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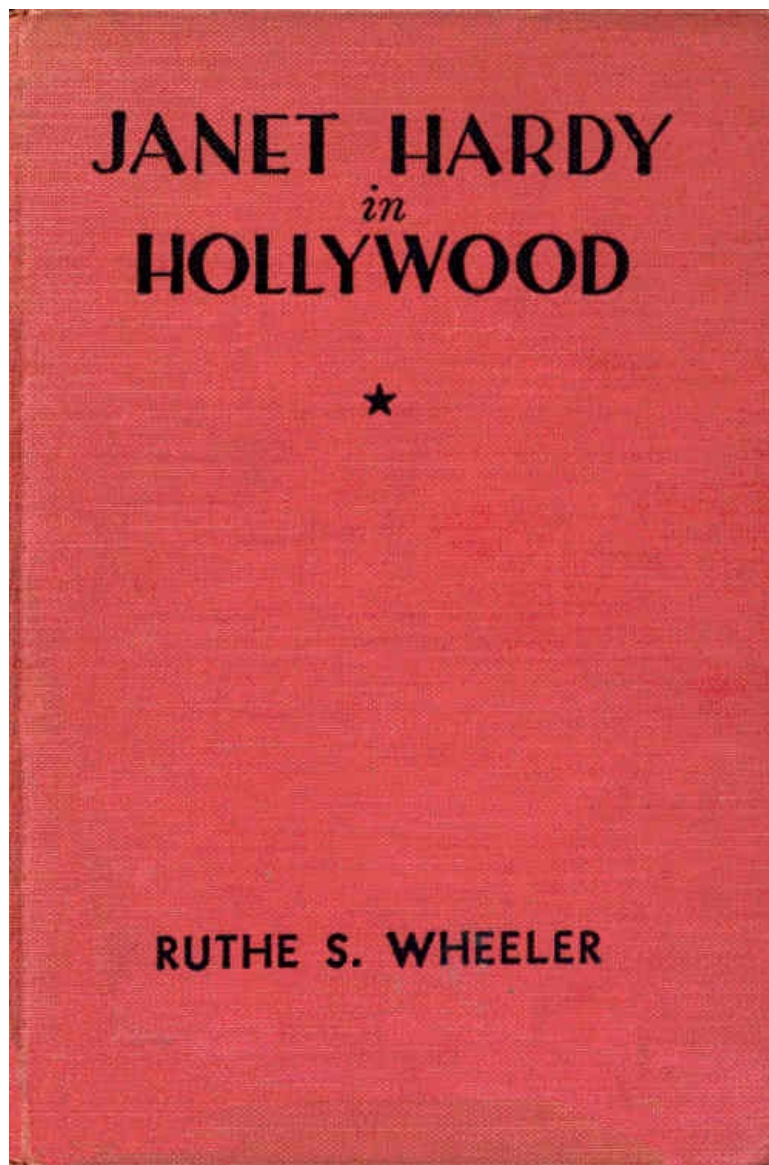
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**JANET HARDY  
IN HOLLYWOOD**

BY  
RUTHE S. WHEELER

THE GOLDSMITH PUBLISHING COMPANY  
CHICAGO

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## Janet Hardy in Hollywood

### *Chapter I* "THE CHINESE IMAGE"

Winter hung on grimly in the Middle West that year. Late March found the streets piled high with snow and on that particular morning there was a threat of additional snow in the air as Janet Hardy, a blond curl sticking belligerently out from under her scarlet beret, hurried toward school.

It was an important day for members of the senior class of the Clarion High School, for Miss Williams, the dramatics instructor, was going to hand out parts to read for the class play. For that reason, Janet walked more briskly than usual and she failed to hear footsteps behind her until another girl, running lightly, called.

"Slow up a minute, Janet. I'm nearly breathless. I've been chasing you for more than a block."

Janet turned to greet Helen Thorne, who lived half a block beyond her own home and on the same broad, comfortable thoroughfare.

The girls fell into step, Janet slowing her pace until Helen could recover her breath.

"What chance do you think we'll have of getting parts in the play?" asked Helen, her face reflecting her hopefulness.

"Just as good as any of the rest," replied Janet. "I don't think there are any Ethel Barrymores in school and I wouldn't worry if there were. I won't be heart-broken if I don't get a part."

"That's easy to say, but I'm afraid I'll be pretty much disappointed if I don't get one. You have the *Weekly Clarion* to keep you busy."

"It does that all right," conceded Janet, who was editor of the page of high school news which appeared once a week in the local daily paper, the *Times*, under the title of "The Weekly Clarion."

The girls turned into the street which led up the hill to the high school, a sprawling brick structure which covered nearly a block. The original building had been started in 1898 and as the city had grown additions had been made, seemingly at random, until hardly any one knew how many rooms there were and it was not unusual for a new student to get lost.

Janet was slightly taller than Helen. Her hair was a golden blond with just enough of a natural curl to make her the envy of most of the girls in school. Her blue eyes had a friendly, cheery look and her mouth had an upward twist that made it easy for her to smile.

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Helen was a complement to Janet, with dark brown hair, brown eyes and a dusky skin. Because of her brunette coloring, she inclined to gayer colors than her blond companion.

It was half an hour before school when they reached the building, but a goodly number of seniors were already on hand and competition for rôles in the play would be intense. With 132 in the senior class, not many more than a score could hope to win parts.

"There's so many it's going to be a discouraging business," said Helen as they went upstairs to the chemistry auditorium where the class was to meet.

"If a lot of the others think that, it will be easy for us," smiled Janet. "Come on, tell yourself you're going to win a part and you will."

"I want to for Dad's sake. He wrote that he would be home for my graduation and would attend all of the senior activities. So I've just got to make the play cast."

"Keep up that kind of a spirit and you're as good as in," encouraged Janet, who secretly confessed that it was going to be quite a job to win a place in the play.

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The chemistry auditorium was well filled when they arrived. Almost every senior girl was there and at least half of the boys.

Janet looked around the large room, gauging the mettle of the girls they would have to compete against. Well up toward the rostrum was Margie Blake, petite and blond and exceedingly vivacious. Margie was popular, confessed Janet, and probably stood a good chance of winning a part in the play for she had innate dramatic ability, while Janet, who had taken a leading rôle in the junior play, had been compelled to study each bit of action carefully.

Near Margie was Cora Dean, a pronounced brunette, who had already announced that she intended to have a leading rôle, and Cora had a reputation of getting whatever she went after,

whether it was a place on the honor roll or a part in one of the drama club's one act plays.

"I'm afraid Cora will be after the part I try out for," whispered Helen. "She's good, too."

"She's not a bit better than you are, and not half as pretty," retorted Janet.

"But you don't always win play parts on your looks," said Helen.

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Just then Miss Williams, the dramatics instructor, hurried in. In one hand she carried a large sheaf of mimeographed sheets while in the other was the complete book for the play. Several plays had been tentatively considered, but final approval had been up to Miss Williams and she was to announce the title that morning as well as give out reading parts.

The room quieted down as a few stragglers, coming in at the last minute, found seats at the rear.

Miss Williams sorted the mimeographed sheets into piles and at exactly 8:45 o'clock she rapped briskly on the desk with a ruler. The dramatics teacher was pleasant and almost universally liked. She smiled as she looked over the seniors who had gathered.

"It looks like we're going to have real competition for the play parts this year," she said. "I suppose, though, that first you'd like to know the name of the play."

She paused a moment, then went on.

"I've read all the plays the committee recommended carefully and my final choice is 'The Chinese Image.'"

There was a ripple of applause, for a number of seniors, including Janet and Helen, had read portions of "The Chinese Image."

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Helen leaned toward her companion.

"That's the play I've been hoping would be selected. There's a part I think I can win."

"The leading rôle?" asked Janet.

"Well, hardly, but it isn't a bad part."

Miss Williams held up her hand and the buzz of conversation which had started after her announcement ceased.

"I have had parts for every character mimeographed and each sheet gives sufficient reading material for tryouts. There are 23 rôles in 'The Chinese Image.' I'm familiar with the ability of almost all of you and if you'll come up as I call your names, I'll give you tryout sheets. The first sheet contains a brief synopsis of the play with the complete cast of characters and the second sheet has the part I want you to try for. You will also find the hours on the second sheet when I want you to go down to the gym for the tryouts."

Janet had to confess that she was more than a little nervous as she waited for Miss Williams to call her name. Senior after senior was called up to the desk and handed his sheets. To some of

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them Miss Williams added another word or two, but she talked too low to be heard by the main body of pupils.

As the tryout sheets were handed out, the seniors left the room for it was nearly assembly time.

Helen looked anxiously at Janet.

"I wonder if we're going to be called? There are less than a dozen left."

"We'll know in a couple of minutes," replied Janet. "There goes Margie Blake. Wonder what part she'll get a chance at?"

"One of the leads, you can be sure of that. And there's Cora Dean. I suppose Cora will get the part I try for. That happened in several of the one acts last year."

"This isn't last year and Cora's a bit too temperamental. Well, we are going to be the last."

All of the others had been called before Miss Williams spoke to Janet and Helen, and with a feeling of misgiving they advanced toward her desk.

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## ***Chapter II*** **LEADING RÔLES**

Miss Williams smiled pleasantly as she looked up from the now slender pile of sheets with the tryout parts.

"Afraid I was going to forget you?" she asked.

"We were commencing to worry," admitted Janet, "for after all there's only one senior play."

"Right. And I'm determined that 'The Chinese Image' be the best ever produced by Clarion High."

The electric gong that heralded the opening of school banged its lusty tone through the hall.

"Never mind about opening assembly," said Miss Williams. "I'll explain to the principal that I detained you."

The dramatics instructor looked quizzically at Janet and Helen.

"You make a good team, don't you?"

"Well, we don't exactly fight," smiled Helen, "but there are times when we don't agree."

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"Of course. That's only human. What I mean is that when you get together with a goal in mind, you work hard to attain that goal. When Janet went out for editor of the *Weekly Clarion* last fall, you were working hard for her to win."

"I did my best," admitted Helen.

"And it had a lot to do with my winning out over

Margie Blake," said Janet whole-heartedly.

"Which is just the kind of spirit I'm looking for to put across the senior play. I'll have to make a little confession or you'll wonder why I'm so intensely interested in the success of this special play. A dramatic producing company has made me a tentative offer, but their final decision will be made after one of their representatives has seen the senior play."

"But that would mean leaving Clarion," protested Helen.

"I'm afraid it would, and while I wouldn't like that, the opportunity offered by this company, if it finally develops, would be such that I just couldn't afford to reject it."

"I suppose there isn't a whole lot of money in teaching dramatics in a high school," said Janet.

"Not enough so I want to make it a life career," replied Miss Williams. "But this isn't getting along with my plan. Helen, I'm assigning you for a tryout for the leading rôle. Here's your part. Read it over carefully and be ready tomorrow afternoon at 4:15 o'clock."

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Miss Williams handed the mimeographed sheets to the astounded Helen.

"They won't bite," she smiled.

"But the lead? I never dreamed you would want me to try out for that."

"Why not? It calls for a brunette with ability and brains and I think you answer that description."

Miss Williams turned to Janet.

"Here's your rôle, Janet. It's the second lead. You play a jittery little blond who hasn't a brain in her head and probably never will have."

"Does that rôle fit me?" asked Janet, her eyes twinkling.

"Well, hardly, but I think you'll have a lot of fun working on such a part. Margie Blake is going to try for it, also."

"Who will be trying for the part you've assigned me?" asked Helen.

"Cora Dean. I expect that with such competition both of you will be forced to do your best to win the part. Maybe it's a little mean of me to match you against each other this way, but I've got to have a superlative cast for the play."

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"You'll get it," promised Janet, "for Helen and I are going to do our best to win these rôles. Why Helen's father is planning on coming back for graduation week and Helen's got to make the play."

"Is he really coming?" asked Miss Williams, almost incredulously, for the name of Henry Thorne was a magic word in Clarion.

"He's promised, and both mother and I are counting on it. We haven't seen him since last fall."

"Then I know one dramatics teacher who is going to be doubly nervous the night of the play."

Just think of it—Henry Thorne, star director of the great Ace Motion Picture Company, watching a high school play. I'm afraid the cast may go all to pieces, they'll be so nervous."

"But Dad's so entirely human," said Helen. "That's just the trouble. Because he's made a success in films, people think he must be some kind of a queer individual who goes around with his head in the air thinking he is better than anyone else. He's just like Janet's father and when he gets home he likes nothing better than getting his old fishpole out, digging a can of worms, and going out along the creek to fish and doze."

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"I suppose you're right, but his pictures have been so outstanding it seems that directing them must be some sort of a genius. I've never quite understood why you and your mother stayed on here, though."

Miss Williams had often wanted to ask that question just to satisfy her own curiosity, but the opportunity had never opened before.

"Dad's working under pressure on the coast, long hours and a terrific strain, and he says some of the things that are said about Hollywood are true. Most of the people are fine and hard working, but a small, wild crowd gives the rest a bad name and he doesn't want to take any chance on my getting mixed up with that bunch."

"But you wouldn't," said Miss Williams.

"I don't think so, but Dad thinks it best for us to stay here in Clarion and mother and I are happy here with all of our friends. Of course we don't see a whole lot of Dad, but when he does get home or we go out there, we have an awfully good time."

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Miss Williams glanced at her watch.

"It's 9:10. You'd better go down to assembly. I'll explain why you were late. Don't forget, tryouts for both of you tomorrow afternoon and I'm counting on you to do your best."

"We'll try," promised Janet, as they picked up the sheets with the tryout parts and left the chemistry auditorium.

In the hall Helen, her dark eyes aglow with excitement, turned to Janet.

"Just think; I've got a chance at the leading rôle. Of course Cora will probably get it, but at least Miss Williams is considering me."

"Now let's stop right here," said Janet firmly, "and get one thing straight. You have a chance at the leading rôle." Helen nodded.

"Cora has a chance at the lead." Again Helen nodded.

"But," went on Janet, "you are going to win the lead."

"Oh, do you really think so?" There was a tinge of desperation in Helen's voice.

"I know you are." Janet spoke with a definiteness that she didn't quite feel, for Cora was a

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splendid little actress. But Helen needed some real encouragement and Janet knew that if Helen felt confident from the start half of the battle was won.

The morning passed in a whirl of routine classes, but Janet found time to study her tryout sheets for several minutes.

“The Chinese Image” was ideally suited for a senior play, with an excellent mystery story to carry the action. A whole lot of dramatic ability was unnecessary for the rapid tempo of the story would carry along the interest of the audience.

The synopsis Miss Williams had prepared was brief and Janet read it twice.

“The Chinese Image” centered about a strange little figure which had been brought back from China in 1851 by Ebenezer Naughton, then captain of one of the clipper ships which had sailed out of Salem for far-away ports in the Orient. The strange, squat little figure had remained in the Naughton family ever since for Captain Ebenezer, in his will, had stipulated that it must never be given away or sold.

“When grave troubles befall my family, turn to ‘The Chinese Image,’” he had written, “and therein you will find an answer.”

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But the Naughtons had prospered and the will had been almost forgotten until the family came upon hard times and its fortune dwindled. Two grandsons of Captain Ebenezer, now heads of their own families, quarreled bitterly and in the ensuing family feud the image became involved. It finally fell to the lot of Abbie Naughton, the rôle played by Janet, to solve the mystery of the image, which she did in as thorough a manner as might have been expected of the light-headed Abbie.

Janet chuckled over the lines she was to read in the tryout. The part of Abbie should be great fun, for Abbie did about every nonsensical thing possible and the giddier the part could be made, the better, decided Janet.

Helen’s rôle was more serious, for she was supposed to be in love with one of the boys of the other branch of the family and many were the trials and tribulations of their love affair. It was a delicate rôle, with much sweetness and tenderness, and it should prove ideal for Helen. Janet couldn’t conceive of Cora Dean, who had a certain harshness about her, getting the part. But then, Cora was capable and she might be able to play the rôle to perfection.

Just before noon the sky, grey since morning, turned a more desolate shade and the clouds disgorged their burden of snow. It was dry and fine and tons of it seemed to be coming down.

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Janet met Helen in the hall.

“What about lunch?”

“I’m going to stay at school and have mine in the cafeteria,” replied Helen. “How about you?”

“I don’t relish the long walk home, but I didn’t bring any money with me.”

Helen smiled. “You wouldn’t accept a loan,

would you?"

"I might," conceded Janet, "because I'm more than a little hungry."

"I've got fifty cents. That ought to buy enough food to last until we get home tonight."

"But we're not going home," Janet reminded her companion. "Have you forgotten about the roller skating party at Youde's?"

Helen flushed. "To tell the truth, I had. I've been thinking so much about the play I completely forgot the party."

"Better not. It will be lots of fun."

"I don't know whether I ought to go. If I do, I won't have much time to study over my tryout part."

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"There'll be an hour after school and you haven't more than two paragraphs to memorize."

"I know them now," said Helen.

"Then come on and go to the party. The bus is leaving school at five o'clock. We'll be at Youde's in an hour and there'll be a hot supper and the skating party afterward."

"It's snowing hard," observed Helen, gazing out into the swirling grey.

"You think of everything," expostulated Janet. "Of course, it's snowing, but the road to Youde's is paved part of the way. If it gets too thick we can turn around and come back."

Both Janet and Helen had one open period in the afternoon which came at the same hour and they went into the library to study their tryout parts.

Janet read her lines, stopping several times to chuckle over the nonsensical words which Abbie Naughton was required to say in the play.

"This is going to be great fun," she told Janet. "How is your part going?"

"It's a grand rôle, and lots of fun. I know the lines, but I'm supposed to be in love."

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"That shouldn't be a hard part then. You rather like Jim Barron, don't you?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with my part?"

"I heard this noon that Jim was trying out opposite you."

"Honestly?"

"Honest true. Of course he may not get it."

"Jim's a grand fellow."

"Seems to me I've heard you say that before," chuckled Janet. "I have a hunch you'll get that part all right."

Helen went through her rôle while Janet looked on with critical eyes, suggesting several minor changes which she thought would improve her companion's chances.

The bell for the final class period sounded and

they folded up their parts and hastened back to the assembly. Their last class for the day was honors English, a group of advanced English students who also served as the editors and reporters for the *Weekly Clarion*, writing and editing all of the high school news which appeared each Friday in the *Times*, the afternoon daily paper published in Clarion.

It was the honors English class which was sponsoring the roller skating party at Youde's and Jim Barron, the sports editor, was in charge of the plans.

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There were seventeen in the class, including Cora Dean and Margie Blake, who wrote the girls' athletic news. Miss Bruder, the instructor, was small and dark, but somehow she managed to keep her high-tempered class under control.

This was a mid-week period and the entire time was devoted to writing stories, which were turned over to Janet for final editing. It was Janet's task to write the headlines, a job at which she had become exceedingly proficient.

Promptly at 3:30 o'clock the final bell sounded and writing materials were shoved hastily aside.

Jim Barron stood up.

"I'm counting on everyone being at the party. The bus will be here at five o'clock. We'll stop at Whet's drug store on the way out of town to pick up any of you who aren't here when we start. Remember, we're taking the money for the party out of the profit we've made from the *Weekly Clarion* and it won't cost you a cent. Wear old clothes and plenty of warm ones. See you here at five."

The class scattered, some of them remaining at school to finish up odd tasks, others hurrying home to change clothes and prepare for the party.

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"Going home?" asked Helen.

"Right now. I'm certainly not going to fall down in these clothes while I'm skating. I've got an old tweed suit and boots I'm going to wear. Why don't you change to your corduroys?"

"I thought I'd stay on and work on my part."

"You know that almost to perfection now. Better get into some older clothes."

Helen acquiesced and they donned their winter school coats and started down the hill toward home. The snow was still coming down steadily, as fine and dry as ever.

"I'm glad there's no wind. This would drift terribly if there was," said Janet, kicking her way through the fine spume.

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### ***Chapter III***

## **THE WIND ROARS**

Janet was home in plenty of time to dress in leisure for the skating party. Her mother looked in once to make sure that she had plenty of warm clothes on.

"I'm glad you're wearing that old tweed outfit. It's warm and at the same time nice looking."

"Even though it's old, mother?"

"Even though it's old. Tweed always looks nice and that's an especially pretty shade of brown. It goes so well with your hair. Wear your scarlet beret and don't forget the boots."

"I won't," promised Janet as her mother started downstairs again.

The Hardy home was pleasant, even though decidedly old-fashioned. There was a broad porch completely across the front of the house. The house itself was L-shaped, the base of the L having been added after the original structure was built. The exterior was shingled and creeping vines softened the sharper angles.

Janet's room had a south exposure with two dormer windows that added to the many angles of the low-ceilinged rambling room. The wall paper was pink and white with gay farm scenes interspersed. Crisp chintz curtains were at the windows and a gay curtain hid the large, old-fashioned wardrobe at one end of the room in which she kept her clothes.

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Her dressing table was between the dormers with a rose-colored shade on the electric light.

The bed, a walnut four poster, was against the wall nearest the hall. A gay, pink-tufted spread covered it. At one side was a small walnut stand with a shaded reading lamp.

Hooked rugs, reflecting the cheery tone of the room in their varied colors, covered the dark, polished floor.

Over in the far corner, where the roof sloped sharply, Janet had built a book case and stained it brown. It was filled with books, arranged in none too perfect order, showing the interest she had in them.

But Janet had little time now to relax in the charm of her room. Parting the curtain of the wardrobe she found her tweed suit far to the back. Her boots were back there too, but they had been well oiled and were pliable.

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From a walnut chest of drawers which stood beside the wardrobe Janet drew woolen socks for it was an 18-mile ride to Youde's and they probably wouldn't be home until late.

Janet dressed sensibly, woolen hose, heavy tweed skirt, a blue, shaggy wool sweater and her tweed coat. The crimson beret would be warm enough.

She glanced at the clock. She had spent more time than she had anticipated, it was after 4:30 and Whet's drug store where they were to meet the bus was a good six blocks away.

Janet hurried downstairs.

"I've a cup of tea and some cookies all ready,"

her mother called.

It would be after six o'clock before they ate and Janet drank the tea with relish. The cookies, crisp and filled with raisins, were delicious and she put several in the pockets of her coat.

"I put your old fur coat in the hall," said Mrs. Hardy. "Your scarf's there, too."

"Thanks mother. I'm certainly going to be too warm."

Her mother went to the window. It was nearly dark and the snow still swirled down in dry, feathery clouds.

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"I almost wish you weren't going," she said, "but there doesn't seem to be any wind."

"Oh, we'll be all right, mother. The bus is large and if the weather should get bad we could stay at Youde's until it clears. Remember Miss Bruder is chaperon and she's extremely sensible."

"She needs to be with your crowd on her hands," smiled her mother, following Janet into the hall.

Janet slipped into her old coat. It wasn't much to look at but it was warm and serviceable, one of those bunglesome coonskins that were so popular with college students at one time. She twisted her scarf around her neck, gave her mother a quick hug and kiss, and strode out of the house.

Janet kicked along through the dry snow, walking rapidly until she reached Helen Thorne's home. There were no lights in the southeast room and Janet knew that Helen must be dressed for that was Helen's room.

She whistled sharply, a long and a short, that penetrated the quick of the twilight.

The porch light flashed on and Helen, sticking her head out, yelled, "I'm coming."

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Helen hurried down the walk, wriggling into a suede jacket.

"Think that will be warm enough?" asked Janet, who felt very much bundled up in her coonskin.

"I've got my corduroy jacket underneath and a sweater under that. I'm practically sealed up against the cold, but I'll run back and get my old coonskin."

They swung along rapidly toward What's scuffing through the dry snow.

"I like this," said Helen, breathing deeply. "The snow's grand and it isn't too cold. Wonder if they'll have any heat at Youde's?"

"Oh, the dining room will be warm, but there's only a fireplace out in the room where we skate. Wraps will probably feel good there until we get well warmed up from skating."

Out of the haze ahead emerged the blob of light that marked the neighborhood drug store. As they approached they could see two or three standing near the front door of the store.

Ed Rickey, captain of the football team, jerked

open the door.

“Greetings, wanderers of the storm. Enter and be of good cheer.”

They stamped the snow off their boots and stepped inside. Cora Dean and Margie Blake were there. Boon companions, they were seldom apart.

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“Hello,” said Margie, but there was no warmth in the greeting.

“Hello,” replied Janet.

“You must think you’re going to the north pole,” put in Cora, as she looked Janet and Helen over coolly.

“Well, not quite that far, but we believe in being sensible and warm,” replied Helen, and Cora’s face flamed, for both she and Margie, always trying to make an impression, were dressed in fashionable riding breeches of serge. They were pleasing to look at, but hardly the thing for comfort on a night when the temperature might drop almost to zero. Instead of coats they wore zipper sweaters of angora wool. Their boots were fashionable, but light, and would be of little use in withstanding any severe cold.

“Here comes the bus,” said Ed Rickey, who was bundled up in nondescript clothes.

“All out that’s going to Youde’s,” he bellowed, imitating a train caller.

The bus ground to a stop in front of the store and the girls followed Ed across the curb. Jim Barron opened the door. The windows of the bus were heavily frosted for a heater was going full blast but the driver, a middle aged man, had a windshield wiper cutting a swath through the frost that formed on the glass in front of him.

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Miss Bruder spoke as they came in.

“Everyone’s here,” announced Jim. “Find your seats. Next stop at Youde’s.”

There was plenty of room in the bus for the vehicle had a capacity of thirty and there were only eighteen in addition to the driver. Most of them found seats well to the fore where they could feel the blast of warm air from the heater.

Clarion was a sprawling city of 19,000, but in less than ten minutes they had left the street lights behind and were rolling along a smoothly paved highway.

It was impossible to see out for the windows were frosted solid, but it was a merry crowd nevertheless. Ed Rickey, who had a fine bass voice, started in with a school song and the others soon joined him.

Six miles outside Clarion they turned off the main road and swung over toward the hills which flanked the Wapsie river for it was along the banks of the Wapsie that Youde’s Inn was located.

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Their progress was slowed here for the road had not been cleared by a snowplow. But the snow was less than five inches deep and the powerful bus forged ahead steadily.

Almost before they knew it they were over the last hill and dropping down into the river valley. As the bus turned into the inn, floodlights in the yard were snapped on. A dog, barking eagerly, leaped forward to greet them.

Ed and Jim were out of the bus first, assisting the others down. With Miss Bruder in the lead, they trooped toward the rambling, one story inn.

Eli Youde, a coonskin cap on his head, was at the door. Behind him stood his wife, a buxom, motherly soul of forty-five.

"Supper's on the table now," said Mrs. Youde as she greeted them. "The girls can take off their things in the room at the right; the boys go to the left."

There were nine boys and eight girls in the honors English class, but with Miss Bruder it made an even number and she was so young and full of fun that she always seemed like one of them.

Cora and Margie stopped before an old fashioned dresser to powder their noses and pat their hair into shape, but at a skating party these things were irrelevant to Janet and Helen and they hastened out to join the group in the dining room.

One long table had been set. There were no place cards and the first to arrive took the choice seats, which were near a glowing soft-coal burner.

Mrs. Youde, assisted by her husband, brought in steaming bowls of oyster stew. Three large bowls of crisp, white crackers were on the table, but huge inroads in them were soon made. Conversation died away as the stew was ladled down hungry throats.

Before the bowls of stew had vanished, Mrs. Youde brought in two heaping platters of thick sandwiches. Janet found at least three varieties and was afraid to ask Helen how many she discovered.

"This is ruining my weight, but I'm having a fine time," said Janet between bites and Helen nodded.

After the sandwiches came pumpkin pie, great thick wedges of it with a mound of whipped cream on top and a slab of yellow cheese at one side.

Ed Rickey yelled for help and when no one volunteered to jounce him up and down to make room for the pie, he managed to get to his feet and trot around the table several times.

"I'm never going to be able to bend down and put on a skate," groaned Jim Barron, who had begged a second piece of pie and was now looking ruefully at the last crisp crust. He wanted it, but he didn't quite dare and with a sheepish look he pushed the plate away from him.

"Perhaps we'd better sit around a few minutes before we start skating," suggested Miss Bruder. The suggestion was welcomed and while Mr. Youde carried armfuls of woods into the skating rink to fill the fireplace they told stories around

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the roaring fire in the heater.

"I feel better," announced Jim a few minutes later. "In fact, I'll be courteous enough to help any of you weak damsels get your skates on. Let's go."

With Jim in the lead, they trooped into the skating rink. The fireplace, along one wall and halfway down the rink, was roaring lustily as Mr. Youde piled it with fresh fuel.

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The skates were in boxes, numbered for size, and ranged in rows along the walls. Jim, Ed and one of the other boys did the fitting while the girls sat on a long bench.

"Here's a pair that ought to be long enough for you," grinned Jim as he placed a skate under Janet's right foot.

"Oh, I don't know that I'm such a clodhopper," smiled Janet. "Anyway, I'll bet I can beat you around the rink the first time."

"It's a go," replied Jim, fastening the other skate. "Wait until I get the wheels under my hoofs."

Janet stood up and tried the skates. Jim had found an excellent pair for her. They felt true and speedy. She tried a preliminary whirl. Her balance was good.

Jim shot out onto the floor, tried to make a sharp turn, lost his balance, and sat down with a thud that shook the room.

"First down," yelled Ed Rickey, who hastened to Jim's aid and entangled himself over Jim's outstretched legs. Ed also went down and shouts of merriment echoed through the room.

"Ready Jim?" asked Janet when the husky senior was back on his feet.

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"Just as ready now as later," he replied and they shot away, Janet's feet moving swiftly as she got up speed.

Jim had the longer legs, the more powerful strokes, but Janet was fast and light. That might overcome the advantage of her heavier rival.

"Go on, Janet, go on!" she heard Helen shouting as they took the first turn.

Jim was still ahead, but he was going too fast for a safe turn and he skidded sharply and lost speed at the next turn while Janet, her feet a twinkle of motion, shot ahead. Jim yelled in protest, but Janet only went the faster and flashed by the finish at least two yards ahead of the puffing Jim.

From then on the rink buzzed with the roll of the skates as in couples and singly they sped around the room.

Ed Rickey was a wizard on skates and after the first rush of skating, when some of them were content to sit on the benches near the fireplace, he gave a demonstration of fancy skating.

Janet had never imagined Ed had that grace and sense of rhythm but the big fellow was remarkably light on his feet.

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Then they were back on the floor again, this time in a series of races Jim Barron had planned, some of them rolling peanuts the length of the rink and back and others skating around backwards in tandem races.

In spite of the roaring fire, the room was cold and Janet felt the chill creep through her bones. She stopped skating and edged over close to the fireplace just as the bus driver came in and spoke to Eli Youde. The innkeeper departed at once with the driver and Janet heard the bang of an outer door as though it had been caught by the wind and closed violently. But there had been no wind when they came down into the valley to the inn.

If the wind had come up, the snow might drift badly. She put that thought out of her mind, and rejoined the skaters.

It was less than five minutes later when the innkeeper and the bus driver returned, striding down the center of the rink. Mr. Youde held up one hand and the skaters gathered around him.

"Wind's coming up and the snow's starting to drift. May be bad in another hour or two. If you want to get home before midnight you'd better start now for it will be slow going up in the hills."

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"We'll start at once," decided Miss Bruder. "Get your wraps, everybody."

Janet, some unknown fear tugging at her heart, hung back and spoke to Mr. Youde.

"Is it perfectly safe to start the trip back?" she asked.

"I guess so. That's a powerful bus. But you'd better start now before the wind gets bad. This snow is going to drift like fury before morning. I expect we'll be blockaded for a couple of days."

Janet rejoined the girls in the room where they had left their coats. A horn sounded outside and they hastened to don their wraps. The floodlights in the yard flashed on and the group, bidding the Youdes cheery goodnights, hastened out to the bus.

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## *Chapter IV*

### **LITTLE DEER VALLEY**

In spite of her warm clothing, Janet could feel the sting of the night air. It was much colder than when they had arrived. The snow seemed to be less, but the wind was shipping it in little eddies across the yard.

With the heater running full blast, the bus was comfortable and they found seats well up toward the front. Miss Bruder counted them to make sure that everyone was on hand. Reassured, she told the driver to start the return trip.

The windows were heavily frosted and it was like

being in a sealed room, the only peephole being the small frame of glass which the windshield wiper kept clear.

"What time is it?" Janet asked Helen, who had a wrist watch.

"Nine forty-five. We're starting home early."

Janet nodded, but she was glad they had made the start. It wouldn't have been pleasant staying at Youde's if they had been snowed in for the lonely inn had few comforts.

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The powerful engine of the bus labored as the big machine topped a grade out of the valley and they swung down into another. For five or six miles it would be one hill after another and Janet wondered if the snow was drifting down in the valleys.

The road was little used and if the wind increased, it might make travel exceedingly difficult. But she dismissed that thought from her mind for the bus had heavy chains on the double wheels at the rear.

The spontaneity which had marked their trip out was missing and conversation soon died away. Everyone was tired and willing to snuggle down into their coats.

Janet must have been dozing for the heavy roar of the bus motor awoke her with a start.

They were backing up. Then they stopped and the driver shifted gears. The bus leaped ahead, the throttle on full and the exhaust barking in the crisp air. Gradually their forward motion ceased and the wheels ground into the snow.

Without a word the bus driver shifted instantly into reverse and they lurched backward. The driver stopped the bus, set the emergency brake, and dodged out into the night.

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"What's the matter?" asked Helen, who was almost hidden in her fur coat and deliciously sleepy.

"I think we've hit a drift," replied Janet.

"We ought to be almost home, though. It seems like we've been traveling for ages."

"I expect we are," but Janet didn't feel the optimism that she meant her words to convey.

If the wind had increased they might find themselves in a serious situation.

The bus driver opened the door and stuck his head in.

"One of you fellows come out and give me a hand with the shovels."

Jim Barron, nearest the door, responded with Ed Rickey at his heels.

After several minutes the bus driver came back inside and slowed the motor down to idling speed and the wave of heat from the heater diminished noticeably.

With the motor barely turning over, outside noises were audible and Janet could hear the rush of the wind. Particles of the fine, dry snow

were being driven against the window beside her.

It was at least fifteen minutes later when Jim, Ed and the driver returned, red-faced and breathless from their exertions. The boys dropped into the front seats while the driver opened the throttle and sent the big machine lumbering ahead.

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The bus plunged into the drift, the chains on the rear wheels biting deep into the snow. Once they swung sharply and Janet gasped, but they swung back and with the engine taxed to the limit finally pulled through the drift.

Janet saw Jim look around and she thought she detected grave concern in his eyes. Then he turned away and she was too far away to speak to him without alarming the others.

The bus labored up a long grade, breasted the top of the hill, and then started down. It would be in the valley that trouble would come, for the snow would be heavily drifted.

The big machine rocked down the slope, jolting its occupants around and bruising one or two of them. Janet heard Miss Bruder cry out sharply and turned around, but the teacher motioned that she was all right.

Then the speed of the bus slackened, the wheels spun futilely, and their forward motion ceased. Almost instantly they were in reverse, but the bus slipped to one side and in spite of the full power of the motor, the wheels churned through the dry snow.

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The driver eased up on the throttle, looked significantly at Jim and Ed, and with them at his heels plunged into the storm again. Fortunately, he had tied several shovels to the bus before leaving Youde's and they were not without implements to dig themselves out.

Janet could hear them working, first at the front and then at the rear and Helen, now thoroughly wide awake, looked at her in alarm.

"It's getting colder in here," she said.

"The engine's barely turning over; there isn't much heat coming out."

"I know, but I mean the temperature outside must be dropping rapidly, and listen to the wind."

But Janet preferred not to listen to the wind; it was too mournful, too nerve-wracking. What it whispered alarmed her for they were still some miles from the main road and there were few if any farms near.

The bus driver returned and motioned to the other boys.

"Give us a hand. We don't want to stay here a minute longer than necessary."

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The rest of the boys piled out of the bus, leaving the girls and Miss Bruder alone.

"I'm nearly frozen," complained Margie Blake. "At least we might have obtained a good bus driver."

"I don't think it's the driver's fault," interposed Janet. "We stayed too long at Youde's."

"Then he should have told us the storm was getting worse. My folks will be worried half to death if we are hung up here all night."

Janet admitted to herself that they would all have cause to worry if they had to stay in the bus all night, for she doubted if the supply of fuel would be sufficient to keep the engine going to operate the heater for that length of time and she dreaded to think of how cold it might get if the heater was off.

Between the gusts of wind that swept around the bus they could hear the steady swing of the shovels biting into the snow. It was eleven o'clock when the driver came inside. His face was almost white from the cold and he beat his hands together as he took the wheel and eased in the clutch.

With the motor roaring heavily Janet felt the power being applied to the wheels ever so gradually to keep them from slipping. The bus seemed cemented into the snow, but motion finally became evident. The wheels churned and they moved backward.

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Someone outside was shouting, but the words were unintelligible to all except the driver. He stopped while one of the boys scraped the frost off the window outside for the windshield wiper had frozen.

Then, barely creeping ahead and with the bus in low gear, they moved through the snow, shouted commands keeping the driver in the right path. At last they were through the drift and the boys piled back into the bus, pounding each other on the back and clapping their hands to bring back the circulation.

Miss Bruder called Jim Barron back.

"Just how serious is this, Jim?" she asked.

"Pretty bad. We're three miles from the main road and there isn't a farm within two miles. Only thing we can do is to keep going ahead and try to shovel through."

"How about Little Deer valley?"

"That's what we're worrying about. The wind gets a clean sweep there and I'm afraid we may not get through."

"Can we turn back and stay at Youde's?"

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"Some of the road behind us would be as badly drifted as Little Deer valley," replied Jim. "I guess the only thing is to grind ahead and trust that the gas holds out."

For a time they made steady progress, the bus rumbling along smoothly and the heater throwing out a steady blast of warm, dank air. Then they rolled down a gentle slope and onto the flat of Little Deer valley, which was more than half a mile wide.

The driver stopped and went out to wade through the drifts. He came back to report that they might make it although in places the drifts were nearly up to the tops of the fence posts.

"It's going to mean plenty of shoveling," he warned them.

"We've got to go on," said Miss Bruder. "If we get stuck at least we're that much closer to the road. Perhaps we could walk to the main highway."

Janet saw Jim glance sharply at Miss Bruder. Perhaps she didn't realize the seriousness of their situation, or perhaps she was masking her thoughts with those words.

The gears ground again, the motor took up its burden, and they lurched ahead, churning through the deepening snow.

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The air was colder now. There was no warmth from the heater. Something had gone wrong with the motor or a pipe had frozen. No matter then. Getting through the drifts was uppermost in their minds.

Gradually the straining progress of the bus slowed, finally stopped, the gears clashed, and they lurched backward several hundred feet. Then they plunged ahead again, burrowing deeper into the snow.

"Everybody out to shovel," said the driver, snapping off the engine to save fuel.

The boys hurried out into the cold and the girls huddled closer to each other. Margie and Cora, thinly clad for such a night, beat their arms almost steadily and stamped their feet in rhythmic cadence.

Janet and Helen, heavily clothed, were still warm although the cold crept through their gloves to some extent.

"I wonder how cold it is?" asked Helen.

"I haven't any idea, but it feels like it was almost zero. Let's not think about it."

"Try not to think about it," retorted Helen, and Janet admitted that her companion was right. There was nothing to think about except the cold and the snow. Of course there was the class play, but marooned in the middle of Little Deer valley with a howling blizzard raging was no time to think of class plays.

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The driver came back and stepped on the starter. The motor was slow in turning over. It must be bitterly cold, thought Janet. Finally the engine started and they plowed ahead a few feet, then finally churned to a stop.

Outside the shovels clanged against the steel sides of the bus as the boys dug into the snow again. It was chilling, numbing work out there and Jim Barron tumbled through the door to stand up in front and beat his arms steadily. When he went out, Ed Rickey came in and the boys alternated.

Margie whimpered in the cold and Janet felt sorry for her.

"My coat's large. I'll come up and sit with you and Cora can come back here with Helen," said Janet.

The other girls, thoroughly chilled, welcomed

the change and Janet unbuttoned the voluminous coonskin and shared it with Margie, Helen doing likewise for Cora. Janet could feel Margie trembling as she pressed close to her.

After a time the driver returned and started the motor again. They moved forward slowly, creeping along the trail the boys had opened with the shovels. Finally they rocked to a stop and the driver turned toward Miss Bruder.

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"It's no use. The drifts are three feet high and getting worse every minute."

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## *Chapter V* **THE WHITE MENACE**

Miss Bruder looked at the girls, huddled together on the seats, desperately trying to keep warm. Outside the boys were bravely attempting to clear a path, but it was hopeless.

"Perhaps we'd better get out and try to reach the main road on foot," she said.

"I wouldn't advise that," replied the driver. "Some of the girls couldn't make it through the drifts. It must be well below zero now and the snow's still coming down bad."

Just then Jim and Ed led the boys back into the bus, closing the door carefully after them. They were covered with fine snow and frost from their own breath.

"I'm going to try and break through to the road," said Jim. "The rest of you stay here and try to keep warm. Whatever you do, don't leave the bus."

"If anyone is going to try to make it to the paved highway, I'm going," spoke up the driver. "I've been over this road a number of times. I'll follow the fence line and get to a farm somehow."

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In spite of the protests of the boys, the driver remained firm, insisting that he, and he alone, could make the trip.

"Keep the door shut and don't run the motor. The heater's out of order now and if you run the motor, carbon monoxide fumes may creep in. They're deadly."

But that was an unnecessary warning for all of the boys knew the danger of the motor fumes in a closed compartment.

Bundling himself up well, the driver plunged into the storm and Miss Bruder and her honors English class were left alone in the middle of Little Deer valley with the worst storm of the winter raging around their marooned bus.

Jim turned off the headlights, leaving only the red and green warning lights atop the bus on. He snapped the switches for the interior lights until only one was left aglow for there was no use to waste the precious supply of electricity in the storage battery.

If anything the whine of the wind was louder and it was exceedingly lonely out there despite the presence of the others. There was something about it that made Janet feel as though she were a hundred miles from civilization. She had not dreamed it would be possible to have such a sense of loneliness and yet be in a group of schoolmates.

Jim Barron and Ed Rickey kept on the move, talking with some of the boys or attempting to cheer up the girls.

"Better get up every few minutes and swing your arms and stamp your feet," advised Ed. "That'll keep the circulation going; otherwise you may suffer frostbite."

Helen squinted her eyes and looked at her watch in the dim light shed by the single bulb. It was just after midnight.

"Wonder if we'll be home by morning," she asked, turning back to Janet.

"Let's hope so, though I'm not in the least bit hungry after the big meal we had at Youde's."

"That seems ages away," replied Helen. "I'd almost forgotten the skating party."

Margie, who had taken shelter under Janet's coat, spoke up.

"It's all the bus driver's fault. We never should have left Youde's."

"But none of us wanted to spend the night there," said Janet. "Of course we didn't dream the snow would have drifted this much."

"The driver should have known," insisted Margie, and Janet thought her more than a little unreasonable, but then Margie was probably thoroughly chilled and likely to disagree with everything and everyone.

The minutes passed slowly, dragging as Janet had never known they could. The cold increased in intensity and some of the other girls, not as warmly dressed as Janet and Helen, began to complain.

"My feet are getting numb," said Bernice Grogan, a slip of a little black-haired Irish girl.

"Better keep them moving," said Ed Rickey. "Here, I'll move them for you until the circulation starts back."

Ed knelt down on the floor and took Bernice's boots in his hands, massaging her feet vigorously.

Soon Bernice began to cry.

"It's the pain. They hurt terribly."

"Just the circulation coming back," said Ed, but Janet knew from the lines on his forehead that Ed was worried.

"If any of the rest of you feel numb, just call out. We've got to keep moving or some of us may suffer some frozen parts before morning," he warned.

Bernice, in spite of her efforts, couldn't keep the

tears back, but they froze on her cheeks, so bitter was the cold.

Jim Barron opened the door, and a rush of cutting air swept in. Then he was gone into the night and Janet could hear him wielding the shovel outside.

It was five or six minutes before Jim returned and he looked utterly exhausted.

"I've never seen such a night," he mumbled. "I'm afraid the bus driver didn't get very far."

"Then we'd better start out after him," said Ed, getting to his feet.

But Jim's broad shoulders barred the door.

"We're going to stay right here. You can't even find the fences now. It would be suicide to start in the dark. The only thing we can do is keep as warm as possible inside the bus. I started throwing snow up around the windows. Some of you fellows give me a hand. We'll bank the bus in snow clear to the top and that will keep out some of this bitter wind."

"But if you cover the bus with snow, they'll never find us when they come hunting us," protested Cora.

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"Just never mind about that," retorted Jim. "The only thing I'm worrying about now is keeping us from freezing to death."

Jim's words shocked the girls into silence.

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## *Chapter VI* **DESPERATE HOURS**

Freezing to death! The phrase was terrible in its import, yet the danger was very near and very deadly, for there was slight chance that the bus driver had gotten through to give a warning of their predicament. Even if he had Janet wondered if any searching party could brave the rigors of the night.

Outside the boys worked steadily, coming inside in shifts, and then going back. They could hear the snow thud against the side of the bus as it was piled higher and higher and the sound of the wind gradually faded as the wall of snow protecting them from it thickened.

The light from the single bulb was ghostly now. The battery seemed to be weakening. Helen looked at her watch. It was just one o'clock when the boys came in, beating their hands and knocking the frost from their breath off their coats.

Jim was the last one in and he closed the door carefully after him.

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Bernice was crying again and Ed, though half frozen himself, bent down and massaged her feet. Miss Bruder was white and shaken for it was more than she could cope with and she



turned to Ed and Jim to pull them through the emergency.

While Ed worked with Bernice's feet, Jim spoke to the group.

"We might as well face this thing frankly," he said. "We're in an awful jam. It must be fifteen or twenty below right now. The snow has stopped, but the wind is increasing in strength and the snow is drifting badly. It may be hours, perhaps a day, before we're discovered."

He paused and watched the conflicting emotions on their faces, then plunged on.

"We've banked the bus with snow to keep out the worst of the wind, but it's going to be terribly cold just the same. We've got to keep moving, keep up our spirits. If we don't—"

But Jim didn't finish his sentence. There was no need for they all knew what would happen once they became groggy and sleepy.

"I'm going to start with a count and I want all of you to beat your feet in time with me. That'll jar your whole body and warm you up a little."

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Jim started counting and soon the whole group was stamping their feet methodically.

Even Janet had not realized how cold she was. Her feet had felt a little numb, but under the steady pounding against the floor they started to tingle, then burn with an intensity that brought tears to her eyes where they froze on her lashes.

"I'm nearly frozen," chattered Margie, huddling closer to Janet. "If it wasn't for your coat I'd be like an icicle by this time."

They kept up the motion with their feet for at least five minutes, and Jim called a halt then.

"Everyone feel a little warmer?" he asked.

"My hands are still cold," said one of the girls, but Janet was too stiff to turn around and see who was speaking.

"Then here's an arm drill for everyone," said Jim, starting to swing his arms in cadence.

When that exercise was completed, most of them could feel their bodies aglow as the blood raced through their veins.

Ed started to tell funny stories and though he did his best, their own situation was so tragic that nothing appeared humorous. But he kept them interested, which was the main thing.

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Helen was the first to break the now monotonous flow of Ed's words.

"Stop, Ed," she said, her voice low and tense. "Shake Miss Bruder, quick!"

Ed turned suddenly to the teacher, who had been sitting back of him. Her head had fallen forward on her chest and her arms hung limp.

The husky senior picked her up and brought her back under the light, the rest crowding around him.

Then Janet took charge. Miss Bruder's eyes were

closed, but she was breathing slowly.

"I believe she's half frozen. She was sitting where a constant knife of air was coming in around the door," whispered Jim. "Get busy and massage her."

Janet, with Helen helping her, stripped off Miss Bruder's thin gloves. Her hands were pitifully white.

Ed scooped up a handful of snow where it had sifted in around the door and used it to rub Miss Bruder's hands while Janet and Helen massaged the upper part of her body and her face.

It was five minutes before the teacher responded to their frantic efforts. Then her eyes opened and she tried to smile.

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"I must have dozed for a moment," she whispered.

"Don't talk," said Helen. "Rest now."

"Is everyone all right?" insisted the teacher.

"Everybody's here," replied Jim, who was keeping a close eye on Bernice, who seemed the most susceptible to the cold.

Ed pulled Janet to the rear of the bus.

"This thing is getting serious," he whispered. "Some of the girls won't be able to stand it until morning unless we're able to keep them warmer. Jim and I have sheepskins. We'll put them down on the floor and you girls get down and lie on them. Huddle together and cover up with your own coats. Your body heat should keep you warm and we'll be moving around and talking to you so none of you will get too drowsy from the cold."

"But you can't do that. You and Jim will freeze," protested Janet.

"Freeze? I guess not. We're too tough for that. Besides, I've got all kinds of clothes on under this sheepskin."

Janet finally agreed to the plan and Ed explained it briefly. Miss Bruder hesitated, but the others overruled her.

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Jim and Ed placed their heavy canvas, sheep-lined coats on the floor and the girls laid down on them like ten pins, huddling together and putting their own coats over them.

"Get just as close as you can so you'll keep each other warm," counseled Jim, who, minus his heavy coat, was busy swinging his arms and legs.

In less than five minutes the girls were ready to admit that the plan was an excellent one, for they were quite comfortable under the mound of coats and Janet made them keep up a constant flow of conversation, calling to each girl every few minutes. Up in the front of the bus they could hear the boys moving steadily and stamping their feet.

How long they had been under the pile of coats Janet couldn't guess, but suddenly there was a wild pounding on the door of the bus. She

managed to get her head out from under the coats in time to see Jim open the door.

"Everyone safe?" cried someone outside.

"We're all right," replied Jim and then Janet saw her father looking down at the huddled group of girls on the floor of the bus. His face was covered with frost, but he brushed past the boys and knelt beside her.

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"All right, honey?" he asked.

"A little cold," Janet managed to smile. "How did you get here?"

"Never mind that. The first thing is to get out of here and where you'll be safe and warm."

Other men poured into the bus. Janet recognized some of them. Ed's father was there. So was Jim's, Cora's and Margie's. Someone had a big bottle of hot coffee and cardboard cups. The steaming hot liquid, bitter without sugar or cream, was passed around.

Janet drank her cup eagerly and the hot beverage warmed her chilled body.

Extra coats and mufflers had been brought by the rescue party.

"Get as warm as you can. It's going to be a cold ride to the paved road," advised her father.

They were soon ready and once more the door of the bus was opened. Outside a powerful searchlight glowed and as they neared it Janet saw a large caterpillar tractor. Behind this was a hayrack, mounted on runners and well filled with hay.

"Everybody into the rack. Burrow down deep so you'll keep warm."

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Janet's father counted them as they got into the rack, yelled to the operator of the tractor to start, and then piled into the rack himself.

With a series of sharp reports from its exhaust, the lumbering tractor got into motion, jerking the rack and its precious load behind it.

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## ***Chapter VII*** **SANCTUARY AT HOME**

It was nearly an hour later when the tractor breasted the last grade and rolled down to the paved road where a dozen cars, all of them warmly heated and well lighted, were strung along the road. Anxious fathers and mothers were on hand, including Janet's mother and Mrs. Thorne and they welcomed their thoroughly chilled daughters to their bosoms.

Janet's father shepherded them into their own sedan where despite the sub-zero cold the heater had kept the car comfortable. Then they started the final lap of their eventful trip from Youde's home.

Helen and Janet sank back on the cushions of the capacious rear seat, thoroughly worn out by their trying experience.

Janet's father, one of the most prominent attorneys in Clarion, slipped in behind the wheel, slamming the car door and shutting out the biting blast of air.

There were other cars ahead of them and they made no attempt at high speed as they rolled back into the city.

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"How did you ever find us, Dad?" asked Janet.

"You can thank the bus driver for that. Somehow he got through to a farmhouse. He was almost frozen, but he managed to tell them the story and they phoned word in to us."

"Who thought of the tractor and hayrack?" asked Helen, warm once more.

"It was Hugh Grogan, Bernice's father. He sells the caterpillars. Good thing he did or we'd never have gotten through."

"It was a good thing for Bernice, too. She was about all in," said Janet.

When they reached the Hardy home, Janet's mother insisted that Helen and Mrs. Thorne come in and have a hot lunch before going to their own home.

While the girls took off their coats and Mr. Hardy put the car into the garage, Mrs. Hardy bustled out into the kitchen where she had left a kettle of water simmering on the stove.

Lunch was ready in short order, tea, peanut butter sandwiches, cookies and a large bowl of fruit.

Janet and Helen had ravenous appetites and the sandwiches disappeared as though by magic.

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"How cold is it, Dad?" asked Janet.

"Twenty-two below."

"The wind was awful," said Helen, between bites at a sandwich.

"I know. It was pretty fierce going across country in the hayrack. The boys must have used their heads for someone banked the bus with snow."

"That was Jim Barron's idea. He and Ed Rickey kept us moving and talking most of the time, but we forgot Miss Bruder. She was in a draft and almost froze to death without saying a word to anyone."

"That scared us half to death," put in Helen, "but the boys massaged her hands with snow and Janet and I massaged the upper part of her body until we could get the circulation going again. I think she'll be all right, but probably pretty sensitive to cold for the rest of the winter."

"But the winter's almost over. Here it's late March. Who'd ever have thought we'd have a storm like this," said Janet.

"If I had, I can assure you that you'd never have

made the trip to Youde's tonight," promised her father. "It was one of those freak storms that sometimes sweep down from the Arctic circle and fool even the weather men. By tomorrow the temperature will shoot up and the snow will melt so fast we'll probably have a flood."

The girls finished every sandwich on the plate and drank two cups of tea apiece.

It was five o'clock when they left the table.

Mrs. Thorne and Helen started to put on their coats, but Janet's mother objected.

"Your house will be cold and our guest room upstairs is all made up. Janet and I will lend you whatever you need. We'll all get to bed now."

Janet got warm pajamas for Helen and then went to her own room. Warm and inviting in the soft rays of the rose-shaded lamp over her dressing table, it was a sanctuary after the exciting events of the night.

A wave of drowsiness assailed Janet, and it was with difficulty that she unlaced and pulled off her boots. Somehow she managed to crawl into her pajamas and roll into bed, but she was asleep before she could remember to turn off the light.

Her mother, looking in a few minutes later, pulled the blankets up around Janet's shoulders, opened the window just a crack to let in a whiff of fresh air, and turned off the light.

Janet slept a heavy and dreamless sleep. When she awakened the sun was streaming in the windows and from the angle she could tell that it was late.

But in spite of the knowledge that she would probably be extremely late in getting to school, Janet was too deliciously comfortable to move rapidly.

After stretching leisurely, she got out of bed and closed the window. The radiator in her room was bubbling gently and she slipped into bed to wait until the room warmed up.

Vivid thoughts of what had happened during the night rotated in her mind, the cold, the wind, the snow—the terror of waiting in Little Deer valley for the rescue, hoping but not knowing for sure that they would be reached in time to save them from the relentless cold.

Someone opened Janet's door and peered in. It was Helen, who, on seeing that her friend was awake, bounced into the room.

"You look pretty live and wide awake after last night," smiled Janet.

"I'm not only that, I'm ravenously hungry," said Helen, "and if you had been out in the hall and caught a whiff of the breakfast your mother is preparing you would be too."

"What time is it?"

"Well, you can call it breakfast or lunch, depending on whether you've had breakfast. For me it's breakfast even though the clock says it's just a little after eleven."

"You're seeing things," retorted Janet, throwing off the covers and hurrying toward her wardrobe.

"I wouldn't be surprised if I am, but your mother says it is after eleven and I'll take her word for it. I'll run down and tell her you'll be along within the hour."

"That isn't fair. You know it won't be more than five minutes. I always dress faster than you do."

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## *Chapter VIII* **POSTPONED TRYOUTS**

Helen went down stairs and Janet hastened to the bathroom where she made a hasty toilet. Back in her room she fairly jumped into her clothes, gave her hair one final and hurried caress with the brush, and then went down stairs.

Mrs. Thorne, who had breakfasted earlier with Janet's father and mother, had gone home, so Helen and Janet sat down to the breakfast Mrs. Hardy had prepared.

There was grapefruit to start with, then oatmeal with dates in it, hot, well-buttered toast, strips of crisp bacon and large glasses of milk.

"Feel all right this morning, Janet?" her mother asked, looking a little anxiously at her vibrant and energetic daughter.

"Fine, mother. I slept very soundly. Last night seems almost like a nightmare."

"It was a nightmare," said her mother, sitting down and picking up a piece of toast to munch while the girls ate their breakfast. "I've never seen your father so worried. He was almost frantic until Hugh Grogan suggested they try to get through with one of his big tractors. They held a council of war right here in the front room and I've never seen as many nervous and excited men in my life. Talk about women getting upset, why they were worse than we ever think of being." She smiled a little. She could now, but last night it had all been a very grim and very near tragedy.

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"You'll have to write an excuse for me," said Janet between munches on a crisp slice of bacon.

"Not this time. I phoned the superintendent and he said that everyone in honors English was excused from school today."

"Wonder if we'll have the tryouts for the class play this afternoon?" said Helen, who until that moment had been devoting her full energies to the large bowl of oatmeal.

"There's one way of finding out," replied Janet. "I'll phone the principal's office and see if it has been taken off the bulletin board."

Janet went to the phone in the hall and called

the schoolhouse. When she returned her face was aglow.

"No school, no tryouts—what a day and what to do?"

"You're sure about the tryouts?" Helen was insistent, for winning the leading part meant so much to her.

"Sure as sure can be. They've been postponed until Saturday morning at 9:30 o'clock when they will be held in the assembly."

"Then that will give me plenty of time to study my part thoroughly," said Helen.

"But you know it now. Why you had it memorized, every word and phrase, yesterday afternoon," protested Janet.

"I know I did yesterday, but last night scared it completely out of me. I can't even remember the opening lines."

"Maybe it's a good thing. We'll both start over and this afternoon we can rehearse upstairs in my room."

"Grand. I've got to go home and help mother for a while, but I'll be back by 2:30 o'clock and we'll start in."

Breakfast over, Janet went to the door with Helen. The day was bright and almost unbelievably clear. The temperature was rising rapidly, the wind had gone down, and their experience of the night before seemed very far away. Rivulets of water were starting to run down the streets and before nightfall the gutters would be full of the melting snow and slush.

Janet found a multitude of little things to do around home to help her mother and the first interruption came with the ringing of the telephone. Her mother answered, but then summoned Janet.

"It's the Times," said Mrs. Hardy.

Janet took the instrument and recognized the voice of the city editor of the local paper.

"I need a good first person story of what took place inside the bus, Janet," said Pete Benda. "Can you come down to the office and write a yarn? You've had enough experience with your high school page to do the trick and do it well."

"But it all seems so far away and kind of vague now," protested Janet.

"Listen, Janet, I've got to have that story." Pete was cajoling now. "Haven't we done a lot of favors for your high school page?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then come down and write the story. I'll save a good spot on page one for it."

Janet hung up the telephone, feeling a little weak and limp. Pete Benda was insistent and she would have to go through with it.

"The Times wants me to come down and write a first person story of what happened last night," she explained to her mother. "I didn't want to,

but Pete Benda, the city editor, just insisted. He's been so good about helping us out on the school page when we've been in jams that I couldn't say no."

"Of course not, and you'll do a good piece of writing. No don't worry about it. Run along. I'll have a little lunch ready when you get back."

Janet put on her coat, but paused at the door and called to her mother. "If Helen comes before I get back, tell her I'll be along soon."

Janet enjoyed the walk to the Times office for the air was invigorating.

The Times was housed in a narrow two-story building with its press in the basement. The news department was on the second floor with the city editor's desk in front of a large window where he could look the full length of the main business street of Clarion.

Pete Benda, thin and too white-faced for his own good health, saw Janet come in.

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"Here's a desk and typewriter you can use," he said. "I'm counting on having that story in less than an hour. You'll have to come through, young lady."

Janet flushed at Pete's appellation, for the city editor of the Times was only a little older than she. Oh well, perhaps Pete was twenty-two, but she could remember when he had been in high school, playing football, and one of the best ends in the state.

Janet rolled some copy paper into the typewriter and looked rather blankly at the sheet. It was hard now to concentrate on the events which had been so tragically real the night before. If she could only get the first sentence to click the rest would come easily. She tried one phrase. That wouldn't do; not enough action in it. Ripping the sheet of paper from the typewriter, she inserted another and tried again. This was better. Perhaps it would do; at least she had started, and the words came now in a smooth flow for Janet could type rapidly, thanks to a commercial course in her junior year.

Pete Benda, on his way to the composing room, looked over her shoulder and read the first paragraph but Janet, now engrossed in the story, hardly noticed him. Pursing his lips in a low whistle, a trick that he did when pleased, Pete went on about his work.

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Janet finished one page and then another. Even a third materialized under the steady tapping of her fingers on the keyboard. Then she was through. Three pages of copy, three pages of short, sharp sentences, of adjectives that caught and held the imagination, that gave a picture of the cold and the apprehension of those in the bus, of the relief, almost hysterical, when rescue came.

Janet didn't read it over. It was the best she could do. If Pete wanted to change it that was all right with her. She put the three sheets of copy paper together and placed them on his desk. Then she slipped into her coat and went down stairs. She had finished the story well within the limit set by the city editor and she turned toward



home and the rehearsal she and Helen had planned for the afternoon.

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## ***Chapter IX*** **BIG NEWS**

Janet had gone less than half a block when she heard someone calling to her. Looking back she saw Pete Benda leaning from an upper window of the Times office. He was waving Janet's story in his hand.

"Great story, Janet," he shouted. "I'll send you a box of candy. Thanks a lot."

Janet smiled and waved at Pete. It was just like the impetuous city editor to lean out his window and shout his thoughts at the top of his voice to someone down the street. But she was glad to know that the story met Pete's approval. But as for the candy. Well Pete was always making promises like that. If he had kept them all he would have needed a private candy factory.

Helen was waiting when Janet reached home and she waved a letter at her friend.

"It's from Dad," she cried. "He says he's about through on the picture he's making at present and will be home without fail for my graduation. Wants me to send him the dates of the play, of the banquet and of everything. Also wants your Dad to make sure the fishing will be good and to line up a good plot where he can find plenty of worms."

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"That's splendid news. I'm so happy," said Janet, who knew how much Helen missed her father's companionship at times, for when he was in Clarion they were almost inseparable. But Janet realized that Mr. Thorne was exceedingly smart in keeping Helen in Clarion rather than taking her west with him to the movie city where she would be subject to all of the tensions and nervous activity there. Here in Clarion she was growing up in entirely normal surroundings where she would have a sane and sensible outlook on life and its values.

"I phoned your Dad, and he says he'll have to start hunting good creeks just as soon as the snow's off."

"That kind of puts Dad on the spot, for he's got to deliver on the worms and the fishing," smiled Janet.

"Oh, well, Dad doesn't care so much about getting any fish. He just likes to get out and loaf on a sunny creek bank and either talk with your Dad or doze. He calls that a real holiday."

Janet went upstairs and got the mimeographed sheets with the synopsis of the play and the part she was to try out for. After the drama of last night, that of "The Chinese Image" seemed shallow and forced.

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The rôle of Abbie Naughton, who was more than

a little light-headed and fun loving until a crisis came along, was comparatively easy for it called for little actual acting ability and Janet was frank enough to admit that she was no actress.

Helen, trying for the straight lead, carried by Gale Naughton, had always liked to think that she had real dramatic talent and Janet was willing to admit that her companion had more than average ability. At least Helen was pretty enough to carry the rôle off whether she had any dramatic ability or not.

Coaching each other, they gave their own interpretations of the parts which they were trying for. An hour and then another slipped away. The brightness faded from the afternoon and Janet turned on a reading light.

"I think we've done all we can for one day. If we keep on we'll go stale. Let's forget the tryouts for a while."

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"You can," retorted Helen, "but I've simply got to win that part. What would Dad think of me if I didn't?"

"I don't believe he'd think any the less of you," smiled Janet, "but I'll admit it would be nice for you to win the leading rôle and I'll do everything I can to help you."

"Of course, I know you will. It was awfully small of me to say that."

The doorbell rang and Janet answered it. A boy handed her a package.

"It's for Miss Hardy. She live here?"

"I'm Janet Hardy."

"Okay. I just wanted to be sure this was the right place."

"This looks interesting," said Janet, returning to the living room with the large box. Her mother, who had heard the doorbell, joined them.

Janet tore off the wrapping, opened the cardboard outer box, and pulled out a two pound box of assorted chocolates. On top of the box was a clipping torn from the front page of the Times.

Janet stared hard at the clipping, hardly believing her eyes. There was her story with her name signed to it.

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"Why Janet, your name is on this front page story!" exclaimed her mother.

"What's all the mystery?" demanded Helen, and Janet explained, rather quickly, about her summons to the Times office.

"Pete Benda said he liked the story and was going to send me a box of candy, but I thought he was joking. You know he's always telling people he's going to send them candy."

"This is no joke," said Helen as Janet opened the box and offered candy to her mother and to Helen. "In fact, I'd like a joke like this about once a week."

"Yes, but I wouldn't like an experience like we

had once a week," retorted Janet.

Helen's mother phoned that they were having an early supper and Helen picked up the tryout sheets, put her coat over her shoulders, and started for home.

"If I disappear, it's just that I've been swept away in the flood," she called as she hurried out.

Janet looked after her. Helen wasn't far from wrong. With the rapidly rising temperature, the afternoon sun had covered the sidewalks and filled the street with rushing torrents of water. Another day and there would be no sign of the storm of the night before.

Mrs. Hardy called and Janet went into the kitchen to help her mother with the preparations for the evening meal.

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"I heard you rehearsing this afternoon," said her mother, "and I wouldn't set my heart too much on winning one of those parts."

"I won't," promised Janet. "Of course I'd like to be in the senior play, but I won't be heart-broken if I don't win a part."

"Perhaps I was thinking more about Helen than you," confessed Mrs. Hardy. "She's so much in earnest that failure would upset her greatly."

"I know it, but I can understand why Helen wants a part and I'm afraid I'd be just as intent if my father were the ace director for a great motion picture company. I suppose I'd think that I should have dramatic ability to be a success in his eyes."

"That's just it," said Mrs. Hardy. "Helen doesn't need to get a part in the play. When he comes home, he likes nothing better than being with his wife and Helen. You know he never goes any place."

"Except fishing with Dad."

"Oh, pshaw. They don't fish. They dig a few worms and take their old fishpoles along some creek that never did have any fish. It just gets them outdoors and away from people who might want to bother Henry Thorne."

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"Well, no matter, Helen has set her heart on winning the leading rôle and I'm going to do everything in my power to help her along."

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## ***Chapter X*** **VICTORY FOR HELEN**

The rest of the week slipped away quickly. The harrowing experience in Little Deer valley became a memory and the seniors concentrated upon winning rôles in the class play.

By Saturday morning the snow had vanished, the temperature was above freezing and the grass was starting to turn green—such are the miracles of the early spring.

Janet and Helen rehearsed their tryout parts so many times that Janet found herself mumbling her lines in her sleep.

Most of the seniors assembled promptly at 9:30 o'clock that morning for the tryouts. A few of them, feeling that they had no chance, did not come, but Janet noticed that Margie and Cora were well to the front of the room where Miss Williams would be sure to see them.

"I want you to do your best this morning for on your work now depends whether you will have a place in the play," she warned them, and Janet felt a little twinge. School was near an end and the senior play was her last chance. Of course it wasn't as important to her as it was to Helen, but it would be nice to have the part of Abbie, for Abbie was such a delightfully irresponsible character.

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Miss Williams called for tryouts for minor rôles first and Helen sent an anxious glance toward Janet and nodded toward the hall.

They slipped out of the assembly quietly and Helen voiced her fears.

"Perhaps I'd better try for one of these minor parts as well as for the lead. Then if I don't get to play Gale Naughton, I may win another rôle."

"I wouldn't," counseled Janet. "Concentrate on the main part. I think you'll make it all right."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"I'm not confident about winning a part myself, but I'm sure you will," replied Janet. "Let's go back and watch the tryouts."

"Perhaps I ought to go over my lines again?"

"Nonsense. You can even speak them backwards. If you work on them any more you may do that, which would be fatal. Let's see the mistakes of the others and then we'll know we aren't the world's worst actresses."

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Miss Williams was conscientious. She wanted every boy and girl who felt he had a chance to have the utmost opportunity and she worked with them carefully. At noon she was fairly well down the cast, but the four major rôles remained, two for the boys and two for the girls, including the parts of Gale and Abbie Naughton which Helen and Janet sought.

"We've been at this long enough," announced Miss Williams as the noon whistles sounded down town. "Everyone take a rest, have lunch, and be back here at one o'clock. Then we'll go on until we finish. For those who have been assigned parts, the first rehearsal will be Monday night at 7:15 o'clock. I'll expect you to have your first act lines memorized."

The group broke up, some of them going home to have lunch and others stopping at the luncheonette of a nearby drug store. Janet and Helen were among this group, which included Cora and Margie. The latter, seated with two companions, appeared confident that they would win the leading rôles, but Janet overheard a spiteful remark by Cora.

"Of course, I haven't the pull Helen has, for her

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father's a famous director," she said, and Janet saw Helen's face flush.

"That's isn't fair," said Helen. "You know Dad wouldn't use any influence to get a part for me."

"So does Cora. She's saying that just to be mean."

When they reassembled it was a small group, Jim Barron, Ed Rickey and two other boys who were trying for the male leads, Cora, Margie, Helen, Janet and Miss Williams.

The instructor worked with the boys first and it was evident that Jim and Ed were to have the major parts. In less than half an hour they were assigned, Ed getting the lead and Jim the second rôle. If Janet won the part of Abbie, Jim would be playing opposite her. That would be fun, for Jim was wholesome and pleasant.

After the boys had departed, Miss Williams turned to the girls.

"Now we're down to the two major parts, for the play hinges on the characters of Gale and Abbie." She looked at the four hopeful, anxious faces.

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"I want Cora and Margie first. Take your places and give me an interpretation of the action you think should go with the lines you have memorized."

Cora, dark-eyed and confident, stepped to the platform. Margie, a wispy, blonde girl, followed. Both girls used excellent diction, spoke clearly and with feeling, but somehow Cora's work lacked a convincing touch. Perhaps she was trying too hard and Janet felt her spirits rising.

Helen should walk away with the rôle unless she got scared when she stepped on the platform. But Janet was more than a little concerned about Margie. The blonde senior was doing an excellent job, putting just the right amount of enthusiasm into the rôle. There was nothing forced. Every word and gesture seemed spontaneous and lines that had sounded silly in their own rehearsals were very logical and convincing when they came tumbling from Margie's lips.

Janet smiled grimly. Of course she wanted the part, but even more, she wanted Helen to win the rôle of Gale.

Cora and Margie finished the part Miss Williams had assigned, and looked anxiously toward the dramatics teacher.

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"That was very nicely done," said Miss Williams. "Janet and Helen next and put plenty of feeling into your interpretations."

From the platform Janet could look down on Cora and Margie. There was a thin sneer on Cora's lips and Janet felt Helen, standing close beside her, tremble.

"Ready?" she asked. Helen nodded.

Janet's lines opened their brief tryout rôles. She spoke them clearly, but somehow the spark needed to add vigor and brilliance was lacking. She was thinking too much about Helen.

The lines and action snapped to Helen and she picked them up instantly. Janet thrilled. Helen had forgotten Cora and Margie. She had forgotten even Miss Williams. She was living her part. She was Gale Naughton, the dark, lovely heroine of "The Chinese Image." The lines came smoothly and without effort.

Then they were through, a little breathless, their hearts beating rapidly. Janet was the first to turn toward Miss Williams and before the instructor spoke, she knew Helen had made a deep impression with her interpretation of Gale.

"Splendid. I liked that very much," said Miss Williams, who was not given to compliments. "If you'll be good enough to wait a few minutes, I'll be back."

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"Will you announce the winners then?" asked Cora, her dark cheeks flushed with excitement and her brown eyes glowing.

"Yes," promised Miss Williams, hurrying from the room.

"Why do you suppose she left to make her tabulations?" asked Helen, her voice low.

"Probably didn't want us to know just how she rated us. She's got a percentage system all her own she uses in casting parts. It won't be long now," said Janet.

"The sooner the better. I'm all fluttery inside."

"Maybe you think Cora and Margie aren't. They can't even sit still."

Which was true. Cora and Margie were walking restlessly up and down the far side of the assembly, looking anxiously toward the double doorway through which Miss Williams would return.

Five minutes slipped away. Then another five and it stretched out into fifteen minutes before the quick footsteps of the dramatics instructor could be heard in the hallway. Involuntarily Cora and Margie joined Janet and Helen at the front of the large assembly room.

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Miss Williams came in briskly, a slip of paper in her right hand, and Janet, who was nearest, saw two names written on the slip.

"Sorry I kept you so long, but I'm trying to be very fair in making the final selections," explained Miss Williams.

"Go on, go on," burst out Cora. "Who won?"

Miss Williams frowned.

"Well, I'm sorry, Cora."

The dark-haired senior interrupted her sharply.

"You mean I didn't win?"

"I mean that Helen gave a more convincing interpretation of the part. She gets the leading rôle."

Cora's eyes flashed.

"I might have known that. Too bad I don't have a father with some influence."

Cora picked up her coat. "Come on, Margie. We've just wasted our time."

"I'd stay if I were you, Margie," said Miss Williams. "What I have to say should interest you."

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And in those words Janet knew the decision. Helen had the lead and Margie was to get the second rôle. She was out, but at least she could take it without creating a scene like Cora.

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## ***Chapter XI*** **A FAMOUS DIRECTOR ARRIVES**

Miss Williams looked at the three girls remaining and she spoke slowly, choosing her words with care.

"I regret that Cora took that attitude," she said, "for there was no influence used in my selection of Helen for the lead. She was much better in the tryout than Cora."

Then the instructor turned to Margie.

"You did a nice bit as Abbie," she went on, "and I want you to take that rôle. Janet was practically as good as you were on the lines, but you seem a little more like the character. You're thinner and you flutter around more than Janet, and Abbie is a very fluttery sort of a person."

Margie grinned. "In other words, Abbie is a dizzy sort of a gal and I'm that type."

"Call it that if you want to," smiled Miss Williams. "Do you want the part?"

"And how!"

"Very well. I will expect you and Helen to have your lines for the first act well in hand by Monday night."

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Miss Williams, followed by Margie, left the room and Helen turned to face Janet.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way. I'd rather you had won a part."

"I'm not," said Janet, and she said it honestly, for a part in the senior play had meant so much more to Helen. She knew she had done her best, but she had to admit that after all Margie was better suited to the rôle than she.

The air softened. April came and went, and the senior play neared its final rehearsals. Miss Williams drove the cast without mercy for on the success of the play would depend her own opportunity for advancement.

Helen, working every spare moment, became tired and irritable.

"I'll be glad when it's all over," she said. "I never dreamed it would be so hard."

"You'll be well repaid when the play is given," said Janet, who had been assigned to the stage crew. In this capacity she attended almost every rehearsal and she couldn't help watching Margie go through the lines of Abbie. It was a delightful part, easy to handle, and so breezy and irresponsible.

Costuming took several nights, for Miss Williams was meticulous. Then came the dress rehearsals, the first on Monday night. The play would be given Friday. On the following week came the junior-senior banquet and then graduation and the end of school days.

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Janet, watching the play in rehearsal each night, came to know the lines of almost everyone in the cast for the lighting of the show was in her charge. It was up to her to get just the right amount of amber in the afternoon scene and just the right amount of blue to simulate moonlight for the evening scene from the rather antiquated banks of lights on each side of the stage.

Brief letters and a telegram or two had come from Helen's father, assuring her that he would arrive in ample time for the presentation of "The Chinese Image." Janet's father had found a small plot at the rear of their own large lot which yielded an ample supply of worms at almost every spadeful and Indian creek, two miles north of Clarion, was said to abound with bullheads that spring.

On Wednesday night, after a long and tiring rehearsal, Janet and Helen walked home through the soft moonlight of the late May evening.

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"I haven't heard from Dad today. He was going to wire what train he would arrive on. It looks like he won't be in until the morning of the play."

"That will be plenty of time. He can stay on longer after the play's over," said Janet.

"It won't be plenty of time if he has to do any more retakes on his last picture. His letters have sounded awfully tired."

"Let's walk on down to Whet's for an ice cream soda. The walk will do both of us good and the soda will be refreshing," said Janet.

Helen agreed and they walked leisurely, breathing deeply of the flower-scented air; for it was a perfect evening. From far away came the rumble of heavy trucks on a through street, but on their own there was an air of peace and contentment.

"Dad will like this when he finally gets here. He always seems to throw off his cares when he's back home."

"Which is why he anticipates coming home so much," added Janet.

"But it can't go on this way forever. He needs mother and I'll be going away to school next fall."

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"I wouldn't worry about that until after graduation. There'll be plenty of time to discuss those matters then." Janet felt somewhat like a very fatherly old man giving advice to a very



young girl and she smiled to herself.

At the neighborhood drug store they dawdled over their sodas, thoroughly relaxing after the strenuous hours of rehearsal. On the way home they again walked leisurely, discussing little things about the play that appealed to them.

Helen's mother, waiting on the porch, called to them the moment they came in sight.

"Hurry up, Helen. I've a telegram from your father."

Helen ran across the lawn with Janet close behind.

"He's coming, isn't he, mother?" And to Janet there was something pitiful in Helen's extreme anxiety for she was so desperately intent upon having her father see her in the leading rôle in the class play.

"He's coming tonight, dear. He wired saying that he would be on the transcontinental plane which stops at Rubio at midnight. Janet's father and mother are going to drive us over. You girls had better clean up a bit. We're leaving right away."

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"I'm so happy," said Helen. "I was afraid it was a message saying he wouldn't be able to come."

Janet hurried on home. Her father had the large sedan out in the driveway and her mother was bustling about the kitchen, making stacks of thin sandwiches.

"Why the sandwiches?" asked Janet.

"I've never known the time when Henry Thorne wasn't hungry. He's been that way ever since he was a little boy and his wife is too excited to think about that. We'll have them all over for lunch after we get home."

"But it will be late. Way after one o'clock and Helen ought to be in bed. She has been keeping terrific hours with the rehearsals."

"It won't do her a bit of harm this time. Being with her father will do her more good than anything else. Wrap these sandwiches up and put them in the breadbox so they'll keep good and moist. Then slice some lemon for the ice tea and put the slices back in the ice box. We'll stop and get some ice cream on our way in to town."

They hurried around the kitchen until Janet's mother noticed the disarray of her daughter.

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"For land's sake, Janet, you're a sight. Working with the scenery and lights again at school? Well, hurry upstairs and clean up. Then slip into that pale green print that makes your hair look golden. We'll be ready in five minutes."

Janet forgot her fatigue and raced upstairs, splashed water on her flushed cheeks, followed that with a few hasty dabs of a powder puff to take the shine off her skin, and then went to her own room where she put on fresh, sheer hose and the green print that was so becoming.

Her hair, with its natural curl, needed only a quick brushing to bring out the highlights.

Down in the driveway her father pushed the

horn button and her mother called.

"We're ready, Janet."

But so was Janet and she hastened downstairs and joined them. The sedan was one of those extra-broad stream-lined cars with room for three in the front seat.

"You and Helen can sit up front with me while your mother and Mrs. Thorne are in the back seat," said her father. "Coming back we'll put the Thornes in the back where they can visit to their heart's content."

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The car rolled down the drive and her father turned and stopped the large, low machine in front of the Thorne home. Half a dozen lights were turned on downstairs and the house fairly glowed with light.

Helen and her mother came down the walk, Helen in a pink, fluffy creation that set off her dark coloring to its best effect.

"You're pretty enough to look like a would-be movie star trying to make an impression upon a famous director," whispered Janet.

"Maybe I am," smiled Helen as she slipped into the front seat.

"Everybody ready?" inquired Janet's father. "I don't want to get half way to Rubio and have one of you women remember that you've left something important at home."

"You do the driving and we'll worry about what's been left at home," replied Mrs. Hardy with a chuckle.

The big machine rolled away smoothly and when they turned onto the main state road to Rubio, John Hardy stepped on the accelerator and they fairly flew down the straight, white ribbon which unrolled before their blazing lights.

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The speedometer climbed steadily, fifty, sixty and then seventy miles an hour, and the needle hung there except when they swung around one of the broad, well-banked curves. Then it dropped to fifty.

The rush of cool air was refreshing and Janet and Helen sank back in the broad, comfortable seat.

When the lights of Rubio glowed ahead Helen spoke.

"It hardly seems possible that Dad will be here in a few minutes. It's been months since I've seen him."

"Then you'll enjoy seeing him all the more. What fun you're going to have the next few days."

"I hope it will be several weeks for I think Dad needs a good rest. He's done three big pictures in the last year."

They rolled through Rubio to the airport, which was just beyond the city limits. The clock over the hangar pointed to 11:50 and Janet's father guided the sedan to a stop in the parking area behind the steel fence.

"I'll find out if the plane's on time," he said, and went over to the office.

Janet thought she could hear the faint, faraway beat of an airplane, but the noise of another car turning into the parking space drowned it out.

"Come on folks. The plane will be here in a minute," called Mr. Hardy.

They hurried out of the car and followed John Hardy through the gate and onto the ramp. In the west were the red and green lights of an incoming plane.

Suddenly the field burst into a flood of blue-white brilliance as a great searchlight came on. Like a ghost, the huge, twin-motored plane glided down its invisible path and settled easily onto a runway, little clouds of dust coming up from the crushed rock as the machine touched the ground.

With its motors roaring a lusty song of power, the monoplane waddled toward the concrete ramp. The pilot swung it smartly about and the ground crew blocked the wheels and rushed the landing stage up to the cabin door as the pilot cut the motors. The propellers ceased whirling just as the stewardess opened the door.

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"There's Dad!" cried Helen and she ran toward the plane with Janet at her heels.

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## ***Chapter XII*** **ON THE STAGE**

Henry Thorne was the first passenger to alight from the east-bound plane. Tall, well-built, with a close-clipped mustache and iron gray hair that curled a bit around his temples, he was a man's man.

Helen threw her arms around her father and he gave her a tremendous hug.

"Golly, I'm glad to see you, hon," he said. "Where's mother?"

"She's coming. She couldn't run as fast as I," explained Helen, breathless with excitement.

Mrs. Thorne, her face flushed with happiness over her husband's coming arrived and they embraced affectionately.

Then Mr. Thorne saw John Hardy and Janet and her mother.

"Say, this is great of you to come over. I feel like a visiting celebrity, or something."

"You're very much a celebrity," smiled Janet.

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"Not to you," he replied. "Well, let's start home. I've only this light traveling bag."

"Does that mean you won't be able to stay long?" asked Helen anxiously.

"I should say it doesn't. I can live for six months out of a traveling bag. Oh, of course, I wouldn't look like Beau Brummell, but I'd be acceptable in average circles."

The Thornes occupied the back seat and Janet and her mother sat in front. The big car purred smoothly and Janet's father sent it humming away on the trip back to Clarion.

Janet got only snatches of the conversation that was going on in the rear seat. She was anxious to listen, but it wouldn't have been very polite to have done so obviously. Anyway, Helen would tell her most of the news the next day.

From the few remarks she overheard, she realized that Henry Thorne was exceedingly happy to be home, and that the last year had been a strain even though all of his pictures had been money makers.

The lights of Clarion were in sight when he leaned forward and spoke to Janet's father.

"Get any worms located, John?"

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"Plenty of them and right in my own back yard. You can dig to your heart's content."

"How about the fishing?"

"I haven't tried it myself, but the boys say there are lots of bullheads in Indian creek. Remember it?"

"I'll never forget the time we were hunting rabbits and walked across the ice of the creek. It wasn't frozen thick enough and we dropped through into water waist deep. Going home was the longest, coldest walk I've ever taken."

"It wasn't very pleasant," nodded Janet's father. "Did you hear about the experience of the girls?"

"Haven't read a paper for weeks. I've been going day and night on retakes for the last picture. What happened?"

They slowed down for the edge of Clarion and Janet's father, briefly and vividly, recounted the events of that harrowing night in the storm and bitter cold of Little Deer valley.

"I should have known about this," said Henry Thorne quietly. "Why didn't someone wire me?"

"I thought of it," said Helen's mother, "but it all happened so quickly. Then, after the girls were safe at home I thought wiring you would only prove disturbing and I knew you were going to the limit of your strength and endurance anyway."

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"Perhaps you're right," he conceded, sinking back in the rear seat. "My, but it's great to be home."

John Hardy swung the car into the drive and they rolled up the grade to the porch.

"Pity you couldn't take a man to his own door," chided his friend.

"All right, I will if you want to miss the lunch that's waiting."

They bantered good naturedly, for John Hardy

and Henry Thorne had been companions since boyhood. Now their correspondence was haphazard and infrequent, but each anticipated their visits together.

Janet hastened to the kitchen to help her mother with the lunch, placing the delicious, thinly cut sandwiches on a large silver platter. There was a heap of them, but it was late and they were all hungry.

Her mother stopped halfway to the dining room, a stricken look appearing on her face.

"I completely forgot to stop on the way home and get ice cream."

Janet looked at the clock. It was 1:15 a. m.

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"I'm afraid it's too late to find any place near here open. We'll make out anyway with sandwiches, cheese wafers and tea."

"There's some chocolate cake left over from yesterday," said her mother.

"Then I'll put that on. We'll have plenty."

They bustled about and almost before they knew it Janet was out on the porch announcing that lunch was ready.

The Hardys sat on one side of the table and the Thornes on the other, the conversation shifting back and forth. The pile of sandwiches dwindled rapidly, tea cups were refilled two and three times and Henry Thorne was noticed taking at least two slices of the thick, delicious chocolate cake. John Hardy accused him of taking three slices, but this he denied strenuously.

"If I'm to be accused of eating three slices of cake, I'm going home," he announced. "And I won't be back until there's more cake."

"I'll get up early and bake a fresh one. It will be ready by noon," said Janet's mother.

"That'll be just about the time I'm getting up. Come on folks. We've got to get some sleep tonight."

Goodnights were said quickly and with Henry Thorne in the lead, the visitors departed for their home.

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Janet helped her mother clear away the dishes. It was too late to wash them and they were hastily stacked in the sink.

"How do you think Henry looks?" asked John Hardy coming into the kitchen.

"He's too tired and looks like he's been going on nervous energy for simply days," replied Janet's mother.

"I got the same impression. If we can manage to make him forget that strenuous business of his, of making successful motion pictures he'll be able to build himself up."

"He'll find plenty to interest himself in the graduation program," said Mrs. Hardy, "and if you take him on some fishing and loafing expeditions along the creek he'll get a fine chance to relax."

“Unless they send a rush call from the coast for him to return at once like they did a year ago just after he had settled down to a fine vacation. Well, staying up and talking doesn’t help the situation. Scoot for bed, Janet. It’s a good thing you aren’t in the class play, what with keeping such late hours as this.”

Up until the afternoon of the play Janet saw very little of Helen’s father. He was over to the house once, but Helen informed her that he had been sleeping and taking long drives around the countryside with her mother.

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“They have so very much to visit about,” explained Helen, who was worn thin by the strain of the last rehearsals. The night before it had been midnight before they rang down the curtain. Janet had been up equally as late for her work on the meager lighting equipment kept her on the job as long as the cast rehearsed.

On Friday afternoon they made a final check of sets and lights and costumes and Miss Williams rehearsed one or two of the minor characters who had been causing more trouble than the leads in getting their lines in just the way she wanted them.

The gymnasium was filled with row upon row of chairs. The old curtain which shielded the stage had been refurbished and looked quite presentable in spite of the landscape scene which it depicted. Someday Janet hoped the school would be able to buy adequate stage equipment. The stage was large enough, but the sets were pitifully few in number and all of them several years old. They had been changed a little here and there by the stagecraft class, but underneath you could detect the same flats and doors and windows of other years.

It was five o’clock before they finally straggled away from the gym and the call for the entire cast and stage crew was 6:30 o’clock for Miss Williams wanted everyone on hand early. Janet had seen the instructor conferring with a rather distinguished looking man that afternoon and guessed that he was the representative of the producing company, there to see the production and make the final decision on offering a job to Miss Williams.

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Janet, in spite of the fact that she was only a member of the stage crew, found it hard to eat even though supper that night was especially delicious and her mother, although silent, looked at her reprovingly.

Helen arrived before supper was over and Janet was surprised to see her so calm. Perhaps her father had been coaching her on composure.

Janet folded up a clean smock, tucked it under one arm, and joined Helen.

“Good luck, girls,” said her father. “We’ll wait for you after the show and all have a lunch down town to celebrate the event.”

“Do you know where your folks are going to sit?” asked Janet.

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Helen shook her head. “Dad wouldn’t tell me; thought if I knew I would be looking for them and it might make me nervous.”

"This is the first time a high school class has ever performed before a famous Hollywood director," said Janet.

"Oh, don't think of Dad in that way. Now that he's back home he's just a neighbor and he wants to be thought of in that way."

"All right, but you can't keep the cast from remembering that an ace director is in the audience tonight."

"I suppose not. I only hope it won't make them too excited and upset."

"How about yourself?"

"I had been wondering up until tonight. But now I've made myself realize that he's just Dad and that makes all of the difference in the world. Sort of gives me the confidence that I need for I know that if I make mistakes he'll understand. I wish you were going to be Abbie."

"Well I'm not, and you'll get along all right with Margie. I think she's really been working hard."

"Oh, she's worked hard enough, but somehow she doesn't seem real in the character."

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"You mean I'm just crazy and silly enough to make a very real Abbie?" chided Janet.

Helen's face flushed quickly.

"You know better than that. Margie is light-headed enough for the rôle of Abbie, but she lacks some spark of sincerity that's needed, for after all, you know, Abbie finally solves the riddle of the Chinese image and pulls out the string of priceless pearls which saves the fortunes of the Naughtons."

The cast and stage crew reported on time and Miss Williams checked each of them in. She devoted her own energies to making up the principals while several other teachers, fairly adept in dramatics, helped with the makeup of the minor characters.

Janet put on her smock and checked the lighting instructions which had been mimeographed and placed it beside the small switchboard. Actually she knew them all by heart, but she wanted to be sure there would be no mistake; no dimming of the lights when they should be brightened nor a sudden blackout in the middle of a love scene.

Margie Blake came up from one of the dressing rooms. She was glorious in salmon-hued taffeta and golden slippers.

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Margie, fully aware of the striking picture she made, walked slowly across the stage, which had been set for the opening scene, the garden of the Naughton home.

Ed Rickey was standing nearby and Janet saw his eyes widen as they took in the beauty of Margie and her costume. And Janet felt her own heart tighten. Here she was in a smock, with her hands none too clean, no wonder that Ed had eyes only for Margie.

One of the sky drops was hanging unevenly and Miss Williams sent one of the boys in the stage crew up into the loft to adjust the lines and even

the drop. The dramatic instructor stood in the middle of the stage motioning for first one end of the drop and then the other to be lifted or lowered.

Suddenly there was a cry from the loft and Janet, looking up, saw one end of the heavy drop sagging. It hung there for a moment. Then there was the sound of rending wood and the drop hurtled down toward the stage.

Miss Williams leaped backward instinctively, but Margie, seated on a garden bench, didn't have a chance.

Janet tried to shout a warning, but the cry jammed in her throat. Margie looked up and Janet caught one terror-stricken look on her face. Then the drop thudded to the floor, a tangle of painted canvas enveloping Margie.

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## *Chapter XIII* **JANET STEPS IN**

Ed Rickey was the first to reach Margie. With desperate hands he tore away the pile of canvas, splintered wood and snarl of rope. Jim Barron, who had rushed from the dressing room with his makeup only half on, helped Ed lift Margie to a nearby bench.

Then Miss Williams took charge. Margie was breathing regularly, but her eyes were closed. There was a nasty bump over her forehead and her dress looked like it might have been run over by a ten-ton truck, for a mass of dust and grime had come down with the drop.

The boy who had been in the scene loft scrambled down.

"The pulleys let go!" he cried. "Honestly, Miss Williams, I couldn't help it."

"Of course not, and I don't think Margie is badly hurt. She'll come around in a minute or two."

Someone brought a glass of water and Miss Williams raised Margie's head and forced some water between her lips.

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After a time Margie opened her eyes.

"Where was the storm?" she mumbled. Then, recognizing the anxious faces of the members of the cast about her, struggled to sit up.

"What hit me?" she demanded thickly.

"The pulleys gave way and a drop came down," explained Ed.

Margie tried to stand up, but sat down abruptly.

"My head," she moaned. "It feels ten sizes too large."

"Carry her downstairs," Miss Williams said to Ed and Jim. While the boys were obeying instructions, Miss Williams went to a telephone



and summoned a doctor.

It was 7:15 o'clock then and the curtain was set for eight. In just forty-five minutes the show must go on and Margie had a splitting headache and her costume was ruined at least for the night.

When Doctor Bates, the school physician arrived, it was 7:30 o'clock and Margie, stretched out on a couch in the girls' dressing room, was holding cold cloths on her head.

Doctor Bates' examination was quick but thorough.

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"Mild concussion, I'd say. She must go to bed at once and remain there, perfectly quiet, for at least twenty-four hours."

Margie struggled to her feet and was as promptly returned to the couch by the doctor, who forced her to choke back her words.

"Sure, I understand," he said. "You've got a part in the play and you've got to go on. That's the tradition of the theater. But this isn't a theater. This is a high school play and young lady you're not going to risk serious injury to yourself by doing any such thing as attempting to appear in this play. I'm going to take you home right now."

Doctor Bates, who usually had his way, helped Margie out to his car. It was a tearful and protesting Margie, but Miss Williams joined in insisting that she go home and there was nothing else for her to do.

By the time Margie was on her way home the first rows of the gym were filling with spectators and Miss Williams, a look of desperate intent upon her face, called the cast together on the stage.

"We've got to go on for this means so much to me and to you. Try and forget, if you can, what has happened to Margie. Do everything you can to help the girl I'm going to push into Margie's rôle. If she stumbles on her lines or forgets them, fake until you can pick it up again."

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Then she swung toward Janet.

"Can you get anything from home you can wear for the first act—something very light and pretty. You'll be able to wear the costumes intended for Margie in the other two acts."

"You mean you want me to step in and take Margie's rôle?" asked Janet.

"That's exactly what I mean. You've got to do it. You're the only one who knows the lines."

"But I'm afraid I'll make a terrible mess of things; I'll spoil the whole show."

"You can't, Janet, you can't." There was desperate entreaty in Miss Williams' words. "I've heard you repeating Margie's lines to yourself at rehearsal. You know them all and you know the action. Just imagine that you were originally picked for the rôle. You can handle it, I know."

"Come on, Janet. This is our chance. We'll be playing together tonight. I need you to steady

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me." It was Helen speaking, saying she needed Janet to steady her.

Janet smiled to herself. She would be the one who would need bolstering.

Miss Williams came up.

"I've found one of the boys with a car. He'll take you home and bring you back with a costume for the first act. I don't want to hold the curtain unless absolutely necessary."

"I'll make it," promised Janet.

There was no one at home and she rushed upstairs and dove into the large wardrobe in her room. She had been wondering all the way home what to select. Probably that pale green silk print. She'd only worn it once or twice, and never to anything at school.

Janet seized the dress, slipped out of the smock and everyday dress she had worn under that, and wiggled into the cool, crisp silk. Stockings and shoes were changed in a flash. Pausing just a moment before her mirror, she brushed her hair vigorously until the light caught all of its natural golden glints. Then she ran down stairs, breathless from the rush.

It was two minutes to eight, just two minutes before the curtain was scheduled to go up, when Janet reached the stage. Miss Williams was pacing nervously when she hurried on, but she stopped instantly and eyed Janet approvingly.

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"Splendid, dear, splendid. We'll start on time. If you forget some of the lines, just make up a few sentences until you can recall them. The rest of the cast will help you carry along."

Helen, dark and radiant, came out of the wings.

"You need a little more color on your cheeks. You look as pale as a ghost."

"I feel pretty much like a ghost," confessed Janet as they slipped into a dressing room where Helen adeptly applied a touch of rouge, used an eyebrow pencil sparingly, and then finished the makeup with just enough lipstick to accentuate the charm of Janet's lips.

"Everybody ready?" It was Miss Williams, calling the cast together for a final checkup.

Fortunately Janet would not go on until the middle of the first act. It would give her an opportunity to regain her full composure, to get into the swing of the play, and to brush up on any lines she was afraid she might forget.

The music of the high school orchestra, which was playing in the pit out front, reached a crescendo and died away. Janet faintly heard a wave of applause for the efforts of the orchestra. Then the girl who had taken her place at the switchboard dimmed the house lights, shoved the switch that sent the electricity surging into the footlights, and the curtain started up.

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There was that little breathless pause before the action of the play began. Then Helen, the first character on the stage, started her lines. Clearly, confidently, she spoke, and Janet's fears for the play, fears for any mistakes of her own,

melted away. Helen was going magnificently, perfectly at ease and seemingly living the very rôle of Gale Naughton.

Janet slipped into the mood of the play. It wasn't hard for she had attended every rehearsal and knew the lines of almost every character.

On the other side of the stage Miss Williams, the prompt book in her hands, was obviously pleased.

Then came a cue that awoke Janet from the pleasant glow. She was on next. With hands that fluttered just a little she picked up a mirror on the tiny dressing table in the wings and made sure that her hair was right.

It was time for her to go on, a rollicking, bouncing sort of entrance that one would expect from gay, light-hearted Abbie Naughton, and Janet did it perfectly.

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The blaze of light from the footlights shielded her from the audience. She didn't need to care what they were thinking. All she needed to do was to go through her part, playing it to the utmost. Later she would know what the audience thought, but then it would be too late to matter.

Janet and Helen had a fast exchange of lines, Helen reproving Janet for her gayety when the family funds were so low. They carried that hard bit of repartee off successfully and when the conversation swung to another character, Helen whispered under her breath.

"You're grand, simply grand. Keep it up."

"Double the compliment for yourself," replied Janet, her lips barely moving yet the words were audible to Helen.

The first act was over suddenly. The curtain came down, smoothly, silently, and as it bumped the floor a gathering wave of applause echoed throughout the gym. Miss Williams nodded and the curtain went up again, the members of the cast smiling and bowing.

Then came the rush for the second act. The stage must be reset and the girls, especially, had to put on new costumes. Miss Williams stopped Janet in the wings.

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"Margie's costumes for the last two acts are laid out in the dressing room. I'm sure they'll fit." Then she laughed. "They'll have to, Janet. We can't stop for a costume, can we?"

"Not after the first act," replied Janet.

But Margie's costumes did fit. It was as though they had been made for Janet.

The action of the play moved more rapidly, swirling closer and closer around the Chinese image on its pedestal in the garden.

Finally came the third act with Janet, clumsy, jubilant Janet, accidentally knocking over the image, which burst open when it struck the stage floor and there, inside the figure of clay, was the secret of the image and the continued comfort of the Naughtons—a ruby, so perfect, so beautiful, that it was worth an exceedingly large

fortune.

Before Janet knew it the curtain came down for the final time and on its echo came a sustained wave of applause. First the cast, then Miss Williams, and then the cast, answered the steady calls for their appearance. When Janet and Helen, coming out hand in hand, took a bow, the applause reached a new peak and then died away as the audience, satisfied as having paid tribute to the two stars of the show, prepared to leave the spacious gymnasium.

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There was the usual crowd on the stage, parents and friends rushing up to congratulate members of the cast and over in one corner Janet saw Miss Williams signing her name to a paper that looked very much like a contract. Without doubt the dramatics instructor had earned her contract with the producing company.

"I'm tired," announced Helen, in a very matter-of-fact manner.

"I suppose I am, too, but I'm still far too excited to realize it," replied Janet. "Here come the folks."

Her father and mother, closely followed by Helen's parents, were pushing their way through the crowd.

"I'm mighty proud of you two," said John Hardy as he gave each of them a hug.

"I'm more than that," chuckled Helen's father. "I'm tempted to sign them to contracts and take them back to Hollywood with me."

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## ***Chapter XIV*** **JUST FISHING**

Henry Thorne's words echoed in Janet's ears as the girls changed their costumes in the dressing room. Of course he must have been saying it lightly, paying them a pleasant compliment for their work. She forced herself to dismiss it from serious consideration.

They changed quickly, hung up their costumes, and hurried out to join their parents for Henry Thorne was entertaining at dinner down town.

"What was the idea of telling us you were in charge of lighting when you actually played the second lead?" Janet's mother asked after they had left the gym and were rolling down town in the car.

"But mother, I told the truth. I was in charge of lighting until about twenty minutes before the curtain went up. Then one of the drops broke away and fell on Margie. She suffered a minor concussion and it was up to someone to step in and take the part or the show would have flopped right then and there before the curtain went up."

"You mean you stepped in cold and handled the

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second lead?" asked Henry Thorne, turning around in the front seat to gaze incredulously at Janet.

"But it wasn't hard. You see I tried out for that rôle and then I attended every rehearsal. Of course I sort of lived the character I tried out for. I missed some of the lines tonight, but the others knew I might and they covered up for me."

"Well, I'll be darned. I thought you had been rehearsing it from the first and had told us you were on lights just to surprise us," said the famous director. "Anyway, you did a swell job. Maybe I will take you back to the coast with me."

"Now Henry," protested his wife, "don't start saying things you don't mean. You'll get the girls all excited and then you'll have to rush away to start work on another picture and you'll forget all about your promises to them."

"Probably you're right mother, but they're smart, good looking girls, even if one of them is my daughter, and heavens knows we could use some really smart, level-headed girls in one of my companies."

Janet's father wheeled the car in to the curb in front of the restaurant where they were to have dinner and in the bustle of getting out of the car conversation switched to another topic, but Henry Thorne's words persisted in sticking in Janet's mind.

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Henry Thorne had planned and ordered the supper himself. It was a man's meal and Janet and Helen, now tremendously hungry after the strain of the play, enjoyed it to the utmost.

First there was chilled tomato juice and in the center of the table a heaping platter of celery, olives and pickled onions that they ate with relish through all of the courses of the dinner.

Then came great sizzling steaks, thick and almost swimming in their own juice, french fried potatoes, a liberal head lettuce salad, small buttered peas, hot rolls and jam. And after that there was open-face cherry pie and coffee for those who cared for it.

"So this is your idea of a meal, Henry?" asked his wife, surveying the welter of dishes on the table.

"Well, perhaps not every day and every meal, but once in a while I'd say yes. This is my idea of a meal."

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"I think it's been grand," spoke up Janet's mother, "especially since I didn't have to do any work toward it."

"That does make a difference," conceded Mrs. Thorne, "but I'd hate to think of Henry's waistline if he had a meal like this every day."

Conversation turned to neighborhood issues and talk of the town, for Henry Thorne maintained a tremendously active interest in the affairs of his home city.

When they finally started home, it was well after one o'clock, but routine school days for Janet

and Helen were at an end. Exams were over and there was only the junior-senior banquet and then commencement.

Janet slept late the next morning and it was after ten o'clock when her mother finally awakened her.

"Helen and her father just phoned they are coming over. I thought you might like to go with them. After they get some worms out of the backyard they're going fishing. I'll put up a lunch."

Janet hurried into her clothes and met Helen and her father as they arrived. Henry Thorne was armed with an ancient cane fishpole, had on a venerable straw hat, cracked but comfortable shoes, old overalls and a blue shirt.

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"I think he's thoroughly disreputable looking," said Helen, laughing at her father.

"Granted, my dear, but I'm most thoroughly comfortable, which is the main thing. I wouldn't trade this old fishing outfit for the best suit of clothes in the world."

Janet showed them a corner of the back lot that promised to be productive of worms, and then went in the house for her own breakfast. She ate on the kitchen table while her mother packed a basket of lunch to be taken by the anglers.

It was a grand morning for a fishing expedition and especially if those going fishing really didn't care whether they caught any fish or not. Just before they left Janet's father arrived and hastily changed into old clothes.

"Want to go to the creek in the car?" asked John Hardy.

"Not on your life. We're walking, both ways," grinned Henry Thorne, and the men, the cane poles over their shoulders, started for the creek. Helen carried the can of worms and Janet took the lunch basket.

Indian creek was a pleasant stream, meandering through the rolling hills north of Clarion. Its waters were clear, alternating in quiet pools and swift little riffles over its gravel bed.

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The air was mild and there was scarcely a cloud in the sky. They went up the creek for more than a mile before Henry Thorne found a pool that looked like it might have a few bullheads. The foliage overhead was thick and the water here looked almost turgid, far different from the clear stream which danced along its bed farther down.

The men baited their hooks and Janet and Helen sat down to watch the fishermen.

Helen's father got the first bite, but he failed to land his fish. After that there was a long interval when the fishermen failed to talk and the fish failed to bite. Then the bullheads all seemed hungry and Janet's father was the first to land one, but Henry Thorne was right behind him with a larger catch.

"Cut a willow stick for a stringer," said Helen's father, tossing a knife to her, and Helen, knowing exactly what was needed, found a forked willow and trimmed it down.

In less than an hour they had eleven bullheads on the willow stick.

"That's plenty," decided Janet's father. "There's no use spoiling the fun by taking more than we need. Shall we have them for supper tonight at my place?"

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"Nothing doing. We'll have them right here. Remember when we were kids and used to clean them along the creek, put them on a stick, and try and cook them over a fire?"

Janet's father nodded.

"That's what we're going to do right now. We'll clean the fish while the girls get some dry sticks and build a fire."

Thus they had their noon meal, bullheads off the spit, crisp and hot, with just a sprinkle of salt on them, sandwiches and fruit from the basket, and cool, sweet water from a nearby spring.

Henry Thorne, his appetite appeased, his mind and body relaxed, stretched out on the grass and looked meditatively into the creek.

"What a life this would be—no strain, no thoughts of tomorrow, no temperamental stars to worry about, no stories to doctor, no budget to watch."

"But after what you've had this would tire in a few weeks. Why, you're thinking about getting back into the harness right now," said Janet's father.

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Henry Thorne flushed guiltily.

"Caught that time," he admitted. "Sure I was thinking about getting back on the job. I'm too much of a work horse, I guess."

"But you'll stay until after graduation, won't you?" asked Helen anxiously.

"That's one thing you needn't worry about," promised her father. "I'm thinking now of what's going to be best for you after high school days are over; whether you and mother will prefer to stay here in Clarion or would like to come west with me. You're pretty much of a young woman now, Helen, and from the play last night, quite a capable little actress."

"Not much of an actress, I'm afraid, Dad, but I did want to be in the class play because you were coming home and I wanted you to be proud of me."

"I was very proud of you, dear. Just how proud you'll never know, and I've been trying to think of something I could do that would show you just how pleased I was over the work you and Janet did in the class play."

They were silent for a time, all of them enjoying the quiet charm of the afternoon. Henry Thorne puffed slowly on a venerable pipe while Janet's father dozed, his hat pulled down to shield his eyes from the sun. The embers of their fire turned black and then grey as they cooled.

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Janet thoroughly enjoyed relaxing on the creek bank. School days were almost over and she couldn't help wondering what the summer and

the coming year would hold in store for her. Of course there would be college in the fall, but just where had not been determined. It was generally understood at home, though, that she would be allowed to make her own choice providing it was anywhere near within reason.

Janet knew that Helen's plans were very uncertain. Her friend wasn't even sure that they would continue to make their home in Clarion.

Just then Henry Thorne knocked the ashes out of his pipe and squinted at the sun.

"Better be starting home," he said. He picked up a small stick and tossed it at Janet's father, who awoke with a start.

"Come on sleepy-head. Time to go."

Janet finished packing the few utensils that went back into the lunch basket while the men wound up the lines on their fishpoles.

They started home, walking leisurely in the warm afternoon, the men leading the way.

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Half a mile down the creek they came upon a farm boy, riding bareback. The horse was a beautiful, spirited animal, and the lad rode with amazing grace. They paused for several minutes to watch the horse and rider until they finally disappeared over a nearby hill.

"Can either of you girls ride?" Henry Thorne asked the question almost sharply.

"A little, but not much nor very well," confessed Janet.

"I belong in the same class," added Helen.

"Is there any place in town where we can find good horses and a good instructor?" Helen's father shot the question at John Hardy.

"Hill and Dale farm keeps a fine string of horses. I'm sure I could arrange for instruction there."

"I'll go with you this evening and we'll see what can be done. I want the girls to become proficient at riding as soon as possible."

"But what's the idea?" asked Helen.

"Just another quirk of mine," smiled her father.

As soon as they reached home Henry Thorne urged Janet's father to accompany him to see about riding lessons for the girls and just before dinner returned.

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"Your first lesson will be at eight o'clock tomorrow morning," he announced. "Look up some old duds that won't be hurt if you fall off."

"But how about the girls?" demanded his wife.

"They'll have to take a chance on that," he smiled.

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## *Chapter XV*



## HOLLYWOOD BOUND

Janet remained awake for some time that night, wondering what the significance of Henry Thorne's decision to have her and Helen learn to ride, and ride well, could be. Finally she gave it up as a bad job, realizing that he would tell them in his own good time.

Graduation week passed in a mixed whirl of events, with the junior-senior banquet and actual graduation exercises interspersed between the long hours passed at Hill and Dale farm where Janet and Helen underwent an intensive series of lessons on horsemanship. Both girls were agile and anxious to learn, and both soon came to enjoy the riding thoroughly. Their instructor, an older man, found them eager pupils and Helen's father encouraged them at each lesson, for he went with them on every trip to the farm.

Like the senior class play, the graduation exercises were held in the gymnasium and Helen stopped for Janet. They were going on ahead of their parents for they had to be at school half an hour before the start of the program.

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"I hope I don't smell like a stable," smiled Helen, radiant in her crisp, white organdie dress. "We've been at the farm so much I almost say 'Giddap' every time I start to do anything."

"I feel almost the same way. One good thing, though, I can sit down comfortably now and I couldn't after the first two days."

When they came down from Janet's room, Helen's father and mother were there.

"We're early, but I want to talk to your folks," Henry Thorne told Janet. "You youngsters run along and we'll be there in plenty of time."

When they were on their way to school, Helen spoke.

"Dad's been acting so mysteriously the last two days and mother seems to be unusually happy about something. This morning Dad put in a call for Hollywood, but he wouldn't talk from home; went down to a pay station. I asked mother what was up, but she said not for me to worry as long as she wasn't."

"Perhaps he isn't going back west," suggested Janet.

"You don't know Dad. I heard him mumbling just this afternoon about some kind of a story idea. You know he usually sits in on the final drafting of all of the stories he produces. I expect that as soon as graduation is over he'll start back."

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"Has he said anything more about taking you with him?"

"Not a word lately and that's what I'm puzzled about. Neither Dad nor mother have talked about what I'm to do next fall. You know I'd like to go to school with you."

"And I'd like to have you, Helen. I'll be lost if we aren't able to hit it off together. We've had such good times through high school and especially

this last year.”

The final meeting of the seniors, as a class, was held in the assembly, the girls in their snow-white dresses and the boys all in their dark suits made a pleasing contrast. Some of them were visibly nervous while others remained unusually calm. To some it was a momentous event while others took it as the last step in a tiresome school career.

Margie Blake, still white and feeling none too strong, was near the door when Janet and Helen entered.

Janet started to speak, but Margie deliberately turned her back, and Janet, shocked and hurt, looked at her sharply.

“Now why do you suppose she did that?” she asked Helen.

“I wasn’t going to tell you, but you might as well know,” said Helen. “Margie is hinting around that she suspects you had something to do with the injury she suffered.”

“You mean that I contrived to have that piece of scenery fall on her just so I could get her part in the play?”

“That’s exactly what Margie’s hinting. Of course she isn’t saying that openly, but she doesn’t give you much room to guess what she means.”

“Then I’m going to have a word with Margie right now. That’s one thing I won’t stand for.” Janet’s face was flushed and she was furiously angry when she confronted Margie.

Margie’s eyes widened and Helen thought she saw her hands tremble just a little. Perhaps she surmised that Janet was on the warpath and that she was the cause of it.

“Margie, I’ve been told that you are insinuating I was responsible for the accident which forced you out of the play and gave me your place. Is that so?”

Janet’s words were low enough so that only Margie and Helen could hear, but there was a compelling force in them that would not be denied.

“Why, no, that’s not so. I never said you caused the accident.” Margie stammered and flushed hotly.

“You’ve no right to accuse me of this thing,” she added defiantly.

“I’ve a very good right if you are dropping hints about me and the accident the night of the play. If you’ve been doing that all I’ve got to say is that you’re smaller than I ever dreamed you could be. You’re simply below contempt.”

Janet whirled and left Margie with tears in her eyes. Helen paused a moment for Margie seemed about to speak.

“I’m sorry about what I’ve said,” Margie managed to say. “I guess I was a little indiscreet, but you tell Janet I won’t say anything else.”

“I’ll tell her and I think you’ll be a very wise girl

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if you decide to let the whole thing drop," advised Helen, turning to rejoin Janet, who had gone to the other side of the room.

The principal was giving his final words of instruction.

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"As your names are called for the presentation of diplomas, each of you will come from your places to the platform, receive a tube of paper, and return. After the exercises are over come to me in this room and I will present your real diplomas. If you can not come here after the close of the exercises, call at my office tomorrow."

He paused a moment, then added, "and I should like to say that I am extremely proud of this class. I think it is the finest to graduate from Clarion High in the eight years I have been principal."

"Which," whispered Helen, "is quite a compliment, if you ask me. It's the first he ever paid this class."

"He sort of made up for the lack before by these last words," smiled Janet.

Again they went onto the stage of the gymnasium, but this time not as actors and actresses in a play of make believe, but in the very serious business of graduating from high school.

The gymnasium was filled with parents and friends of the seniors. The air was close, portending the storm that was to break later. Fortunately the program was simple, the address by the superintendent of schools lasting only fifteen minutes. Then the names were called and one by one they went forward and when they came back their high school days were over.

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It had been grand, being in school, decided Janet, and now she felt just a little scared. Life was ahead and life was so vast and uncomprehending and she knew it could be cold and cruel and merciless.

They bowed their heads at the benediction, there was a final swell of music from the orchestra and the lights in the gymnasium glared. It was over and Janet, in that moment, felt years older. She was a high school girl no longer....

Parents and friends of the graduates crowded around them and Janet saw her father beckoning.

"Get your diplomas," he called. "We'll meet you outside."

Janet and Helen went up to the assembly where they turned in the paper scrolls which had been presented to them at the program. In return they received their real diplomas.

Outside they found their parents.

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"We were tremendously proud of both of you," said Janet's mother. "You were by far the prettiest girls on the stage."

"I'll cast my vote in support of that statement,"

put in Helen's father, "and that's from someone who should know a pretty girl when he sees one."

They had planned a light supper at Thorne's and all of them enjoyed the walk home for the air was close. Dark banks of clouds, illuminated once in a while by flashes of lightning, were mounting higher and higher in the west.

"Looks like we'll get a real one tonight," said Janet's father, and the others agreed.

"Do you realize that the folks haven't given us anything for graduation?" whispered Helen.

"Well, not exactly any concrete gift just now, but they've given me a lot of character and a sense of realization of the finer and honest things of life."

"Oh, silly, of course I realize that, but Dad has been so mysterious today I know something is in the wind."

When they reached Helen's home they sat down to an informal supper in the dining room.

On two plates were envelopes, one marked "Janet" and the other "Helen." Helen's father was puffing rather furiously at his pipe as he watched the girls, their fingers clumsy from their haste, rip open the envelopes.

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Long green slips of paper, looking very much like railroad tickets, came out of the envelopes. Helen was the first to read hers.

"Why, Dad," she cried. "It's a round trip ticket by airplane to Los Angeles."

"So is mine," gasped Janet. "What does this mean?"

Her father chuckling, nodded toward Henry Thorne.

"I'd say that it meant a round trip to Los Angeles. Also, if you'll dig a little further into your envelopes, you'll find reservations for the westbound plane out of Rubio just one week from tonight."

"But Dad, we didn't know anything about this," gasped Helen.

"Of course not. It wouldn't have been a surprise," chuckled her father.

"Seriously though," he added, "I liked your performances in the high school play and I've talked it all over with Janet's folks and with mother here. You're going back to Hollywood to spend the summer with me and this morning I contracted the production unit of our company which makes cowboy films and both of you are to have a chance in the cast of that picture. You're Hollywood bound, girls."

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## *Chapter XVI* **THRILLING HOURS**

Janet was speechless and Helen was the first to give vent to her thoughts in words.

"Oh, Dad, it's grand of you, but it doesn't seem possible." She looked at the ticket again, feeling it to see if it actually was real.

Tears brimmed into Janet's eyes.

"I'm so happy I could cry," she confessed. Then added quickly, "But I don't know how I can thank you."

"Don't try now," smiled Henry Thorne. "I'll be more than repaid if you two make good in the western pictures I'm going to try to put you in."

"But Dad, we've never had any experience like that," protested Helen. "We'll probably be awful flops."

"Nonsense. It doesn't take much acting ability to get by in the 'horse operas' as we call them. You just act natural, look pretty, and you'll have all of the cowboys in the cast asking you for dates."

Janet looked at her mother, wondering just how she had been won over to letting them go to Hollywood, even though Helen's father would be there to oversee things in general.

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Just then Mrs. Thorne spoke, pulling an envelope from a pocketbook.

"You're not the only lucky ones," she reminded Janet and Helen. "I'm going along and see that you are properly chaperoned when these dashing cowboys ask you to go places with them."

That explained to Janet why her mother had consented for with Mrs. Thorne along she would have little to worry about.

"Does that mean we're going to leave Clarion for good?" asked Helen.

"Well, hardly," boomed her father. "I'd be lost if I didn't have Clarion to come back to for a rest when I get fagged out and I don't know what the bullheads out in Indian creek would do without me. We're going to keep the place here for you never know when even a famous Hollywood director will start turning out poor pictures and once you hit the toboggan out there, it's hard to come back. I've been at it so long now, that another year will just about see me through. Then I'll want to retire to some quiet city and Clarion suits me."

"I'm glad of that, Dad, for I've grown up here and it would be so hard to think of cutting all of the ties of friendship at just one sweep."

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"You won't have to do that, Helen, and maybe, if you two youngsters can't make the grade with our western company, you'll be back here before you know it."

"But we're leaving in just a week. It doesn't seem possible," said Janet, half to herself and half to the rest.

"The time will go before you know it," said her mother, "what with the packing we'll have to do and the new clothes to buy."

"Now let's stop right there," put in Helen's father. "Packing is all well and good, but let's cut out the new clothes. Instead of loading the girls up with things here, we'll give Mother the money and she can let them have it in Hollywood when they see a dress in the shops out there that they want. I think they'll feel a little more in style in Hollywood clothes than in Clarion clothes in Hollywood."

"I suppose they would," confessed Janet's mother, "but I'm afraid the money for Janet's summer clothes allowance won't go very far."

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"She'll be getting a regular salary each week and the company will furnish whatever costumes are needed for each picture."

"Each picture," smiled Helen. "I like that Dad. How long does it take to make a picture?"

"When I'm directing anywhere from six weeks to three or four months, but the western company moves pretty rapidly. They'll grind the average one out in two weeks or three at the most. They're after action and plenty of scenery."

"Which explains why we were carted off to Hill and Dale farm and hoisted up on horses and jogged up and down for hours until I thought every bone in my body would be broken," said Janet.

"Good guess. I've had this idea in mind ever since the night of the class play," confessed Helen's father. "If you think you're going to get out of the riding class the rest of the time you're in Clarion you'll be sadly mistaken. I'm certainly not going to show up on the lot and ask Billy Fenstow to take on a couple of girls who can't ride."

"Who's Billy Fenstow?" asked Helen.

"He runs our western unit. Billy writes most of the stories, does the supervising and directing and just about everything else about the picture. You'll like him. He's fat, forty, bald and lots of fun and if he likes you, he'll invite you to the Brown Derby for dinner."

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"What fun that would be," exclaimed Janet. "Why that's where all of the stars go."

"You usually find a few of them eating there," admitted Helen's father.

They talked for another hour, the girls, in their excitement, planning things that could never come true, but their fathers and mothers, indulging them the sheer joy of their mood, let them ramble on.

It was nearly midnight when they finally pushed their chairs away from the table and the Hardys started for home.

"I'll see you first thing in the morning," said Helen, "but I don't believe I'll sleep a wink."

"I'm afraid I won't either," replied Janet, "but I'm so excited I don't care."

On the way home she linked her arm with her father and mother and they walked slowly.

"Happy?" her father asked gently.

"Gloriously happy," replied Janet softly, squeezing her mother's arm. "Of course I want to go to Hollywood, but I'm going to miss both of you terribly."

"We'll miss you, too. You know that," replied her father, "but it's an opportunity that comes to few girls. Don't be too disappointed if you fail to remain in the cast of that western picture. You're going out there for a lark and not with the serious intent of becoming a motion picture actress."

Janet bit her lips. Of course her dad was right. She couldn't seriously hope to be a motion picture actress, but for just a moment she had found herself dreaming of real fame and fortune in Hollywood. Why it WAS just a lark, a sort of super vacation that only Helen's father could make possible for them.

In the fall, after the summer on the film lots, they would probably come back to the middle west for Janet knew her father favored her entering the state university, Janet resolutely set her mind right. She must realize that it was to be only a vacation lark. Then she could come back happy and without regret when the summer was at an end.

## ***Chapter XVII*** **ON THE WESTBOUND PLANE**

The week following graduation was a hectic one for Janet and Helen. There were the riding lessons each day, their wardrobes to be gone over, new shoes and hose to be purchased and they finally decided that each of them needed at least two new dresses to last until they could get into the shops in Hollywood and select things they desired there. It was fortunate that Janet's father was a successful lawyer and Helen's a famous director or their personal pocketbooks would have been much thinner at the end of the shopping expeditions.

Neither Janet nor Helen told their friends of their plans, but somehow the story got around that they were going to Hollywood and had already signed for rôles in a new picture. Some said they were to have parts in Henry Thorne's next production while others claimed the girls were going to be bathing beauties in a series of comedies.

"Now wouldn't that make you boil," said Helen, as she related a conversation between Cora Dean and Margie Blake which she had overheard. "I was half way minded to step in and tell them the truth, but then I realized that was just what they wanted."

They were sitting on the Hardy's front porch and the telephone summoned Janet inside. She called Helen to her a few seconds later.

"It's Pete Benda of the *Times*. He says he's heard the story and if we won't confirm it he will print all of the rumors going the rounds,

including the one that we're going to be bathing beauties. What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him we're going to Hollywood with Dad for a vacation and if we get in any pictures we'll send him an autographed picture," suggested Helen, which Janet promptly did.

"Pete isn't satisfied, but I guess he won't print all of the rumors," reported Janet as she hung up the telephone.

"You can just bet that Cora and Margie ran up to the *Times* office and filled Pete full of hot air," said Helen. "I thought maybe after we were out of high school things would be different. I'd like to be friendly with them for they can be delightful when they want to be, but both of them are still carrying a chip on their shoulders."

There was only one more afternoon of fishing and loafing along the banks of the creek and John Hardy went with Janet, Helen and Henry Thorne on the outing. Their luck was with them again and they hooked a fine mess of catfish and fried them over an open fire. Through the late afternoon Janet and Helen talked incessantly of their hopes and plans while at a distance their fathers dozed along the creek bank.

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It was dusk before they started home, walking slowly through the twilight.

"This is the last night at home," Janet's father reminded her. "Tomorrow night we go to Rubio and you take the west-bound plane for Hollywood."

"It hardly seems possible, but it must be so," said Janet. "Everything is like a dream."

"It will be until you actually arrive and start work in the studio." Janet's father was silent for several minutes. When he spoke again his voice was so low that it could not be overheard by Helen and her father, who were walking a short distance ahead.

"I'm not expecting you to turn into a motion picture actress, but I want you to do your best out there. The change will be a fine vacation and when you're actually on the lot working before the cameras, give it everything you've got. That will add to the pleasure you'll have in later years when you look back on this summer."

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"I'll do it, Dad. I'll do the best possible job."

"Sure, I know you will. It's going to be lonesome here," he added, "but the break had to come sooner or later."

"But I'm not going away for good, Dad. Only for the summer."

"Of course. You'll be home in the fall and we'll make plans for school then. Have you thought anything more about the university?"

"Too bad I wasn't a boy, Dad, then I could have tried for football there." There was just a note of seriousness in Janet's voice for her father was an All-American halfback at Corn Belt U. and she knew he had always secretly been a little disappointed when she proved to be a girl, for there was no chance of a girl becoming an All-



American halfback.

"Football isn't everything," replied her father. "I'm satisfied," and he said it with a conviction that brought joy to Janet's heart.

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Through the evening hours Janet and her mother checked over the last minute packing. Trunks had been sent ahead by express and only the essentials were going to be carried in the bags they would take on the plane.

Janet's luggage was attractive, but not expensive, for her father had never believed in undue waste of money.

That night Janet found it difficult to get to sleep. Tomorrow night they would be winging westward at three miles or more a minute and by the noon of the second day would be landing at the Grand Central airport at Glendale, from where they could motor over to Hollywood.

Finally sleep came and Janet dropped into the dreamless slumber of youth. It was mid-morning when she finally awakened as her mother shook her shoulders.

"Time to get up," said Mrs. Hardy, "for there's much to be done today before you start for Hollywood."

Janet leaped out of bed for in spite of all of the preparations they had been making through the last week there were a hundred and one small things that remained to be done.

The hours fairly melted away. She made three or four trips down town on hurried errands and as many over to Helen's, where the same hurry and bustle prevailed.

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At dinner time her mother made her slow down.

"Everything's done," she announced. "Of course you may have forgotten one or two things, but they aren't important, and they can be sent on later. Now you take it easy and enjoy dinner for this is the last one you'll have with your father and me for some weeks. My Janet, but we're proud of you," she added, with a happy smile.

"I'm just afraid I won't make good; that's the only thing that scares me," confessed the usually self-reliant Janet. "Everything out there is going to be so strange and as actresses, I'm fearful that Helen and I will be about the worst that ever struck Hollywood."

"Impossible," smiled her mother encouragingly, and after Janet mentally reviewed some of the pictures she had seen, she decided that quite likely her mother was right.

Her father arrived home promptly and they passed more than an hour at a leisurely dinner, visiting about a score of different incidents, none of them important in themselves, but all of them important in that they kept them around the dinner table, prolonging their last dinner hour.

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Janet's father finally looked at his watch.

"You'd better dress, dear. The westbound plane leaves Rubio at eleven o'clock and there's no reason to rush the trip over there."

He reached into his coat pocket and drew out a small case which he handed to Janet.

"Here's a little present mother and I want you to have."

Janet opened the case with hands that shook visibly. Inside was a tiny wrist watch with a thin, silver chain to go around her wrist. It was a beautiful creation of watchmaker's skill and Janet looked up with just a trace of a tear in her eyes.

"It's wonderful, but you shouldn't have done this after giving me the trip to Hollywood."

"You'll have to have something to keep time by so you can get to the studio on time. Maybe I should have gotten you an alarm clock," grinned her father.

"I packed one in her trunk," smiled Mrs. Hardy. "Now hike and get into your things."

Janet, tremendously happy and so thrilled she felt she was walking on air, hurried up to her room. After a quick bath, tapered off with a cool shower, she started dressing. Her outfit was new from the silken underthings to the sensible but attractive summer linen suit. The skirt, snug and well tailored, fitted beautifully and a small but bright blue tie added a note of color to her heavy, white silk shirtwaist.

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The night air was warm and Janet decided to carry her coat. There was no use in putting it on and getting it mussed until necessary.

Standing in front of her dressing table, Janet looked around her room and a queer little lump caught in her throat. It was such a pleasant room; she would miss it, she knew, in the months to come.

Then her father called and she caught up the small traveling bag she was to carry on the plane, snapped out the light, and hurried down stairs.

"Step right along," her father warned, and they hastened into the car and rolled around in front of the Thorne home down the block.

Henry Thorne, pacing up and down the porch, called to his wife and Helen, who appeared almost immediately. Both carried small overnight cases. As they came down the walk to the street, Henry Thorne turned off the lights in the house, locked the door, and followed them.

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Now that the time of departure was near there seemed little to say. They had talked of it for so many hours it hardly seemed possible that they were on their way.

John Hardy sent his big car over the road at a smooth, effortless pace. The lights of Clarion dropped behind and they sped through the open country where there were only the occasional lights from farmhouses to mark the blackness of the night. Later there would be a moon.

Tonight they were in the heart of the mid-west and to Janet it was almost incredible that by noon tomorrow they would be in the city made famous by the movies.

When they reached the airport at Rubio several hundred cars were parked near the entrance for the coming and going of the night planes always brought out a crowd if they arrived before midnight.

Henry Thorne, who had their tickets, took them into the office to have them validated. When he returned he announced that the plane would arrive in 25 minutes.

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"There's a good tail wind up high tonight and they're stepping right along," he explained.

A field attendant took their bags and stowed them on a small luggage cart.

They talked almost aimlessly and Janet suddenly felt very empty and more than a little afraid of what her reaction would be when she got into the plane and the ground started dropping away from her.

Then a ripple of excitement ran through the crowd and she heard someone call.

"Here comes the plane!"

Out of the east twin stars suddenly appeared, coming rapidly and very low, and then she heard the steady beat of two powerful motors. Like some great bird of prey, a-wing in the night, the silvery monoplane swung over the field, circled sharply, and dropped down far out on the runway and rolled smoothly toward them, its propellers flashing in the bright rays of a floodlight which bathed the entire field in a mantle of brilliant blue.

Janet watched the scene with fascination. The ground crew rolled a small platform up to the door of the passenger cabin and a girl, not much older than herself and dressed in a smoke grey suit with a jaunty overseas cap perched on a mass of brown curls, stepped out. After her came several passengers, alighting for a bit of air and to stretch their legs before settling down for the long flight over the plains and into the higher altitudes that would take them over the Rockies.

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Janet's mother hugged her hard.

"We'll miss you, dear. Write often and remember to do your best if you get a chance in any pictures."

"I will, mother," she promised.

"Goodbye, Dad."

"Goodbye, Janet. Hit the line hard."

"I'll tackle it with all I've got."

"I know you will," he said with a confidence that Janet wished she could have felt.

Then Helen's father touched her arm.

"Time to go," he said, and Janet and Helen walked toward the plane while the Thornes said a final word of goodbye to their old neighbors.

"You have seats four and five on this side," said the stewardess as the girls reached the plane.

Helen went in first with Janet close at her heels.

The interior was much like a bus, thought Janet, and she found her seat unusually comfortable.

Helen's father and mother took seats across the aisle from the girls and the stewardess came along and snapped on the safety belts.

"You can take them off as soon as we're away from the field," she explained.

The landing stage was pulled away, the starters hummed deeply as though struggling with stubborn motors, and finally the mighty engines burst into a deafening roar, but were soon throttled down.

Lights in the cabin were turned low and Janet, pressing her face close to the small, round window, could see her father and mother standing on the ramp. She waved, and they waved back. Then the plane started forward, rolling smoothly along the concrete. When it came to the crushed rock runway it bumped slightly, but before Janet knew it they were in the air and when she looked down again, the field was several hundred feet below. She was actually on her way to Hollywood.

## ***Chapter XVIII*** **HELLO, HOLLYWOOD!**

Janet and Helen found that by leaning close together they could converse but with the steady beat of the engines in their ears, a sense of drowsiness soon overtook the girls and they relaxed in their chairs. Janet dropped into a deep sleep that was not broken until their plane dropped down at Cheyenne well after midnight to change pilots and refuel.

Here the stewardess offered them a selection of fruit and Janet ate several oranges with relish. Then they were off again, meeting the sunrise east of Salt Lake City with the most glorious panorama Janet had ever seen unfolding beneath her eyes.

After that they swung southwest in an almost direct line for Los Angeles, climbing dizzily over the Sierras and then dropping down into lower California.

Helen glanced at her watch and Janet, still unused to her own, followed suit. They would be at the Grand Central airport in less than half an hour.

Helen, leaning back, cried, "We're almost there," and Janet nodded happily.

It seemed almost on the echo of Helen's words, although it was actually minutes later, when the plane wheeled and settled gently down on the runway of a huge airport.

Janet, looking eagerly from the window, saw a group of cameramen standing at the gate which led to the field. There must be some celebrity on their own plane or on a ship due in soon. She

scanned the passengers in their own cabin. None of them appeared unusually famous and she decided the cameramen were there to meet some other plane.

A landing stage was rolled up the moment the plane stopped and the stewardess opened the door.

"Take your time," said Helen's father. "We'll all be a bit stiff after this long ride. You girls want to look your best."

Janet stood up and smoothed out her skirt. It had remained remarkably fresh and the heavy silk shirtwaist showed only a few wrinkles. Her jacket would cover that up and she got that garment down from the rack over her head. Helen, who had worn a brown silk suit, had fared almost as well, and after a hurried glance into the mirrors in their handbags, both girls pronounced themselves ready to see what Hollywood looked like.

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Helen's father and mother were out of the plane first with the girls close behind them.

A uniformed airport employee nodded to Mr. Thorne.

"I've had your bags put in your car," he said, and Janet saw the famous director hand over a bill.

The cameramen were still clustered at the gate and instead of looking for the arrival of another plane, seemed to be watching them as they advanced.

"Hi, Mr. Thorne," greeted one of them, a chunky little fellow half hidden behind a huge camera. "Have a nice trip?"

"Fine, Joey. Couldn't have been better."

"Get any fish?" another one called.

"You guess," smiled Helen's father.

"That's far enough," said the photographer called Joey. "Just line up with the girls in the middle. What's the idea trying to sneak in on us like this?"

"What do you mean?" parried Mr. Thorne.

"The Ace publicity office just tipped us off that you were coming in this noon with a couple of girls from the midwest and that you think they're a couple of great film possibilities. I don't call that playing very fair with us."

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"So the office phoned and said I was bringing in a couple of new stars?"

"That's right. Now girls, smile a little. We won't bite even if the cameras do look big."

Janet and Helen, more than a little perplexed by the sudden turn of events, couldn't help smiling while the photographers clicked their machines.

Then several reporters, who had remained in the background until the photographers were through, pushed ahead.

"Give us the dope, Mr. Thorne—who they are, where you found them, what you have in mind

for them? Do you really think they're good?"

"Good?" asked Henry Thorne slowly. "Good? They're two of the finest possibilities that ever struck Hollywood. Boys, you don't know how enthusiastic I am."

"Think they'll be big box office?" one reporter asked.

"As far as I'm concerned, they're box office attractions right now and they are going to be under my personal management and supervision."

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Janet chuckled quietly for she could see the trend of Henry Thorne's conversation.

"Sure, sure, we'll admit they're good," said another reporter, "but who are they and where did you find them?"

Henry Thorne paused a moment as though deciding a question of tremendous importance.

"Well, gentlemen, of course I hadn't expected the office would tip you off on my arrival. I'd rather planned on slipping in quietly and giving these girls a chance to get used to Hollywood, but I suppose I might as well tell you now. I want you to meet my daughter, Helen, and her friend, Janet Hardy."

Reporters and photographers stared.

"You're kidding us!" one of them protested.

"I'm very serious," replied Henry Thorne. "You boys let yourselves in for this. I've always played fair with you and you thought I was pulling a fast one on you so I let your imaginations run along for a while."

"Then they're not new stars?" asked one photographer, who had taken unusual care to get some excellent shots.

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"I didn't say they weren't. Now here's actually the story. The girls graduated from high school last week and this trip west is a present to them. Both of them have brains, better than average looks, and both of them can ride. Billy Fenstow is going to put them into his next western, but whether they'll be any good is another question. I'm willing to bet that they will."

The photographer called Joey looked at Janet and Helen critically.

"I'll string along with you," he decided. "Those girls look like winners to me."

"Thanks Joey. I'll remember that."

"Any time you have a picture scoop," Joey retorted.

The Thornes and Janet went on to a waiting sedan where a driver was ready to whirl them to the home Henry Thorne maintained in Hollywood.

"That was quite an experience," grinned Helen. "We almost became celebrities."

"Just another fool stunt of the publicity office, but I guess it didn't do any harm," admitted Helen's father.

Half an hour's ride took them to a comfortable, sprawling bungalow set well back on a side street.

"I've been living in an apartment, but when I got the idea of bringing you back with me I leased this place," Henry Thorne told his wife and daughter. "I've installed George, my negro cook, and there ought to be something in the way of lunch ready for us."

The bungalow was delightful with a tremendous living room clear across the front and two long wings to the rear, one housing the dining room, kitchen and servants' quarters while the other contained a series of bedrooms with baths between. At the rear, flanked by a high hedge, was a medium sized swimming pool with a diving tower.

"Dad, this is wonderful," exclaimed Helen. "I don't care now whether I ever get before a camera. I'll be happy right here, spending my days in that pool."

Mrs. Thorne took charge, made instant friends of George, the smiling cook, and assigned the bedrooms, Janet and Helen sharing one large room with twin beds. It was at the very rear of the house with a door that almost opened onto the pool, which pleased the girls.

"Clean up and we'll have lunch. George informs me that it will be ready in fifteen minutes," said Helen's mother.

"How about a swim?" asked Helen.

"What in?" asked Janet.

"The pool, silly."

"But I hear it's even against California laws to go in a pool in your birthday suit."

"I forgot. Of course we'd put our suits in the trunk and I suppose it will be a couple of days before they arrive."

After a more prosaic shower, they felt tremendously refreshed and the luncheon which George had prepared was delicious.

"See about a maid at once to do the housework, mother," said Henry Thorne, "and with George to do the cooking you can have a little fun, too."

"But I want something to do," protested Mrs. Thorne.

"There'll be plenty just keeping track of Janet and Helen."

"How would you like to attend a premiere of a new picture at the Queen's Court tonight?" he asked.

"Fine," replied Helen, "but what's the Queen Court?"

"It's the newest of the deluxe motion picture theaters here. You'll see a lot of stars. What do you say now?"

"Count us in," declared Janet.

"What'll we wear? Our trunks aren't here?"

"Mother'll take you shopping this afternoon," promised Henry Thorne. "Or better, I'll take you around to Roddy at the studio."

"I'm not a mind reader. Who's Roddy?" Helen asked.

Her father looked at her in astonishment. Then grinned. "Sure, you wouldn't know Roddy. Well, he's a thin little fellow, almost bald, but he creates the most sensational clothes worn by the stars at our studio. His credit line on the screen is always signed Adoree, but that's just for publicity. Roddy wouldn't be a good name for a creator of ultra fashions."

"You mean you'll have Adoree do dresses for us for tonight?" asked Helen.

"You'd better not call him Adoree or he'll stick you full of pins. He's just plain Roddy around the studio."

Janet's throat suddenly felt dry. Here, on her first day in Hollywood, she was to have a gown created by a famous designer and attend a premiere at the Queen's Court.

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## ***Chapter XIX*** **GORGEOUS GOWNS**

Henry Thorne telephoned for an appointment with Roddy and then drove the girls to the studio.

The Ace plant, one of the largest in Hollywood, was built in a rambling Spanish style.

Where most automobiles were stopped at the main gate, Henry Thorne sent his car rolling right on through and the gatekeeper waved and smiled. He stopped at a small office and a boy hurried out.

"Mr. Rexler wants to see you at once. It's about your next picture."

Henry Thorne scowled a little as he said, "Tell him I'll be along in a few minutes."

Turning to the girls, he explained, "Rexler is the general manager and I'll have to see him, but I'll take you to Roddy first."

The creator of famous styles had his office and workshop in a rambling, one story white stucco building.

Roddy looked just as Henry Thorne had promised he would and Janet thought a good, strong wind might blow the little man away. But she liked him instantly, for his eyes twinkled when Henry Thorne explained his mission.

"And you'd like to have them look like real stars tonight?" he smiled.

"That's the idea," grinned Henry Thorne. "Maybe the publicity office wasn't wrong in sending out the photographers and reporters

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this morning.”

Roddy stepped back and surveyed Janet and Helen with cold, analytical eyes.

“Nice hair, even features, not too heavy and not too thin, trim ankles,” he said, half to himself and half out loud.

“I’ll leave them with you, Roddy. I’ve got to see Rexler.”

“Another picture?”

Henry Thorne nodded.

“I hear they need another of your smash hits,” said the designer.

“You mean smash up or smash down?”

“Up. You never do flops.”

“But I have.”

“That was years ago when I was only a tailor. Go along now,” added Roddy. “I’ve work to do with these girls.”

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He took them back into his private fitting room and called for silks and satins by the bolt.

“Something vivid for you,” he told Helen, taking a great bolt of crimson velvet and fashioning it around her with dexterous hands, pinning it here and there. Before Janet’s eyes he created a gown, stepped back, shook his head, changed a pin or two, and surveyed his handiwork again.

“Not perfect, but it will do for a hurry up job,” conceded Roddy.

Then, with a bolt of silver cloth, he quickly fashioned a waist length cape.

“Not too much makeup tonight,” he told Helen. “Just a touch of color to take off the pallor.”

Then he turned to Janet.

“This will be a little harder,” he told her. “Brunettes are always easier to design for than blondes, but I am glad you are not an artificial blonde.”

Janet smiled, but said nothing and Roddy called for various fabrics, finally deciding on a sheer, vivid blue and a cape of gold cloth.

“For you,” he told Janet, “more color in your cheeks. It will be needed with this blue. Use a blue band to tie your hair, but do not curl it any more than the natural wave it now has. Both of you carry white gloves and it will be better without bags. I shall be proud of you.”

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Janet and Helen felt very much like fairy princesses as they left the designer’s office. In less than an hour they had seen stunning gowns created. True, they had to be put together, but they did not doubt that this would be done in time, for Roddy had a certain magic in his hands and his energy seemed to flow out to the others who worked with him.

They waited for a time for Helen’s father to return and when he finally arrived there was new enthusiasm in his eyes.

"I'll bet you're assigned to a new picture," said Helen.

"Right, dear. I start work on the script tomorrow. The first draft is ready, but I always like to sit in on the finishing touches."

"What's it going to be?" asked Janet.

"The kind of picture I've always wanted to do, an epic of the air, a story of the air mail, but on broader, more sweeping lines than anything else ever attempted. We need one more big picture to bolster up the production schedule for next year and I've drawn the assignment."

Helen's father was as happy as a boy with a new bicycle, and he hummed to himself half the way home.

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Suddenly he burst out. "I forgot all about your dresses. How did you get along with Roddy?"

"He's grand, and we're all fixed up. Mine is crimson velvet and Janet's is some divine shade of blue. I have a silver cape and she has a cloth of gold cape. Oh, he planned everything for us, even telling us just how much makeup to use."

"That's Roddy. He's a fine friend."

They drove on in silence for a time before Helen's father spoke again.

"I must be getting absent minded," he said as they turned into the drive at the bungalow. "I ran into Billy Fenstow at the administration building at the studio. He said to send you to see him tomorrow morning. He's going to start shooting on a new western next week."

"Things," said Janet, "are happening too fast. We only arrived this noon and have already been fitted for gowns. Tonight we go to a premiere and tomorrow we meet a director who may give us places in his next pictures."

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"That's Hollywood for you," grinned Helen's father.

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## ***Chapter XX*** **AT THE PREMIERE**

After a leisurely dinner that evening they enjoyed a quiet half hour beside the pool.

"There's plenty of time; let's take a swim. The trunks arrived this afternoon and mother's found our suits," said Helen, and Janet seconded the idea at once. It had been a hectic day and the water would relax them.

They had trim one-piece suits, Janet's of cool green and Helen's a sharp blue. For twenty minutes they splashed in the water or relaxed and floated just as the mood struck them. Finally Mrs. Thorne called.

"It's less than an hour before we must start for the premiere," she said.

Janet and Helen climbed out of the pool, rubbed themselves briskly with heavy towels, and hastened into their bedroom.

Large boxes were at the foot of each bed and from them they drew the gowns which Roddy had created.

Dressing that night was one of the thrills Janet would never forget. The costume was complete for just the right undergarments had been sent by the designer. The hose were the sheerest gold, with gold slippers to match, while Helen's accessories were silver.

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"How do you feel?" asked Helen.

"Something like a fairy princess and it's hard to make myself believe that this is all real."

"Then let's enjoy every minute of it. We may wake up and find that it is all just a dream."

Janet looked at herself in the mirror. She was sheathed in blue silk, ankle length, with just enough of a slit in one side to show her dainty, silken ankles. Helen helped her tie a blue ribbon around her hair and watched while Janet applied rouge judiciously.

"I imagine the lights will be bright as we go into the theater," said Helen, "so remember what Roddy said about the color."

In turn Janet helped Helen, fastening the crimson velvet dress. Like her own, it was a sheath of material with Helen encased inside.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to sit down. Dad may have to hire a truck and drive us to the theater in it. I'd hate to have this gown all mussed."

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"Mine looks awfully tight, but it feels very comfortable," confessed Janet. "Oh, I feel grand—simply grand."

"About ready?" called Helen's father.

They caught up their capes and threw them around their shoulders with just the right touch of abandon. Even the gloves had been provided in the boxes sent by Roddy.

Mr. and Mrs. Thorne were waiting for them in the living room, Helen's mother looking very beautiful in a brown velvet gown while her father was distinguished in his dinner jacket.

Henry Thorne caught his breath as he looked at the girls in Roddy's gowns.

"I knew Roddy was a wonder worker, but I didn't know he could perform miracles. I'd hardly know you if I saw you any place else."

"That's a real compliment, Dad," smiled Helen.

"Here's something I thought you'd like to see." He handed a copy of one of the evening papers to them. On the front page was one of the pictures taken at the airport with Janet and Helen between Mr. and Mrs. Thorne.

"Famous Director Brings Daughter and Friend West to start Their Careers in Movies," was the caption over the picture. Underneath the story said: "Moviedom will get its first chance to see

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Henry Thorne's daughter, Helen, and her companion, Janet Hardy, tonight at the premiere at the Queen's Court. Both girls are slated for movie careers if their screen tests turn out all right. Their initial rôles will probably be in a new western which Bill Fenstow is casting now and plans to put into production next week."

"We look pretty much 'midwesternish' in that picture," observed Helen.

"What if you do? There are too many Hollywood types. What we need in pictures is fresh faces on girls who have ability. Come on now, we've got to hurry or we'll be late."

The big sedan was in the drive and Helen's father had summoned a driver he employed when he needed a chauffeur to drive them that evening.

They turned out of the side street on which they lived into a main boulevard and whirled rapidly toward the Queen's Court.

Janet, attending a movie premiere for the first time, felt her heart quicken as she saw the blaze of light which marked the front of the theater.

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The whistle of a traffic officer slowed them down and the driver was forced to produce a card before they were allowed to go past the police lines. The sidewalks were lined with people, anxious for a glimpse at some Hollywood notable.

The car fell into line behind several others and Janet caught her first glimpse of the theater. It was magnificent white marble, with the entrance an open court and down this court the honored guests had to walk, running the gamut of the stares of hundreds who backed the police lines.

Their car pulled up under a canopy.

"Here we are, girls. Take your time and enjoy it. Don't be stiff. It's just like going to the Idle Hour back in Clarion," said Helen's father.

He stepped out first, assisted Mrs. Thorne and then turned to the girls. Janet heard the master of ceremonies, standing at the microphone nearby, announce, "Henry Thorne, most famous of the directors for Ace productions, Mrs. Thorne, their daughter, Helen, and Janet Hardy."

Janet stepped out into the glare of the floodlights. For just a moment a terrific wave of stage fright gripped her. Then she saw smiling, friendly faces, and she smiled back. Flashlights boomed as the photographers worked.

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The announcer beckoned to Henry Thorne. "Just a word, Mr. Thorne."

But the director shook his head. "This is the girls' night," he smiled, shoving Helen toward the microphone.

"All I can say," gasped Helen, "is that I'm tremendously happy to be here."

"Thank you," said the announcer. "And now, Miss Hardy, please."

"I like all of the smiles," said Janet simply, and a

burst of applause came back from the crowd.

"Well done," whispered Henry Thorne and they started down the long walk past the sea of faces.

Janet felt supremely confident, perhaps it was just knowing that her gown and accessories were perfection, and more than one compliment on her costume came from the packed masses.

In the grand foyer there were film stars on every hand, some of them stopping for a moment to talk, and as Helen's father introduced the girls to all of these, Janet thought she detected several frankly unfriendly stares from some of the actresses, who seemed to be little if any older than they were.

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Then the picture started. Actually Janet saw very little of it. She was too busy drinking in the beauty of the theater and straining to catch glimpses of stars who had arrived late.

When they left the theater, various groups congregated in the foyer for brief visits and Janet saw a tubby little man, looking ill at ease in his dinner suit and mopping his bald head, struggling to reach them. He kept his eyes quite frankly on Janet and Helen as he neared them, but there was nothing offensive in his stare. He grabbed Henry Thorne's arm.

"Say, Henry, are these the girls?" he demanded.

"Hello, Billy. Sure. I want you to meet my daughter, Helen, and Janet Hardy."

"Girls," he explained, "you want to be nice to this scamp. He's in charge of the western unit and it will be his decision on whether you get into the cast. In other words, meet Billy Fenstow."

"None other and none such," grinned the affable little director. "Why didn't you tell me you had a couple of stars in tow?" he chided Helen's father.

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"Are you willing to take a chance on them and promise them parts right now?"

The creator of western pictures looked a little surprised. "Well maybe not for sure. Tell you what. I'm going home and make some changes in my script. I'll build up some stronger parts for the girls. Can they act?"

"Billy, I don't know. I saw them one night when I thought they could, but you'll have to find out for yourself. Now I'm going to take them home and see that they get some sleep or they won't be able to act."

"I'm glad I met you tonight," said Billy earnestly. "See you in the morning," as Helen and Janet moved toward the car.

He watched them through shrewd eyes, and if Janet could have turned around she would have noticed that Billy Fenstow was looking at her in particular.

"I think she'll do," whispered the little director. "I think she's got just what I want for the new pix. Gosh, I wish this was morning." He jammed on his soft, black hat and went out in search of a taxi.

## *Chapter XXI*

### SCREEN TESTS

Despite the excitement of the premiere, Janet and Helen were up early. Mrs. Thorne, tired from the trip, decided to remain in bed until later and Helen's father had already gone to the studio, but not before leaving a note directing them on where to find Billy Fenstow.

Helen scanned a morning paper for an account of the premiere.

"Here's a paragraph about us," she exclaimed. "Listen."

"I am," said Janet.

"Two of the most stunningly gowned girls seen at the Queen's Court last night were Helen Thorne, daughter of Director Henry Thorne, and Janet Hardy, a friend from the midwest. It is rumored their gowns were special creations of Adoree. Both girls are to get film tests."

"I must clip the picture in last night's paper and the story this morning and send them to dad and mother," said Janet.

While Janet clipped out the items she wanted, Helen telephoned for a taxi and they were soon speeding toward the studio.

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The driver looked at them a little suspiciously as he slowed down at the main gate of the studio. Evidently he had seen too many girls like Janet and Helen get turned away, but Helen produced a note from her father which gained them instant admission. They paid the cab driver and a boy was assigned to direct them to Billy Fenstow's office.

They found the director of the westerns at an office well to the back of the lot and he greeted them warmly.

"We might just as well make a test the first thing," he said. "I've got a camera crew over on stage nine where there's an old interior that hasn't been struck. You girls any lines you can go through?"

"Only from our senior play," confessed Helen.

Billy Fenstow looked aghast. "That sounds pretty bad, but we'll try it."

Stage nine was one of the smaller sound units on the Ace lot, but the director had a camera crew, the sound men and an electrician awaiting their arrival.

He tested the lights quickly.

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"Just walk onto the set, do your lines and action, and forget about the rest of us," he said. "We'll take part of it, maybe."

Janet's knees felt very weak and when she touched Helen's hand it was damp with a chill perspiration.

"This is awful," whispered Janet. "I wish your Dad could be here."

"I'm glad he isn't," said Helen fervently.

"Go ahead, girls," urged the director, and Janet and Helen, who had already agreed on the scene, started their lines. The action and words were simple, but both of them were scared stiff and they acted like wooden people.

"Wait a minute," said Billy Fenstow. "I'm human. I won't bite and I don't expect you to be world beaters. Now try that over and loosen up."

Janet laughed a little and Helen found a handkerchief and wiped the palms of her hands. Both of them felt better. The lights brightened until it was impossible to see the camera crew; it was more like being on the stage of the gym with Miss Williams over in the wings with her prompt book in her hands.

Both girls entered into the spirit of their bit the second time, talking and acting as they had the night of the class play. For the moment they forgot the camera crew and failed to hear the soft whirring of the camera as Billy Fenstow signaled the cameraman to pick up the sequence. They ran through the scene and the lights dimmed.

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Billy Fenstow stepped forward.

"That was better. We shot it and I'll have it put through at once. There's a couple of others have a final word on the casting and they'll want to see the test."

"When will it be ready?" asked Helen.

"Tonight. Suppose you bring your father over at eight and we'll send it through with rushes of other stuff that's been taken today."

"We'll be here," promised Janet.

On their way out they overheard several electricians talking.

"One of the kids was Henry Thorne's girl," said one. "What did you think of her?"

"She's not bad looking, but their skit was lousy."

"Yeh, I thought so too."

Helen looked at Janet and for some reason or other, felt like laughing. Why hadn't her Dad warned them about the test? He should have given them something to rehearse that would have been impressive.

It was nearly noon when they reached home and after lunch Janet sat down and wrote in detail of the things that had transpired since they left Clarion. In the letter she enclosed the picture and the newspaper paragraph.

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In the late afternoon Henry Thorne came home, tired but elated.

"I'm delighted with the first draft of the script for the new picture."

"Haven't you seen Mr. Fenstow?" asked Helen.

"No, why?"

"I'm afraid it wasn't so good."

"Nonsense. You made out well enough. What did he put you through?"

"That's just it," explained Janet. "He had us do a scene from the high school play and we felt like awful nit-wits."

"I suppose so," conceded Helen's father. "When will the test be ready?"

"Mr. Fenstow said to come over at eight. He said several others had to have a word about the casting."

"Sure. The supervisors always want the last word."

After dinner they drove to the studio, Mrs. Thorne accompanying them.

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Helen's father took them directly to the projection room. Billy Fenstow was waiting and half a dozen others were in the room. Most of them spoke to Henry Thorne and he introduced several to Janet and Helen, but Janet couldn't remember their names.

Then the lights went out and they settled back into comfortable leather-upholstered chairs.

Scenes from a number of pictures in production flashed before their eyes. Suddenly Janet and Helen saw themselves on the screen, moving and talking, and Janet dropped her eyes for a minute. To her it looked pretty terrible, but her voice was well modulated and pleasing.

After that the lights came on and Henry Thorne went over to speak to Billy Fenstow. When he returned a few minutes later Janet couldn't even guess what the decision had been.

"The action was punk," Helen's father said frankly, "but the supervisors liked your voices. You've got good faces and figures. In other words you report Monday morning and both of you go into 'Broad Valley,' Billy's next picture."

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## ***Chapter XXII*** **WESTERN ACTION**

In the days intervening Janet and Helen found plenty to do. Billy Fenstow sent over scripts of his new western and they had a chance to familiarize themselves with the general theme of the play. The story, briefly, was the efforts of a band of ruthless men to gain control of "Broad Valley," a great cattle ranch which had been left to young Fred Danvers by his father. There was plenty of action, some gunplay, and a love theme in which Fred fell in love with the leader of the band of men who sought his property. The theme was as old as western pictures, but Billy Fenstow had a knack of dressing them up and making them look new.

Janet and Helen reported at stage nine at eight o'clock Monday morning, Henry Thorne driving



them over himself. He left as soon as they reached the lot.

Nearly a score of people were clustered around the chubby little director and he nodded as Janet and Helen joined the crowd. Janet nudged Helen.

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"There's Curt Newsom, the western star. I'll bet he's got the lead."

"He looks nice," replied Helen, "but older than he appears on the screen."

A rather artificial blonde was seated at Billy Fenstow's right, idly thumbing through the sheaf of script from which the picture would be shot.

Mr. Fenstow spoke sharply. "Attention everybody. All of you have had a chance to study the script; all of you should be familiar with the parts. We'll make plenty of changes as we go along, but in general you know what we're aiming at. We've got two weeks assigned for the shooting and that means we'll be done in two weeks, and not three."

He looked around at each of them, then went on.

"Curt Newsom goes into the lead as Fred Danvers and Miss Jackson will play the rôle of Ruth Blair, the girl he falls in love with."

He ran on down the list. "The green cousins from the east who come to visit Bill will be played by Janet Hardy and Helen Thorne."

Janet felt her heart bound. She actually had a part and it mattered little that it was an insignificant rôle.

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Bertie Jackson, the blonde in the chair, turned and looked sharply at the girls, then sniffed. "I should say they would be well qualified to play such rôles."

Billy Fenstow caught the sneer in her voice and turned quickly.

"You know, Miss Jackson, you don't have to work in this picture if you don't want to. There are plenty of blondes would jump at the chance to play this lead."

"Oh, calm down, Billy. Just because one of the girls is Henry Thorne's daughter, you don't need to get on your high horse when I make a harmless wisecrack."

But Helen had her own ideas about Bertie Jackson's wisecrack and she resolved to watch the pallid blonde. Bertie, if it served her own purpose, was quite capable of doing any number of mean tricks.

The morning passed rapidly with costume assignments being made. There were a number of interior shots of the ranch house which would be necessary and these scenes had already been erected on stage nine.

Janet and Helen would have their first scenes tomorrow, but they remained on hand to watch the first shots of the picture and to attempt to get acquainted with other members of the company. Most of them were friendly enough, but they seemed to feel that the girls had

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deliberately been put into the cast through Henry Thorne's influence and Helen voiced her belief quietly.

"We've got to expect that," admitted Janet, "but we don't need to let it spoil all of our fun."

Whatever she might have thought of Bertie Jackson from a standpoint of personality, Janet had to admit that the actress was a thorough workman and she went through her rôle in an easy and screen-appealing manner. In makeup Curt Newsom appeared much younger than the forty years he was willing to admit.

The next morning Janet and Helen reached the lot early. Although not their first scene in the picture, the first one in which they were to be shot showed them arriving at the ranchhouse.

Simple travelling costumes had been assigned by the wardrobe department, but Roddy stepped in and quietly added a touch or two that made them distinctive. Janet could almost hear Bertie Jackson hissing. It was an unheard of thing for Roddy to pay any attention to the costume worn by a minor character in a western or any other character in a picture of that type.

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"Your lines are simple, girls. You've just gotten out of a buckboard after a long ride from the nearest railroad station. You're tired and stiff and a little mad because Curt didn't come to meet you. Janet, remember that you're a little giddy and anything crazy you do will fit in all right."

"She'll do plenty of that," said Bertie Jackson, under her breath.

Billy Fenstow didn't believe in rehearsals. He told his people what he wanted, then asked them to do it, and started the cameras grinding. If it was too bad, he had to shoot it over, but if it was fair, he let it go, with the result that once in a while he got some exceptional shots.

"All set, girls?" asked the director.

Janet, her mouth dry, nodded.

"Let's go. Camera!"

They stepped into the range of the cameras, Helen in the lead and Janet, a rather vacant stare on her face, following. There was a bear-skin rug in front of the door and some way her feet became tangled up in it and she pitched forward, only the strong arm of Curt Newsom preventing her from falling. Curt, a veteran trooper, faked a line and Janet had enough presence of mind to come back with a cue. Then they went on with the scene, which was extremely brief, ending with a cowboy, laden with baggage, trying to get through the door.

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"Cut it," waved Billy. "What are you trying to do, clown this?" he demanded of the red-faced Janet.

"No, Mr. Fenstow. You see, I slipped. I didn't mean to do it," she explained.

"Well, whatever it was, it was a nice bit of action and I think we'll keep it. It ought to be worth a laugh or two."

The next morning they left early by bus for a location back in the mountains. Billy Fenstow had every ranch possibility listed in a small black book and this was one of his favorites. He had used it several times, but a studio carpenter crew, by going out several days in advance, had changed the barns and corrals enough to disguise them. They arrived shortly before noon and a delicious meal was waiting for them.

Janet and Helen had little to do for the next two days, most of the shots being confined to action on the range, with the camera, mounted on a special truck, racing ahead of the pounding horses while the broad valley resounded to volleys of blank shots as the cowboys, led by Curt Newsom, chased and were chased by the marauders.

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Then Janet and Helen got their chance in a comedy sequence called for their first riding. Neither of them felt any qualms until they were mounted. Then their horses seemed to explode and both girls hung on for their lives, their faces registering surprise in no uncertain terms.

Helen lost her grip and flew through the air to land in an undignified position in a cloud of dust. Janet, either more fortunate or a better rider, clung on for another minute, then found herself dumped into the open water trough. Splashing furiously and sputtering at a great rate, Janet got her head above water. Her hair was plastered to her head and she was soaking wet. The camera crew, in spite of their roars of laughter, had kept grinding away.

"Great stuff, Janet. You've got a natural born sense of comedy," chuckled Billy Fenstow as he wiped the tears out of his eyes.

"It looks like I'm all wet as an actress," admitted Janet.

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"Oh, I don't know. Getting all wet may make you one," countered the director. "Get into some dry clothes. We're through with this sequence, anyhow."

The days on location passed swiftly and in the main pleasantly. Curt Newsom took an interest in the girls, which only heightened Bertie Jackson's jealousy. He taught them several tricks about riding and they spent every extra hour in the saddle.

One of the last sequences to be filmed at the ranch was one calling for a wild ride by Janet to take news of a raid on the ranch to the sheriff's office in a near-by town.

With the camera crew in the truck ahead, the action started. Janet rode hard, but was careful to keep in camera range. Suddenly she felt her saddle slipping and she grabbed desperately at the mane of the galloping horse. Alarmed by the looseness of the saddle, the beast increased its stride and Janet, a stifled scream on her lips, plunged headlong. She felt the shock of the ground as she struck and then a mantle of merciful darkness descended upon her.

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## *Chapter XXIII* **ON THE SCREEN**

Curt Newsom was the first to reach the unconscious Janet. He picked her up, almost without effort, and ran to the car in which Billy Fenstow had been following the action.

"Step on it, Billy. This girl's had a bad fall," he said, and the director swung the car quickly and sped back toward the ranchhouse. Helen, mounted, galloped after them and the rest of the company, including the camera crew, trailed along.

When Janet regained her senses she was lying on a bed in the ranchhouse with Helen, her face expressing her anxiety, bending over her.

"What happened?" asked Janet faintly.

"Your saddle came loose and you took a header," explained Curt. "How do you feel?"

"Let me get up and take a few steps and then I'll tell you," replied Janet.

"Better stay quiet for a few more minutes. We've got a doctor coming out to look you over," advised Billy Fenstow.

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"But I'm sure there's nothing really wrong with me, except perhaps I'm clumsy," replied Janet.

Just then one of the cowboys tiptoed in and whispered something to Curt Newsom. Janet caught a flash of anger in his face as he turned and followed the cowboy outside.

The doctor arrived within a few minutes and made a thorough examination for possible injuries.

"Just a liberal supply of bumps and bruises," he decided. "Better take it easy for a day or two."

"Well, that's that," Janet managed to smile when the doctor had departed. "I'm afraid I spoiled another sequence and you'll have to shoot it over."

"I should say not," replied Billy Fenstow. "The camera got every bit of action and I'll work it in somehow. Any time I let a swell shot like that go unused you can write 'finished' after my name. Stay in bed the rest of the day. The schedule of scenes you were in is practically completed anyway."

Helen was in and out the rest of the day for there were several shots in which she appeared and it was late afternoon when she came in to stay.

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"Curt Newsom is on the warpath," she said slowly as she sat down beside Janet.

"Sore about my mussing up that scene?" asked Janet.

"No. He's been looking at the saddle and says someone tried to kill you."

Helen's voice was flat.

Janet sat up in bed.

"Someone tried to kill me?" she demanded.

Tears welled into Helen's tired eyes.

"Oh, this is all a mess," she cried. "We never should have come out here. There are too many intrigues and jealousies among those established."

"Tell me just what you mean?" insisted Janet.

Helen waved her hands helplessly. "Curt's found out that the saddle girth was almost cut through. That's the reason your saddle came loose and you were pitched out."

"Does he have any idea who did it?"

"If he does, he isn't saying anything, but I heard him tell Billy Fenstow that this is the last picture he'll work in with Bertie Jackson."

"I wonder if that means he suspects Bertie?" Janet pondered.

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"You could take it that way if you wanted to, and personally I think Bertie is fully capable of some despicable stunt like that. I'm glad shooting on this picture is practically over. I've seen all of Bertie I ever want to."

"It doesn't seem as though she would do anything like that, though," said Janet. "But, after all, Bertie's determined to get ahead and I expect she's wholly unscrupulous when she thinks anything or anyone may be blocking her way. But why should she pick on us?"

"Because we came in as absolute greenhorns and got fairly good bits. She's afraid we may be pushed ahead too fast because of Dad's position with the company. I think it's all plain enough."

"Perhaps you're right," conceded Janet. "I'll certainly watch myself when I'm around Bertie from now on."

Janet felt much better the next morning. She was still stiff and sore, but was able to walk with only a moderate amount of discomfort.

It was the final day of shooting for "Broad Valley" and a certain tenseness gripped the whole company. Billy Fenstow was determined to finish on time and they worked like mad through the long, hot hours.

Janet had to do another riding sequence, and she went about it gamely, although every bone in her body ached as her horse galloped at a mad pace across the broad valley and into the rolling hills behind it. Then it was done. The picture was "in the can."

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Supper was served at the ranchhouse and after the meal, in the soft twilight of the summer evening, they piled into the bus that was to take them back to Hollywood.

There was little conversation on the way back to the city. Some of them were completely worn out by the strain of working against time for the last few days and a number dozed as the bus, striking a concrete road, rolled smoothly and swiftly toward Hollywood.

The days had been exciting and even thrilling for Janet and Helen—an experience they might never know again and both girls knew they would come to treasure the recent days highly.

Janet wondered what would be in store for them in Hollywood. Would they win other rôles or were they through? It would depend on the verdict after “Broad Valley” had its screening before the studio executives.

The lights of Hollywood glowed and they pulled up in front of the studio. Some of the actors and actresses had their own cars; others took busses and only a few signalled for waiting taxis. Janet and Helen were among these.

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Henry Thorne was waiting for them when they reached home.

“All done?” he asked.

Helen nodded wearily. “The picture is and we may be too.”

“Why?”

“Won’t it depend on how our work shows up whether we get any more rôles?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said her father, “but I could push you into some minor parts in other films.”

“Now you’re wrong, Dad. We don’t want that any more than you would want to do it.”

“I guess you’re right, dear. I did give you a boost with Billy and if you didn’t make good on ‘Broad Valley’ there’s little more that I can do.”

They were silent for a time. Helen’s mother, who had been to a neighborhood picture house, came home and they went into the dining room where a cold lunch was ready for them.

“I hear you had some unusual experiences,” said Helen’s father.

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“Oh, we had a few falls,” admitted Janet. There was no use in voicing their suspicions about Bertie Jackson.

The next four days were spent in sight-seeing around Los Angeles, in a trip to Catalina Island and several swimming expeditions at Malibu. Then came a call from Billy Fenstow.

“We’re screening ‘Broad Valley’ at the studio tonight,” he informed them. “Better come on out. It’s at eight.”

This was the news they had been waiting for, but now that the actual screening was to take place, both girls felt nervous and upset. Helen’s father and mother insisted on coming with them, “to enjoy the triumph or share the sorrows.” Henry Thorne smiled and Janet later wondered whether he had advance information on the outcome of the picture.

The small auditorium in which the picture was screened was well filled that night with most of the members of the cast on hand, including Curt Newsom and Bertie Jackson.

The lights were out and the picture started. Janet read the title: “‘Broad Valley’ with Curt

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Newsom and Bertie Jackson, directed by William Fenstow; produced by the Ace Motion Picture Corporation." Then came the cast of characters and well toward the bottom of the list she found her name. Her heart leaped and she held Helen's arm close. What a thrill it was to actually read her own name in the cast of characters of a film.

Then the action started, the story of Curt Newsom's fight to hold title to his ranch.

Almost before Janet and Helen knew it they were in the picture, the midwestern cousins arriving for a visit and in spite of herself Janet chuckled as she stumbled over the rug. It DID look wholly accidental.

Then for a time they were out of the action, coming back again in the riding sequence in which Janet was dumped into the watering trough. This entire bit of action had been kept in the film and she heard several hearty chuckles as she went headlong into the trough.

After that came the wild ride in which Janet was pitched from her horse and the final victory of Curt over his enemies. "Broad Valley" came to a close with Curt winning the affections of Bertie Jackson and Janet felt her distaste for the actress growing as she watched the final fadeout.

The lights in the projection room flashed up and Henry Thorne turned to the girls.

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"Nice work," he said.

"Do you really mean it, Dad?" asked Helen.

"Of course I do, honey. I think both of you handled your parts very well and Janet added a couple of top notch comedy incidents."

"They weren't intentional," Janet assured him.

"Then that explains why they look so natural. Billy will be a sap if he cuts them out in the final version."

"And I'm not a sap," said Billy Fenstow, who had quietly joined them. "How about my next western? Think you could stand a few more weeks in my company?"

"Are you serious?" demanded Janet.

"Enough so that I'm promising you parts right now. In fact, we'll pay you \$75 a week instead of the \$50 a week you got for this first picture. How does that sound?"

"Not enough," put in Henry Thorne, "especially if the girls can give you some more comedy as good as the stuff they put into this one."

"Now wait a minute," protested the little director. "I don't work on budgets that run up to half a million. I've got to watch my pay-roll."

"I was only kidding, Billy. But honestly, the girls ought to be worth a hundred a week. You'll only use them a couple of weeks and that's pretty cheap."

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"I won't make any promises about a hundred a week," said Billy, "but you can count on another

job if you want to join the company for my next western."

"Then we're in right now," decided Helen, and Janet nodded her approval.

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## ***Chapter XXIV*** **"KINGS OF THE AIR"**

The next morning Janet found an interesting paragraph in one of the morning papers, which had been written by a reporter who had attended the screening of "Broad Valley."

"One of the pleasant surprises about this latest Billy Fenstow western was the work of Helen Thorne and Janet Hardy, two newcomers. Miss Thorne is the daughter of the famous director and Miss Hardy is a friend of hers from the middle west. Although playing minor rôles, both girls handled their parts well with Miss Hardy providing several of the best comedy touches seen in a western by this reviewer in some months. It is reported that both will be in the next western which the prolific Fenstow will produce."

Janet read the brief comment three times, then clipped it out of the paper, wrote a brief note home, and sent the clipping to her folks.

Later in the day they received their final vouchers from the studio for work on "Broad Valley." Altogether the two weeks work on the picture had netted them \$100 apiece, more money than either of them had ever earned in a similar length of time.

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"No wonder girls come to Hollywood," said Helen as she looked at the check.

"Yes, but remember that we're lucky. We didn't have to break down any barriers; we didn't have to make introductions. The way was all smoothed out for us. Look at those poor kids over at the casting office."

Helen turned in the direction Janet pointed. Half a hundred young men and women were waiting patiently in a line before the window of the casting office. Most of them were rejected; only one or two were allowed inside.

"That's what happens to the average seeker of fame in the films," said Janet. "So many, with some beauty and high hopes, come out here expecting to make a success, and then almost starve. Of course they get a bit once in a while, but it's hardly enough to buy their food much less their clothes and all of the other necessary things."

"You're right, of course," admitted Helen. "If it hadn't been for Dad we'd never have had a look-in."

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They were having lunch that noon at the studio restaurant with Helen's father. They were waiting when he arrived. Accompanying him was



a stranger.

"Girls, I want you to meet Mr. Rexler, general manager of the company."

The general manager, tall, thin and exceedingly nervous, greeted them cordially, then seemed to forget that they even existed for he talked business from the moment they reached their table until lunch was over. But in spite of that Janet and Helen enjoyed the hour. Some of the most famous stars on the Ace lot were lunching there that noon and Janet and Helen enjoyed watching them come in.

The general manager, a man of quick thought and action, suddenly turned toward them.

"I saw 'Broad Valley' the other night. Congratulations on a nice bit of work."

The hour passed quickly, with Helen's father and the general manager continuing their conference in the executive's private office in the administration building.

"Dad and Rexler are having trouble over the story for the new air picture," said Helen. "I heard him talking with mother just last night. They can't agree on the final version. Dad was going over it last night."

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"I'd like to read it," said Janet.

"I'll get it for you if he brings it home tonight."

That night Janet had her chance to scan the script of Henry Thorne's next picture. The tentative title was "Kings of the Air." The action was fast and stirring, the panorama of the story covering the entire transcontinental route of one air mail system and Janet could understand that there was material here for a really great picture. But there was something lacking—a crashing climax that would make the spectators grip their seats.

Henry Thorne, watching Janet as she laid the script aside, spoke quietly.

"If you can suggest a suitable climax you can just about name your own ticket on our lot," he said.

"How about a race for a contract?" suggested Helen.

"Too old; it's worn out."

"Then why not have the plane going through with valuable papers which are needed for say," Janet paused, "a naval conference at Washington, on the outcome of which may hinge the fate of the world."

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Henry Thorne started to reject the idea, but halted. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Something I read in a paper several months ago suggested it," admitted Janet. "Navy planes were racing across country with a naval envoy and they got held up somewhere in Wyoming on account of bad weather. You could have your mail plane take over there after the navy ship was grounded."

"That would give the navy a black eye."

"Some other solution could be worked out then," said Janet.

"You know, that's not a bad idea. It would require some rewriting of the script, but we've got to have a terrific air race against time and the elements in this thing for a conclusion. I'll talk it over with Rexler in the morning."

Then Helen's father changed his mind. "No, I'll talk it over with him tonight if he's home."

He phoned the general manager's home, found Rexler there, and informed him he was coming over.

"We'll see what he thinks of your suggestion," he flung at Janet as he hurried out the door.

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"Shall we wait up and learn the outcome of the conference?" asked Helen. "Just think if they should decide to work out a climax along the line you suggested."

"I'm all for waiting up, but I'm afraid my suggestion is pretty weak," said Janet.

At eleven o'clock Mrs. Thorne decided to retire and urged the girls to do likewise, but they insisted upon awaiting the return of Helen's father.

Midnight passed and finally the clock struck one A. M.

"I'm too sleepy to stay up any longer," admitted Helen.

"Oh, wait half an hour more," urged Janet, and Helen agreed.

It was 1:20 when Director Thorne reached home. There were hollows under his eyes and he looked unusually tired, but in his eyes burned a spirit of elation that fatigue could not beat down. Mrs. Thorne, in a dressing gown, joined them.

"What's the decision?" asked Helen.

"We're going to work out the climax along the line suggested by Janet," replied her father. "Rexler called two of the writers down and they're working right on through the night on a new treatment for the whole script. It must be done tomorrow noon. We're to start shooting next week. It means another bouquet for you, Janet."

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Janet blushed. "It was just luck."

"No, it wasn't luck. It was good, clear thinking and the ability to recall a worthwhile incident. Incidentally, both of you are going into the cast of 'Kings of the Air'."

"But, Dad, you can't mean that!" exclaimed Helen.

"I mean just that," retorted her father, "and I wasn't the one who suggested it. Rexler insists that you be included. It's his way of trying to repay Janet for her suggestion."

"Then that means we'll get another chance in a picture," said Janet, and she felt her heart beating like mad.

"Indeed it does and you'll be in the biggest

feature the Ace company is producing this year," Helen's father assured them.

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## *Chapter XXV* **THE STARS VANISH**

Janet and Helen did get rôles in "Kings of the Air" and even though they were very minor parts, both girls were elated. They were cast as waitresses in the restaurant which served the pilots at the main western terminal of the air mail line.

Almost every contract player on the Ace lot was in it, with a good, substantial rôle going to Curt Newsom, who was taken out of Billy Fenstow's western unit long enough to play the part of a bitter field manager. Even Bertie Jackson got a part as a gold-digger who was out to get all the information she could from the pilots and was suspected of selling secrets to a rival air line.

Janet and Helen saw little of Helen's father for the next few days. He was immensely busy on the details of the production and a complete airport was set up out in the California desert for one of the major sequences would revolve around this lonely outpost on the air mail route.

The sequences in which Janet and Helen were to appear were shot at Grand Central at Glendale, actually in the field restaurant and were among the first to be taken.

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Janet had only four lines and Helen had three. All of them were in a brief scene with Curt Newsom and his encouragement helped them through for it was hard work under the glare of a brilliant battery of electrics. What made it all the harder was that Mr. Rexler was with the company the day this particular sequence was shot, but somehow they managed to get through with it. After that they were free to stay with the company and watch the rest of the shooting schedule until Billy Fenstow called them back for his next western.

It was during the second week of shooting that things started to go wrong. There were innumerable little delays that were maddening in themselves and when a dozen of them came, almost at the same time, even level-headed Henry Thorne showed signs of extreme exasperation. The cast was large and expensive and a dozen planes had been leased. The daily overhead was terrific and each day's delay sent the cost of the picture rocketing.

When they went on location out in the desert Curt Newsom, lunching with Janet and Helen, gave voice to his fears.

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"This outfit is getting jitters," he said. "I heard this morning that one of the pilots found several of his control wires half way eaten through by acid. That's bad business."

Janet, looking up from a dish of ice cream, spoke slowly. "Then that means someone is

deliberately trying to cripple the company?"

"It means someone is doing it. That flyer pulled out; refused to take his plane off the ground again and some good shots are already 'in the can' with his plane in it. Means they'll have to get another plane and fix it up like his or shoot over a lot of footage. Either one will be expensive."

That night Henry Thorne called the company together. Their location was at the edge of the ghost town of Sagebrush, and members of the company were sheltered in the three or four habitable houses which remained. All of them had grumbled a bit, but there was nothing that could be done about it for the nearest town of any size was too far away to make the drive back and forth daily.

Helen's father spoke plainly.

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"There have been a series of accidents," he said. "These have slowed up production and put us almost a week behind schedule. All of you know what that means on a picture of this size. I am convinced that someone in the company is aiding in this sabotage and I am giving fair warning now that this town will be patrolled at night and that all equipment will be watched. The guards are armed and have orders to shoot first and ask questions afterward."

That was all, but it started a buzz of conversation that lasted nearly an hour. When the company finally broke up to go to quarters, Janet happened to be watching Bertie Jackson and she saw the blond actress, slip between two buildings and vanish into the night.

Helen was some distance away and Janet, playing a hunch, followed Bertie at a safe distance.

There was no moon, but the sky was studded with stars. The walking through the sand was hard going, but noiseless, and Janet, keeping low, could discern Bertie's silhouette.

Suddenly the older actress stopped and whistled softly, a long, a short and a long whistle. The sound could not have carried back to Sagebrush and Janet, vaguely alarmed, waited.

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Almost before she knew it another figure joined Bertie and she could hear the two conversing, but she didn't dare move closer. The newcomer struck a match to light a cigarette and carefully shielded though it was, Janet was close enough to glimpse his face. It was that of a stranger. The match went out and the night seemed darker.

Janet wanted to get closer, but as she moved forward she stumbled over something in the dark and plunged headlong into the sand.

Before she could regain her feet she heard a muttered exclamation and knew she had been discovered.

Then the thin beam from a shielded flashlight struck her face.

Janet knew her only chance was to run for it and she tried to rise, but her feet were entangled in a tough creeper.

"Look out! She may scream!" warned Bertie.

Janet opened her lips to cry out, but before she could do it, the man with Bertie leaped forward and thrust a heavy hand against Janet's mouth. Suddenly the world went black, the stars vanished, and she dropped into the sand.

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## ***Chapter XXVI*** **BOMBS FROM THE SKY**

It was later in the evening when Janet was missed. Helen thought her companion had gone to visit some other member of the company and it was well after ten o'clock when she became alarmed and started making inquiries.

"Looking for someone?" asked Bertie Jackson, who seemed to be everywhere.

"I haven't seen Janet for several hours."

"Maybe she's got a date with a boy friend in the desert."

"Janet hasn't any boy friend and she wouldn't be dating in the desert," snapped Helen.

"Have it your own way," retorted Bertie, but as she turned away a sneer distorted her vapid face.

Helen finally communicated her fears to her father.

"I've gone over the entire camp and no one has seen Janet for at least an hour and none of them are sure it was that recent. I'm worried."

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Henry Thorne, busy working with one of the writers on a difficult bit of script that needed smoothing up half way dismissed Helen's fears with a wave of his hand. Then he stopped.

"You're sure she's not in camp?" he asked.

"I'm positive, Dad. Do you think anything terrible has happened?"

"Of course not. She's probably walked out into the desert and has gone too far. I'll rout out some of the men and we'll start a searching party."

Curt Newsom was one of the first to answer the call and he muttered to himself when he heard the news.

"There's trouble brewing," he told Helen. "You stick close to me."

"What do you mean, Curt?" asked Helen, her voice filled with anxiety.

"I mean this picture promises to be too big and someone is trying to throw a wrench in the proceedings."

"Some rival company?"

"It could be that. I'm not saying, but I'm

certainly going to keep my eyes open.”

Under the brisk commands of Helen’s father, the ghost town awoke. Men who had been asleep were routed out, cars commandeered, and parties swept away over the desert in search of the missing girl.

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Curt Newsom, who had brought several horses with him, preferred to ride and Helen went with him. Curt saddled the horses and they swung away into the desert together.

Across the almost level floor of the desert they could see the cars swinging in great circles.

“They won’t find anything,” said Curt, and after that they rode on in a silence broken only by the steady shuffling of the horses through the sand.

At intervals they stopped and Curt’s great voice boomed through the night.

“We’d better turn back to camp,” the cowboy star finally advised. “Maybe some of the others have news.”

But when they gathered in the ghost town, Helen knew that the search had been fruitless.

Each searching party brought back the same report—no trace of the missing Janet had been found.

“Everyone try to get some sleep now,” said Helen’s father. “We’ll resume the search at dawn.”

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Helen went to the room assigned to her and lay down, fully dressed, to try and rest in the short interval before dawn. But sleep would not come and thoughts raced through her head. Something was decidedly amiss and, like Curt Newsom, she could now sense impending disaster to the company. Just what it was or how it would strike she could not determine, but a terrible uneasiness gripped her.

Breakfast was served at dawn. Most of the women in the company were on hand to aid in the search, but Henry Thorne called only upon the men.

Half a dozen cars were manned and they swung out again to comb the desert floor.

“Let them go,” said Curt Newsom to Helen. “We’ll ride. If there are any tracks, we’ll be able to follow them easier.”

The tall, well-built cowboy star swung into his saddle and they trotted away between two tumbledown houses of the ghost town.

Shadows of the morning were long and heavy, for the sun was just topping the mountains, but Helen, riding close behind the cowboy, glimpsed a footprint in the sand. She reined in her horse and called to Curt, who whirled quickly.

“Someone’s been through here,” she said, pointing to where the sand was fairly hard packed.

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“Anyone could have left a print like that,” replied the cowboy star. “Your nerves are getting the best of you, Helen. Steady up.”

She smiled and they turned again toward the desert, riding at a steady pace and scanning the sand intently for anything unusual.

They were less than a quarter of a mile from the old town when Curt pulled his horse up sharp and leaped from the saddle to bend down and scrutinize a tough creeper which had been pulled out of the sand.

"Get down here, Helen. Here's something the others have missed."

Helen dismounted and ran to Curt's side. In his hands he held a tough section of the creeper and his eyes were fastened on a brown stain. "What is it?" demanded Helen.

"Looks like someone got caught in this and scratched," said Curt, trying to pass the remark off lightly.

"You mean it might have been Janet?"

"It might have been," agreed the cowboy star. "Look back toward the village. This is in a direct line and although you may not have noticed it, we've been following footprints all of the way. Two came out and only one returned."

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Helen looked at him, her eyes showing her fear.

"Then someone in the company was responsible for Janet's disappearance!" she gasped.

"Right," snapped Curt. "The first thing is to find Janet; then we'll catch up with whoever was responsible."

"Hadn't we better tell the others?" asked Helen.

"They're not used to tracking; I am." He grinned. "Even if I am a movie cowboy most of the time, I know a few tricks about the range and the desert. Come on!"

They remounted and Curt led the way, scanning the ground closely. Even Helen, as inexperienced as she was, could see the signs now. Someone had left deep prints in the sand.

"He was either an awful big man or he was carrying someone," said Curt. "One thing, he won't be able to go far."

The trail led toward the hills back of the ghost town and it was evident that the man they were trailing had rested frequently. Curt saw another of those brown stains, but he made sure that Helen did not see it for there was no use in increasing her fears.

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The trail led on, perhaps half a mile altogether, and ended suddenly in a tiny depression where the sand was smooth and hard.

Curt dismounted and made a minute survey of the bowl. The trail came in all right, but there were no tracks going out. In the center were two marks, about four inches wide and 12 or 14 feet long, but that was all. Beside one of these was a tiny smudge of black and Curt got down on his hands and knees and sniffed keenly.

"What is it?" asked Helen.

Curt shook his head. "Can't tell yet and there's

no use in guessing.”

He mopped his forehead with a large bandana and scanned the heavens. The sun was blazing down and shortly the temperature in the little bowl they were in would be stifling.

“We’d better get out of here,” he said.

“But Janet? Where can she be? We’ve followed the trail but it’s simply vanished.” The questions tumbled from Helen’s lips.

“I wish I could answer them all,” said Curt. “Maybe I can later.”

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They rode back to the ghost town at a brisk trot and Curt cornered Henry Thorne and told him of their discovery. Then he led a searching party of half a dozen into the hills back of the town while the other members of the company assembled for the day’s work under the boiling sun.

Helen attempted to join the searching party, but was told it was no place for a girl so she went with the company out into the desert where the airport had been laid out and a dummy hangar erected.

Shooting went ahead on schedule until just before noon when someone shouted an alarm and they turned toward the ghost town. The remaining houses were rapidly being consumed by flames and before they could reach them there was no hope of saving anything, including a number of valuable cameras, sound equipment and hundreds of dollars worth of costumes.

Henry Thorne fairly blazed for he knew now that a deliberate effort was being made to stop the production of “Kings of the Air.”

But before they had recovered from that disaster, another befell with startling swiftness. There was a dull boom from the valley and they turned to see a fast, black plane swinging over the set on the desert. A cloud of dust was rising near the hangar and as they watched, another explosion echoed in their ears.

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“That guy’s bombing the set!” yelled a cameraman, leaping into a car.

The third bomb was a direct hit and the hangar collapsed. Over to the right were half a dozen planes which were being used in the picture and the unknown flyer turned his attention toward these.

“If he blows them up, we can figure a hundred thousand dollar loss right there,” groaned Helen’s father.

But the unknown flyer had reckoned without the resourcefulness of Curt Newsom. The lanky cowboy, riding hard by in the hills, had heard the first explosion and the roar of an airplane motor. They saw him flash out into the desert at a mad gallop.

“He’s crazy; someone stop him!” cried Henry Thorne, but there was no one near enough to reach Curt.

Helen saw him drag a rifle from the scabbard on his saddle. The flyer was apparently disdainful of the lone rider for he dropped another bomb. It

[242]



missed the planes by only the narrowest of margins and the pilot of the black ship swung around for another try. He swooped toward Curt and waved jeeringly as Curt leaped from the saddle.

They were too far away to hear the report of the rifle but they could see the little puffs of smoke from the muzzle. Suddenly the black plane heeled sharply, its motor sputtering. The pilot shot over the side, his chute billowing out and Curt, jumping back into the saddle, rode like mad toward the hills.

The plane gyrated uncertainly, then dove toward the ground. It struck with a tremendous explosion as the bombs still aboard let go.

Helen saw Curt whirl back into the valley and sweep down on the flyer, who had landed in a tangle of cord and silk from the parachute. All thought of resistance was gone from the flyer's mind and the cowboy captured him easily. By the time the others arrived, Curt had the situation well in hand.

"I think a confession out of this guy will solve our troubles," said the cowboy star as Henry Thorne stared at the flyer.

"What have you got to say for yourself. Who employed you?" demanded the director.

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The flyer was sullen. "I'm not talking. I want an attorney."

Curt rocked back and forth on his heels.

"So you won't talk?" He grinned, but it was a mirthless grin that struck terror to those who watched. Curt was living in real life the rôle he had played so many times on the screen. With a quick jerk his lariat was free from the saddle and before the flyer knew it, he was in the coils of the rope and his feet had been jerked out from under him.

Curt swung into the saddle, twisted the rope around the saddle horn and looked down on the helpless man.

"Going to talk?"

The captive shook his head.

Curt spoke to his horse and the magnificent sorrel moved ahead slowly, dragging the captive after him.

After bouncing over the desert floor for a rod, the flyer cried for mercy.

"I'll talk; I'll talk. Get this rope off quick."

"And you'll tell us what you did with that girl last night and where we can find her?"

The captive nodded emphatically and Curt shook the rope loose.

[244]

## ***Chapter XXVII*** **THE SHOWDOWN**

When Janet regained consciousness she was aware of a roaring that filled her ears. It was as though a great storm was sweeping down upon her. Then, from the motion, she realized that she was in an airplane. Her head ached terrifically and she made no attempt to move for several minutes.

As her eyes became accustomed to a dim glow of light ahead she could distinguish the figure of a man at the controls in the small cabin they were in.

Janet shifted her weight and the man turned instantly, focusing a flashlight on her.

"Keep still or I'll crack you again," he warned and from the fierceness of his voice Janet knew that he would not hesitate to carry out his threat.

The pulse of the motor lessened and she felt the craft sinking, to settle smoothly into a little circle of light. It was then that she learned they were in an autogiro.

Her captor opened the door and ordered her out.

[245]

Still with her head throbbing wildly, Janet managed to get out. There was a bad scratch on her left leg that had bled rather freely.

To her anxious questions, the flyer gave only the same answer, "You'll find out later, maybe."

Janet was forced to allow her hands to be tied behind her and then was led to a small shelter tent. There was a blanket on the ground and the flyer tossed another over her.

"Don't make any attempt to escape," he warned.

The portable electric light which had guided the autogiro down into the basin was snapped off and Janet passed the remainder of the night in desperate anxiety, wondering what was happening back at camp and the meaning of her abduction.

With the coming of dawn she hoped to learn more about the camp, but she was doomed to disappointment for her captor appeared and dropped the canvas fly which covered the front of the tiny tent.

It was well after daylight when she heard another plane approaching. It landed nearby and a few minutes later she heard men's voices, one of whom she recognized as that of the flyer who had brought her there. Then the plane which had just landed roared away and it was shortly after that when Janet heard a series of booming explosions.

[246]

Suddenly her tent flap was jerked roughly aside and her captor, a stocky, heavy-set man with a mass of black hair, ordered her to her feet. Janet struggled to get up, but she was numb from being in one position so long. The man half cuffed her upright and then hurried her toward the autogiro.

The motor of the queer looking plane responded instantly and they rose almost straight out of the valley, which Janet judged must be some distance from Sagebrush. As they gained altitude she looked across the desert. Although

it was several miles away, it seemed almost a stone's throw to Sagebrush, hardly recognizable now with the flames still consuming the few structures left in the village. Janet saw that the set for the desert airport had been destroyed. But what was more important was the swarm of planes which were climbing off the desert floor.

Like angry hornets they were buzzing around. Suddenly one of them shot toward the autogiro and the rest followed. Janet heard her own pilot shouting in anger, but the autogiro was slow and the movie planes were around it almost instantly.

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In the foremost was Curt Newsom and Janet felt her blood chill as she saw the rifle in Curt's hard hands.

Under the warning muzzle of the gun, the autogiro settled toward the floor of the valley and in less than three minutes the other planes were down around it while cars raced toward them, clouds of desert dust rising in their wake.

Bertie Jackson was in the first car and when she saw Janet her face blanched. Helen and her father were in the same machine.

"Are you all right?" asked Helen anxiously, for Janet was white-faced and deep hollows of fatigue were under her eyes.

"A little tired," confessed Janet. "What happened? Was this something in the plot I wasn't supposed to know about?"

"Tell us where you've been and why?" said Henry Thorne, and Janet briefly related the events. She didn't like to do it, but there was nothing else she could do under the circumstances and her story implicated Bertie Jackson.

"She's jealous, that's all," snapped Bertie. "The whole story is trumped up."

[248]

Then Curt Newsom took a hand.

"Let's look at this thing squarely. How much were you and these two flyers paid to slow up production on 'Kings of the Air'?" He shot the question at Bertie.

"You're impertinent," she blazed.

"Sure, but you're likely to go to prison. Setting fire to buildings is arson, you know." There was no humor in his words and Bertie looked from one to another in the group around her. Each stared at her with scornful eyes.

Defiant to the end, she flung her head back, "Well, what of it?" she demanded.

"Only this. You'll never work in another picture for anybody." It was Henry Thorne speaking, quietly and firmly, and Bertie turned away.

The two flyers, the one who had abducted Janet and the one who had bombed the set, talked. Janet didn't hear the whole story, but she and Helen learned enough to know that another rival company was implicated. It was Bertie who had set fire to the dry old houses in Sagebrush and who had supplied the flyers with information on the plans of the company.

When they finally returned to what little was left of the village, Henry Thorne spoke quietly to the girls.

“Don’t worry now,” he assured Helen. “There’ll be no more delays. We can erect another set on the desert without too much loss of time and we’ll have to live in tents, but that is endurable.”

Turning to Janet, he surprised her.

“Janet, I’m going to put you in Bertie’s rôle. We’ll shoot the scene in the field restaurant over again when we get back to Hollywood, but I need someone right now to step into Bertie’s place and you can handle the part. What do you say?”

“I’ll do my best,” promised Janet.

“I know you will.” Then Henry Thorne hurried away to attend to one of the hundred details that are the worry of a successful director and Janet and Helen faced each other.

“It looks like ‘Kings of the Air’ is going on to a successful conclusion now,” said Janet. “I’m so happy.”

“And I’m happy that you are getting Bertie’s part. Do you suppose we’re going to be able to keep on in the movies?”

“That,” smiled Janet, “is something I couldn’t even guess. If we don’t we’ll go home this fall with the memories of the most thrilling summer any two girls could have had.”

They turned to rejoin the rest of the company, unaware of the further adventures in Hollywood and in New York which were to befall them before winter came.

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## Transcriber’s Note

- Obvious typographical errors were corrected except for a few amusing ones.

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