward four years of college."

"I've saved a lot this summer, too," admitted Helen. "Dad and mother were talking this morning. We're going back to Clarion."

Helen was silent for a moment. Then Janet spoke.

"When are you going back?"

"Soon; perhaps next week. But you and I will go on to New York to help with the radio promotion of 'Kings of the Air.'"

"Will you be happy in Clarion after a summer here?" asked Janet, watching her companion closely.

"I'm sure I will. After all, I'm a small town girl and all this amazes and scares me a little. Perhaps when college days are over I'll want to come back and try to make a name for myself in pictures. Dad thinks that would be wise."

"What school are you going to go to?" Janet asked the question with bated breath. They had always planned on going to their own state university, Corn Belt U., but she thought it possible that Helen's father might have expressed some other preference since their arrival on the coast.

"Corn Belt U.," replied Helen. "Dad left that entirely up to me and of course I wanted to follow out our plans."

Janet sighed heartily. She was elated at Helen's words for it meant that the pleasant companionship they had enjoyed through high school days could continue through college.

"We'll have lots of fun," said Helen, "but if we go on to Radio City for the promotion work we'll have to register late. Perhaps we can arrange for that while we're home. It isn't more than half a day's drive from home to school."

"I'm sure we can, especially if we explain that the trip to New York will enable us to earn more money for our college educations."

"But, Janet, you know we don't actually have to earn our way through school. Dad's got plenty

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and your father is comfortably fixed.”

“I know it, but it’s a matter of pride. I’d like to have as much of my own money as possible for college. If I got in a pinch, I’d yell for Dad’s help, I suppose.”

They talked on about college plans and were finally interrupted when Mrs. Thorne summoned them to lunch,

More plans for their return to Clarion were made at the luncheon table. Packing would have to be started soon.

“Let’s pick out our college wardrobes here in Hollywood. Then we’ll be sure and have the latest styles.”

“Maybe Hollywood styles won’t be campus styles,” smiled Janet, “but I would like a chance to wear that wonderful gown Roddy made for me to a college party.”

It was pleasant to think of their first experience in Hollywood when Roddy, the famous designer of gowns at the Ace studio, had created gorgeous evening gowns for them to wear at their first movie premiere. Janet could imagine that wearing such gowns at a party on the campus at Corn Belt U. would create quite a sensation, and she thrilled pleasantly at the thought.

After luncheon was over, Janet returned to her writing and Helen joined her beside the pool, stripping the wrapper off a copy of the *Clarion Times*, which had arrived on the noonday mail.

“Look at this; what nerve!” exclaimed Helen, shoving the front page of the paper at Janet. She pointed to a story in the center of the page.

Janet stared at the headline with unbelieving eyes.

“LOCAL GIRLS FEATURED IN MOVIE.”

Her eyes followed down to the story, which heralded the fact that Cora Dean and Margie Blake, Clarion girls touring in the west, had been drafted for rôles in a western picture by Billy Fenstow, the famous director. Janet read on.

“Miss Dean and Miss Blake report that Janet Hardy and Helen Thorne also have rôles in the picture,” the story said.

It was then that Janet flushed. She could have told Cora and Margie just what she thought of them if they had been anywhere within hearing distance but fortunately for them, perhaps, they were a good many miles away.

“How do you suppose the *Times* got that story?” asked Janet, the flush fading from her cheeks.

“I know,” said Helen with emphasis. “Cora wrote to Pete Benda, the city editor, and gave him all of the information which is in the story. Imagine her telling him ‘that we are also in the picture.’ I’m certainly going to see that ‘Water Hole’ is shown in the theaters at home. That will kind of spoil their story.”

Janet laughed. “Perhaps Cora and Margie did feel that they had the major rôles. You never can tell what others will think is important.”

“It would be a joke on them if the film cutters left out the sequence they’re in,” chuckled Helen.

Janet looked at her quickly.

“Don’t you suggest that to anyone,” she warned.

“I won’t,” promised Helen.

Janet handed the paper back to her companion and went on with her work. She spent most of the afternoon at the typewriter and when she was through, felt that she had done a good day’s work. The manuscript would be ready with only another morning’s writing.

Billy Fenstow, dropping in after dinner for a visit with Helen’s father inquired about the story and Janet handed him the first draft of as much as she had completed.

The little director read it with interest, the lines around his eyes gathering in little puckers as he skimmed through the typed pages. Janet almost held her breath through all the time he was reading and she saw Henry Thorne leaning forward, trying to read some reaction on Billy Fenstow’s face.

When the director had finished, he looked up and smiled at Janet.

“Reads well,” he commented. “Of course there are a lot of rough spots, but we’ll be able to use it.”

#### Chapter Fourteen

#### CLOTHES BY RODDY

Janet felt her pulse pounding. Acceptance of the story would mean a great deal toward swelling her college fund and she leaned forward eagerly.

“You mean you’ll accept it?” she asked.

“If your final chapters are as good as these, we’ll take it,” replied Mr. Fenstow. “Of course we won’t be able to pay a whole lot since the studio staff will have to whip it into shape, but we’ll

make it worth your while.”

“How much do you think it will be?” this was from Helen, whose interest in the sale of the story was almost as great as Janet’s.

Billy Fenstow mopped his forehead.

“That will be up to Mr. Rexler. I’d say that it wouldn’t be more than a thousand dollars.”

“Really!” gasped Janet, who had visions of her college fund mounting in one great jump.

“Well, maybe not that much, but I’ll get all I can for you. Now you finish it up as rapidly as possible.”

“It will be ready tomorrow noon,” promised Janet.

Billy Fenstow left a short time later and after he had gone, Henry Thorne spoke to them about the journey back to Clarion.

“Now that Janet is practically assured the sale of her story, we’d better make our plans. Can you be ready to start home next Monday?”

The girls looked blankly at each other. Of course they had known that their stay in Hollywood was near an end, but to put the date so soon was something of a shock.

Mrs. Thorne spoke first.

“I’m sure we can, Henry. But we’ll almost need a truck to take back all of the things we’ve accumulated.”

“I’ll have some professional packers come out and make whatever boxes are needed,” her husband assured her.

“But we’ve got to get clothes,” wailed Helen. “We want to wear Hollywood styles when we go to college.”

Her father bit the end of his cigar and looked at it thoughtfully.

“Why don’t you call on Roddy?”

“But he wouldn’t do clothes for us; we couldn’t afford it,” said Helen.

“He might do it for you as a special favor to me,” grinned her father. “As a matter of fact, I think he mentioned something about it the other day. Wanted to know when you were leaving and said he might be able to do something for you.”

“We’ll see him the first thing in the morning,” said Helen.

“I won’t,” spoke up Janet. “I’ve got to finish the story whether I have clothes made by Roddy or not.”

“That’s the fight, Janet,” said Henry Thorne.

“When do we go on to Radio City?” asked Helen.

“You’ll have only a couple of days at home. Then you’ll have to go on to New York.”

“How long will we be there?” Janet wanted to know.

“I’m not sure. At least ten days; perhaps more.”

“Which means we’ll have to hurry back home and start in to school as soon as our work at Radio City is over,” put in Helen. “I wonder how it will seem to be before a microphone?”

“Not any worse than before a camera,” said Janet.

They talked on at length of plans for their college days and although it was late when they went to bed, Janet was up early and working at her typewriter. The final two chapters of her story unrolled easily and rapidly and at eleven o’clock she leaned back in her chair. The job was done.

Helen had gone on to the studio to talk with Roddy and Janet was to join her after lunch. Janet stood up and stretched. Her back ached from the strain of bending over her typewriter and she went into the house and changed into her trim swimming suit. Fifteen minutes in the pool washed away the aches and when she emerged she felt greatly refreshed.

Janet dressed carefully for she wanted to look well when she talked to Roddy. Mrs. Thorne was the only other one at home for lunch and they enjoyed a pleasant meal.

Janet picked up the finished manuscript and took it with her to the studio. She left it at Billy Fenstow’s office and went on to the building where Roddy had his office and where the wizard of design created the gorgeous fashions that were worn by the stars in the big productions at the Ace studio.

Helen was in Roddy’s own fitting room and Janet joined her there. Roddy appeared in a few minutes and after greeting her warmly, set about the task of providing her with a new outfit.

“Tell me just what you want,” he smiled.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’m going to college,” said Janet.

“Then let me decide,” he begged and Janet agreed.

The next hours passed in a swirl of fittings and cloth which was draped this way and that around them, and when they were through neither girl knew exactly what had happened.

“That’s all,” said the little designer. “I’ll send them to your home. It will be a week before they’re ready.”

“Thanks so much,” said the girls as Roddy waved them out of the office.

"What do you suppose he's going to make?" asked Janet.

"Well, I know there'll be a sport outfit and an afternoon dress; perhaps something for the classroom; about three apiece."

"But how will we ever pay for them? The materials alone will be more than we can afford."

"Let's not worry about that. I have a hunch that there will never be a bill for them."

They met Helen's father near the studio entrance and they all drove home together.

"I've had a long talk with the general manager," he said. "You've got to be in Radio City in about ten days."

"That won't mean much time at home," said Janet.

"Nor much to get to Corn Belt U. and get our late registrations fixed up," added Helen.

"Don't worry about that. All those details can be taken care of," said her father. "Just plan to have a good time in Radio City when you get there."

Both girls knew that they would enjoy their broadcasting experience in New York to the utmost. There might be a little fear of the microphone but they knew that facing a camera couldn't be any harder than one of the silent "Mikes."

At dinner that night they told of their hours with Roddy and speculated again at the creations which his fertile mind would turn out for them.

"No use to try and guess," warned Helen's father. "You never can predict what Roddy will do."

On the following day Janet received a telephone call from Billy Fenstow.

"Can you come over to the studio?" he asked.

"Just as soon as a taxi can get me there," she promised.

Helen and her mother were down town shopping and Janet phoned for a taxi. She slipped into a fresh dress while she was waiting and then was whirled away to the studio. Envious eyes watched her go through the gates which were shut to so many.

Janet found the little director in his office back at stage nine, her pile of manuscript in front of him.

"I've finished the story and Mr. Rexler has gone over it," said the director, after greeting Janet and waving her toward a chair.

She waited breathlessly for his next words.

"We both think it will do. Mind, it isn't anything sensational, but it does have a new twist or two and can be made into a Curt Newsom feature very well."

He paused and picked up a check which was on his desk.

"There will have to be a great deal done to the story by our own writing staff, so we felt seven hundred and fifty dollars would be a fair price to offer for the story," he said handing the check to Janet.

She took it mechanically and turned it over. Then looked at the name on the face of the check. It was payable to Janet Hardy.

"Thanks so much, Mr. Fenstow. It's very satisfactory."

"Too bad you won't stay on. I'd give you the lead," he urged.

"I'm sorry, but I've made up my mind. Perhaps when college days are over, I'll come back and apply for a job."

"You'll get one if I'm still on the lot grinding out westerns," he promised.

Janet left the little office and walked across the sprawling motion picture plant. It was probably her last visit for the hours left before their departure would be filled with thoughts of packing. It was a dull time at the studio, with only one or two pictures in production, but with the coming weeks every sound stage would be humming with activity as new celluloid dramas were rushed to completion for the entertainment of millions of movie fans. Janet knew that she would not be a part of it, but there was a tremendous satisfaction in recalling the experiences of the past weeks and looking forward to the new ones that were bound to come at Radio City.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### HOMEWARD BOUND

Hours filled with packing and last minute details took their time up almost until the actual hour of the departure of their plane. They finished finally at midnight and they were to take the four o'clock eastbound plane for the midwest. New schedules had been inaugurated since they had come west and they would be home in time for dinner that night.

Helen's mother came in.

"You girls must get some sleep, or you'll look pretty much worn out when you reach Clarion."

"I'm too excited to sleep," confessed Janet.

"Then let's take a swim in the pool. That ought to relax us," urged Helen.

They slipped into their suits and for nearly half an hour enjoyed the pool. The moon was well up in the cloudless sky and it was an ideal night. Neither girl said very much, just floated on the pool, wondering what the coming weeks would have in store for them.

When they finally emerged from the water they were ready to call it a day and they were sound asleep by one o'clock.

Mrs. Thorne called them at three. It was still dark, but a hot breakfast was ready for them in the dining room. Even up to the last minute it seemed as though there were a host of things to do and they took a final survey of the house before they closed their bags. Two cabs were waiting; one for them and the other to take their bags.

It was exactly three-thirty when they started for the airport. The streets were deserted and lights were on in only a few of the homes. Their cab swung on to a boulevard and flashed past the entrance of the Ace studio. Janet caught only a glimpse of the plant, but she felt a queer tightening of her heart, and she wondered if she had been wise in deciding to leave Hollywood. But it was too late now. She had made her decision.

At the airport the big twin-motored transport was on the ramp, its motors idling and flickers of blue flame coming out of the exhaust under the wing.

An attendant at the gate checked the tickets Henry Thorne held in his hand and they were escorted to the plane where their stewardess assigned their seats. The cabin of this ship was even more luxuriously furnished than the one in which they had flown west and Janet settled herself comfortably into the thickly upholstered chair. Their baggage was stowed in the tail of the plane and then she saw the pilots come out of the office.

They stepped into the cabin and walked up the narrow aisle to their own compartment. Both of them were youthful and Janet wondered that they had the marvelous skill in their hands necessary to guide the huge plane on its flight.

Two more passengers hastened up to the gate and were escorted to the cabin. Then the stewardess checked the list of reservations. In addition to Henry Thorne and his party, there were only the two late-comers, both of whom were men.

The motors roared and the plane rolled ahead, gaining speed rapidly. Before Janet knew it they were off the ground and soaring into a half light of the early day. A blanket of lights unfolded beneath them, but the lights were strangely dim and the plane headed away for the mountains, climbing steadily to have safety in crossing the dangerous peaks.

Night faded rapidly now and they were well into the mountains at sunrise. They were heading northeast, flying now over great stretches of desolate land where there was nothing but sand and sagebrush, and sometimes precious little sagebrush.

Salt Lake City was beneath them almost before they knew it and when the plane landed there Janet and Helen got out to stretch their legs while the crews were changed and the plane refueled. Then they were in the air again, climbing once more to get above the continental divide and after that came the descent to Cheyenne. Lunch was served aboard the plane with Omaha the next stop and they roared on east as the sun rolled westward.

Janet was watching the landscape below closely now for this was her home state—a land dotted with many farms and huddles of houses that were the villages, tied together by strips of white highway and an occasional train that seemed to be puffing along a ladder which had been laid on the ground.

Almost before she knew it the motors of the plane lessened their roar and a town appeared underneath. It was Rubio, the nearest regular stop on the transcontinental line.

The giant transport settled down easily. Janet felt the wheels touch and she looked eagerly through the heavy glass of the window for the first glimpse of her father and mother.

She saw them on the ramp, gazing anxiously at the plane as it wheeled up to the concrete slab.

Janet, the first out of the plane, ran to greet them. Her mother embraced her affectionately and her father gave her a hearty hug.

"My, but it's good to see you!" he declared. "We've missed you so much."

"And I've missed you, but I've had a grand time," replied Janet, locking her arms in theirs.

The Thornes came up and there were greetings all around. Then Henry Thorne and Janet's father supervised the loading of the luggage into the Hardy sedan.

The car was crowded, but they had so much to talk about and were so eager to say it that the inconvenience of short space mattered little.

Taking turns, Janet and Helen, rather breathlessly, told the story of their summer in Hollywood while John Hardy whirled them smoothly and safely along the ribbon of concrete that led from Rubio to Clarion.

They stopped at the Thorne home and unloaded most of the luggage there.

"You're coming over to dinner," Mrs. Hardy told them. "Is six-thirty all right?"

"We'll be there," promised Mrs. Thorne, who was anxious for all of the news of her friends in Clarion.

When they were home, Janet and her father and mother sat down in the comfortable living room and she told them more in detail of her adventures in the west, of the making of the western films and of their narrow escape from death in the fire.

"We were greatly worried by the radio report," said her father, "but the call from the Thornes reassured us."

Janet's mother spoke up.

"Are you going on to New York City?"

"Yes, mother. We'll only have a few days at home. Then Helen and I are to go on to New York for a few days for a promotional broadcast on Mr. Thorne's new picture, 'Kings of the Air.' You know, we had minor rôles in it and some members of the cast are being sent east to take part in this promotion work. I think it will be great fun."

"But how about college?" her father wanted to know.

"That's one of the things I'll have to see about while I'm home this time. Maybe you would drive Helen and me over to Corn Belt U. some time tomorrow or the next day so we could see about registration? We'll have to arrange to enter classes late."

"We can go tomorrow," nodded her father. "I've arranged to spend most of the rest of the week at home. Mother and I want to hear *all* about Hollywood."

"I didn't see it all," smiled Janet. "But it's a grand place, at least in which to spend one summer."

The Thornes arrived promptly at the dinner hour and they visited at length over a leisurely meal. At eight o'clock Henry Thorne glanced at his watch.

"The manager of the Pastime telephoned just before dinner to say that he had received a print of 'Water Hole,' a new western, and would add it to his regular program tonight. Think you'd like to go?"

"Why, Janet, isn't that the picture you and Helen were in?" asked her mother.

Janet nodded and turned to Henry Thorne, who was smiling.

"I believe you had that print of the film shipped east on the plane with us," she accused.

"What of it?" he parried.

"Of course we'll go," said Janet's mother. "We'll leave the dishes right on the table. It isn't every day that I get such an opportunity."

Helen slipped away from the table and Janet could hear her at the phone calling for Pete Benda, the city editor of the *Times*.

"Pete? This is Helen Thorne. Yes, I'm back in town. Drop in at the Pastime this evening if you'd like to see the parts that Cora Dean and Margie Blake took in that western picture they wrote you about. No, never mind a story about us now. We've had plenty of publicity."

Helen hung up the receiver and turned to face Janet.

"Do you think that was nice?" asked Janet, but there was an upward twist of her lips.

"Maybe it wasn't exactly nice, but it was a lot of fun," conceded Helen.

There was just a tang of fall in the air and they slipped on light jackets, deciding to walk to the theater, which was less than half a dozen blocks away.

Janet's father insisted on buying the tickets for the party and they had excellent seats well down in the front of the theater. Janet thought she saw Pete Benda slide into a seat ahead of them, but she couldn't be sure.

The regular feature came to an end and the western, which had been added, flashed on the screen. Janet felt her pulse quicken as the title and the cast of characters, with her own name under Curt Newsom's. The action started and she glanced at her father and mother. They were completely absorbed in the picture.

Janet enjoyed it thoroughly. After all, it *was* a pretty good picture for a western and the clothes Roddy had designed for Helen and her added just the right touch of smartness.

The action came to a driving climax and then the picture was over and people around them started to leave. As they walked down the aisle Pete Benda joined them.

"Congratulations, girls. That was a nice show. Say, where were Cora and Margie?"

"Didn't you see them?" asked Helen naively.

"Don't kid me," growled Pete. "Where were they?"

"If you had been looking closely at the crowd in one of the scenes in the town you would have seen them," smiled Helen. "Better come tomorrow night and look again."

"Maybe I will," admitted Pete, "but if I do it will be to look at Janet and you. Say, what's this I hear about you going on to Radio City?"

"That's something that will keep," said Helen. "See you later."

On the way home Janet's father and mother told her how proud they were of her work and she felt a real sense of elation, for compliments from them meant more than from anyone else.

It was well after midnight when she finally went to sleep in the bed in her own attractive room. Tomorrow there would be the trip to Corn Belt U. and then on to New York in a few days.

The next morning both the Hardy and the Thorne households were up early for it had been decided to make the trip to Newton, the seat of Corn Belt U., during the morning. The girls could complete their plans for registration during the afternoon and in the evening they could return home in good time.

Janet was nearly through breakfast when an express messenger called at the door.

"Package for Miss Janet Hardy," he announced. "Air express, too."

Janet signed for the package. It was long and unusually well wrapped and when she saw the return address, "Ace Motion Picture Corp., Costume Department," she tingled all over, for she knew that inside were the dresses George Roddy, or Adoree as he was known professionally, had created for her.

Janet's mother helped her rip aside the heavy brown paper with which the cardboard box was wrapped. Inside were layers of tissue and then they gazed upon the first dress, a sport outfit of green wool in lines so plain that its daring was startling. The jacket fitted snugly with a tie about the throat and the ends extended over Janet's shoulders. 146

After that came an afternoon dress, a rich brown velvet that caught and threw back at them the morning light. The skirt was plain with the upper half of the dress in a Russian blouse design with the plain roll collar of cloth of gold.

"Why, it's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen," exclaimed Janet's mother. "How did this all happen?"

Briefly, Janet told how Roddy had taken an interest in them and in seeing that they had attractive and striking clothes.

There was one more dress, a garment designed for classroom wear. This was a corduroy—a deep blue that was dazzling in its intensity.

Before Janet could get it completely out of its heavy tissue wrappings the telephone rang and when she answered Helen's excited voice came tumbling over the wire. She, too, had received her box from Roddy—a sports outfit, an afternoon dress and another dress for classroom wear. 147

"Let's wear one of our new dresses when we go to the university to register," said Helen, and Janet agreed. Each of them had corduroys and they decided to wear these.

Janet took the last garment, the corduroy one, from its wrappings and hurried upstairs to try it on. Her mother hastened after her, as eager as Janet to see how the new dress fitted and looked.

Janet wriggled into the cool, smooth garment and whirled to face her mother. Her hair was a bit tousled and her cheeks flushed from the excitement and the vivid blue of the dress only heightened her youthful charm.

"You look beautiful, dear," breathed her mother. "I've never seen anything more lovely."

Janet turned back to her mirror and gazed at the dress Roddy's agile mind had conceived for her. It was striking.

The blue corduroy hung well, fitting closely around her slim hips and opening at the throat with a semi-military cut. A neat little pocket was placed just above her heart. The sleeves were wrist length, rather full at the shoulders and tapering to a close fit just above her hands where they were caught and tied with two silver bands. 148

Someone came pounding up the stairs. It was Helen, who burst into the room like a young hurricane. Like Janet, she was attired in one of her new dresses. It was corduroy, but of an amber hue that was set off to perfection by Helen's dark hair and the olive coloring of her face. There was just enough difference in the two dresses to make them varied, yet at a glance an observer could tell that they had been created by the same master hand.

Helen even had on brown hose and shoes that matched her dress.

"Where are your new shoes?" she demanded.

Janet delved further into the box. At the bottom was a shoe box and she opened it with shaking fingers. This was more than she had ever dared imagine. She drew forth a pair of blue kid slippers and tucked in them were three pairs of blue hose to match her dress and shoes. She changed shoes and hose and stood up again, whirling in front of the mirror. The costume now was perfection itself. She ran a comb through her golden hair and knew the thrill that comes from knowing a costume is perfect. 149

"Do you suppose we'll be asked to join a sorority at school?" asked Helen.

"If they see you in these dresses I imagine you can join any or all of them," smiled Mrs. Hardy. "Come now, we must be ready when the men want to start."

On the echo of her words a horn sounded below. Janet dabbed a little powder on her face and joined Helen as they hurried down stairs. Even their fathers were elated over the new dresses and both girls felt that their cups of happiness were filled to overflowing.

"Honestly," confided Helen, "I hate to wear this in the car. I'd like to take it off and then put it on when we get near school."

"I suppose you'd like to ride all the way wrapped up in a blanket or something," chided Janet. "But I'll admit that I hate to sit down in this dress."

It was a beautifully clear morning and John Hardy sent his big car speeding over the paved road 150

at a fast pace. They were in Newton in ample time to drive around the university grounds and have a leisurely lunch before going to the office of the dean of women to take the first steps in registering.

The campus of Corn Belt U. was lined with stately elms that had watched over the destiny of the school for more than three quarters of a century. The main buildings were of Indiana limestone with a few of the older ones of red-faced brick, now well covered with a rich growth of English ivy.

Janet knew that she would enjoy going to school here. There was a spirit of calm and dignity about the campus that appealed to her.

At lunch they talked of plans for school and of what they would take.

"I'm going to get all of the dramatics and English I can absorb," declared Helen. "Perhaps a little history, too."

"How about you, Janet?"

"I think my major courses will be journalism, and perhaps just a little in the way of dramatics."

"Not thinking about going back to Hollywood and joining Billy Fenstow's company when you're through, are you?" chided the director. 151

"Well, I might have that idea in mind if no newspaper will take me on as a reporter," conceded Janet.

Luncheon over they went directly to the administration building where, after a short wait, they were ushered into the office of the dean of women.

Mrs. Laird was a pleasant woman of about fifty and Janet saw her keen eyes take in every inch of their costumes in a glance and she thought she saw just a trace of suspicion arise in the dean's eyes.

Janet's father explained their mission, pointing out that because of their coming trip to Radio City they would be late in taking up class work.

"It's a little unusual to arrange registration in this way," said the dean, "but I believe you can be accommodated."

For an hour they went over class schedules, the dean advising them on the courses best suited to what they had in mind. She assisted them in filling out the final registration cards and paused at one question.

"Do you hope to join a sorority?" she asked. 152

"We won't be here in time for the rushing parties," replied Janet. "Perhaps that had better wait until another semester, that is, if any of the groups should want us for membership."

The dean's cool eyes surveyed the fashionably dressed girls.

"I rather imagine you could take your pick of the sororities right now if the girls were here," she said.

The registration was over. The girls were to have rooms in Currier Hall, an old but comfortable dormitory.

"The dean seemed a little cool," said Helen.

"I noticed that, too," Janet said. "Evidently she doesn't think much of the plans which call for us hurrying away to New York."

"Can't be helped; we're going," said Helen.

When they returned home a telegram was waiting for Henry Thorne.

"This interests you girls more than it does me," he said, handing the message to his daughter.

Helen read it eagerly.

"Have Janet and Helen report next Monday morning at Radio City at ten o'clock," she said. 153

"That means we'll have to leave here Saturday night. Why, that's only tomorrow night!" gasped Janet.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### HELLO, NEW YORK 154

They were so busy until after dinner that night that Janet had no time to scan the evening paper. When she picked up the *Times* it was with pleasant surprise for in the middle of the front page was a story by Pete Benda, reviewing "Water Hole" and describing the rôles Janet and Helen played.

"Miss Hardy gave a most pleasing portrayal in the rôle of the heroine," Pete had written, "and a good many local people will enjoy this picture to the utmost. It is far above the average western."

Near the end was a line. "Cora Dean and Margie Blake, local girls who were also in the picture, may be seen in a crowd scene at the village." Janet smiled as she thought of the humiliation that Cora would feel. Well, it had been a mean trick of Cora's to write Pete Benda that she and Margie had leading rôles.



Helen's father made complete plans for their trip to New York for the Ace company was paying all expenses as well as salaries to Janet and Helen while they were in the east.

Both Janet and Helen packed the new dresses Roddy had sent them in the large bags which they were taking with them. There might be little actual opportunity to wear them, but they wanted to be prepared.

Their train for Chicago left at ten o'clock and they arrived at the station in ample time, Janet's father conveying them there. He had reserved a drawing room for them and they felt elated over that.

The *Chicago Limited* was on time to the minute, the puffing locomotive drawing its long string of Pullmans to an easy stop. The girls had drawing room A in car fifty-seven. The porter took their bags as they turned to say good-bye to their parents.

"Got plenty of money?" Janet's father asked in a whisper.

"Plenty, Dad. And I'll get paid while I'm in New York."

But he slipped her a small, black book that resembled a check book.

"Put this in your purse. It will come in handy if you have an emergency," he said.

Calls of "Bo-o-oard," rang along the train. Final good-byes were said and the girls stepped into the vestibule of their car. The train started easily and they waved to their parents. Then they were out of the train shed, picking up speed rapidly for the remainder of the night run to Chicago.

They retired to their drawing-room, finished in restful tones of rose and gray, and slipped into pajamas. Both being tired, they went to bed at once, Janet in the upper berth and Helen in the lower.

The car was air conditioned and they slept restfully, neither one of them awakening until they were in the outskirts of Chicago.

"What are you going to wear today?" asked Helen, stretching luxuriously between the crisp, cool sheets.

"My corduroy dress," said Janet. "It's excellent for travel; comfortable and it won't muss easily."

"That appeals to me," replied Helen, slipping out of bed and starting to dress while Janet lowered herself out of the upper.

The train was past Englewood by the time they were dressed and their porter came in to take their bags.

"Going to wear a hat?" asked Janet.

"Not with this dress; I haven't anything that goes well with it."

Janet tipped the porter and a red cap, waiting on the platform, took their bags. Their New York train was only four tracks away and would depart within an hour so their bags were taken directly to the Pullman, where another drawing room had been reserved for the Chicago-New York trip.

After making sure that their bags were in the drawing room, Janet and Helen went into the great, high ceilinged dining room in the station. They enjoyed a hearty breakfast of delicious country ham and eggs with crisp toast and a cool glass of milk.

Janet bought several morning papers and they returned to the train shed. Trains which had been rushing across the plains all night in their dash for Chicago were still arriving, while on other tracks long strings of coaches, ready to start carrying passengers away from the city, were being backed down the tracks.

Re-entering their New York train, they found seats in the luxurious limousine-lounge car at the rear of the train where the observation platform was enclosed in glass. A radio was tuned softly and all of the latest magazines were available.

Travel was light that day and at the start of the trip they were the only ones in the lounge car as the train rolled smoothly out of the station.

There was a brief pause at Englewood, then they were off again, picking up speed as the train skirted the southern edge of Lake Michigan where great industrial plants were perched along the shore and lake freighters seemed to spring out of the prairie as the rails crossed canals.

At lunch time they were well into Indiana. Only a few more passengers had boarded the train and they had the dining car practically to themselves.

As the afternoon advanced they dipped into Ohio and stops were more frequent. By late afternoon the train was well filled and space in the lounge car was almost at a premium.

Janet and Helen went to bed early that night for the coming day promised to be an unusually busy and exciting one for them—they would have their first glimpse of New York, visit Radio City, and receive their assignments for the radio play they were to be in.

"What are you going to wear tomorrow?" asked Helen as she snuggled down between the crisp sheets.

"I don't know, perhaps the corduroy dress I had on today," replied Janet. "It's so comfortable and I think it's becoming."

"I guess I'll vote that way, too," said Helen, and a minute later both girls were asleep.

They were up early the next morning, breakfasting as the train sped out of the Jersey hills and

straightened out for its dash across the tidewater flats to Jersey City. They shot past commuter trains at almost regular intervals for their limited had the right of way.

As they neared the terminal, the porter took their bags and Helen handed him a tip. Her father had deliberately routed them over a line which ended in Jersey City so that they might have their first real glimpse of the towering New York skyline from a ferryboat.

The passengers poured off the train and onto the nearby ferry. Bells clanged, smoke rolled from the twin stacks, and the bulky boat nosed out into the river. 160

Helen crowded close to Janet as the full majesty of the skyline was unfolded. To their right was the lower city with its cluster of skyscrapers while to their left was mid-town with the Empire State towering almost into the clouds. A little beyond that the sharp spire of the Chrysler building rose skyward.

On the New York side of the Hudson liners were sandwiched into the docks and Janet grabbed Helen's arm and pointed to one. It was the *Europa*, famed speed liner. A little further along was the *Rex*, pride of the Italian merchant marine.

Then the ferry was nosing into its pier. Gates clanged, their baggage was loaded aboard a taxi, and almost before they knew it they were whirling away toward the heart of the city. Helen had given their hotel address.

Up onto an elevated roadway sped their cab where it rocketed along at forty-five miles an hour. Then they shot onto an incline and eased down into a street below. Traffic lights slowed them up now, but in less than ten minutes after leaving the ferry they were in Times Square, the very heart of the throbbing city, where Broadway and Seventh Avenue cross to form a great triangular opening. 161

At the hotel desk Janet registered for both of them.

"We were to have reservations," she said.

The clerk checked the registration list and marked their names off. Then they were whisked away to their rooms, high up and on the inside, where they could sleep in something like quiet. They had two rooms with a connecting bath.

"Well, what do you think of the city?" asked Helen.

"I'm still a little breathless," admitted Janet. "Los Angeles was large—but New York—it just seems to swallow you up."

They dressed carefully in preparation for their trip to Radio City and at nine-thirty o'clock went down stairs and inquired the best way to reach their destination. The clerk on duty suggested that they walk.

"It's only a short distance. Go one block to Sixth Avenue, turn to the left, and continue six blocks to Radio City."

The morning air was clear and cool as they set forth, walking briskly and taking in everything about them. On Sixth Avenue elevated trains rumbled overhead, but up the street they could see the towering building which housed Radio City and their steps quickened. 162

They reached their destination in a few minutes and turned to the right to the entrance which led to the offices of the World Broadcasting Company, the chain which was to put their program on the air. The lobby was of chromium and black and they stepped into a modernistic elevator that whisked them upward so rapidly they were breathless.

They stepped out at the twenty-seventh floor and into a luxuriously furnished lobby where there were comfortable chairs and restful lights. A young woman at the reception desk looked up as the girls advanced.

"We're to join the company from the Ace studios," Janet explained.

"Your names?" The inquiry was purely impersonal.

"Janet Hardy and Helen Thorne."

The young woman checked their names and called a page.

"Take them to studio K," she directed. 163

Janet and Helen turned and followed the page, who was leading them to a new chapter of their lives—one more thrilling than they could have imagined even in their deepest dreams.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

### IN RADIO CITY 164

The page ushered them into the studio and the first person they saw was Curt Newsom, the tall cowboy star who had also had a part in "Kings of the Air."

Curt hastened to greet them.

"When did you get in?" he asked.

"This morning," replied Janet. "My, but it's good to see you again. I didn't know you were going to be in this promotional unit."

The cowboy flushed and grinned somewhat sheepishly.

"Well, to tell the truth, I've always wanted to try broadcasting a little and I finally pestered the general manager out on the coast until he sent me along and ordered them to give me a part. Come on and meet the director of this unit."

Curt led them over to a small group where a rather slender, dark-haired man was speaking. He turned to face them as they approached and Janet noted that he wore unusually thick glasses, indicating that his eyes were in need of heavy correction.

"This is Mr. Ben Adolphi," said Curt, by way of introduction. "Mr. Adolphi has been assigned by the World Broadcasting Company to handle this promotion work."

He introduced each of the girls to the radio director and Mr. Adolphi smiled pleasantly.

"I shall get at your parts presently," he said. "Please be seated."

They found comfortable chairs at one side of the studio and Janet enjoyed the opportunity to look around the room for it was here that they would put on their radio show. The ceiling was high and evidently covered with a cloth which absorbed sound readily. The walls were also covered with a cloth of heavy texture and the carpet on the floor felt an inch thick.

At the rear of the room was a low platform which might be used for an orchestra and to the left, through a heavy plate glass window, was the control room where the engineers regulated the volume of the program and fed it out on the air. Near the door was a desk with a microphone on it for the announcer, and beyond that was a tall steel stand with several microphones, attached to adjustable arms, on it. These could be placed in any portion of the room to pick up the program to the best advantage.

Mr. Adolphi joined them within a few minutes. He carried a handful of script with him and handed one section to Janet and another to Helen.

"You understand that this company is comparatively small when you think of the one used in the production of the picture?" he reminded them. "It will be necessary for you to take several parts, but all of them will be minor rôles since I understand neither of you have had any experience in broadcasting."

The girls nodded their understanding, and the director plunged on.

"We are going to give only the high spots of the film story over the air, but in addition we are going to weave in some of the actual drama and the thrills attached to the shooting of the picture—some of the behind-the-scenes incidents. Understand?"

Again they nodded.

"We have not been able to get all of this material that we desired and Mr. Newsom has informed me that you have a fair ability at writing."

This was aimed at Janet and she replied promptly.

"I enjoy writing," she said, "but the question of ability hasn't been very well determined yet."

"But you sold a script for film purposes only recently," pressed the director.

"Yes, that's true, but I think it was more luck than anything else."

"Be that as it may, I'd like you to write some of the intimate and unusual things that go on in the production of such a picture. Get in all of the thrilling material possible. Get me?"

"I think so," replied Janet, recalling the vivid hours that had marked the production work on "Kings of the Air" when the company was out in the desert and she had been kidnaped.

"Then take the rest of the day off and try to get some of the material into my hands tomorrow morning. We'll have it whipped into shape by the studio continuity writers, for this program goes on the air day after tomorrow."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Adolphi," promised Janet, and the director hurried away to give further instructions to others in the company.

Helen looked at Janet admiringly.

"Well, you certainly get yourself into all kinds of work," she smiled. "Now you'll have to go back to the hotel room and pound away on a rented typewriter while I go down and see a show in the Music Hall."

"Oh, don't do that," begged Janet, who was anxious to see the interior of the world's largest theater. "Wait another day until I can go with you. There'll be plenty for you to see in New York beside the Music Hall."

"All right," agreed Helen. "We'll plan on that for tomorrow afternoon."

As they left the studio they bumped into a slender, dark-haired girl who was hurrying in.

"Clumsy fools," Janet heard the other girl murmur as she went on and Janet's face flushed for it had been as much the other's fault as their own.

They dropped down to the street level in the elevator and Janet started back for the hotel while Helen walked toward Fifth avenue to enjoy a window shopping tour along the exclusive shops that had made the avenue famous throughout the world.

Janet went directly to their hotel and asked at the desk about renting a typewriter. Arrangements were made to have one delivered at her room within half an hour and she went to change into an older dress, something that wouldn't be hurt by wrinkles that were bound to come as she labored over the typewriter.

The machine was delivered promptly and Janet used a supply of the hotel stationery for her writing material. At first the idea of setting down intimate little things about the filming of the picture had appeared easy, but now that the task was before her, the words and ideas did not come freely.

Janet wondered if she dared to record the story of the sabotage when the company was on desert location. She could imagine that it would make grand material for broadcasting purposes and so she set resolutely about the task. The worst that could happen would be for Mr. Adolphi to reject it entirely. Janet finally got started and once under way the flow of words came smoothly and her fingers moved rapidly over the keyboard.

She worked steadily for more than an hour, got up, stretched, walked around the room and returned to the writing. She wasn't attempting to make it a complete story, just giving the sequences as they had happened during the filming of "Kings of the Air" and the mysterious events which had taken place out on the desert. It was natural that Janet should hint that the plotting was the work of another concern for it had been common talk in their own company later that Premier Films, also producing an air story, had attempted to keep their own film from a successful conclusion. But it had only been talk for there was no definite proof.

Helen came hurrying in just as Janet finished her work.

"How is it going?" she asked.

"All through," replied her companion. "Have a good time?"

"Grand. I never knew there could be so many beautiful shops in such a small area. Come on now. I want to ride a subway."

"I'll have to change clothes," said Janet.

"Never mind changing for a subway trip. We'll go down to the Battery. I inquired the way at the desk."

Janet slipped on a light brown coat and followed Helen down and across to the Times Square subway station where they found themselves engulfed in the crowd and the noise. Helen dropped two nickels in the turnstile and they went through the gate, Helen still in the lead and striding along as though she were the veteran of many a ride in the subway instead of a rank beginner.

A train roared out of the darkness of the tube and Janet saw a sign, "South Ferry," on the windows.

"This is our train," cried Helen, shoving her companion ahead of her and into one of the seats. Other passengers piled in, the doors clanged and they were roaring through the tunnel far under the street level. Their train was an express and occasionally they shot past a slower local. The air was close with an odor that is peculiar to a subway, but Janet enjoyed the ride, watching the crowd in the car. It was evident that most of them were accustomed to using the subway several times a day and they were either visiting or reading evening papers, which they had folded so they would take up the least possible room.

At the South Ferry station they walked up to the street levels and entered Battery park. Janet paused a moment, struck by the beauty of the harbor in the late afternoon. Beyond the Battery was the Statue of Liberty and even further the tidewater flats of Jersey.

Several freighters, which had cleared their docks a few minutes before, were going down the harbor and Janet and Helen, standing along the Battery wondered for what distant port they might be bound.

They walked past the Aquarium. On another afternoon they would come back and spend several hours going through that fascinating building.

"I'm tired," confessed Janet. "Let's get back to the hotel now, clean up, and have dinner. Perhaps we'll go to a show after that."

Helen readily agreed to the suggestion and they returned to the South Ferry station where they caught an uptown express that took them to Times Square at a dizzy pace.

When they emerged from the tube, the shadows were lengthening in the heart of the city. Sidewalks were crowded with hundreds of men and women on their way home after a day's work in the city. They paused for several minutes to watch the teeming mass of humanity and then turned and entered their hotel.

Janet was the first to step into their rooms and the instant she passed the threshold a feeling of foreboding gripped her and she stopped so suddenly that Helen bumped into her.

"What's the matter?" asked Helen, looking up quickly.

Janet looked a little sheepish. "I don't know. For some reason I thought there was something wrong in here."

"Want me to scream?" smiled Helen. "I can do a good job of that and I guarantee to get someone here in less than a minute with one scream."

In spite of the banter Janet was far from reassured for a feeling of unrest had settled down upon her. She snapped on the lights in the room and looked around.

Apparently nothing had been disturbed and Helen walked past her and went on into her own room. A puff of wind stirred the curtains at the half-opened window and Janet walked over and looked out. There was no fire escape nearby and it would have been impossible for anyone to have gained access to their room in that manner. But then, she asked herself, why would anyone want to enter their room. They carried no personal jewelry of any value and the money they had left in the room was of such a small amount that it would not make robbery worth while.

In the next room Helen was humming to herself as she undressed and prepared to take a shower. Janet dropped down on the bed to rest a moment. It had been a hectic day and she was tired. Her eyes dropped and she fell into a deep sleep.

Helen finished her shower, looked in at Janet, then returned to her own room, where she partially dressed, put on a dressing gown, and sat down to write a letter home chronicling the events of her first day in New York.

Janet awoke as suddenly as she had fallen asleep. Helen had turned out the light in her room and it was quite dark now, the only light coming through the half-opened door that led to the bathroom and on to Helen's room.

Janet turned on the light over the desk where she had been writing and glanced down at the manuscript she had been working on. She turned and called sharply to Helen.

"Did you pick up the manuscript I finished this afternoon?" she asked.

"Haven't seen it since we left for the Battery," replied Helen. "The last I knew it was right beside your typewriter. Maybe you're too sleepy to see it."

"I'm not that sleepy," retorted Janet.

Perhaps she had put it on the dresser and she turned toward that article of furniture but there was no sign of the manuscript there. She pulled open the drawers, but the manuscript was not there and Helen joined her in the hunt.

"Sure you haven't taken it to your room and mislaid it?" asked Janet, a deep pucker of worry lining her forehead.

"We'll look to make sure," said Helen and they hastened to her room, but the search there was just as fruitless as the one in Janet's room. Janet even looked in the closets, but there was no encouragement there. In a last hope, she went through the wastepaper basket, but she was doomed to disappointment and turned to Helen, her voice shaking with emotion.

"There's no doubt about it now," she declared. "Someone entered our rooms while we were away and stole the manuscript I had been working on!"

## *Chapter Twenty*

### THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

The girls stared helplessly at each other and Helen was finally the first to speak.

"But Janet, that can't be possible. It must be here somewhere."

Janet shook her head firmly. "It isn't here and we both know it. My premonition when we entered the room was right. Something is decidedly wrong."

"But what can we do about it?" asked Helen.

"I'm going to call the clerk," said Janet, picking up the telephone. She explained briefly what had happened. "The assistant manager is here. He's coming up in five minutes," she said when she replaced the instrument on the stand.

Helen rushed back to her own room to finish dressing and was fully clothed when the assistant manager arrived. He made a careful examination of the door and the lock and then went all over the rooms with the girls, but as Janet had felt convinced, there was no further trace of the missing papers.

"I regret this deeply," said the hotel official, "and can only promise that every effort will be made to see that the papers are returned if they are still in the building." He excused himself to question the housekeeper about any maid who might have been working in the room while the girls were away.

In less than five minutes he returned, a maid following close behind him.

"I think the mystery is solved," he explained. "The maid says she came in to put fresh towels in the bathroom and someone knocked at the door. She answered and a man from the World Broadcasting Company said he had come to get your manuscript. He came right on in and picked up the papers beside the typewriter. Of course she should not have admitted him, but he appeared to know just what he wanted."

"What did he look like?" Janet asked the maid.

"Well, I didn't pay particular attention, but he was small and I guess you would call him dark. He had on a hat and it was pulled down over his forehead. He took the papers and went on out. Said they'd be waiting for you at the broadcasting office tomorrow."

"I believe this solves the mystery," said the assistant manager.

"I hope so," agreed Janet. "We're sorry to have caused you so much trouble."

When the hotel official and the maid had taken their departure, Helen turned to her companion.

"I didn't know the radio people were in such a hurry for the material you were working on," she said.

"Neither did I," replied Janet, "but I guess it is all right. Let's have dinner now and then perhaps a show. I feel tremendously relieved about the manuscript."

They added a dab of powder and a touch of rouge to their faces and went downstairs. Further down the block they had noticed an attractive Old English Inn and they walked there where they enjoyed a leisurely dinner.

"What shall we do now?" asked Helen as she finished the dish of ice cream which was their dessert.

"Shall we go back to Radio City and see the Music Hall?" asked Janet.

"I'd like nothing better. We're on our way."

They strolled along at a leisurely pace, turned into Sixth Avenue and headed north toward the great mass of gray limestone which was Radio City. Overhead the trains rumbled along the elevated, but Janet and Helen had eyes only for Radio City.

Ahead of them opened the doors of the world's largest theater and with their hearts beating faster than usual they purchased their tickets and walked into the grand foyer, the most majestic, breath-taking enclosure either of them had ever been in. Their feet sank into the heavy pile of the great carpet and their eyes feasted on the beauty of the towering bronze doors which led into the theater itself.

Then they went on into the Music Hall, which with its sixty-two hundred seats, was the largest of the world's modern theaters. A great expanse of space greeted their eyes, the theater sloping gently forward to the huge stage. An orchestra, in full dress, was rising from the depths of its pit as though lifted by the hand of some unseen giant. The orchestra broke into a full swell of music and Janet and Helen, sinking into deep, comfortable seats, were enraptured. Above them hidden lights changed the color effect of the ceiling continuously. Then the overture was over and the curtains of the stage parted and for half an hour they enjoyed a musical entertainment based on Coney Island, the famed fun center of the city. After that came the feature picture, and they enjoyed every moment of the nearly three hours of entertainment.

When it was over they walked out slowly, for the Music Hall was one great part of Radio City. Tomorrow, across the street and up on the twenty-seventh floor, they would be in another but very vital part of Radio City, in the broadcasting studios of the World Broadcasting Company. As they walked down Sixth Avenue they glanced aloft and far up in the building a blaze of light shone from windows. Some company was busy up there tonight, providing thousands of radio fans with drama or music for their entertainment and they thrilled at the thought that within a very short time, they, too, would be a part of the radio world.

Back in their rooms that night Janet glanced at the place beside the typewriter where the manuscript had disappeared. She would have liked to have telephoned Curt Newsom and told the lanky cowboy about the incident but he had not mentioned where he was staying. She thought of telephoning Mr. Adolphi, their radio director, but dismissed that for she felt that he might think her foolish. Undoubtedly he had sent for the manuscript.

They were up early the next morning, refreshed after a night of sound sleep. A quick shower was followed by a rapid but thorough toilet and they were ready for what they might have in store for them. They had breakfast in the grill room which opened off the main lobby of their hotel and then started for Radio City.

There was a touch of fall in the air and they walked briskly, pushing through other hurrying throngs of men and women who were on their way to work.

The elevator shot them up to the twenty-seventh floor in a dizzy, breathless rush and they stepped out into the reception room. A page took them to studio K and there were only two others there when they entered—Ben Adolphi, their director, and Curt Newsom. The cowboy star looked a little pale.

"Sick?" asked Janet.

Curt shook his head. "Not exactly, but I didn't sleep very well last night. Too much noise here in the city. I'm going to move. My hotel's right on Times Square."

"Why, we're staying there too," said Helen. "Our hotel is the Dorchester. We slept fine."

"I'm staying there," replied Curt, "but I don't see how you slept. I heard fire engines and police patrols and street cars and newsboys all night. I might as well have been down in the subway trying to sleep on an express train."

The radio director looked at Janet.

"Manuscript ready?" he asked.

Janet stared at him and he repeated the question.

"Haven't you got it?" she asked.

"Certainly not," he snapped, evidently a little provoked at what he considered dull wits.

"But the maid at the hotel said someone from the studio called yesterday afternoon for it. It's

gone!"

"Certainly I didn't send for it," he retorted. "Evidently it was some one's idea of a practical joke." 185

"I don't think it was much of a joke," said Curt quietly. "If the manuscript Janet was working on has disappeared, it vanished because someone was afraid of what she might write."

## *Chapter Twenty-one*

### INSINUATIONS 186

At the cool words of the cowboy star, the radio director whirled to face him.

"Just what do you mean by that," he demanded, his face flushing.

"I mean just this," retorted Curt. "There was a very real attempt made on the coast to stop the filming of 'Kings of the Air' and it begins to look like that attempt is being carried on even in New York in an effort to stop the promotion of the picture. All I've got to say is that someone had better be careful."

"Are you insinuating anything?" demanded the radio director.

"I'm not insinuating; I'm just saying," said the cowboy star firmly.

The director turned back to Janet.

"You're sure the manuscript was stolen?"

"It was unless someone in the studio here has it," she replied.

"I'll make inquiries," he promised, "but I am sure no one in the studio would have sent for it." 187

Mr. Adolphi left studio K and Janet, Helen and Curt Newsom were alone.

"You're not kidding about the manuscript being missing?" Curt asked.

"No, Curt, I'm terribly serious. We went out for a time yesterday afternoon. While we were gone the maid came in to leave clean towels and while she was in the room a man came in. He said he was from the studio here and had come for the manuscript. Naturally the girl didn't object and he walked out with the papers."

"What did you have in the story?"

"Oh, a lot about the final days in the desert. How the attempts were made to stop the picture, the bombing from the sky and my own kidnaping."

"Did you hint that some other company was responsible for this?" The question was snapped at Janet.

"Come to think of it, I did, but of course I didn't mention any company by name."

Curt scratched his head in frank worry.

"You know," he confessed, "this thing has got me puzzled. There is some powerful agency at work to stop the picture Helen's father made and I believe its influence must extend right here into this studio. You girls be sure and watch your step and especially at night." 188

"But nothing will happen to us," protested Helen.

"No, I don't suppose there will, but you keep on the alert just the same," Curt warned them.

Mr. Adolphi returned and shook his head in response to Janet's inquiring gaze.

"I've checked everyone in the studio," he said, "and no one knows anything about it. Can you do the manuscript over?"

"Probably," assented Janet, "but I'd prefer not to under the circumstances."

The director did not insist and Janet thought perhaps he even seemed a little relieved.

Other members of the company arrived. Several of them had been in the film company on the coast but most of them were from the regular stock company which the studio maintained for its dramatic needs. Most of them were pleasant enough. Only one of them turned Janet against her and that was the small, dark-haired actress who had bumped into her the day before and called her a "clumsy fool." That was Rachel Nesbit and Janet thought her eyes a trifle too close together and her mouth too hard. It looked as though it was difficult for Rachel to look pleasant and there was a sully twist to her lips. 189

Janet soon found that Rachel was the pampered member of the studio's stock company. She was considered an actress of ability and she arrived late and left early during rehearsals. Her one redeeming grace was that she came through when she was before a microphone. Janet also learned that Rachel was writing in addition to her acting and that she had had several of her skits produced on the air.

As soon as the company was assembled, Director Adolphi plunged into the task of rehearsing. Sound men brought in the necessary paraphernalia and through the hours of the morning they went over the first scene which was to be presented in their radio show. The program was to be unusual, running half an hour for five consecutive nights, each of them increasing the tempo and mystery of the action. Janet, reading the script, could feel the thing getting into her blood and she was anxious for the hour to come when they would actually go on the air. 190

She had no fear of the microphone, now, for that had vanished while she was working for Billy Fenstow in the westerns with Curt Newsom and Helen.

The trio had lunch together that noon, and returned immediately to the studio, where rehearsals continued into the afternoon and at the close of the day the director rather grudgingly conceded that the company had made excellent progress.

"Be here tomorrow sharply at nine," he cautioned as he dismissed them for the day.

Members of the company scattered quickly, some of them hurrying away to catch trains for their suburban homes.

Janet, Helen, and Curt Newsom walked slowly toward the elevators. The corridor down which they walked was practically deserted for none of the studios flanking it were in use. They entered the main lobby of the World Broadcasting Company office. From a loudspeaker on the reception desk came the voice of a world-famous crooner which Helen recognized instantly.

"That's a program I'd like to see," she told Curt.

"Come on, then. Now that we are members of a radio company, we ought to be able to crash the gates."

The cowboy star inquired the way to the proper studio and they turned and walked down a long corridor to Studio A, the largest and most costly of all of the broadcasting rooms of the World Company. It was like a little theater, with sloping seats and a stage upon which the performers worked before the microphone. At the back was a large orchestra, while up to the front of the stage the famous crooner was singing into a "mike."

"Why, he doesn't look at all like I thought he would," exclaimed Helen as they peered through the plate glass windows which flanked one wall of the studio. "He's much older."

"Many of us are disillusioned about our heroes and heroines," said Curt quietly. "Let's eat. I'd like a steak."

"Sounds good to me," agreed Janet, and even Helen was willing to leave the studio after another minute or two of gazing at the crooner.

They ate in a small but attractive restaurant off Sixth Avenue and after a leisurely meal Curt hurried away to keep an appointment and Janet and Helen, though tired from the long day's grind of rehearsals, strolled over to Fifth Avenue to look into shop windows. After half an hour on the avenue, they started back to their Times Square hotel, heading west on one of New York's dark and little-frequented cross streets.

They were halfway down the long, dimly lit block when Helen seized Janet's arm.

"Someone's following us!" she whispered.

## *Chapter Twenty-two*

### SHADOWED!

Despite Helen's whisper of warning, Janet never missed a stride. If anything, she quickened her pace.

"Keep up with me," she replied, "and don't look around."

From somewhere behind Janet could hear steady footfalls that quickened as they walked faster.

"Are you sure someone is following us?" asked Janet.

"Positive," replied Helen. "There was someone back of us on the avenue and he turned onto this street right after we did."

"But it must be coincidence," insisted Janet.

"But remember what Curt said about our knowing too much of the mysterious events that went on during the last days of the filming of 'Kings of the Air,'" said Helen. "He warned us to watch out."

There was no answer to that for Curt had warned them and Janet was glad that they were near the bright lights of Broadway. She felt safer now. As the noise of that great artery of traffic deepened, they slowed their pace and Janet turned and looked around.

There was no one on the street behind them. She grasped Helen's arm and both girls stopped.

"There's no one following us," smiled Janet. "It was just imagination."

"It wasn't imagination and you know it," declared Helen. "Whoever it was could easily have slipped into a doorway. Maybe he's watching us this very moment."

Janet felt a shiver of nervousness race along her spine. It was not pleasant to think of being shadowed, especially in New York where there were so many people and so few friends.

They turned into Times Square and entered the lobby of their hotel. At the desk they inquired for mail and each received letters from home.

Once up in the privacy of their rooms, they undressed, slipped into comfortable pajamas and dressing gowns, and read their letters. There was little actual news from Clarion, but just hearing from their fathers and mothers was nice.



"Dad is anxious to hear the first part of the program," said Helen as she finished her letter. "He says they'll all be over at our house grouped around the radio when we go on."

"Nervous about it?" asked Janet.

"Not particularly about the program, but there's something about the whole thing that has me uncertain. The company seems to be on edge as though there was some danger hanging over the heads of everyone."

"Perhaps talk about the trouble on the coast has reached them," suggested Janet.

"That may be. But I'm so anxious for the program to be a success. This picture has meant so much to Dad; it's the air epic that he has wanted to do for years. If it goes over in a big way, the Ace Company will renew his contract for a substantial time and give him a big increase in salary."

Shortly after that they retired and both girls slept soundly.

Next day at the studio the pressure was on again and Director Adolphi whipped them through the rehearsals at a terrific pace. Several changes in script were necessary and the director sent a page to the scenario department on the run. He returned in a few minutes with Jim Hill, the writer who had handled the continuity for the radio play.

"Listen, Jim," he snapped. "This sequence is punk. It will fall flat on the air and too much money is being spent on this program. Get some punch into this or I'll see that another writer gets the job."

Jim Hill was tall, lean and pleasant, with dark eyes that shot back sparks at the director's criticism.

"You okayed this script once," he reminded Adolphi, "but I'll see what I can do about it."

Dark, pretty Rachel Nesbit stepped forward.

"I'm pretty good at that sort of thing," she declared, flashing a winning smile at Jim Hill. "Perhaps I could help on the rewriting."

The continuity writer looked at her glumly.

"Your stuff is all right for lighter things, but this is straight action drama," he said shaking his head.

"But I can at least try," insisted Rachel, and the worried continuity writer finally acceded to her insistent requests. He left the studio with Rachel accompanying him.

Janet turned to Curt Newsom.

"I thought all of the work on this script was being handled with the utmost precaution and that no one outside was to do anything on it?"

"I guess that's right, but Rachel can hardly be called an outsider since she belongs to the studio's stock company."

"But she sells some of her radio skits free lance," insisted Janet.

"That's right," agreed Curt. "I hadn't thought of that."

He hastened over to Director Adolphi.

"No one with any outside contacts is supposed to work on this script or in the company," he told the director.

"That's right," replied Mr. Adolphi. "There's an iron-clad contract with the Ace Motion Picture Corporation to that effect."

"Then you'd better get Rachel back here. She'll read the rest of the script and know what the final broadcast will be."

"Oh, but Rachel's all right. Of course she does a little free lance stuff, but she can be depended upon."

"I'm not arguing that point," said Curt firmly. "I'm just telling you to get Rachel back here unless you want a violation of your contract reported to the Ace Company."

"I didn't think you'd stoop to such a dirty trick," sneered the radio director.

"You don't even need to think," snapped Curt, his eyes flashing. "You just live up to the agreements of that contract and you'll have no more trouble."

With his temper considerably ruffled, Mr. Adolphi left the studio and other members of the company stared wide-eyed at the husky cowboy star for most of them held their director in awe, but Curt had spoken firmly and there had been nothing else for Adolphi to do unless he violated the contract.

He returned to the studio in less than five minutes with Rachel Nesbit at his heels. The minute she entered the room, she rushed toward Janet, her hands clenched and her eyes snapping sparks of anger.

"You're responsible for this insult," she stormed at Janet. "I'd like to step on you."

"Oh, calm down, Rachel," said the director. "It was this skinny cowboy who started the trouble."

The radio actress and continuity writer whirled toward Curt Newsom.

"Go ahead and step on me," he grinned, and a titter of giggles ran through the rest of the company.

Rachel's dark cheeks flamed anew with anger, but she kept her tongue and turned away in silence.

The rehearsal continued. They were getting well along in the production and Janet felt that it was going smoothly. It was a condensed version of the real story of "Kings of the Air" and so to Janet and Helen it was familiar material.

Promptly at noon the director stopped the rehearsal.

"Half an hour for lunch," he announced and the company scattered at once.

Janet and Helen walked down the long corridor to the reception room where a hurrying figure almost bumped into them.

It was Jim Hill, the continuity writer. He stopped suddenly and his face lighted up as he recognized them.

"Just the girls I'm looking for!" he exclaimed. "Lunch time?"

Janet nodded.

"Then have lunch with me," and before they could remonstrate, he hurried them toward the elevator and they dropped downward with a suddenness that always unnerved Janet.

200

### *Chapter Twenty-three*

#### JANET PINCH HITS

201

Janet and Helen found that Jim Hill was extremely pleasant and likeable, but he appeared to be laboring under some severe nervous strain and Janet noticed that his hands shook when he picked up a glass of milk.

"This script for your broadcast has about got me down," he confessed. "I've got to keep lots of punch in the action and yet I can't give away the actual plot of the film. On top of that old Adolphi is a regular crab and it doesn't seem like anything will suit him. This whole show of yours has to be okayed Saturday night by the Ace film people and if they don't like it they can cancel out and give it to another company."

"Is there any danger of that?" asked Janet.

"I'll say there is. This is a juicy contract and two other chains would like to get it on their networks. Believe me, there is some intense rivalry in getting big contracts like this. Why the Acme and the Sky High chains would be willing to pay a large sum just to see us fizzle the rehearsal Saturday night."

202

Janet was silent for a time. She had sensed the tension in the studio without knowing exactly what was behind it. Now she knew what was wrong.

Jim Hill was speaking again.

"Both of you girls are from the original film company on the coast, aren't you?" he asked.

Helen nodded in agreement.

"Then perhaps you would have some suggestions that might help me out of this tangle," suggested the continuity writer.

"Mr. Adolphi suggested that several days ago and I worked one whole afternoon on it, but someone stole the manuscript I had finished out of my room," explained Janet.

Jim whistled softly to himself.

"So that's how it stands." Janet and Helen weren't sure whether he was talking to them or to himself.

The continuity writer pushed back his chair and stared at them appraisingly.

"I wish you'd help me and I'll promise that your script won't be stolen from your hotel room. What do you say?"

203

Janet looked at Helen, and her companion nodded approvingly. The decision was easy to make for Jim was likeable and both of the girls wanted the broadcast to be a success.

"All right, we'll do it," said Janet.

"You mean you'll do it," Helen corrected her. "I'm not good as a writer and you can fairly make a typewriter talk. I'll just hang around and give you whatever advice I can and try not to be a nuisance."

"Say, that's great," said the continuity writer. "When can you begin?"

"As soon as we are through rehearsing this afternoon," promised Janet.

"How long will it take?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "Radio continuity is something new for me. I'll simply do the rough stuff and you'll have to smooth it over."

"Then suppose you come to my office as soon as you're through and you can work right on into the evening. Helen and I will see that you are well supplied with coffee, sandwiches and whatever you want in the way of eats."

"I'll be there," promised Janet. "Now we've got to get back to the studio."

At rehearsal that afternoon neither their director nor Rachel Nesbit were in a good mood and Rachel made it obvious that despite Curt's explanation she still blamed Janet and Helen for being taken off the continuity work on the script.

"It was the chance of a lifetime," Janet overheard her telling another girl in the company. "What if there is a clause about keeping the script secret. I'd know it as soon as the final chapter is placed in the hands of the company for rehearsal."

"But we won't get the final chapter until Saturday afternoon," replied the other. "They're taking no chances about any leaks on this program so any of the other companies can interfere with their contract for this big film broadcast."

Janet had no idea just how much the broadcast of their program would mean to the World Broadcasting Company, but from all the talk in the studio, she knew that it must be an exceedingly large sum. The vice president in charge of programs dropped into the studio that afternoon and watched them work for over an hour. At the end of that time, when the director called a brief recess, Janet saw him conferring with Mr. Adolphi. Whatever passed between them evidently was not pleasant to the director for he called them back at once and they started all over again, the director driving them with an intensity that approached a white-hot fury.

At last the rehearsal was over and most of them were completely worn out. Janet, fortunately, had been spared most of the director's criticism while poor Helen had come in for several bitter attacks from him.

"I'm going on to the hotel, take a shower and crawl into bed," said Helen. "Another day like this will put me in bed for a week."

"I'll be along later," said Janet. "Get the mail at the desk and if there are any letters for me, leave them on my bed."

They parted, Helen taking the elevator down and Janet turning toward the suite of rooms where the continuity writers worked. At the end of a long corridor, she found Jim Hill's office, a tiny cubby that contained only a desk, chair and typewriter stand.

"I thought you'd forgotten all about this writing date," said Jim, looking up. "I've patched up the sequence that Adolphi objected to this afternoon, but I'm still in a mess over the last episode. It's got to carry a lot of punch and this is the chapter we've got to guard until the last afternoon of rehearsal. There are more leaks in a big studio like this than you can shake a fist at."

"But who would give away this information?" asked Janet.

"That's not hard to guess," replied Jim. "It could be someone jealous of another member of the company, or someone who wanted a job with another broadcasting outfit and who figured that by double crossing his or her present employer, a better job could be obtained."

Jim stood up and motioned for Janet to take his place at the typewriter. Briefly he explained what he had been trying to work out and Janet thought his ideas sounded good. But somewhere the winning punch was lacking.

She scanned the last pages of script which he had written. Then she rolled a fresh sheet of copy paper into the typewriter and started work. A new interest took possession of her and the fatigue of the day dropped away as she got into the swing of the writing.

### *Chapter Twenty-four*

#### NIGHT ON THE TWENTY-SEVENTH FLOOR

Jim Hill peered over her shoulder for a time. Then satisfied at the work she was doing, he slipped away and went in quest of a basket of lunch. It was nearly half an hour before he returned and by that time Janet had completed two pages of manuscript.

Jim laid the lunch out on his desk and while Janet munched a thick, cold meat sandwich and quaffed a glass of cold milk, he read the pages with real care.

"Say, this is just the stuff my script lacked," enthused the continuity writer. "My gosh, Janet, you ought to be on the staff here. We pay money for fresh ideas like these."

Janet stopped munching the sandwich and looked at Jim Hill with real interest.

"You actually think it is good?" she asked.

"I'll say it's good. Of course a lot of work has to be done to put it in finished form, but you've got the meat of it here. I'm going to take this down to McGregor. He's still in his office."

Before Janet could ask about McGregor and who he was, Jim Hill picked up the manuscript and his own work and fled down the hall.

When he returned ten minutes later a square hulk of a man, who had thick pompadour hair and peered through thick lensed glasses, followed him into his office.

"Janet," said the younger writer, "I want you to know Mr. McGregor, who is head of our continuity department. I showed him your manuscript and he agrees with me that it is just what we want for the final episode in the program for Ace Pictures. Can you go on working tonight? We've got to have the finished draft in the morning."

There was a dire appeal in young Jim Hill's eyes. Janet couldn't have ignored that and then Mr. McGregor spoke.

"It is extremely important that we have the Ace contract," he said in his slow, precise way. "Other companies are also anxious for it and if our dress rehearsal Saturday night fails to meet the approval of the Ace officials, we may lose the contract, which would then go to one of our rivals. We are none too sure but what they have certain people within our own staff who might sell them some of our secrets about this program."

210

"I know the situation," said Janet. "I'm tired, but I'll keep on until I either go to sleep or am through."

Mr. McGregor smiled approvingly and Jim Hill felt like shouting.

"That's splendid," said the continuity chief. "I'm going to send Jim along to bed. He's to report here early tomorrow morning to start the rewriting of your story. You keep on as long as you can. When you are through you can lock the script in the right hand drawer of Jim's desk. Here is a key for you and Jim has one already."

The head of the continuity department departed and Jim Hill lingered on for a minute or two.

"Want some more lunch?" he asked.

Janet, who had turned back to her typewriter, shook her head.

"How about a cup of coffee to keep you awake a while longer? I don't want you to go to sleep before you get this material hashed out for me."

211

"Go on, Jim. I'll get along all right. It won't take long now if I'm not interrupted."

Jim Hill took the hint and departed quietly and Janet continued with her work. It was something she thoroughly enjoyed doing. This writing was creating something out of whole cloth. Of course it would have to have a special revision by Jim tomorrow to work it into the script, but when it finally went on the air there would still be a lot of her material in the radio play.

Janet worked for more than half an hour and then leaned back in her chair for her arms ached and her eyes were blurred.

The studio was strangely silent. From somewhere at a distance came the soft strains of an orchestra but there was no sound in the corridor where the writer's offices were located.

Janet picked up the sheets of copy she had written and scanned the material. She smiled a bit as she read it and admitted that it did real well.

Placing the sheets back on the desk, she inserted a fresh page of copy paper into the typewriter. She would be through in a few more minutes. She glanced at her wrist watch before she started in again. It was eleven-forty. By midnight she would be through.

212

Janet was about to resume her work when a queer sensation started at the base of her spine and shot up her back. It was a feeling she couldn't quite describe and she sat perfectly motionless for several seconds.

Through her mind shot the thought that someone was watching her, peering at her from the darkness of the long corridor.

Janet turned suddenly, but there was no one behind her. She got up and went to the door where she could look down the corridor, but there was no one in sight. The office across the corridor from Jim's was dark and the windows only mirrored the shadowy depths.

Despite the fact that she saw no one, Janet was not wholly reassured and she looked about Jim's office. There were shades at the windows and the door which could be pulled down and she closed the door and drew all of the curtains. Before returning to the desk, she snapped the spring lock on the door. That done, she went back to the typewriter, but it was hard to concentrate now.

213

Janet forced herself to the task. She knew she must finish and at last got into the mood of her script again, working now at high speed and wholly forgetful of the strange feeling which had alarmed her.

Somewhere in the distance a bell tolled midnight as she finished the last page and pulled it triumphantly from the typewriter. The job was done and she felt that it was well done.

The pages she had written were scattered over the top of the desk and as she reached out to pick them up, one of them floated to the floor. Janet half turned to pick it up. As she did so, her eyes fell on a small gap in the curtains she had drawn on the windows along the corridor.

### *Chapter Twenty-five*

214

#### JANET OPENS A DOOR

A half stifled scream escaped from her lips. Someone was staring at her intently through the small opening. The light from the desk lamp was just strong enough to reveal two eyes. That was all, but Janet saw the desperate intentness with which they were focused upon her.

Then the eyes vanished and there was no sound from the corridor. Involuntarily Janet leaped to her feet, her trembling hands seeking the curtain and closing the gap. She wanted to cry out, but the words stuck in her throat and she realized that to scream would be useless for there was no one along the corridor at this hour of the night who could help her.

Stepping back from the curtained window, Janet listened intently for the sound of footfalls in the corridor. Then she remembered that it was heavily carpeted and one could move along it without making a noise.

215

Visibly shaken, she finally rallied her nerves and stooped down to pick up the sheet of copy which had fallen from the desk. Almost mechanically she placed the sheets in order and stacked them neatly. That done she sat down at the desk to decide what to do.

There was no question in her own mind but what someone was after the manuscript she had finished and someone outside the studio. The disappearance of the manuscript from her hotel room tied up with this latest event and Janet knew that some agency was determined that the story of the last eventful days of the filming of "Kings of the Air" should never be told as a part of the radio play they were to present. Whether the unknown force was the Premier Film Company or a radio rival of the World Broadcasting Company, she couldn't even guess, but in either case she knew that she was in a particularly unpleasant position, and wished that Jim was with her.

Janet unlocked the right hand drawer of Jim's desk and pulled it out. For ordinary purposes it was strong enough, but to place a valuable manuscript in it was something that made her hesitate.

216

She turned around and stared at the curtains at the windows and the door along the corridor. They were drawn tightly now. It would be impossible for anyone to see in the office.

What should she do with the manuscript? Would it be safe in her own hands when she walked down the long corridor she must traverse before she reached the reception lobby and the battery of elevators?

Janet didn't feel she wanted to risk that, yet she knew it would be unsafe in the drawer of Jim's desk.

Suddenly her gaze fell upon the telephone and she smiled a little foolishly. She picked up the instrument and waited for the operator in the main office to answer.

There was no response.

Janet jiggled the hook several times, but still there was no answer. She did not know that the particular branch exchange on that floor which served the publicity department did not have an operator on duty after midnight.

Janet's spirits drooped when she failed to get a response through the telephone and once more she looked about the room for some place to hide the manuscript.

217

Suddenly she hit upon a plan of action. Seizing the manuscript she hastened over near the outside window, reached down and pulled up the heavy carpet which covered the floor. Working swiftly she placed the manuscript under the carpet, spreading the sheets out so there would be no noticeable bulge in the floor covering.

That done Janet returned to the desk, picked up a handful of blank copy paper, folded it quickly, and stuffed it into a large envelope. Taking up a pen she scrawled these words on the envelope: "Jim Hill—Here is the manuscript you wanted. Hope it is something that will fit into your program. Janet Hardy."

Janet didn't even stop to blot the wet ink, dropping the envelope into the drawer, and closing and locking the receptacle.

She felt better after that. At least she felt she had done her best to save the manuscript. Now the problem was to get up enough courage to attempt the walk down the long, darkened corridor.

218

Janet slipped the key to the drawer of Jim's desk into her left shoe, mechanically patted her hair, and decided that she might just as well be on her way.

It took nerve to open that door, and to step out into the hall from which someone had been staring at her only several minutes before. But somehow Janet managed it.

## *Chapter Twenty-six*

### IN THE HALL

219

From a distance came the soft strains of an orchestra playing in one of the more distant studios on the same floor, but there was no movement in the corridor.

Janet paused at the door. Should she snap out the lights? If no one came along they would burn all night, yet if she turned them off, she would be in utter darkness.

Then she realized that she was silhouetted in the light. Anyone who might trouble her would be even more handicapped than she in the darkness and her fingers pressed the switch.

As the lights went out, Janet stepped quickly away from the door, her feet treading silently on the heavy carpet which covered the floor of the hall.

Janet pressed close against the wall, listening for some sound which would indicate that someone was lurking in the corridor. There was only the far away music of the orchestra as it played a dreamy waltz. From outside a clock boomed, but Janet couldn't remember whether it was a half after midnight or a quarter to one. It didn't matter much, she decided.

220

Convinced at last there was no one moving along the corridor, she started feeling her own way along. The end of the corridor was marked by a very dim light that failed to penetrate more than

a dozen feet in any direction. It was toward this glow that Janet started.

It was a ghostly and unnerving business, but she couldn't spend the whole night in Jim's office. It just wasn't possible. She had to get out.

Fighting to keep down a mounting fear, Janet quickened her steps. Then she stopped abruptly. Just why she did that, she would never know, but her instinct warned her that someone was near.

She turned toward an office door she had just passed. It was open and a flood of light poured out to blind Janet's tired eyes. The beam from the electric torch was so bright it fairly seared its way into her fatigued mind.

Then the stabbing light vanished and Janet heard a swift movement. A hard hand was clapped over her mouth and she felt an arm slide around her neck. 221

Before she could scream or move, a soft cloth, which reminded her of a hospital, was slapped against her face and the fumes of ether penetrated her nose and throat. Janet attempted to struggle but two capable arms held her fast.

She felt herself losing consciousness. She felt delightfully tired and dreamy. Once she rallied her senses, but the next time she slipped away into unconsciousness and her captor, satisfied that she would cause no trouble for some time, let her fall into a heap on the floor.

While Janet remained unconscious, a lithe figure darted into Jim Hill's office and the flash sought the drawer into which she had dropped the manuscript.

A small steel instrument, expertly inserted, forced the drawer open and the beam of light fell upon the inscription Janet had placed on the envelope. The intruder's breath was drawn in sharply and it was evident that this was the property sought.

Removing the envelope and placing it in his pocket, the unknown closed the drawer and slipped out into the corridor. Bending down over Janet, the figure vanished. Someone watching closely could have seen it dodge into the main reception room, but there was no one there to watch—only Janet unconscious on the floor. 222

Just how long she remained slumped on the floor she would never know exactly; probably it was not more than half an hour at the most.

Finally lights penetrated her tired mind and the sweetish smell of the ether assailed her returning consciousness. Someone was shaking her gently and someone else was rubbing her arms.

"Wake up, Janet, wake up!" a voice kept repeating.

It sounded strangely like Helen's voice, but Helen, she realized, had gone home hours before.

"Take a drink of this," another voice commanded and Janet obeyed almost automatically for she was far from being in full command of her senses.

The cool water, flowing down her aching throat, helped and she tried to sit up.

"Take it easy," a voice cautioned and she let her head drop back against someone's knees. 223

Lights were on now in the corridor and as consciousness returned Janet recognized Helen leaning over her. Curt Newsom was massaging her arms and grumbling to himself in anger.

"Feeling better?" Helen asked as Janet's eyes opened wide.

"I'll be all right, soon. I'd like another drink of water," said Janet.

A second glass of water followed the first and she felt stronger as her head cleared.

"What happened?" she asked.

"That's what we'd like to know," said Curt. "We found you unconscious on the floor a few minutes ago and the place smelled like a hospital."

"Look at Jim Hill's desk and see if the right hand drawer has anything in it," Janet whispered to Curt and the tall cowboy hurried away to do her bidding.

He returned almost instantly, shaking his head.

"Someone's pried the drawer open with a jimmy," he declared. "There isn't a thing in the drawer."

Helen looked stricken.

"Don't tell me that manuscript you worked on all evening was in that drawer," she said. 224

Janet looked beyond Helen and Curt to where half a dozen studio employees, most of them from the engineering department, were clustered looking at her and wondering what it was all about.

"I put the manuscript there just before I started down the hall," nodded Janet. "It looks like it's gone."

There was a flicker of her right eyelid, barely visible to Helen and Curt, and they caught its meaning and played the parts Janet wanted.

"Then that means they won't be able to bolster up the program for Ace Pictures," wailed Helen. "The World Broadcasting Company will probably lose its contract."

"Yep, and we'll all lose our jobs," groaned Curt. "Well, there's nothing we can do about it now. We might as well go back to the hotel. We'll report to Director Adolphi in the morning. Think you can walk if I steady you?" The question was aimed at Janet.

"I'll make it all right," she said, but the steadying influence of Curt's arm was welcome,

They walked down the corridor, across the reception lobby, and then sped downward in an elevator.

When they were outside and comfortably ensconced in a taxi, Helen faced her companion.

"Is the manuscript safe?" she asked.

"Unless Radio City burns down," replied Janet.

"Well, for goodness sake, where is it?"

"I slipped it under the rug in Jim's office and spread the sheets out so there won't be a hump which would attract attention. I'll have to get up early and phone him at the studio for he's coming down to start the revision of my material."

"You'll do no such thing," cut in the cowboy. "You've earned a morning of sleep. I'll phone Jim Hill myself and explain where the manuscript is hidden."

"Now I want to know just what happened." It was Helen speaking.

Janet shook her head.

"I don't know. I knew someone was prowling in the corridor, but I couldn't stay there in the office all night and I couldn't get a phone connection out. After I'd hidden the manuscript I turned out the light in the office and started down the hall. Someone turned a flashlight into my face, then I was grabbed around the neck and finally a cloth filled with ether was smashed against my face. About that time I forgot to remember and the next thing I knew you two were with me."

"How many jumped on you?" asked the cowboy.

"I can't be sure, but I'd say that it was one man who was capable of moving very rapidly."

"One man could do it all right," nodded Curt. "I wish I could get my hands on him and I'd teach him a thing or two."

"How did you two happen to get into the corridor? That's a question I'd like to have answered," said Janet.

"I became worried when you didn't get back to the hotel at midnight and I phoned Curt. He agreed to meet me at Radio City and we came up together. It was as simple as that," explained Helen.

"Well, for once I'm glad someone worried about me," confessed Janet. "And, oh what a headache that ether gave me. The water tasted good, but I feel queer inside now. Bed is going to seem like heaven."

## *Chapter Twenty-seven*

### SUSPICIONS

When she was alone in her room, Janet fairly tumbled into bed but not until she had picked up a letter Helen had brought up from the desk and placed on the bedside table. When she was stretched out comfortably in bed, Janet opened the letter. It was from home, her mother telling of news of the neighborhood and of interesting little things about the house.

Janet finished the letter, tucked it under her pillow, and snapped out the light. She was glad that her mother did not know of the stirring events of that night.

Janet slept late the next morning, for her fatigue had been heavier than she had imagined. After an invigorating shower, she returned to her own room and there found a note propped on the writing table.

"Have gone on to Radio City," wrote Helen. "Will meet you there for lunch if you're awake."

Janet partially dressed and pulled on her dressing gown. Then she called the World Broadcasting Company and got a connection with Jim Hill's office. The young continuity writer answered at once.

"This is Janet Hardy. I just wanted to know if you were able to dig the copy out from under your carpet."

"I'll say I was," replied Jim. "It's good stuff, Janet. Say, what under the sun went on here last night?"

"I'd like to really know," she replied.

"Well, the studio officials are all upset about it. They were worried enough trying to land the big contract with the Ace Motion Picture Corporation and now they fairly have the jitters. The studio is being gone over with a fine-toothed comb to see if some clue can be unearthed. Have you thought of anything that would help?"

"To tell the truth, I've just gotten up and I don't think well without any breakfast," confessed Janet. "Maybe I'll have an idea or two by the time I reach the studio."

"It's almost time for lunch," Jim reminded her.

"I'm to meet Helen for lunch at the studio," replied Janet.

"Then count me in on that and maybe we can get a line on who this was chasing around the studio last night."

Janet completed dressing and started for the studio. The morning was clear and cool and it seemed impossible now that such events could have happened the night before in the studio. She swung into Sixth Avenue, walking briskly, and headed for Radio City.

When Janet arrived at the studio, the rehearsal in studio K was at an end for the morning and members of the company were hurrying out for lunch. Rachel Nesbit, her dark eyes flashing, pushed past Janet with little ceremony and Janet thought that the director looked away and flushed. But then, she might have been imagining that for Director Adolphi and Rachel were known to be close friends.

Helen came hurrying up, followed by Curt Newsom.

"How are you feeling now?" she asked.

"Hungry," confessed Janet. "What's the news around the studio?"

"Oh, everybody is looking at everybody else and wondering who did it. They all seem to think it was an inside job for outsiders couldn't have known that you were working on that script, much less where you were working. I guess suspicion centers pretty strongly right on this company."

"That would mean someone in our own unit has sold out to a rival company and is doing everything in their power to keep this broadcast from being a success," mused Janet.

"That's putting it politely," put in Curt. "I'd say that someone is a skunk, and I hate skunks."

Jim Hill joined them just then. He looked tired and worried.

"Let's eat," he said, and the others agreed, the group adjourning to a nearby restaurant. They obtained a secluded table where they could talk with little risk of being overheard by prying ears.

After giving their orders, Jim turned to Janet.

"Been able to think up any clues?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I've tried to think of every event that took place, but I can't remember any special smell, or noise, and I didn't even feel the garments of my assailant. I'm afraid I'm of no help."

"Not much," conceded Jim, running his fingers through his hair.

"What have you found out, Curt?"

The cowboy star likewise had nothing to contribute.

"I've got plenty of suspicions, but not a grain of proof," he grumbled.

"That's just it. We all have suspicions but no proof and this program must be in dress rehearsal tomorrow night and there can't be any boners pulled then. We've simply got to solve this mystery before then. Until this is cleared up the script won't be safe for a minute unless someone is with it all of the time."

"Where is it now?" demanded Janet.

"In my office with the door locked and an office boy standing guard in front of the door."

"That doesn't sound very safe to me. Suppose someone well known should come along and send the boy on an errand. He'd leave the door and there your manuscript would be unprotected."

"Oh, it's safe enough," smiled Jim. Then he paused suddenly.

"Say, maybe you're right. That could happen, especially if one of the program directors or other officials happened along. I told the boy to be sure and stay on the job, but he'd run an errand for any one of them."

Jim stood up.

"Go ahead with your lunches. I'll skip up and get the script and rejoin you. It won't take five minutes."

## *Chapter Twenty-eight*

### REHEARSALS AGAIN

Jim Hill hastened away, but it was fifteen minutes before he returned with a large envelope with the manuscript. When he arrived his face was flushed and he was breathing rapidly.

"What's the matter?" asked Helen, who sensed that Jim was greatly upset.

"Plenty. It was a good thing I got there when I did."

"You mean someone was after the manuscript?" demanded Janet.

"I mean someone had it," retorted Jim. "But I got it back and without much trouble."

"Who was in your office?" It was Curt who fired that question.

Jim looked at them steadily.

"It was Adolphi."

He waited for the significance of his words to sink in and smiled a little grimly at the bewilderment which was reflected on their faces.

"Surprised? Say, maybe you think I wasn't. And now I don't know what to think."



"Tell us everything that happened after you reached the studio floor," urged Janet.

Jim took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead, where glistening beads of perspiration had gathered.

"When I swung down the corridor I saw the boy had left my door so I ran the rest of the way," he said. "The carpet's thick and I made little if any noise. The door of my office was open and Adolphi was thumbing through the pile of script I had been working on. When I came up behind him he jumped almost across the desk."

"What did he say?" asked Helen.

"Said he'd found the door of my office open and since he knew I was working on the script thought he would look it over while I was out at lunch."

"What did you do?" It was Curt speaking.

"I picked up the script, stuffed it into an envelope, and told Adolphi he could see it when McGregor, my continuity chief, put his okay on it. I asked Adolphi if he was sure my office was open and he got sore. Wanted to know what I was trying to insinuate and all that sort of thing. But I think he felt guilty as thunder. Gosh, but I'd like to know how he got in there after all my precautions."

"I can tell you," said Curt. "He simply walked down the hall, told the boy to go on an errand, and then used a skeleton key on your door."

"It couldn't have been as easy as that," protested Helen.

"Things like that are done easily," smiled Curt. "Mark my words, you watch our director closely. He isn't putting his best foot forward in getting us in shape. I wouldn't be surprised if he has sold out to some other company."

"That's a terrible thing to say about anyone," said Janet.

"It's worse to do it," Curt insisted.

They finished their lunch and returned to Radio City where they were whisked up to the twenty-seventh floor in one of the express elevators.

"Stop in after the rehearsal this afternoon," Jim told them. "I'll have the final script in shape by then."

The afternoon was a fatiguing one, for Adolphi, as though possessed of a demon, found fault with everything and almost everyone. The only one who noticeably escaped his ire was Rachel Nesbit, and Janet had to admit that Rachel handled her work in a way that defied criticism. Curt Newsom came in for some especially bitter comments.

"Too bad we can't get a horse in here so you'd feel at home," snapped the director after Curt had bungled one bit of action.

"I don't like skunks," shot back Curt and turned away.

The director, his face flaming, grabbed Curt's arm.

"You've got to explain that," he cried.

"Do you want me to?" asked Curt, looking straight into the face of the incensed director.

Adolphi dropped his arm and turned away, and in that action he stirred Janet's suspicions anew. If he were without guilt, she felt he would have forced Curt to a showdown. But he had turned away and Janet thought she caught just a flicker of Rachel Nesbit's eyes.

Then they were back at work, rehearsing until well after the usual dinner hour. When the director finally released them, most of the company was dizzy with fatigue,

"He's trying to wear us out so we won't be able to put on a good show tomorrow night," muttered Curt. "I've a good notion to drop him down an elevator shaft and see if he'll bounce."

Jim Hill was waiting for them.

"I thought you'd never come," he said. "Adolphi been pretty tough?"

Janet nodded. "He couldn't have been much worse."

"He's got a reputation for driving his casts just before the final show. Sometimes he gets marvelous results; then, again, the thing will fall flat with everyone all worn out."

"He's trying to break us in two," grumbled Curt, whose feet were hurting.

Jim Hill took them down to his office and they ordered sandwiches sent in while they went over the manuscript. It had been given the approval of the continuity chief and was to be incorporated into the program.

"I think it's good stuff," said Janet as she laid down the script. "You've caught the spirit of the picture at last. If this doesn't boom public interest in 'Kings of the Air' to a high pitch, I'll be a very mistaken young lady."

The others agreed with her that Jim had struck the right note.

"Now the thing to do is to get Adolphi to swing it through for me tomorrow night. He can if he wants to."

"That's a real question, too," said Curt. "I suspect he's the guy behind all of the trouble and we'll find Rachel Nesbit right in with him."

They left a few minutes later, Jim Hill taking the precious manuscript with him.

Parting on Sixth Avenue, Jim signalled for a cab.

"I'm not taking any chances tonight," he said.

They watched him get into the cab and he waved as the taxi shot away and swung onto a side street. But before it disappeared Janet saw something that caused a wave of apprehension to sweep over her.

A long, rakish sedan, which had been parked further along the street, leaped ahead, and swung around the corner behind the taxi which was carrying Jim Hill and the final draft of their radio script.

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### *Chapter Twenty-nine*

#### JANET FINDS A CLUE

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Janet's sharp cry halted Curt Newsom and Helen. They turned startled faces toward her.

"What's the matter? Someone try to run you down?" asked Helen.

"It's Jim," replied Janet. "A car's following his taxi. It started up from the curb and swung right behind his cab. Someone is after that manuscript. We've got to follow them."

Curt hailed a cruising taxi and they piled in, the cowboy giving the driver sharp directions.

"Step on it; we'll pay any fines," he said.

The cab lurched away, gaining speed so rapidly they shot around the corner in a dizzy skid. Turning onto Fifth Avenue they saw the long, dark sedan and ahead of it the taxi in which Jim was riding. A stop light blazed in their faces and their cab ground to a halt.

"Go on, go on," urged Janet, leaning toward the driver.

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"Can't make it," he growled, pointing to the heavy stream of cross traffic which was flowing ahead of them.

When the light changed the taxi and its pursuing sedan had disappeared.

"Pull over to the curb," Janet told their driver. "Now what shall we do?" she asked her companions.

"Anybody know where Jim lives?" asked Curt.

"I do," replied Janet.

"Then let's go there and wait for him. We'll be sure that he gets home all right."

Janet gave the driver Jim Hill's address and they raced up the avenue once more. In less than fifteen minutes they pulled up before an apartment house and Janet went into the small lobby and pressed the buzzer that signalled Jim's apartment. There was no reply and she returned to the cab, a mounting fear in her heart.

She communicated the news to Curt and Helen and they fell silent, waiting and hoping that Jim would arrive.

Minutes ticked away and the taxi driver glanced uneasily at his meter and wondered about his pay.

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"I'm going to call the studio and see if he returned there by any chance," said Janet, driven to action in her desperation.

She walked to a nearby drug store and from a pay station there telephoned the World Broadcasting studio. It was as she had feared; Jim had not returned. In fact, there was no one in the continuity department.

It was with a heavy heart that Janet returned to the cab. So much depended upon the safeguarding of the script. There was their own radio debut for one thing. But that was comparatively minor. More than that was the success of the broadcast which was to arouse public interest in the film which Helen's father had created. This was what really counted.

When she told Helen and Curt that Jim had not returned to the studio, the cowboy sat silent for a time.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," he said. "We may get in trouble, but it's worth a try."

Without explaining what he intended to do, he bolted toward the drug store and returned a minute later with an address written on a slip of paper. He gave this to their driver and ordered him to get there with the least possible delay.

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"Where are we going?" asked Janet.

"To pay a little call on Director Adolphi."

"Then you think he's mixed up in this thing?" Helen asked.

"I'm sure of it now. There's something about him that just doesn't ring true."

There was little conversation in the cab during their fast ride to the director's apartment and they all went up together after Curt had paid the taxi bill.

Insistent ringing of the bell failed to bring an answer and at last they turned away, their hearts heavy with despair.

"I'm going to report this to the nearest police station," said Curt. "You girls might just as well go back to your hotel. There's nothing further you can do."

"But we seem so helpless," groaned Helen.

"We're just exactly that," growled Curt as he signalled two cabs, one for the girls and the other for himself. "I'll phone you the minute I get any word of good news."

Janet and Helen said little on their way back to the hotel, for a numbing sort of ache had taken possession of their bodies. After days of fatiguing rehearsals, the broadcast appeared doomed. Helen cried a little as their cab swung onto Broadway and the bright lights of the Great White Way blazed in their faces.

At the hotel Janet stopped at the desk to inquire about mail and the clerk handed her a telegram.

"It's for you," she said, handing the message to Helen, who tore it open with fingers that were none too steady.

"Oh, this is awful," she groaned. "Dad and Mother are coming to New York for the first broadcast. What will I do?"

"Don't answer the telegram tonight," Janet warned her. "Perhaps something brighter will have taken place by tomorrow."

Janet opened the door of her own room and snapped on the light. As she did so a small envelope, which had been slipped under the door, drew her attention and she reached down to pick it up. Helen came in the room just then and looked at Janet curiously as she opened the envelope.

Janet's face flushed as she read the message, which had been printed crudely on a sheet of fine linen paper.

"What is it?" asked Helen, alarmed at the expression on Janet's face.

Janet handed her the sheet of paper.

"Go back to the sticks where you belong or you'll get more of what happened last night. This means both of you."

"Why, the nerve of some people," stormed Helen. "I won't be threatened into leaving."

"Neither will I," said Janet firmly, "but this thing is getting terribly serious. Last night I was made unconscious by some prowler and tonight Jim has disappeared with the script of our radio show."

Janet paused and looked at the sheet of stationery in her hand. Then she lifted it to her nose and sniffed carefully. Helen looked on in wonderment and Janet finally handed the sheet to her.

"Smell anything?" she asked.

"There's just a trace of perfume," agreed Helen.

"Ever smell that before?" Janet was insistent.

"It does seem kind of familiar, but I don't know where."

"Wasn't it in the studio?" Janet was pressing hard for an answer.

"Perhaps it was."

"Someone in our company?"

Helen looked frankly alarmed and finally a wave of comprehension swept over her.

"You mean Rachel Nesbit?"

Janet nodded. "That's just who I mean. This sheet is scented with the same perfume Rachel uses. Of course hundreds of others may use it, too, but it at least gives us a clue. And this printing, disguised though it is, is that of a woman."

"Then if we can find Rachel, we may be able to solve this mystery," burst out Helen.

"If we can scare her into telling us something," agreed Janet. "I'll phone the studio and get her home address. We'll go there at once."

"What about Curt? He'll want to know what's going on."

"This is a woman's job," replied Janet. "We'll let him try to find Jim. You and I are going alone on this particular mission."

### *Chapter Thirty*

#### OPPORTUNITY AHEAD

They obtained Rachel's home address from the studio, slipped on their coats, and after making sure that they had an ample supply of money in their purses, hastened down and hailed a cab.

Rachel lived in the Greenwich Village section and their driver swung over to Fifth Avenue and raced south, green lights winking a clear path ahead of them.

There was little conversation in the cab as they sped toward the village and when they drew up in front of the narrow building which housed Rachel's apartment Janet paid the bill.

"What are you going to say to her?" asked Helen.

Janet shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "I suppose I'll accuse her of writing this

threatening note. That ought to be enough to get us into her apartment and once we're there you look around for anything suspicious."

They were entering the apartment when a car drew up to the curb and Janet seized her companion's arm.

"Get out of sight, quick. That's the sedan which followed Jim's taxi."

They slipped into the shadows to the right of the doorway and watched the sedan. Rachel Nesbit stepped out and after her came John Adolphi, director of their radio program. Janet could hear Helen's gasp for under the director's arm was a familiar portfolio. It was the portfolio in which Jim Hill had carried the manuscript.

Rachel and the director disappeared into the apartment building and Janet, without a word to Helen, ran toward the nearest shop, a little fruit store in a half basement.

"Where can I find a policeman?" she demanded.

The shop keeper helped her phone in an alarm and in less than five minutes a radio car pulled up in front of the store.

Janet told her story quickly and when the officers looked doubtful, she pleaded with them.

"You've got to believe me. Every minute counts. If that script is destroyed the company may lose thousands of dollars worth of business."

Then she put through several calls and finally reached Mr. McGregor, head of the continuity department. His words electrified the police and they swept down the streets and stormed up into the apartment building to the third floor where Rachel lived. In answer to their sharp knock, Rachel opened the door and they shouldered their way in.

Janet saw Rachel's face blanch as she saw her, but Janet's heart leaped for on a table was the missing manuscript. Director Adolphi was pulled out of a closet and from his ashen lips tumbled the sordid story. He was really Rachel's brother and the two had conspired to steal the manuscript and ruin the World Broadcasting Company's chances for the contract with the motion picture company. Another broadcaster had offered him a large sum, he said, and promised a job if he would steal the script and ruin the program.

They hastened back to the studio where a tense group awaited their coming. Mr. McGregor was there and so was Curt. Janet started suddenly when she saw Jim Hill with a bandage around his head.

"What happened to you?" she asked anxiously.

"Adolphi ran my cab into a curb and then pulled a gun on me and took the script away. Of course he had a mask on, but I recognized his voice. He clouted me over the head when I tried to resist and the next thing I knew Curt had found me at the police station where I was being given emergency treatment."

Mr. McGregor spoke. "What about Adolphi and that precious sister of his?"

"They are in police custody awaiting whatever charges may be filed against them," said Janet.

Mr. McGregor nodded. "That can be done tomorrow. How about you girls?"

"We're all right," replied Janet and Helen.

"A little tired, maybe," added Helen, by way of an afterthought.

The continuity chief looked at Jim Hill.

"Think you can step in tomorrow and whip this company in to shape so we'll be sure of the contract?" he asked.

Jim's face lighted up. "I know I can."

"Then get home and get some sleep. You're in charge of the program."

He turned back to Janet and Helen.

"Like New York?" the question was so sudden that it caught them unawares.

"It's exciting," gasped Helen.

"It isn't always like this," smiled the continuity chief. He was looking intently at Janet.

"How would you like to join my staff as a writer?"

Janet could hardly believe her ears.

"Why, I think I'd like it," she managed to say. "Yes, I know I would." She plunged in blindly.

"Then if you girls want to stay on, there'll be a place for Helen in the stock company and for you on my writing staff," he said. "Think it over and let me know tomorrow."

An hour later when they were alone in their rooms, Janet and Helen had their first chances to talk uninterruptedly.

Helen smiled contentedly.

"It's such a relief to know that the program to boost Dad's picture is going through all right," she said. After a pause she went on, "What shall we do about the jobs in Radio City?"

"I think I'll accept," said Janet.

"But what about school back home; what about going to Corn Belt U.?"

"I've thought of that, but an opportunity to work in Radio City doesn't come every day. In six months we'll have had enough. Then we can go back and start our university careers at Corn Belt

U.”

“What will our folks think?” asked Helen.

“I believe they’ll agree with us that six months here in radio work can be looked upon as a valuable part of our education.”

“Then we’ll tell Mr. McGregor we’ll stay?”

“That’s exactly what we’ll tell him. Now I’m going to write the folks and tell them all about it,” said Janet, picking up a pen and sitting down to the task of writing of the thrilling adventures which had befallen them since their arrival in New York.

THE END

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