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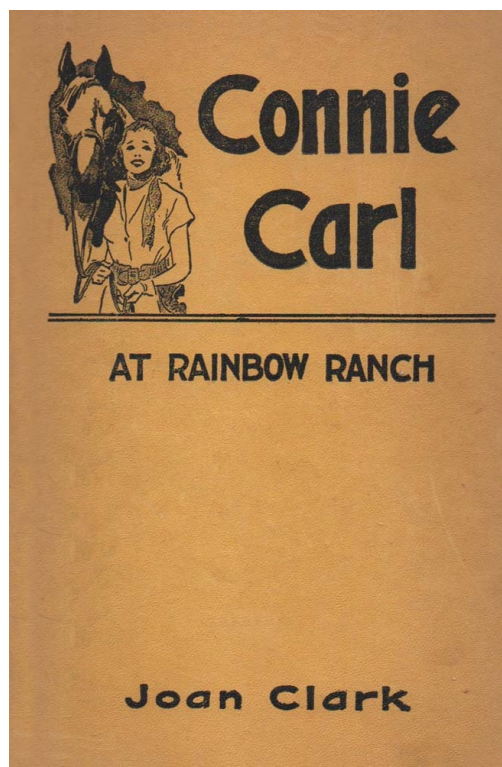
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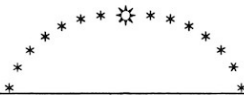
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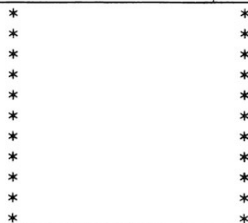
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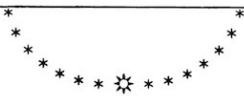


CONNIE CARL AT
RAINBOW RANCH

By Joan Clark



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Contents

- I. [A HOMECOMING FOR CONNIE](#)
- II. [THE COMING RODEO](#)
- III. [BAD NEWS](#)
- IV. [THE FOREMAN'S BOAST](#)
- V. [POP BRADSHAW'S TREACHERY](#)
- VI. [KIDNAPING CATAPULT](#)
- VII. [A MIDNIGHT ESCAPE](#)
- VIII. [A RESCUE](#)
- IX. [MR. POSTIL'S OFFER](#)
- X. [THE HOLDUP](#)
- XI. [WRANGLING DUDES](#)
- XII. [AN ARGUMENT](#)
- XIII. [OVER THE PRECIPICE](#)
- XIV. [A TELLTALE HANDKERCHIEF](#)
- XV. [AN UNPLEASANT REVELATION](#)
- XVI. [THE ROUNDUP](#)
- XVII. [A NIGHT PROWLER](#)
- XVIII. [STAMPEDE](#)
- XIX. [TURNING THE HERD](#)
- XX. [THE END OF THE TRAIL](#)

Connie Carl at Rainbow Ranch

CHAPTER I

A Homecoming for Connie

"I'll take your luggage now, Miss," said the colored porter politely. "We'll be a-pullin' into Red Gulch in five minutes."

"Yes, I know," replied the girl softly, without shifting her gaze from the window.

For the past hour Connie Carl had been watching the horizon beyond the flashing telegraph poles. A faint cloud-like blue line which represented New Mexico's mountains—her mountains—had steadily moved closer. She was going home at last, home to Rainbow Ranch.

At first glance a stranger never would have taken Connie Carl for a Westerner. The girl was neatly dressed in a blue suit with gray suede slippers, and a wisp of auburn-red hair peeped from beneath her jaunty felt hat. She looked for all the world like a young lady who had just graduated from a stylish Eastern finishing school, which in truth, she had. But now, at sixteen, Connie Carl had returned to the prairie land she loved, to make her home once more at the place of her birth, Rainbow Ranch.

The train had slowed down for the station. Connie went quickly down the aisle, waiting in the vestibule until the train came to a full stop.

"Someone meetin' you, Miss?" asked the porter as she slipped a coin into his hand. "This heah Red Gulch ain't nothin' but a wide place in the road."

"Yes, I've wired ahead, so I'm sure someone will meet me," said Connie with a smile. "Anyway, I've been here before."

The porter set out the luggage on the platform. As the train pulled slowly away, Connie looked quickly about.

Two men in wide brimmed hats and blue overalls were loading freight on a motor truck, but she did not know either of them. Otherwise the platform was deserted.

"It's queer there's no one here to meet me," thought Connie. "Perhaps I didn't send my wire in time for it to reach the ranch."

After hesitating a moment, the girl picked up her heavy suitcases and carried them into the unswept little station. She walked over to the ticket window where the agent was busy with a report.

"Hello, Andy!" said Connie.

The agent looked up and stared. Then light broke over his face.

"Well, if it ain't Connie Carl! I'm sure glad to see you back."

"I'm glad to get back home too, Andy. It seems as if I've been gone half my life."

"Let's see, how long has it been?"

"Three years—three long years."

"So they educated you, did they, Connie?"

"Well, they tried it," laughed the girl, "but I've not forgotten how to ride a horse. I can hardly wait to get out to the ranch. I thought someone would meet me."

"Haven't seen Blakeman or any of the Rainbow outfit in town for a week. Roads have been pretty muddy. But you can get through now."

"I'll hire a rig," said Connie. "Does old Charlie Trench still rim his jitney?"

"Same as ever," the agent agreed with a grin. Then his face became sober. "But you may find other changes around here."

"What sort of changes?" inquired Connie quickly.

"Oh, one thing and another," answered the agent vaguely. "Say, I see Charlie across the street now. If you want to catch him you better hurry."

Connie hastened across the street, stopping the old man just as he was entering a cafe. He greeted her with a hearty handshake and declared that he would be glad to drive her out to Rainbow Ranch.

"Everything looks just the same," laughed Connie as Charlie loaded her bags into the decrepit old car.

"Maybe they look that way," replied the old taxi driver shortly, "but they ain't! You'll find plenty of changes, Connie—'specially out at Rainbow."

"Why, is anything the matter, Charlie?" Connie stared at him in surprise. "I thought everything was running well. The foreman, Forest Blakeman, seemed to be very efficient."

"Sure, he's efficient. 'Specially where his own interests are concerned. You'll find most of the old outfit broken up."

"Isn't Red Farnham there?" asked Connie in amazement. "And Shorty and Sixshooter Pete?"

"Red left six months ago," Charlie answered with a shrug. "Sixshooter Pete drifted north this spring, and some of the other boys hired out to the Drowsy Water outfit. Shorty took himself to Mexico. I reckon Lefty Forbes is about the only one still there."

"Why didn't Blakeman write me about these changes?" asked Connie indignantly. "Why, those boys were my father's most loyal cowhands. Rainbow Ranch won't seem like home without them."

"There's been a lot of changes since your Dad died, Connie."

"Yes," agreed the girl soberly. "When he willed Rainbow Ranch to me, he provided that I must attend school in the East. I never wished to leave New Mexico because I feel that I belong here. Now that I'm through school, I'm aiming to take over the management of Rainbow Ranch myself."

Old Charlie glanced sideways at the girl as he steered the car along the narrow dirt road.

"Maybe that won't be so easy to do, Connie," he said quietly.

"Dad left Rainbow Ranch to me, didn't he?" the girl asked sharply. "What are you driving at anyway, Charlie? I wish you'd speak right out."

"I've already talked a-plenty, Connie. You'll get the lay of the land soon enough."

Old Charlie lapsed into moody silence, devoting all his attention to the road. For a time they drove through a winding canyon, following the bed of a swift-moving stream. On either side rose red rock walls which under the light of the fading sun took on many beautiful hues. By craning her neck Connie could see the tops of spruce trees, aspens and cottonwoods.

The girl watched the blue mountains moving closer and closer. She breathed deeply of the fresh, crisp air. It was good to be home, and yet the edge had been taken from her enjoyment.

She felt disturbed. Both the station agent and Old Charlie had hinted that she would find many changes at Rainbow Ranch. She wondered if she had trusted too much in the judgment of her foreman, Forest Blakeman.

Presently the car rolled over the crest of a high hill. Connie leaned forward and glanced down into the valley. She could see the rambling old adobe buildings of Rainbow Ranch.

The car crept down the hill, and came at last to a huge wooden gateway. Old Charlie unfastened it and they drove up a long lane to the courtyard of the ranch house. A dog began to bark.

As Connie stepped from the car, she saw a tall, dark-haired man striding toward her. It was the ranch foreman, Forest Blakeman.

"Howdy, Miss Connie," he said heartily, sweeping off his sombrero. "Welcome home to Rainbow Ranch. I was just aimin' to drive in to Red Gulch myself."

"Then you did receive my telegram?" asked Connie.

"Yes, but a lot of work piled up on us this afternoon, and I couldn't get away as early as I planned. We're short handed you know."

"Charlie was telling me that Shorty and Red are gone."

"Yes," nodded the foreman indifferently. "Here, let me take your bags. You must be tired after your long trip."

"I am," Connie confessed wearily.

She followed the foreman into the ranch house. A feeling of relief came over her for inside the dwelling very little had been changed. The adobe walls, mellowed by the smoke of the fireplace, were still adorned with her father's Mexican treasures. The furniture was all massive and hand carved.

A shy Mexican girl whom Connie had never seen before in her trips to the ranch took her bags and led her down a long tiled corridor to the east bedchamber.

Connie unpacked her luggage and changed into a fresh skirt and blouse. She was tired but she felt too excited to lie down. She went to the window and opened it.

Below she could see the corrals and the barn, and beyond, a long stretch of green meadow land.

"I wish I had time for a canter before supper," Connie thought.

She had forgotten to ask the foreman about her favorite mount, Silvertail. Connie had raised the big gray from a colt and he was the best horse in the Rainbow string.

Leaving the ranch house, the girl walked rapidly toward the barn. But she stopped short as she saw a familiar slouched figure leaning against the corral bars.

"Connie!" cried a gruff voice.

"Lefty Forbes!" laughed Connie, clasping his horny hand in her own. "I'm glad to see one familiar face around here."

"I reckon you won't be seein' mine much longer," drawled the cowboy.

"What do you mean?" asked Connie quickly.

"Blakeman is figurin' on givin' me my honorable discharge if I kin read the signs," replied the cowboy dryly. "But I calculate to beat him to the trigger. I'll be quittin' any day now."

"Oh, Lefty, you can't! Why, I need you here."

"That's the only reason I've stayed on, Connie," said the cowboy soberly. "I thought a lot of your Dad, and this ranch. But there ain't nothin' I can do now. Blakeman runs things with a purty high hand."

"He's only the foreman, Lefty. Now that I'm home, I mean to manage the ranch myself."

"I reckon you don't know jest how bad things are, Connie."

"Blakeman wrote me the ranch had been losing money the past year. Is that what you mean, Lefty?"

"Things have been runnin' down hill ever since he took over, Connie. Blakeman's handled the ranch with a high hand. First he fired Pete and Shorty—"

"He discharged them?" Connie gasped. "Why I thought they left of their own accord—"

"Well, they didn't. They didn't see eye to eye with Blakeman so he told 'em to go. 'Course you know how the cattle market's been the last few years. An' Blakeman seems to have a talent for sellin' at the bottom. Truth is, things are in a purty bad way."

"I mean to have a talk with Blakeman tomorrow," Connie declared. "If he doesn't wish to handle the ranch as I say, I'll find a new foreman."

"You can't do that, Connie."

"Why can't I? Isn't this my ranch?"

"It was your ranch," said the cowboy quietly, "but I reckon now that the First National Bank has a strangle hold on it. They have a couple of notes—"

"Yes, Blakeman wrote me about that," Connie interrupted, "but I understood the debt was only a small one."

"It's enough so the bank can take over any time. For the past year Blakeman has paid the interest out of his own pocket—or so he claims. And you're owin' him more than a year's back salary. So you see, unless you're supplied with ready cash, you can't tell him to go."

"I begin to understand," murmured Connie.

"Blakeman is a slick sort of fellow, Connie. You want to think your way and move slow."

And with that bit of sage advice, Lefty Forbes moved off toward the barn.

The Coming Rodeo

Connie was abroad at dawn the next morning. Dressed in riding clothes, she let herself out of the ranch house and went to the barn where Silvertail was stabled.

The big gray turned his head at her approach and gave a low whinny of welcome. Connie laughed with delight as she patted the mane on his glossy neck.

"You *did* miss me, Silvertail," she said softly. "And how lonesome I've been for you!"

She led the horse from the barn, and with a quick, agile spring vaulted on his back. Connie needed no saddle. She had learned to ride bareback as a child, and when it came to handling a high spirited horse there were few cowboys who were her equal.

Turning her mount eastward toward the rising sun, the girl dug in her heels. Silvertail snorted and the dust rolled from under his hoofs. The rhythmic, regular beat of the steel shoes came as music to Connie's ears.

Silvertail's action, as always, seemed nothing short of marvelous. He ran smoothly and easily, obedient to the slightest touch of his mistress. Connie rode him with body bent low, the wind whipping her hair about her face.

"We've gone far enough," she said at last, turning back toward the ranch.

As they came up to the corrals, Lefty Forbes emerged from the bunkhouse. Connie slid to the ground, her face flushed, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Oh, Lefty, Silvertail is marvelous!" she declared. "In all the world there's not a horse to compare with him."

"Nor a rider who stacks up with you," replied the cowboy affectionately. "I suppose you saw the posters advertisin' the rodeo."

"No! When is it coming, Lefty?" Connie asked eagerly.

"Next week. Entries close Thursday night. They're offerin' some good prizes this year. Five hundred dollars for the best gal bronco rider. I remember you won out in that event when you were just a kid —"

"I'm afraid I was a better rider then than I am now," said Connie. "I've been out of practice for three years."

"You can still ride circles around all the girls in this county," Lefty insisted loyally. "It might be an easy way to pick up some money."

"Or a few broken bones," added Connie with a laugh. "No, I think I'll let someone else try for that five hundred dollars."

After breakfast she asked Forest Blakeman if she might have a talk with him.

"I reckon you can," he replied with a frown. "It's time you learn just how matters are around here. I hate to tell you, Miss Connie, but the old Rainbow is headed for the rocks."

"You gave me no hint of it in your letters," said Connie.

"Didn't see what good it would do to worry you. We might have made it if the bottom hadn't fallen out of the cattle market. Lost a thousand dollars on our last shipment."

"My father always made money from this ranch. It's considered one of the best in New Mexico."

"Times have changed since your Dad was alive, Miss Connie. Most of the smart ranchers have gone into the Dude business."

"Then why can't we do the same?" demanded Connie. "The ranch house would hold at least a dozen guests. If necessary we could build on an extra wing and——"

"It takes money to make improvements, Miss Connie." The foreman spoke with a slight sneer which was not lost upon the girl.

"Can't we raise even a few hundred dollars? That would be enough to get us started."

"We can't raise a dime—not a dime. Our credit has been stretched to the limit. Fact is, there's a note coming due for fifteen hundred dollars at the First National—that's next month. If you're not able to meet it, I'm afraid you're going to lose the ranch, Miss Connie."

Connie stared at the foreman thoughtfully. She had not realized that matters could be so bad.

"You should have told me about it months ago," she murmured.

"No one could have done a better job than I of managing this ranch," the foreman snapped. "I've worked night and day at the job. I've even advanced my own money to pay interest on the ranch debts. My own salary hasn't been paid for months!"

"I wasn't blaming you," Connie said quickly. "I just wish you hadn't kept these things from me. What do you think is the best for us to do?"

"If the bank won't renew your note you're through," replied the foreman bluntly. "I can't advance any more of my own money."

"I certainly don't expect it of you," said Connie quietly. "Tomorrow I'll drive in to town and see the banker."

After Blakeman had gone to the barn, she sat for a long while on the top rail of the high corral, gazing toward the distant mountains. She felt very alone and for the first time in her life, inadequate to the situation.

For some reason which she could not have explained, she did not like Forest Blakeman. Nor could she entirely trust him. He had badly mismanaged the Rainbow Ranch, she believed, allowing the quality of the stock to run down and the buildings to deteriorate. But she could not discharge him because she owed him money.

"Lefty is right," Connie thought uncomfortably. "I'll have to move carefully."

The girl sat watching the horses which had been herded into the smaller pens. A sorrel in particular held her attention for only the night before one of the cowboys had told her that the animal was as yet

unbroken.

Presently Lefty and Alkali Pete came out of the barn with a saddle. They grinned at Connie as they stopped by the corral.

"Now you'll see some fun," said Lefty grimly. "Old Firewater has a wicked look in his eye this morning."

Connie watched with keen interest as Lefty's swinging rope started the sorrel to running in wide circles around the corral. Then the lariat flashed out, stopping the animal neatly.

While the two cowboys were trying to get the saddle on, the sorrel snorted and snapped his teeth and fought at their slightest touch. Connie slid down from the fence.

"Lefty, let me ride Firewater," she pleaded.

"Not this baby, Connie," said the cowboy. "He's thrown me twice."

"Oh, Lefty, don't be stubborn. You know I can do it. Anyway, I'm not afraid to wipe up a little corral dust. It won't be the first time."

"Quit your teasin'," muttered Lefty.

But in the end he gave in, just as Connie knew he would. When the sorrel was saddled, the cowboys blindfolded him, and held his head between them until Connie was mounted. Then the ropes were released and the blindfold jerked away.

"Yip-ee!" yelled Lefty, jumping aside. "Ride 'im, Connie!"

For an instant Firewater stood perfectly still. Then he ducked his head, shot up into the air and came down stiff-legged. At every jump he seemed to go a little higher and strike the ground harder. Connie's slender little body whipped back and forth as she waved her hat and used her rowels.

But after a few minutes Firewater stopped bucking and the girl rode him off across the sage. She came back flushed and triumphant.

"Nice work," praised Lefty as she slid to the ground.

"Lefty, I've been thinking over what you said about the rodeo," Connie declared slowly. "Do you really believe I'd have any chance to win that prize for bronco riding?"

"I sure do, Connie. No girl around here would have a chance against you, unless maybe it might be Enid Bradshaw."

"I could use five hundred dollars right now," Connie went on soberly. "I've decided to go out for it, Lefty."

"The boys from the Rainbow will sure be pullin' for you."

"I'll have to get busy and practice up," Connie declared. "Until rodeo time I expect to be one big black and blue spot."

Rather well pleased with her decision to enter the contest, the girl spent the afternoon making an inspection of the ranch. Everywhere she found evidence of careless management.

"If only I could win five hundred dollars in the rodeo, I'll be able to pay Blakeman everything I owe him," she thought. "Then I can get rid of him."

After her long ride over the range, Connie felt more at peace with the world. Supper was over when she saw a lone rider turn in at the gate.

"Why, that's Pop Bradshaw!" the girl thought as she recognized the stout rancher. She quickly arose from the porch and went to meet him.

"Hello, there, Connie," beamed the old man as he stiffly dismounted. "Didn't know you were back home."

"Yes, I arrived yesterday," Connie answered as she shook hands. "How is Enid?"

"Oh, fine, fine. She's grown a lot since you saw her last, but for that matter, so have you. Blakeman here, I suppose?"

"Why, yes, he's out at the barn," Connie replied. She wondered what had brought Pop Bradshaw to the ranch but did not like to ask.

"Ride over an' see Enid," the old rancher invited cordially. "She'll be right glad to visit with you again."

"I'll do that," Connie promised.

The old rancher went on toward the barn. Connie sat down on the steps again.

"I wonder what business Pop has with my foreman?" she reflected. "If it's anything to do with the ranch, I'm the one he should see. But I don't seem to cut much ice around here."

Since her arrival Connie had felt somewhat like a guest. She had been treated with the greatest of politeness by Forest Blakeman, but he paid scant attention to any suggestion which she offered. His attitude rather than his words had given her to understand that he did not consider her opinions worthy of notice.

Connie was thinking of going indoors when Pop Bradshaw and the foreman emerged from the barn. Pop was leading a horse. In the gathering dusk the girl could not be certain which animal it was. But as the two men came closer she saw that it was Silvertail.

The foreman did not notice Connie sitting on the porch. He said to Pop Bradshaw:

"Well, you've made a good bargain this time. You've bought a fine hoss."

Connie wondered if she had heard correctly. But she could not doubt her own ears, and besides, she saw that the rancher was preparing to lead Silvertail away.

"Just a minute please," she said, stepping forward. "Mr. Blakeman, why is Pop Bradshaw taking my horse?"

"Why, I bought him a few days ago," answered the rancher before the foreman could reply.

"You bought Silvertail?" Connie echoed in amazement. "But he's *my* horse. I'd not sell him to anyone."

"Now be reasonable, Miss Connie," interposed Blakeman. "We need money and Silvertail's not much use as a cow pony. I thought the best thing to do would be to get rid of him."

"You might have consulted me," retorted Connie, striving to control her anger.

"I don't aim to take your hoss if you feel that way about it," Pop Bradshaw said hastily. "It's nothin' to me one way or the other."

"Thank you, Pop," replied Connie gratefully. "I couldn't possibly let Silvertail go. Mr. Blakeman quite overstepped his authority."

The foreman's dark eyes flashed angrily, but he made no comment until after the rancher had ridden away.

"You made a mistake, Miss Connie," he said coldly. "You may not get another chance to sell to a good owner like Pop."

"I'll not sell Silvertail to anyone!"

"I hope you're right," returned the foreman with a shrug. "But after you've talked with the banker you may get a different idea!"

CHAPTER III

Bad News

Forest Blakeman's words gave Connie a strange feeling. For a moment it had seemed to her that the foreman took satisfaction in knowing that she was fighting with her back to the wall. It was almost as if he wished to see her lose Rainbow Ranch.

She brushed aside the thought. After all, had not Blakeman gone without his salary for many months in an effort to stave off financial ruin? It was unjust of her to question his motives. But it would be hard for her to forgive him for trying to sell Silvertail.

Early the next morning Connie took the car and drove in to Red Gulch. She was waiting at the door of the First National Bank when it opened at nine o'clock.

"Come right in, Miss Carl," invited the president, leading the way to his private office. Connie thought he glanced at her a bit appraisingly as she seated herself opposite him.

She came straight to the point.

"Mr. Haynes, I wanted to talk to you about our note which is coming due in a few days."

"Oh, yes," murmured the banker. "On the sixteenth, I believe. I trust you are prepared to pay it."

"Well, no, I'm not," Connie admitted. "But with a six months' extension——"

"I am afraid that is impossible, Miss Carl," the banker said quickly. "I should like to do it, of course, but I must think of my depositors."

"But Mr. Haynes, you don't realize what this will mean!" Connie cried. "I'll lose my ranch—everything! If only I had a little more time, even three months——"

The banker smiled tolerantly but shook his head.

"If you had a year, Miss Carl, it would not help. Ranching is no longer the profitable industry it was in your father's time."

"I could make it pay if only I had a little time," Connie insisted desperately. "I'd take summer boarders—dudes from the city."

"I fear you haven't the capital for that," smiled the banker. "I know exactly how you feel, Miss Carl, and I only wish I might help you."

Connie left the bank feeling discouraged and almost ill. Mr. Haynes' attitude had stunned her. She had never believed that he would refuse to extend the note.

"Somehow I must raise fifteen hundred dollars before the sixteenth of the month," she told herself grimly. "But how? There's no possible way."

Connie crossed over to the grocery store where she bought a box of supplies to take back to Rainbow Ranch. She chatted for a few minutes with the genial owner, Joe Ferris, who had known her since she was a child. It was well after the noon hour when finally she started home.

The girl drove automatically, her mind absorbed with the problem which beset her. Upon reaching the ranch she avoided Blakeman, feeling that she could not bear to talk with him in her present mood.

Slipping out to the barn she saddled Silvertail and went for a run through the sage. The rush of cool air seemed to quiet her nerves. She rode toward the vermilion cliffs, following an indistinct trail but one which Connie knew well.

Suddenly Silvertail shied. The girl was startled to see a man lying on the ground ahead of her. Instantly she thought that it was someone in hiding, then she saw that he lay perfectly still.

Springing from the saddle, Connie ran to him and dropped on her knees. He was a lean young man, clean-shaven and pale. She had never seen him before.

"Are you hurt?" she gasped.

The man stirred, opened his eyes and tried to smile.

"Water," he mumbled.

Connie ran to get it from her canteen. She pressed the container to the man's lips and he drank thirstily.

"Not too much," she warned.

Tearing off the sleeve of her blouse she sopped it in water and sponged his forehead.

"How did you get here?" she asked. "Where is your horse?"

"Haven't any," the man mumbled. "I walked from Red Gulch."

"You walked!" exclaimed Connie. "No wonder you had a touch of heat. You're a stranger around these parts, aren't you?"

"I guess maybe I am," the man admitted. "I'm looking for a job. They told me in Red Gulch I might get one out at Rainbow Ranch. I started walking but I couldn't find the place."

"Why, you're at Rainbow Ranch now," declared Connie. "But as for getting a riding or cowboy job——"

"I can ride even if I don't own a horse," the man said quickly. "My name is Jim Barrows."

"I'm real glad to meet you," replied Connie smiling.

She liked the young man but she doubted very much that he could ride or that he knew anything about ranch work. A cowboy never would have tried to walk the distance from Red Gulch, nor would one accustomed to outdoor life have been affected by the sun. Jim Barrows obviously was a tenderfoot.

"Here, let me help you," she said kindly as the man tried to raise himself. "If you're able to ride my horse I can get you to the ranch house. Or maybe it would be better to go for help."

"No, I can make it," Jim Barrows insisted. "My head isn't so woozy now."

Connie helped him into the saddle, observing that he really did know how to mount. Then she led Silvertail down the trail.

"What made you think of getting a job at Rainbow Ranch?" she asked presently.

"They told me in Red Gulch that the place was badly in need of a few good men. I guess the ranch

has been run by a girl who lives in the East and she's let it go to pieces."

Connie bit her lip and avoided looking at Jim Barrows.

"I need a job mighty bad," the man went on. "Fact is, I've not had a square meal in a week."

"I'll see that you get one as soon as we reach the house," Connie promised.

"I'm sorry to put you to so much trouble, Miss. Say, do you live near here?"

"Yes, at Rainbow Ranch," the girl answered, laughing. "I neglected to tell you my name. I am Connie Carl."

"Why, you're the girl who owns the ranch!"

"Yes."

"Say, I didn't mean anything——"

"Don't worry about that," said Connie quickly. "I know what people are saying, and in a way it is true. I trusted too much in the ability of my foreman. About that job, I'll have Blakeman talk with you. We are short handed, but I'm afraid we can't pay very much even for a good cowhand."

"I'd be willing to work almost for my grub."

"In that case I think we should be able to come to some sort of deal," Connie laughed.

Lefty and Alkali were working in the corrals when the girl led the horse into the courtyard. They turned to stare at the stranger.

"Lefty!" Connie called. "Come here and help Mr. Barrows into the house. Tell Marie to give him all the food he can eat."

"You bet!" replied the cowboy.

Supported by Lefty, the stranger walked quite steadily into the kitchen. Connie went to find the foreman. He was not at the barn or in the leather shop, but when she returned a few minutes later to the house, she discovered him talking angrily with Lefty.

"Who is this stranger?" he demanded. "What's he doing here?"

"You'll have to ask Connie," returned Lefty with a shrug. "I don't know nothin' about it."

"I was just looking for you, Mr. Blakeman," said Connie. "I found the man lying on the trail. He's down on his luck and hasn't had a square meal in days. I brought him here. I thought you might find some work for him to do."

"We can't pay the men we have now," the foreman snapped. "Anyway, I don't like the looks of this fellow."

"I do," said Connie quietly. "My father never would have turned a man away when he was hungry and half-sick."

"He's no more sick than you are," retorted the foreman. "I can tell when a guy is puttin' on."

"I don't agree with you at all," returned Connie. "What reason would he have for pretending that he was ill?"

"I don't like him," said Blakeman stubbornly. "We ought to cut down expenses wherever we can."

"A few dollars won't make any difference now. I wish you would hire him, Mr. Blakeman."

"We could use a herder," spoke up Lefty. "The cattle in that southeast section have been gittin' out into the road. Another calf was killed yesterday."

The foreman glared angrily at the cowboy and started to walk away.

"Just a minute," Connie called after him. "I'll tell Barrows that he is hired."

"It's your ranch," the foreman said sullenly. "But you're making a mistake!"

Connie made no reply but went into the kitchen. Jim Barrows had just finished the ample lunch which Marie had set before him.

"I couldn't help overhearing," he said to Connie. "Thanks for going down the line to help me."

"We'll be glad to have you work here," smiled Connie.

"I hope you didn't get into trouble on my account."

Connie shook her head.

"Blakeman is only my foreman. I'm really the boss here, but he doesn't seem to realize it. I guess maybe that's because he knows I'll probably lose the ranch in a short while."

Connie did not go on for she felt that she had told the stranger too much already. He regarded her curiously but did not ask leading questions.

"When do I start work?" he inquired presently.

"Why, whenever you feel able," Connie told him.

"I'm a lot better already," the man declared heartily. "I'll be ready to go to work in the morning."

After Connie had gone, Jim Barrows wandered outdoors. He went out to the corrals and talked for a time with Lefty and Alkali. The foreman coldly ignored him, but the other cowboys tried to be friendly. It came to them by degrees that the stranger knew more about ranch work than they had thought.

"There's something queer about that fellow," Lefty confided to Connie later on.

"How do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"Seems to me like I've seen him before, only I can't remember where," the cowboy said, scratching his shaggy locks. "But I'm dead sure of one thing. Jim Barrows ain't the greenhorn we took him to be."

The Foreman's Boast

Try as she would, Connie could not rest that night. Her mind was a turmoil of worries which made anything but fitful sleep impossible. The girl stood long by her bedroom window, gazing out across the moonlit ranch which had been her childhood home; now her sole possession. She could not rid her mind of the fear that soon her beloved Rainbow would pass into the hands of another owner. At dawn she dressed and sauntered down to the stables.

When Connie was a little girl she liked nothing better than to get up early to see the sunrise; and this morning, as the eastern sky reddened against the distant mountains, the old scenes lived again.

Connie was startled from her reverie by the sound of masculine voices coming from the bunkhouse. The cowboys were starting the day with their usual round of banter. They talked so loudly that she could not help hearing every word that the men said.

"Well, Alkali," Lefty Forbes drawled, "in a few days now me and you can feast our eyes on the champeen bulldogger of these here parts."

"Meanin' who?" Alkali asked.

"Why, meanin' old Blakeman hisself. To hear him tell it a man would think nobody even heard of bulldoggin' till he came along."

"I wouldn't lay no money on him," Alkali said. "The guy is a big loud-speaker."

"And that ain't all he is nuther," Lefty added. "He's a washout when it comes to runnin' a ranch. Look at the jam he's got this place into."

"Yeah, and Miss Connie walked right into it. What a homecomin'!"

"I know. Alkali. And I feel rotten about the whole deal. Miss Connie is one swell kid. If it weren't for her I'd quit today."

At that moment the girl saw Forest Blakeman approaching from around the house. She wished to warn Lefty and Alkali. If the foreman heard them there might be trouble.

Picking up a large clod of earth she tossed it against the bunk-house door.

"Hey, what's that?" Lefty shouted.

Both cowboys emerged and looked about.

"It was only I," Connie laughed. Then she jerked her head in the direction from which Blakeman approached.

"There comes your friend now," she said, her voice lowered.

"Oh, that big ape," Alkali muttered, scorn in his voice.

The foreman came up to the trio, looking quickly from one to the other. He remarked that Connie was abroad early.

"Yes, Mr. Blakeman," she replied. "I couldn't sleep so I wandered down here. Beautiful sunrise, isn't it?"

"It's o.k., I reckon."

"I think we are going to have fine weather for the rodeo," Connie continued mischievously. "Are you in any of the events, Mr. Blakeman?"

"Tell her, Blake!" laughed Lefty and there was an edge to his voice. "Tell her they couldn't run the show without you doin' some fancy bulldoggin'."

"Yeah!" Alkali put in. "They don't come no hotter than Blake when he sets himself to dump over a steer by his horns."

"Now listen, you two," Blakeman said, perceptibly angered. "I don't have to take any sarcasm from a couple of cow stooges like you! I'll show you what I can do. I'll be on hand for the bulldoggin' and I hope you lugs lay your money against me!"

Having delivered himself of this defy, Forest Blakeman turned on his heel and walked off.

"We'll be there to see it, won't we, Alkali?" Lefty chortled.

"With both of our hair in one braid," Alkali agreed.

"Just wait till Blake goes up against Catapult. Boy, oh boy, will that steer ruin him?"

Connie did not quite follow the two men's conversation. She wondered who this Catapult might be.

"Why, that's Pop Bradshaw's prize bulldoggin' steer, Miss Connie," Lefty explained. "That old hunk of animated baloney has got a neck that's made of pure spring steel."

"It sure is," Alkali confirmed. "That steer ain't never been throwed in his whole life. If you ask me there ain't a man a-livin' who can do it, nuther."

"He must be quite an animal," Connie remarked, laughing.

"Blakeman's been braggin' all winter he's a champeen bulldogger," Alkali went on contemptuously. "No one round here ain't even seen him toss up a cow!"

The talk ceased abruptly as Jim Barrows came up from the house. He walked with a firm step and seemed to have fully recovered his strength.

"You're to start herdin' in the southeast section," Lefty told him.

"I'll ride out that way with you after breakfast," Connie said quickly. "I thought I might go over to the Bradshaw ranch."

The stranger nodded and followed Lefty to the corrals. He roped his own horse and did it neatly the girl observed. By the time she had finished breakfast he was ready to start and had saddled Silvertail for her.

As they rode along, Connie kept stealing quick glances at her companion. She could not figure him out. Lefty had been right in saying that he was no tenderfoot. But who was he?

Connie might have asked a number of direct questions, but she did not. After all, Jim Barrows' business was his own, she thought. She had no call to inquire into his private life.

At the Forks the girl said good-bye and rode on toward the Bradshaw ranch where she hoped to

renew her friendship with Enid.

"It's three long years since we've seen each other," she thought. "I imagine we've both changed a great deal."

Connie unhooked the gate without dismounting and galloped up the lane to the ranch house. The sound of hoofbeats brought both Enid and her father to the door.

"Connie!" cried Enid, rushing out to meet her. "My, but it's good to see you again."

Connie sprang lightly to the ground, tossing the reins over Silvertail's head.

"You're surely a wonderful sight for sore eyes yourself!" she declared. "I thought you'd be coming over to see me."

Enid glanced quickly at her father and then looked away.

"Well—I intended to come—but——"

"I know," said Connie quickly, "I haven't been home many days."

"Come on into the house," Enid invited.

"I hear you happen to own a champion steer by the name of Catapult, Mr. Bradshaw," remarked Connie as she stepped up on the veranda.

"Reckon I do," answered the rancher.

"I'd love to see Catapult," Connie went on. "All the boys are saying no one can throw him."

"Catapult's out on the range now," replied the rancher. It seemed to Connie that his voice was not very friendly. At any rate he did not carry on the conversation.

"Come on into the house, Connie," urged Enid hurriedly.

Connie spent a pleasant hour with her friend, but there were moments when they both felt ill at ease and at a loss for something to say.

"It's only because we haven't seen each other for such a long while," Connie thought. When she left she gave Enid a cordial invitation to ride over to the Rainbow.

In the days which followed the girl found much to occupy her time at the ranch. She spent many hours in the saddle practicing for the rodeo. Sometimes she rode alone and occasionally with the new cowhand, Jim Barrows. He had proven himself to be both quiet and efficient, but his very ability seemed to infuriate Forest Blakeman who gave him the most disagreeable tasks about the ranch.

Twice Connie drove over to the Bradshaw Ranch. She and Enid had delightful visits and at times they came close to recapturing the old feeling of comradeship which had existed between them. But always Connie sensed that Pop Bradshaw did not seem to like her. At least he never became cordial or even as friendly as upon the day of their first meeting.

"Don't mind Pop," Enid said to her once. "He's not himself these days. We've been losing money on the ranch, and you know what this place means to him. He'd rather give an eye than lose it."

"I know exactly how he feels," Connie replied.

Although she went many times to the Bradshaw Ranch, Enid never once came to the Rainbow. At first Connie was puzzled and then hurt.

"I feel almost as if Enid didn't like me at times," she thought. "Can it be that she's jealous because I'll compete against her in the riding contest?"

Connie could not really believe that Enid would take such a narrow-minded attitude. Yet something was wrong. She was certain of that.

"I'll not go to the Bradshaw Ranch until she comes over to see me," Connie thought.

Several days elapsed and Enid did not visit Rainbow Ranch. A sense of hurt gave way to one of indignation.

"Well, if that's how she feels about it, I'll show her I really can ride!" Connie told herself grimly. "I'll win that prize if it's the last thing I ever do."

That very afternoon she roped Dynamite, one of the most unmanageable horses on the ranch. Despite the efforts of every cowboy at the Rainbow, Dynamite had never been successfully broken.

"Connie, you're plumb crazy to try it," Lefty told her. "That hoss is a sunfisher. He'll go over on his back sure as shootin'."

Connie would not be dissuaded. With Lefty's help she saddled the broncho, while the other cowboys came to the corral fence to watch.

Then the blindfold was jerked from Dynamite's eyes and the gate swung open. The bronco shot up into the air, twisted and came down with a terrific jar which all but unseated Connie. Again he leaped, seeming to double in the middle.

"Ride 'im, Connie!" shouted Lefty.

But Dynamite had not played his best trick. He shot straight into the air and before the girl could free herself, came down on his back. Connie was pinned beneath.

A yell went up from the cowboys, but it was Jim Barrows who was the first to act. His rope sailed out to catch the fallen bronco, thus preventing Dynamite from running while Connie's feet were still in the stirrups.

"Are you bad hurt?" Lefty cried as he and Alkali ran to help her.

"No, I'm all right," Connie said shakily.

Her face was pale and twisted with pain.

"You *are* hurt, kid," Lefty said, lifting her to her feet.

"Just my shoulder," Connie muttered.

"No bones busted?"

"Not even a little one, Lefty. But I did twist my shoulder pretty hard."

Connie tried to laugh and failed completely.

"It served me right," she said. "I should have known enough to stay off Dynamite. I was trying to show off."

Connie brushed the dirt from her clothes and walked slowly to the house, conscious that the cowboys were watching her soberly. She had done a very foolish thing in trying to ride Dynamite. The penalty was apt to be great.

"Unless my shoulder mends rapidly I'll never be able to ride in the rodeo," she thought. "And

without that five hundred dollars I haven't a Chinaman's chance of saving the ranch."

CHAPTER V

Pop Bradshaw's Treachery

In the morning Connie's shoulder was so stiff and sore that the slightest movement of her arm gave her great pain. At Lefty's suggestion she rode in to Red Gulch to consult old Doctor Horn. Other than to give her a liniment to rub on, there was nothing he could do.

"Just rest the muscles for the next two weeks," he advised. "It will gradually get better."

"But I'm planning to ride in the rodeo," Connie declared anxiously.

The doctor shook his head.

"Don't do anything foolish, Connie. I doubt very much that your shoulder will be well by that time."

Connie left the doctor's office feeling as if all her troubles had reached a climax. She knew she had no one to blame save herself, yet that made it no easier.

She was walking along, eyes on the ground when she heard her name called. Turning quickly she saw Nate Jordan, an old rancher who had been a close friend of her father's. He operated a profitable dude ranch, the Circle R, near Santa Fe.

"Why, hello, Nate!" cried Connie in delight. "What are you doing up in our country?"

"You should ask," laughed the rancher. "Didn't I just sell your foreman one of my best steers?"

"How should I know?" retorted Connie in a light vein. "After all I'm only the owner of the ranch. You didn't really sell Blakeman a steer?"

"Shore did, Connie. Thought you knew all about it."

"I certainly didn't," the girl replied soberly. "Nate, Blakeman shouldn't have done that without asking me. I'm so hard up for money I don't know when we'll be able to pay—if ever."

"Blakeman settled for cash," the rancher told her. "But if you don't want to go through with the deal it's all right with me. Just have one of your men trundle the steer back to the Circle R."

"Did you just now take the animal to the ranch, Nate?"

"No, Blakeman came for the steer himself yesterday afternoon. I rode over this way today to see a man."

"That's funny," said Connie slowly. "Blakeman didn't say anything to me about buying a steer."

"Well, suit yourself about keepin' the animal."

"Thanks, Nate," said Connie gratefully. "I'll talk it over with Blakeman when I get back to the ranch."

All the way to the Rainbow she puzzled over Blakeman's strange deal with the rancher. She was almost positive that the foreman had not brought a steer to the ranch the previous day. In fact, she remembered seeing him when he rode into the yard and had noticed how tired his pony appeared.

"If Blakeman doesn't have enough money to pay salaries, how could he buy a steer?" she reflected. "Especially when we don't need one. There's something mighty queer about this business."

The foreman was nowhere about when Connie reached the ranch. However, she asked both Lefty and Alkali if any new stock had been bought and both assured her in the negative.

"I believe I'll just wait and see if Blakeman says anything about the matter to me," she thought.

Later when the foreman returned she carelessly mentioned that she had seen Nate in town. While Blakeman gave her a quick, sharp glance, he said nothing about the steer. Connie was further puzzled because her inspection of the ranch stock did not reveal an addition to the herds.

"Did he buy that steer with his own money or with mine?" Connie speculated. "And where is the animal?"

She spent the morning going over the records which Blakeman had kept. The foreman had not been a good bookkeeper and it was almost impossible to tell anything about his figures.

"He may have cheated me," the girl thought. "I can't tell. But in any event, it looks as if the ranch will not pay for itself on the present basis. My only hope would be to operate a dude ranch, but I can't do that without money."

Connie glanced at the calendar and frowned. Only two more days until the rodeo, and then a scant ten days before the sixteenth. She was certain she could never meet her obligations.

"I'd have a chance if I could win a few prizes at the rodeo," she told herself. "Oh, why did I have to cripple myself?"

Connie tried to move her right arm and winced with pain. She thought the muscles weren't quite as sore as they had been. Perhaps she would enter the riding contest anyway.

The girl was sitting moodily by the window when she heard hoofbeats in the courtyard. Enid came riding up to the door.

Connie's depression vanished as if by magic and she rushed out to greet the ranch girl.

"Oh, Connie, I just heard about how you hurt yourself!" Enid cried as she alighted and looped her lines over the hitching post. "Will you be out of the rodeo?"

"I'm not sure," Connie answered. She felt warmed because Enid had cared enough to ride over to the ranch. At the same time she was ashamed because she had doubted the girl's friendliness.

"Oh, I hope you are able to ride," Enid went on. "It will be too mean if you're forced out of the contest."

"Do come in and stay for lunch," Connie invited cordially.

"Oh, no I can't," Enid said hastily. "I really shouldn't have come, only Dad went to town to see a man

___"

She broke off in confusion as if she had revealed too much.

"Doesn't your father like you to come here?" Connie asked quietly.

"Well, he—oh, it isn't that," Enid began to stammer. "I can't explain, Connie, but Pop has changed lately. He isn't himself—he—"

"I think I understand," Connie said quietly, although she didn't at all.

"I hope I'll see you at the rodeo," Enid declared hastily. "I'll have to be riding back now."

Without looking directly at her friend, she sprang into the saddle and rode from the yard.

"Pop Bradshaw has told her to keep away from me," Connie thought shrewdly. "One would think I might be a brand of poison! There's something going on around here that I don't understand."

Scarcely had Enid left the courtyard when Forest Blakeman strode up to where Connie was standing.

"Wasn't that Enid Bradshaw?" he asked curtly.

"Yes."

"Did she want to see me?"

"If she did, she forgot to mention it."

The foreman made no reply, but turned and walked swiftly toward the barn. A few minutes later Connie saw him ride away down the road. It occurred to her as she watched the disappearing figure that in the past few days Blakeman had made many unexplained trips.

"I'd like to find out where he's going," she decided impulsively. "It may be a sneaking trick to follow, but that's exactly what I shall do!"

Connie saddled Silvertail and without telling anyone of her purpose, rode in pursuit of Blakeman, taking care to keep a long distance behind him. In a very short time she was convinced that he was on his way to Red Gulch.

"He's probably going there to buy nails or something of the sort," the girl thought. "But since I've come this far I may as well keep on."

Connie lagged even farther behind, for she did not wish the foreman to suspect that he was being trailed.

When she finally came into Red Gulch Blakeman was nowhere in sight, but she saw his mare tied up in front of the pool hall. Connie had no errands to occupy her time so she thought she would drop over to the doctor's office.

"You should never ride in the rodeo," he said to her after he had examined her shoulder. "But I know it's no use to tell you that. So go ahead."

"Thank you, doctor," laughed Connie.

She left his office feeling in a much better mood. Suddenly she slackened her speed as she saw Forest Blakeman just ahead of her. He was entering the Norton Cafe. Connie was quite certain he had not seen her.

She walked slowly on, wondering whether or not to return to Rainbow Ranch. Although she had tied Silvertail on a side street, the foreman might see the horse. Then of course he would know that she had followed him unless she had a ready excuse for her trip to town.

Connie was so absorbed with her thoughts that she bumped squarely into a heavy-set man who was coming from the opposite direction. It was Pop Bradshaw.

"Why, hello, Pop!" said Connie.

"'Mornin'," responded the old rancher uneasily.

He turned and entered the Norton Cafe. Connie glanced curiously through the plate glass window. Forest Blakeman was nowhere in sight so she knew that he must have stepped into one of the ice cream booths. And now Pop Bradshaw disappeared from sight in a similar manner.

"It looks to me as if they are meeting each other by appointment," Connie mused. "What business can they be having together?"

Her suspicions aroused, Connie quietly entered the cafe, seating herself in a booth adjoining the one occupied by the two men. She knew they were there for she could hear their voices.

"I'd not advise you to double cross me, Pop!" Blakeman said distinctly although in a low tone. "This is a fine time to get cold feet!"

"Don't get excited now," returned Pop in a quavery voice. "I'll do as I said. I'm only sayin' it goes agin' my grain to play it on the boys that way with them all thinkin' I've entered Catapult in the rodeo same as always."

By this time Connie was all attention. She leaned closer to the wall so that she would not miss a single word.

"Let's get this straight," said the cool voice of the foreman. "I paid you five hundred dollars to keep that old horned rhinoceros of yours out of the show. You agreed and took the money and now you're cryin' around about me playin' it dirty on the boys. You knew it was dirty before you took the money, didn't you?"

"I didn't realize it then, I reckon. I'm ready and willin' to pay you back."

"And leave me holdin' the sack! Oh, no you don't! Where have you got that steer now?"

"Oh, he's safe enough," replied the rancher. "He's in the mountain meadow."

"Then see that he stays there until after the rodeo," said the foreman. "Deliver Nate's steer to the rodeo barns tomorrow just as I told you. That's all you have to do."

Connie waited to hear no more. Quietly she slipped away from the cafe.

Kidnaping Catapult

Connie felt a trifle stunned by the conversation which she had overheard.

"I'd never have believed it if I hadn't heard with my own ears," she thought. "Pop Bradshaw, who has stood for everything honest and square in this community! For five hundred dollars he means to keep Catapult out of the rodeo, substituting a steer which Blakeman will be sure to throw in the bulldogging event!"

The girl mounted Silvertail and started slowly back toward the ranch. She rode along in deep thought for a time.

"I'll not let Blakeman get by with it!" she exclaimed. "It's a cheap, contemptible trick!"

Connie was smiling by the time she reached the ranch. She knew exactly what to do. Calling Lefty and Alkali she asked them casually if bets were running heavy on the bulldogging event.

"Sure, Blakeman's goin' to lose his shirt," Lefty grinned. "He's been coverin' everything in sight."

"He hasn't a chance against Catapult," added Alkali with satisfaction.

"That's just the point I was about to bring up," said Connie quietly. "Supposing another steer should be substituted for Catapult?"

"There's no chance of that," declared Lefty. "Pop Bradshaw entered old Catapult two weeks ago."

"Well, I've just learned something which will interest you. Pop plans to substitute another steer for Catapult—one which resembles him in appearance, I judge."

Connie then repeated every word of the conversation she had heard in the restaurant.

"Why, the dirty crook!" exclaimed Lefty. "No wonder Blakeman was so willin' to cover all bets. He thought he'd clean up pretty!"

"We got to do something about this!" muttered Alkali. "Let's protest to the committee."

"An' spoil all the fun?" said Lefty. "No, I got a better idea! We'll kidnap old Catapult tonight and sneak him into the rodeo barns! Then Pop can't squawk without givin' himself and the whole scheme away."

"That idea ain't nothin' to whoop 'em up about," complained Alkali. "That mountain medder is in plain sight of Pop's house. It's surrounded by hills and there's just one way out. That's down the trail past Pop's buildings."

"We can do it real quiet-like so he won't ketch us," insisted Lefty.

"Don't you reckon Catapult's tracks on the trail will show?" Alkali asked jeeringly.

"Trust Papa," replied Lefty with a mysterious grin.

The two cowboys separated, after pledging Connie to secrecy regarding their proposed adventure. Lefty immediately rode to Red Gulch to hold a confidential consultation with Jack Crawford who was in charge of the barns at the rodeo.

In an hour Forest Blakeman returned to the ranch without explaining where he had been. But all that day he was aware of curious stares which followed him. He could feel that something was in the air. Now and then coming unexpectedly upon a group of cowboys he would hear his name being mentioned. In anger he vented his spite upon Jim Barrows.

The day passed slowly. Connie went to her room early but she did not go to bed. Instead she read until nearly midnight. Then she snapped out her light and sat by the window.

In a short time she saw Lefty and Alkali emerge from the bunkhouse carrying several gunnysacks. At their shrill whistle, she quickly joined them.

Alkali led Silvertail and two broncos down to the main road where they all mounted.

"What are you planning to do with the gunnysacks?" Connie asked curiously as they rode toward the Bradshaw Ranch.

"I'm aimin' to tie 'em on Catapult's hooves so he won't leave no tracks," explained Lefty.

"Ain't that the dizziest idear any sane guy ever had?" demanded Alkali. "How we goin' to get gunnysacks on Catapult? Maybe you think he'll just hold up his feet nice an' purty like he was in a shoe shop!"

"Now see here," Lefty said sharply. "Are you with me or ain't you?"

"Oh, I'm with you all right," drawled Alkali, "but my doubts sure are percolatin'."

All was still about the Bradshaw Ranch as the three rode quietly into the mountain meadow. No lights were burning in the house.

Connie and the two cowboys tied their horses to a clump of cottonwood trees. Lefty removed the gunnysacks from his saddle and Alkali threw a coil of rope over his shoulder.

"It may not be easy to find Catapult," Connie whispered. "This is a big meadow."

"Yeah," Alkali added, "he's apt to be roostin' in any one of these thousand acres."

"I figure Catapult will be parked by the lake for the night after this blisterin' hot day," said Lefty. "That old uncanned baloney has more sense than his owner."

After a brisk walk the three approached the lake. From that point they moved cautiously, crawling forward until they reached the bank. Lefty pulled aside a clump of overhanging tree branches and looked out over the moonlit water. A dark blot appeared at the opposite end of the lake and Lefty's excited fancy envisioned it as a life-sized steer.

"It's Catapult, Alkali, sure as you're a cow nurse!" he muttered. "He's standin' in up to his belly, a-swishin' flies with his tail."

The three conspirators crept slowly around the little lake to the rear of the place where Catapult's presence was suspected.

"It's him!" exclaimed Lefty. "Get your rope ready, Alkali, and if you nail him, tie the other end to this here tree. Then I'll wade out and shoo him in."

The rope swished through the air and landed fairly around the big steer's head. Lefty waded out

toward the frightened animal, circling around him and splashing water with his cupped hands. Connie watched anxiously because she was afraid that Catapult might turn upon the cowboy and gore him with his sharp horns. But instead, Catapult bolted headlong for shore.

"Keep him circlin' 'round the tree," Lefty called to Alkali as he followed the steer ashore.

The two cowboys drove Catapult around and around the tree until his head banged into it. Then they roped his front and hind legs together. Catapult fell to the ground and rolled over on his side.

"Now come on with them gunnysacks," Lefty said exultantly.

Alkali chuckled as he helped his friend bind the pads on the steer's feet.

"Guess we better bring up our hosses before we untie this here bovine," he chuckled. "He'd make us feel like a tail to a kite a hoofin' it."

Alkali disappeared into the darkness and soon returned, riding his own horse and leading the other two.

"Pass me that rope, Lefty," he directed. "Then you can untie him."

The frightened steer arose to his feet with a snort. He eyed his tormentors for a moment and then bolted. Alkali's horse braced and Catapult was brought up sharply.

"He'll soon wear out them gunnysacks at this rate," Lefty lamented. "We've got to quiet him down."

"Get a rope on him too if you can," Alkali advised. "Move up ahead. I'll stay behind. Then when he makes a pass at you, I'll hold him, and when he lays back you yank him right along with you."

Lefty's rope swished through the air and settled neatly over Catapult's thick neck. Then riding ahead, with Alkali's rope leading to the rear, the two cowboys began their task of leading Catapult from the meadow.

Connie found it hard to control her laughter. The steer presented such a ludicrous spectacle even in the uncertain moonlight, thumping along the trail shod in gunnysacks. At times he would stop as if trying to fathom the strange method of torment. Then Lefty's rope would become taut and pull him along. Again he would take a lunge forward in a brave effort to escape but Alkali's rope would stiffen and bring him up short.

They emerged from the mountain meadow and turned to the main road. Connie breathed a sigh of relief.

And just at that moment Catapult stopped and whiffed the night air. Then he gave voice to the loudest and longest bellow in his system.

"If Pop hears that we're sunk," groaned Lefty.

A light flickered in the ranch house.

"He heard it all right," muttered Alkali.

"Now what are we going to do?" asked Connie nervously. "You always have such brilliant ideas. Lefty! Think of something quick!"

CHAPTER VII

A Midnight Escapade

A thicket of small trees and bushes loomed up in the moonlight fifty yards ahead of the trio. Lefty pointed to the spot as he said:

"We'll have to park in there and take a chance."

Scarcely had the unique cavalcade disappeared into the thicket when Pop Bradshaw and his foreman emerged from the ranch house. They looked about and then walked over to the meadow trail. Connie and the cowboys could hear them conversing in low tones and they saw Pop shoot the beam of his flashlight on the trail.

"We must have dreamed it, Sam," he said in a puzzled tone. "The only way out of the meadow is down this trail and there's not a fresh steer track on it. Just a few horse and shoe tracks where some of the boys went in to do a little fishin' at the lake."

The two men walked back to the ranch house.

"That was a narrow escape," chuckled Connie as Lefty and Alkali started Catapult on the move again.

"Sure was," Lefty agreed. "I'll be glad when we get this critter to the rodeo barns."

Connie parted company with the cowboys farther on down the road, returning alone to the ranch while they delivered Catapult into the keeping of Jack Crawford. It was after two o'clock when she reached home. Letting herself quietly into the house, she went to bed and slept so soundly that she did not awaken until Marie opened the door in the morning.

"Oh, I had no idea it was so late!" Connie cried in dismay. "If I don't hurry I'll be late for the rodeo."

As she hurriedly dressed in cowgirl regalia which she planned to wear in the parade, she tried out her shoulder. It was still sore, but she could bear the pain now when she moved it.

Connie had coffee and rolls in the *patio* alone, and then hastened outside. Lefty and Alkali, resplendent in bright colored shirts and silver-trimmed sombreros, were saddling up their broncos ready to start for Red Gulch. Blakeman and Jim Barrows already had left.

"How did you come out last night after we parted company?" she asked quickly.

"Everything's set," chuckled Lefty. "And you should have heard old Blake a-blowin' around this morning. He thinks he has that bulldoggin' event cinched. Wait 'till Catapult gives him the double 'o'."

Connie laughed and declared that she would not miss the fun for anything in the world. Saddling Silvertail she rode into Red Gulch with her friends. On the way in she told them of her determination to compete in the various events open to girls.

"You're takin' a big chance with that game shoulder," Lefty declared. "I wouldn't do it if I was you."

"That money means a lot to me," Connie replied soberly. "If I could win the five hundred dollar prize, I might be able to raise enough extra so I could meet my bank obligations. Then I'd be able to keep the ranch."

"We'll sure be a-pullin' for you, Connie," Alkali declared warmly.

Red Gulch was jammed with visitors even at such an early hour. The town was decorated with flags; bands, playing slightly off key, marched up and down the streets. Cowboys in big hats and high-heeled boots lounged in the doorways of buildings calling out friendly greetings to passers-by. Indians from nearby reservations added to the crowd.

At the entrance of the Fairgrounds Connie parted with her friends. While she went to the rodeo barn to look over the horses. Lefty and Alkali wandered toward the arena. Immediately an official hailed them.

"I can use you boys," he said. "I want you to keep everyone except rodeo officers, performers and owners out of the ring."

Lefty and Alkali leaped the fence and strolled about observing the fast-gathering throngs that swarmed into the terraced tiers of the wooden grandstand. Men in charge of the day's activities hustled about on horseback, calling orders, while a group of starters and judges conferred at the distant end of the arena.

Suddenly Lefty's eyes were arrested by the sight of Pop Bradshaw talking with Forest Blakeman near the arena fence. An intriguing idea flashed into his mind. What could be sweeter than for Pop to be among those immediately present when Catapult magically appeared in place of the steer which he believed had been substituted?

"Come on in. Pop," he called. "We want you in here to see that Catapult gets a square deal."

The idea delighted the crowd. The old man hesitated but friendly hands seized and boosted him over the fence.

Connie, who understood the prank which the cowboys were playing on Pop, felt rather sorry for him. But she had no sympathy for Forest Blakeman. He was swaggering about the arena, his attitude proclaiming that already he had been named the champion bulldogger.

As Connie stood by the fence, Jim Barrows sauntered over. After making a few casual remarks he fell silent, but the girl noticed that his gaze followed Blakeman almost constantly.

"Your foreman reminds me of someone," he said thoughtfully.

"That's funny," laughed Connie. "Blakeman was saying almost the same thing to me about you. By the way, where did you work before you came to the Rainbow, Jim?"

"Oh, one place and another," the man answered vaguely. "Mostly on ranches down in Texas."

Without giving Connie an opportunity to ask another question, he moved away.

"He certainly means to keep his past his own," the girl reflected thoughtfully. "I never met anyone so reserved. I wonder if perhaps he hasn't been in trouble sometime?"

Connie dismissed the matter from her mind because it was time for the opening parade. She rode in it, side by side with Enid Bradshaw. The other girl nodded almost curtly to Connie, offering no remark

save to ask about her injured shoulder.

Connie tried not to show her hurt at Enid's attitude. It only made her more determined than ever to win in the riding event.

The preliminary contests were quickly run off. Roping events, steer riding and Indian races excited but passing interest.

At last the bulldogging event was called. Several cowboys from the Bar Six Ranch performed with a skill which brought cheers from the crowd. The steer was allowed a thirty foot start after he had rushed from the pen. Then horse and rider were after him, with a hazer to keep the animal in a straight course. Catching the steer by the horns, the cowboy would hurl himself from the saddle, and twist the animal's horns until he rolled over in the dust.

"Bring on Blakeman!" shouted the crowd. "Let's see him throw Catapult!"

Lefty glanced anxiously toward the stanchion, trying to catch Jack Crawford's eye. He need have had no fears, for just then the gate opened and a large rangy animal was driven in.

Shouts of "Catapult! Catapult, do your stuff!" informed Forest Blakeman that something had gone amiss.

It dawned upon him instantly that Pop Bradshaw had double crossed him. Despite his anger he realized that there could be no retreat. To default would be to make himself ridiculous, and brand himself a coward. He waved to the crowd and rode alongside the stanchion.

As the bars dropped. Catapult rushed out into the arena. Partisans of the animal greatly outnumbered those of the man and cries of, "Throw him, Catapult," muffled occasional urgings of, "Throw him, cowboy!" Blakeman appeared oblivious of the crowd as he drove home his spurs and rushed pell mell after the fleeing steer.

They traversed nearly the full length of the arena before the sorrel overtook the steer and raced him head to head. Then Blakeman shot through the air in a perfect leap as if hurled from the saddle by the uncoiling of a gigantic spring. Headforemost he dived, his body parallel to the ground. He grasped Catapult's horns and brought him to a standstill.

Then, exerting the last iota of his strength, Blakeman made a supreme effort to bring the animal to the ground. Catapult's head slowly turned under the tremendous force of the man's tensed muscles. But he suddenly snorted and with a sharp toss of his head, hurled his tormentor into the air.

Blakeman sprawled into soft turf, twenty feet away. The crowd roared its delight; the air became thick with sailing sombreros. Lefty and Alkali laughed until they collapsed weakly against the fence.

"And him claimin' to be a champeen bulldogger!" Lefty jeered.

Blakeman arose unhurt but with a mighty anger surging through him. Not a dozen paces away he saw Pop Bradshaw, the man he believed to be the author of his downfall. Furiously, he advanced upon the embarrassed rancher.

"So you double crossed me!" he said menacingly. "You'll pay for this!"

"I didn't know anything about it," whined the old man.

Apparently aware that any violence upon the person of Pop Bradshaw would only draw the anger of the crowd, Blakeman turned and limped away. He was followed by the boos of the throng.

"Guess that ought to put a damper on his braggin' for a while," Lefty grinned. "I'll bet Pop spends the rest of his life wonderin' how Catapult got out of the mountain medder too!"

His voice died quickly away for the announcer was calling the next event. It was the bronco riding contest for girls.

"Where's Connie?" Lefty muttered.

With one accord he and Alkali turned the chutes. They saw the girl, white-faced and grim, perched on the fence, waiting for her turn to ride.

The two cowboys crowded close enough to speak an encouraging word.

"Good luck, Connie!" grinned Lefty.

"I'll need it," Connie replied with a forced smile. "I've drawn Tanglefoot—the worst bronco in the lot."

CHAPTER VIII

A Rescue

As Lefty and Alkali both knew well, Tanglefoot was a wild bronco which had brought the downfall of more than one ambitious rodeo rider. If Connie were able to handle him she might win the grand prize, but even the two cowboys doubted that she had the skill.

Connie was the fifth rider. Before her there were three local girls whose riding while good was not particularly colorful. The fourth contestant, Enid Bradshaw, by far outpointed her opponents. She knew she had done well and a satisfied smile played over her face as she left the arena.

"I'll have to ride as I never did before if I beat that!" thought Connie.

Her turn came next. She mounted Tanglefoot from the fence.

"Let her go!"

As the shout went up, the gate flew open, and out streaked the roan, landing with a running buck in the midst of the judges, forcing them to wheel their horses.

A ripple of comment passed over the crowd. Here was a girl who could ride!

Tanglefoot, too, acted as if he were surprised. For a moment he seemed to be debating the disgrace of his failure to dislodge his fair rider. Then the wiry little mustang went into a veritable paroxysm of bucking.

Connie never knew that seconds could spin out to such an interminable length. The horse leaped into the air, twisting his lithe body like an ancient equine ancestor trying to shake off a puma or a jaguar from his back. Down he would come, stiff-legged, and then rise again into the air as if his muscles were made of spring steel.

From her waist up Connie held her body as relaxed as possible, at the same time shifting her weight with lightning-like rapidity to preserve her balance. Her torso remained vertical to the ground, regardless of Tanglefoot's rapid maneuvers. Waving her hat with her rein-free hand, the girl kept a graceful seat through it all. Tanglefoot's best was not good enough.

Connie at last heard the timekeeper's pistol. The contest was over as far as she was concerned. She felt that she had acquitted herself well and she was sure of it when she heard the cheers of the crowd ringing in her ears.

Leaping from Tanglefoot's saddle to the back of another horse led by the hazer, she galloped in triumph from the ring.

"That was wonderful ridin'," Lefty told her proudly, a few minutes later. "If you don't win the prize then the judges have been bought off!"

Connie watched anxiously as four other girls took their turns in the contest. One was thrown while the other three had drawn horses which did not require a high degree of skill to ride.

"It's in the bag, Connie!" whispered Lefty excitedly.

And he was right. A few minutes later the announcer rode forth to broadcast through his megaphone that Connie Carl had won first prize in the riding contest.

"Oh, Lefty!" the girl cried, fairly overcome by her good fortune. "Just think! Five hundred dollars! And maybe I'll win more before the day is over."

Connie had entered her name in a free-for-all race as well as a roping contest. In the latter event she placed third, netting a cash award of fifty dollars. Second prize in the running race brought her an additional two hundred dollars.

It was a proud moment for Connie when she stepped forward to claim her ribbons and a slip of paper which represented seven hundred and fifty dollars.

Jim Barrows, separating himself from the crowd, come over to the fence to congratulate the girl.

"What will you do with so much money?" he asked jokingly.

"I could use six times as much!" Connie laughed. "I think I'll take it home and hide it under the bed. I know one thing! Not a cent will be deposited in the First National Bank."

"You don't trust the banker?" smiled the cowboy.

"He and I don't feel too friendly toward each other."

"Seriously though, Miss Carl, you're not thinking of carrying that money on your person?"

"Why not?" asked Connie quickly. "I'll cash the check just before I start for the ranch."

"Aren't you afraid someone might rob you?"

Such a thought had never even occurred to Connie.

"There hasn't been a holdup around here since the stagecoach stopped running!" she laughed. "Besides, no one could ever get this money away from me."

Jim Barrows said no more, but after chatting for a few minutes wandered off again. It was the longest conversation he had ever carried on with Connie.

"He really acted as if he were worried about my money," the girl thought.

The rodeo was drawing to a close and already many persons were leaving the stands. Connie's eye wandered over the crowd. She wondered what had become of Pop Bradshaw and Enid. She had not seen the old rancher since the bulldogging event, nor had the girl appeared to congratulate her upon winning out in the bronco riding contest.

"In her heart I don't believe Enid really likes me," Connie told herself. "And from now on it will be harder than ever for us to be friends."

She turned her attention once more to the arena. Only one more event remained on the day's program, an Indian race.

At the opposite side of the track she could see the ponies being lined up. They were small, sleek, beautiful animals, so high spirited that their riders had trouble holding them in position. The Indians themselves, adorned with bright sashes, paint and feathers, added a colorful note to the scene.

The start of the race was delayed and the crowd grew more impatient. An increasing number

deserted the stands, many leaving the bleachers to crowd against the fence. A portion of it gave way causing a momentary flurry of excitement.

"Back from the track, folks!" warned one of the guards, but when he moved off a minute later, the crowd swarmed through the opening again.

No one noticed that a child, separated from its parents, stood alone just inside the break of the fence.

Then at last the starter's pistol cracked and the racers were off! Down the track in a cloud of dust came the ponies, their bareback riders bent low as they urged their mounts to greater speed.

At that moment, the child, unaware of any danger, started to toddle across the track. Midway to the other side the little girl saw the oncoming horses and heard the thundering hoofs. Frozen by terror she stopped and stood perfectly still.

"That child will be killed!" screamed a woman.

Before any of the guards could act, Connie slid down from the fence. The racers were almost at the grandstand. With no thought for her own safety, the girl darted out onto the track, directly in the path of the onrushing horses.

CHAPTER IX

Mr. Postil's Offer

Connie rushed forward and snatched the child up in her arms. With the riders bearing down upon her, she dived head foremost, rolling over and over at the side of the track. The horses thundered past, and were lost in a cloud of dust.

The crowd, thrilled by Connie's act of bravery, surged forward. In vain the guards sought to keep the arena clear. Friendly hands seized Connie and the child, lifting them to their feet.

The little girl was crying piteously, but more from fright than because she had been hurt. Her only injury was a slight bruise on her arm.

"Are you all right, Baby?" Connie asked.

"You threw me down in the dirt," the little girl said accusingly. "Just look at my pretty dress! I'm not a baby either!"

"Of course you're not," agreed Connie soothingly. "What is your name?"

Just at that moment a stout gentleman came hurrying up. He caught the child in his arms, hugging her tightly. Without saying a word he brushed the child's disheveled hair out of her eyes and mopped the dirt from her face with his handkerchief.

"I don't believe she's hurt, sir," declared Connie. "Only shaken up a bit."

The old gentleman seemed too shocked by the accident to make any reply. Connie started to move away.

"No, wait, please," he requested. "You saved my granddaughter's life. I must talk with you."

"Anyone would have done the same, sir," Connie responded, smiling. "I just happened to be close to the fence."

"I saw it all," the old man declared. "You risked your life to save the child. It was magnificent."

"Oh, hardly that," said Connie, flushing with embarrassment.

"I didn't know Doris had wandered away until I saw her on the track," the old gentleman went on. "I was stunned—paralyzed for I thought surely she would be killed. The child is all I have in the world."

"I quite understand," Connie murmured.

"I haven't told you my name," the man said offering an engraved card. "I am James Postil."

Connie, after introducing herself, glanced at the card, noticing that it bore a New York address. She remarked that Mr. Postil was a long way from home.

"Yes, I am spending my vacation in the Southwest," he explained. "My granddaughter and I came out here to live at one of these dude ranches for a few weeks."

"I hope you found a nice place and that you're having an enjoyable time," Connie said pleasantly.

"It hasn't turned out that way yet. I was looking for a nice, quiet ranch where Doris could run wild and grow healthy and strong. Perhaps you've heard of Silverhorn Ranch?"

"Oh, yes," nodded Connie, "only it isn't really a ranch at all. Don't you find it more on the order of a big tourist hotel?"

"That's it exactly! Something going on from morning to night. I've made up my mind to move out. But you're not interested in my difficulties. Tell me about yourself."

"There is really nothing to tell," said Connie evasively.

"You are too modest, I fear," smiled the old gentleman. "I remember you now. You are the young lady who won the bronco riding contest. Come, let's go somewhere away from the crowd. I'd like to talk with you."

By this time Connie had gathered that James Postil was a man of considerable wealth, and she half suspected that he meant to offer her money for saving his grandchild. Of course she would refuse.

Mr. Postil seemed to sense the girl's attitude, for he led up to the subject very gradually. First he told her more about himself. The head of a large manufacturing company in the east, he found himself at sixty-eight, lonely and alone in the world save for his one grandchild.

"I've done my best to raise her up right," he told Connie, "but Doris has been too much under the care of a governess. That's why I cut loose this summer and brought her out here. I thought I'd try to give her a little personal looking-after. So far the idea hasn't turned out very well."

"You'll probably find a more satisfactory place to stay than Silverhorn Ranch, Mr. Postil. I can understand that it wouldn't be suitable for Doris at all."

"Here I am, talking about myself again," declared Mr. Postil. "I've not given you an opportunity to tell me a thing about yourself."

Connie had not meant to reveal any of her personal troubles, but she found the old gentleman a most sympathetic listener. He interposed a question here and there and before she knew it he had learned the entire story of her financial difficulties.

"I don't believe you need to worry any more," Mr. Postil said briskly. "How much is your bank loan?"

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't, young lady," smiled Mr. Postil, "but it happens that I owe you a great debt for saving the life of my grandchild. Doris means more to me than anything in the world. Now I'll be only too happy to give you enough money—"

"Oh, no," broke in Connie. "I couldn't take a penny."

"Call it a loan then."

Connie was sorely tempted but she shook her head.

"I really think I'll be able to weather the storm unaided," she insisted. "With the seven hundred and fifty dollars I won today, I'll fix the ranch up a bit and advertise for summer boarders. Then if the bank learns I am going ahead in a profitable way, my note may be extended."

Mr. Postil asked Connie many questions about Rainbow Ranch. With no conscious attempt to exaggerate she described the wonderful fishing streams and the lake.

"We have an extra special attraction, too," she added. "The ruins of ancient cliff dwellings. My father discovered them in the canyon years ago, and experts say they are in as fine a state of preservation as any ruins in the Southwest."

"Why, you have everything at your ranch," declared Mr. Postil enthusiastically. "I've been trying to find just such a place. How about taking Doris and me as your first paying guests?"

"Why, I'd like to have you," Connie stammered, "only the ranch house isn't fixed up. The food would be plain and there wouldn't be any frills."

"That's exactly what I want," Mr. Postil insisted. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll finish out the week at Silverhorn, then Monday morning I'll come to your place, and I may be able to round up a few other guests for you. Here's a couple weeks' board and room money in advance."

The old gentleman handed her two bills.

"Why, you've given me a hundred dollars!" Connie protested. "I can't accept that much."

"Take it, take it," Mr. Postil urged carelessly. "I'm a very cranky old man and require a lot of service. You'll find it will be worth that much to keep me."

Connie was quite overcome by her good fortune. She tried to thank Mr. Postil for his generosity.

"I'm doing myself the service," he declared. "I'll get busy right away and see if I can't locate those friends of mine. If I have any luck I'll send you word."

"But you've not even seen the ranch," Connie protested. "You may not like it at all."

"I have no worry on that score," said Mr. Postil confidently.

After he and Doris had walked away, Connie stood for several minutes with the money held tightly in her hand. It did not seem possible that so many wonderful things could have happened in one day. Yet it was true.

"I can't help but succeed if Mr. Postil brings his rich friends to the ranch," she thought excitedly. "But I'll need to hire extra household help and redecorate the bedrooms. Oh, I have a million things I must do."

Connie wandered about the rodeo ground searching for Alkali or Lefty. She felt she had to tell someone about her good fortune, but apparently both cowboys had drifted away from the arena.

Finally she gave up the search, and presenting her check at the rodeo office, received cash in the amount of seven hundred and fifty dollars. Connie pinned the bills together and fastened the roll inside her shirt pocket.

It was after six o'clock by the time she rode Silvertail out of the grounds. The streets still swarmed with people and Red Gulch would be a lively place until the small hours of the morning. But Connie was eager to get back home.

The sky in the west glowed rosy pink and slowly darkened. On either side of the lonely road the limestone cliffs were a blaze of reflected color. Connie rode slowly, enjoying the twilight.

As she cantered along she made her plans. With eight hundred and fifty dollars she could remodel the ranch house, hire another Mexican woman to help Marie, and still have money left. With even a few paying guests she soon would have all her debts paid.

Connie whistled a gay little tune. For the first time since she had returned home from the East, she felt entirely happy.

The sun dropped below the horizon line and the distant mountains seemed to cast their dark shadow over the earth. A chill wind sprang up, rustling the ragged branches of the gnarled cedars.

Connie shivered and drew her jacket more closely about her. She could feel the cold numbing her fingers.

Rainbow Ranch was still many miles away. The narrow road wound and twisted as it steadily climbed toward Eagle Pass. Just ahead was a short tunnel bored in the rock. As they approached it, Silvertail quivered and pricked up his ears.

"What's the matter, old boy?" Connie asked softly.

She thought someone might be approaching from the opposite direction but she heard no one. It had grown so dark that she could not see far ahead. Yet for some reason Connie shared Silvertail's uneasiness.

She rode into the tunnel. As the walls closed in about her, she glanced nervously over her shoulder. It was as if she could *feel* a presence. Yet of course there could be no one in the tunnel.

Connie breathed easier as she saw a circle of light ahead. The tunnel had not been longer than fifty feet yet it had seemed six times that length.

Connie relaxed in the saddle, and just at that moment, as she emerged from the tunnel, she heard a horse nicker from the bushes at the side of the road.

Before she could turn her head to look, a man rode out in front of her, deliberately blocking the way. A blue bandana handkerchief had been pulled high over his mouth, and a revolver dangled carelessly from his hand.

"Pass over the money," he said in a low, grim voice. "And don't try any tricks!"

CHAPTER X

The Holdup

Connie's first impulse was to spur Silvertail into a gallop and try to ride by the holdup man. But an instant's reflection convinced her that such a course would be sheer folly. He might coolly shoot her down.

"Hurry up and hand over that money!" the man commanded again.

Connie was certain she had heard the voice somewhere before. From the strained manner in which the man spoke she believed that he was disguising his normal tone.

"What money?" she asked, stalling for time.

"Don't try to bluff," retorted the man curtly. "I know you have it pinned inside your shirt pocket. Will you give it up or shall I take it?"

He urged his horse a pace closer. Connie slowly reached up as if to unpin the roll of money. But the thought of handing over her earnings was more than she could bear.

Suddenly, throwing caution to the wind, she spurred her horse. Silvertail lunged forward.

The holdup man laughed harshly as he seized the horse's bridle bringing him up so sharply that Connie was nearly unseated.

"Oh, no you don't!" he said.

Connie felt the cold muzzle of a revolver press against her side. Her determination to save the money at all cost ebbed quickly away. She reached up and unpinned the roll of money.

The holdup man jerked it from her hand.

"Now dismount!" he commanded.

Connie hesitated and then slowly obeyed.

The masked man gave Silvertail a sharp clip with his quirt which sent the horse racing down the road. Then with a mock bow to Connie, he wheeled his own pony, and disappeared into the brush. For several minutes the girl could hear the thud of hoofs and then all was quiet.

Connie stood in the middle of the road, too stunned to move. Every penny of the money she had won at the rodeo was gone! And likewise lost was the hundred dollars given her by Mr. Postil as an advance on his board and room.

After a moment Connie started on down the road. She had a long, discouraging walk ahead of her for the nearest habitation was Slocer's Ranch, a full mile away.

"This is the cruelest thing that ever happened," Connie told herself bitterly as she trudged along. "All my hopes ended!"

A half hour later she pounded on the door of the Slocer ranch house. Connie knew the owners well although she had not seen them since her return from the East. They were two bachelor brothers who worked the ranch in partnership.

George Slocer, a man with a bushy red beard, opened the door. For a moment he did not recognize Connie.

"May I use your telephone?" she asked quickly. "It's terribly important."

"Why, if it isn't Connie Carl!" exclaimed the rancher. "Come right in. You didn't walk all the way here?"

"Yes, from Eagle Pass! I was held up."

Connie related what had occurred. Then she telephoned the sheriff's office in Red Gulch, asking him to send a posse at once to search for the man.

"We'll saddle up and do a little huntin' ourselves," George Slocer promised. "That's the lowest trick I ever heard tell about. Stealing a gal's money!"

"I don't believe there's a chance of catching the man now," Connie said glumly. "He's had a good half hour's start."

"Did you get a look at him?" the rancher asked.

"Not really. It was so dark and he kept the handkerchief over his face."

"Didn't recognize the hoss?"

"No, it was a dark pony about Silvertail's size. I'm sure it must have been some man who knew me because he disguised his voice."

"Likely someone who knew you were carrying the money on your person. Do you remember tellin' anyone you were cashin' the check?"

"Why, no—" Connie said, and then recalled that she had spoken to Jim Barrows. He had warned her that she was acting unwisely, but she had taken his advice lightly.

"Several persons were standing near when I cashed the check at the rodeo office," she ended, "but I don't remember anyone in particular."

"I reckon your money is gone, Connie," the rancher admitted, buckling on his gun belt. "But there's a chance the sheriff may catch the fellow."

The Slocer brothers loaned the girl a horse so that she might ride on to Rainbow Ranch while they went to join the sheriff's posse.

When Connie finally rode into the courtyard Marie came running out to meet her. The Mexican girl was relieved to see her young mistress, for some minutes before Silvertail had galloped up to the gate without a rider.

"Oh, I'm glad Silvertail came home," Connie said in relief. "But I thought he would."

She told Marie what had happened and asked if the cowboys had returned from Red Gulch. No one was back.

Connie took the borrowed horse to the barn and unsaddled him. Then, feeling discouraged and fairly ill, she went to her own room. Marie rapped a few minutes later and brought in a tray of food and a hot drink.

"You are so kind, Marie," Connie said gratefully. "Perhaps food will make me feel better."

She had eaten no lunch or supper, yet she did not feel hungry. But rather than disappoint the Mexican girl, she made a pretense of enjoying the food.

"What am I to do now?" Connie thought when she was alone once more. "Mr. Postil arrives Monday and nothing will be ready for him. I've accepted his money so I can't turn him away, yet for two weeks he'll be a financial liability rather than an asset."

After tossing for more than an hour on her pillow the girl at last fell asleep. She was so exhausted that she did not awaken until morning.

Connie went downstairs to learn that news of her misfortune had preceded her. The cowboys came to offer their sympathy. Later in the morning George Slocer rode in to report that the sheriff's posse had been unable to find a trace of the holdup man.

"Oh, the money is gone all right," Connie said gloomily. "Perhaps it served me right for carrying so much on my person."

She was leaning dejectedly against the corral bars when Lefty came to talk with her.

"I wish there was somethin' we could do to help you," he said.

Connie hesitated and then without looking directly at Lefty replied quickly:

"I hate to ask this, Lefty, but I know you picked up a tidy bit of money yesterday at the rodeo. Would you lend it to me for a few weeks?"

"I sure would, Connie, if I had any left," the cowboy answered. "I'm plumb ashamed to tell you but me and Alkali did a little celebratin'. We're both busted flat."

"That seems to be a common ailment around Rainbow Ranch," Connie said ruefully.

"Why don't you ask Jim Barrows?"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Connie replied quickly. "Besides, he hasn't any money."

"You're wrong there, Connie. I saw him countin' a big roll this morning in the bunk house."

"I don't know where he'd get it," Connie said, frowning thoughtfully. "He was stony broke when he came here, and he's not even received his wages since then. What do you think of Jim, Lefty?"

"Oh, I guess he's all right. He minds his own business and that's somethin'."

"I like him too," said Connie. "Lefty, I'm thinking of giving you and Jim new jobs. I suppose you've heard about my idea to turn this place into a dude ranch?"

"Yeh, I did hear somethin' about it, but I figgered you wouldn't do anything rash like that."

"I don't believe it's a rash idea at all," Connie said, smiling. "If I hadn't been held up everything would have worked out beautifully. But now I'm in the business whether I like it or not. My first prize dude arrives Monday, and there may be others."

"What's this new job?" Lefty asked uneasily.

"You and Jim are to wrangle the dudes—if we snare any. I thought you could take Mr. Postil riding and fishing. And we'll plan special little over-night camping trips—anything to keep folks entertained."

"Look here, Connie," Lefty began to protest, but his voice trailed off as Forest Blakeman swung into view.

The foreman, still smarting from his recent humiliation at the rodeo, was in a bad mood.

"You might do a little work, Lefty, instead of loafing around all morning," he said curtly. "Get those calves watered."

"They're already watered," Lefty muttered but he moved away from the corral.

The foreman turned to Connie, making no attempt to disguise his annoyance.

"A nice mess we're in now, Miss Connie! It seems to me you might have consulted me before you decided to turn this place into a dude ranch! Just how do you think we'll be able to feed and entertain a house full of guests when we can't even pay our regular help?"

"Everything would have turned out all right if only I hadn't been robbed."

"Aren't you forgetting that the sixteenth of the month isn't far away?"

"Oh, I'm beaten," Connie acknowledged. "I realize that. There's no chance my money will ever be recovered."

The foreman was silent for a moment. Then he said in a lowered tone:

"I don't suppose it ever occurred to you to question Jim Barrows?"

"To question him? About his personal affairs?"

"They'd bear investigation all right," Blakeman replied grimly. "But I wasn't referring to that. I meant about what he was doing yesterday and where he got that big roll of money."

"I suppose at the rodeo—"

"That's what *he* claims," Blakeman said shortly. "I have a different opinion."

"Just what are you trying to suggest?" Connie asked. "I know you've never liked Jim Barrows."

"That has nothing to do with it. But there's no use trying to convince you he's bad medicine."

"If you have the slightest evidence against him I'll certainly listen to it," Connie replied coldly. "What do you think the man has done?"

The foreman looked quickly about to make certain no one was within hearing distance. Then he said tersely:

"Jim Barrows is a sneak and a crook! He was the masked man who held you up at Eagle Pass!"

Wrangling Dudes

"That is a very dangerous statement to make unless you have proof," Connie replied gravely.

"Jim Barrows' bank roll is proof enough for me," the foreman answered gruffly. "He knew you were carrying the prize money home with you, didn't he?"

"Yes," admitted Connie reluctantly.

"And where was he last night? No one saw him in town. He came back to the ranch about four o'clock this morning. His horse was just about done up."

"The idea sounds ridiculous to me," Connie said scoffingly. "I think you're inclined to be entirely too suspicious, Mr. Blakeman."

"All right," retorted the foreman with a shrug. "I knew you wouldn't believe me. But don't say later that I didn't warn you."

After Blakeman had walked away, Connie stood for a long while gazing off toward the distant mountains. She knew perfectly well that the foreman bore Jim Barrows a grudge and would enjoy seeing him involved in trouble. For that reason she largely discounted his words.

Yet the accusation he had made served to arouse a certain distrust in her mind. Little things which had seemed insignificant before now took on greater importance.

It was true, as Blakeman had said, that Jim Barrows knew she intended to carry the rodeo prize money on her person. His sudden acquisition of a bank roll did seem rather strange. She was almost sure the man had been without funds when he first came to Rainbow Ranch.

As Connie mulled the matter over in her mind, she saw Jim Barrows emerge from the bunk house and walk toward the barn. She was tempted to summon him, but could not quite bring herself to do it.

"The idea is ridiculous!" she told herself again. "I'll not think any more about it."

But Connie found that it was not easy to dismiss the matter from her mind. She caught herself studying the cowboy and pondering Forest Blakeman's words.

Late afternoon brought a message from Mr. Postil in the form of a telegram sent out from Red Gulch.

"Expect three more guests Monday," it read. "W. P. Grimes, son Cecil, and daughter Helena, arriving with me."

Connie scarcely knew whether to feel elated or dismayed. But at least the message served to shake her from the lethargy into which she had fallen.

She promptly set Marie to work cleaning and preparing the guest chambers. The rooms were pleasant enough but they were barren. There were so many things needed—curtains, rugs and linen.

"I'm going to town now to buy supplies," Connie told the servant. "I'll just have to get credit, that's all. And I'll try to find another woman to help you."

At the dry goods store in Red Gulch, the girl made her selections. As the owner wrapped up the package, he remarked casually:

"Well, so you're going into the dude business?"

"Only in a very small way."

"Reckon the fever's struck everyone around here," the storekeeper went on. "Hear your neighbor's going to try it too."

"My neighbor?"

"Sure, Pop Bradshaw. He's fixing up the ranch and planning on quite a number of city folks spending the summer there. They say he's going to build a swimming pool."

"Things like that cost money," Connie said gravely. "I didn't know Pop had it to spend."

"Oh, he's just the front so they say. I hear that the banker is behind the deal."

The news filled Connie with deep resentment. It seemed unjust to her that the bank, while refusing to grant an extension to her loan, would risk a large amount in trying to develop Pop Bradshaw's run-down ranch.

She was offended, too, because Enid had told her nothing about the proposed plan.

"Sometimes I feel as if I haven't a true friend in this community," Connie thought bitterly. "As for Mr. Haynes, I believe he deliberately planned to get my ranch. And the worst is that he'll undoubtedly succeed!"

Back at Rainbow Ranch the girl called Lefty and Jim Barrows to tell them about their new duties.

"In the morning you must be on hand to greet the guests when they arrive," she declared. "I'll appoint you two to keep them happy and satisfied. And now we may as well take a ride over your route."

"Route?" demanded Lefty. "Are we supposed to run a milk wagon too?"

"It's this way," explained Connie. "The guests probably will wish to ride. Either you or Jim must escort them, and I'd like to have you give an interesting little talk about the different places of interest."

"Jim here is the one to do that," Lefty insisted. "He's the handsome boy and he has style. He could give the ladies a lot of good poses a-settin' on his steed and a-pointin' off dreamy-like into space."

"You'll make a good stage cowboy yourself when you get used to the idea," Connie laughed. "Come on, let's ride up to the lake."

The three riders passed along a narrow trail which led through a dense wood of cedar trees. The path soon became steep and narrow, causing the horses to labor as they climbed single file toward the summit. Upon reaching the top of the hill, Connie dismounted, and throwing the reins to the ground, said to her companions:

"This is Lover's Leap."

"It's *what?*" demanded Lefty incredulously.

"It used to be Conner's Lake but from now on we're calling it Lover's Leap," Connie chuckled. "Didn't you ever hear the story about how a beautiful Indian princess jumped off here and lost her life when her beloved warrior married another squaw?"

A grin spread over Lefty's face.

"Oh, sure, I get the idea," he said. "Atmosphere."

"The lake doesn't really need any build-up," Connie declared. "Our guests will not find a more beautiful spot anywhere in New Mexico."

As she spoke, Connie moved nearer the edge of the cliff. The opposite side of the hill top sheered off into a perpendicular wall of rock nearly sixty feet high. At the base of the declivity was a small pool of deep blue water. Beyond, the hill sloped gently away into the wooded valley.

"I'd be careful, Miss," warned Jim Barrows uneasily. "It must be seventy feet down to that lake."

"Not quite so far," replied Connie, moving back from the cliff. "But it's a long drop."

After viewing the scene for a few minutes the three riders mounted again and rode down to a fork in the trail.

"This path leads to the cliff dwellings," Connie explained for Jim Barrow's benefit. "There are two trails, but for an inexperienced rider this one is best."

"Alkali was telling me about those cliff ruins," Jim Barrows remarked. "Your father discovered them years ago, didn't he?"

"Yes, and they're in an almost perfect state of preservation. Dad had some excavation done and cut away brush. If you've never been over we might go now. I could spend hours there."

"I've seen Blakeman over this way a lot," Barrows commented as they started down the trail. "I reckon he's interested in such things."

"Not that I ever heard," laughed Connie. "Blakeman's hobbies aren't so very cultural, I fear."

"He was probably over this way lookin' for a stray cow," Lefty contributed.

The trail wound down into the valley and then ascended at a steep angle. A little farther on, Connie halted her horse so that Jim Barrows might view the cliff dwellings from this particular point.

"Of course you know the cliff people were widely distributed throughout the Southwest in prehistoric times," she remarked. "The most noted of their ruins are at Mesa Verde, the national park, but I think ours are just as interesting if they're not so large."

"What was the idea of building their homes up under the lip of the cliff?" the cowboy asked.

"Oh, that was for protection against their enemies," Connie explained. "Then too, it gave them shelter from the cold. As we go farther you'll find that the cliff dwellers used many devices to guard the entrances of their homes."

"It takes an acrobat to get to the place," Lefty added. "On the other trail you have to go through a narrow tunnel."

"This route is much easier," Connie said, "but we'll do a little fancy climbing."

She urged her horse on again and for a time they rode single file, circling the cliffs as they ascended higher. Presently, tying their steeds to a tree, they continued afoot.

By means of a knotted rope, Connie swung herself down to the lower level of the cliff.

"The old cliff dwellers didn't need ladders to get up and down as we do," she told Barrows, pointing out toe holds which had been chipped in the rock. "They climbed like flies."

The three companions now stood on a shelf of rock and earth. Back beneath the lip of the cliff were visible the geometrical ruins of square granaries, round towers and oblong rooms cut with tiny windows and doors. Connie told Barrows that seven different families once had occupied the site.

"How do you know?" he inquired curiously.

"Why, by the number of *kivas*," she declared. "Here, I'll show you what I mean."

She pointed out a deep, circular hole in the earth which had been roofed over. It was large enough to have held perhaps twenty or thirty people.

"A *kiva* such as this was used for ceremonial purposes only," she explained, "but each little tribe or family had its own. There is a great deal of lore connected with them but I'll not bore you with that. Would you like to go down into it?"

"How would I get out again?" he inquired.

"Oh, one of the other *kivas* has a ladder. Dad put it in years ago."

"Let's take a look at it then," Barrows agreed.

Connie crossed over to another *kiva* which had been hidden from view by a high wall.

"Why, where is the ladder?" she asked in surprise.

"Looks like someone has swiped it," Lefty declared peering down into the dark opening. "I'll have to make another before our dude season gets in full swing."

"We could let you down on a rope if you'd like to see the inside," Connie offered. "But there's nothing down there."

"I'll not bother this time," the man returned. "It's getting late anyway."

"Yes," agreed Connie, quickly, "we really should be getting back to the ranch."

They retraced their way, finding themselves winded by the time they reached the horses.

"It's funny about that ladder," Lefty muttered as they started down the trail. "I'd like to know who swiped it."

Presently they swung back into the path leading from Lover's Leap and Connie pointed out a site which would be excellent for picnics.

"You've really given a lot of thought to this dude ranch business, haven't you?" Jim Barrows asked soberly.

"Yes," Connie acknowledged; "it seems to me we have wonderful attractions here. A dude ranch has been one of my dreams. A silly one, I'm afraid."

To hide her emotion, she quickly rode on down the trail. Presently she reined in to indicate a large cliff across the ravine. At this hour of sunset it was a shimmering wall of color.

"Echo Cliff," she said softly. "Be sure to point it out to our dudes."

"Say, you sure have picked up a lot of fancy names," Lefty complained good naturedly.

"They are the names I gave these places when I was a child. I was a great one to pretend, you know."

"Will the rock really echo?" asked Jim.

"Listen!" commanded Connie.

Cupping her hands to her mouth she gave a long, clear cry which came back not once but several times.

"Say, that's a real echo!" Lefty exclaimed. "In all the years I been workin' here I never knew you could get an echo like that."

"Maybe I'll be able to teach you a few things about this ranch," Connie laughed. "I know and love every rock and stone here."

"If you lose the place," said Lefty, "it will be a rotten shame."

No sooner were the words spoken than he regretted them. Connie's smile faded and a tired look came over her face.

"Yes," she replied.

And then, pulling her jacket more closely about her throat, she added: "It's getting chilly. Let's be going home."

CHAPTER XII

An Argument

In the excitement of preparing for the expected guests Connie forgot entirely Forest Blakeman's warning concerning Jim Barrows. She had meant to question him about his activities on the day of the rodeo but somehow the opportunity never presented itself. She did not believe that he could have had anything to do with the holdup at Eagle Pass.

Early Monday morning a high powered limousine drove into the courtyard, bringing Mr. Postil, his small granddaughter, and the Grimes family. The latter consisted of F. P. Grimes, a distinguished railroad official, his son Cecil, and daughter, Helena.

Connie and the cowboys were on hand to greet the guests and to make them welcome. Helena, who appeared to be about eighteen, was a pretty, dark haired girl, dressed in a modish white suit. She gazed about with undisguised distaste as she alighted from the car.

"I don't think I shall like this place at all," Connie heard her say to her father. "Why, it's nothing but a run-down cattle farm."

Cecil, several years older than his sister, looked equally pained as he gazed about the courtyard.

"My man," he said, addressing Lefty in a condescending tone, "will you be good enough to show me to my room?"

"Just follow me," Lefty replied gruffly. "Our butler ain't workin' today."

Mr. Postil and Mr. Grimes, apparently old friends, lingered in the courtyard for a few minutes while Connie took Helena to her bedchamber.

"Only one room?" the girl asked in surprise. "And no private bath?"

"I'm afraid not," Connie said politely. "This isn't a very luxurious place, of course. It's merely a ranch."

"I can see that," Helena murmured dryly.

A flush of anger spread over Connie's face. Offering no reply she quickly left the girl alone.

"Wrangling dudes isn't going to be quite as great a pleasure as I expected," she thought grimly. "I've never seen such a spoiled girl in all my life. And Cecil is just like her, too!"

Connie found it a relief to talk with Mr. Grimes and Mr. Postil. They both seemed well pleased with Rainbow Ranch and assured her that they would not mind a few inconveniences.

"It will do my son and daughter good to rough it for a few weeks," the railroad man declared. "Life has always been too easy for them."

Connie quite agreed with Mr. Grimes before the day was ended. Helena spent nearly all of her time sulking while Cecil annoyed the cowboys by asking ridiculous questions and trying to let them know that he considered them as menials whose sole function was to serve him.

"If this is a sample of the dudes I'm to herd, I'm quittin' right now," Lefty complained to Connie.

"Oh, you wouldn't let me down at a time like this," she said quickly. "Mr. Postil is fine and for that matter, so is Mr. Grimes."

"Old Grimes ain't so bad," the cowboy admitted. "He broke down and told me he's plannin' to make a regular he-man out of that son of his. If that ain't a laugh!"

"You be nice to Cecil, Lefty. Remember, he's a paying guest."

"Oh, I'll treat him gentle unless he 'my mans' me again. Then I'm liable to give him a good poke in the nose!"

With the ranch undermanned, and the new arrivals demanding constant service, Connie found herself hard pressed to keep the household running smoothly. It seemed to her that Forest Blakeman had lain down on his job completely. He made it increasingly clear that he was not in sympathy with her plan of trying to run a dude ranch.

However, for some reason which was not clear to Connie, Blakeman singled Helena out, and wasted hours chatting with her. The girl kept the other cowboys from their work too, assuming that it was their duty to keep her entertained.

"There's just nothing to do around here," she complained to Connie.

"Perhaps you'd like to ride," Connie suggested. "I'll have Alkali saddle up a pony for you."

"Let's do go for a canter," proposed Cecil who had come up behind the girls. "I was looking over the horses just now. There's one that's not bad—the others are nags."

Connie smiled as she followed the brother and sister to the barn. She felt quite certain that neither of them had ever done much riding. It therefore took her by surprise when she learned that the horse which Cecil had chosen for his own was none other than Silvertail.

"I reckon you'll like Star a lot better, sir," Alkali told the boy persuasively. "Silvertail belongs to Miss Connie, and no one rides him but her."

Cecil gazed disdainfully at Star, a beautiful roan.

"If I can't have a horse of my own choosing then I'll not ride," he said peevishly.

"Saddle Silvertail for him, Alkali," Connie instructed quietly.

The cowboy did as he was told, noting as the young man mounted that he was stiff and awkward.

"You better handle Silvertail easy," he warned. "That hoss is high-spirited."

"Alkali, you ride along with them," Connie directed.

"We don't need a guide," Helena said quickly. "Not unless that other young man is free."

"The foreman?" Connie inquired. "I'm afraid he isn't. If you wish I'll go with you——"

"We'll ride alone," interrupted Helena rudely. "Come along, Cecil."

Connie and Alkali watched the two ride away. Helena evidently had taken lessons in the East for she sat her horse well, but her brother bounced high in the saddle.

"That conceited coot will ruin Silvertail's gait," Alkali muttered.

"I only hope Cecil isn't thrown," Connie replied anxiously.

"It would serve him right to get pitched into a cactus plant—but he's too lucky for that."

Connie turned her eyes away from the riders, for just then a car drove into the courtyard. It was Lefty returning from Red Gulch where he had gone for supplies, but the girl was surprised to see two middle-aged women with him.

The cowboy climbed out over the car door and came hurrying toward Connie.

"Say, I dragged home two more dudes," he reported in a whisper. "Found 'em at the postoffice. They was inquirin' for a place to stay, so I gave 'em a long line about Rainbow. They're schoolmarms."

"Lefty, you're a genius!" Connie laughed.

She hastened to the car to greet the newcomers. They were pleasant women, spinsters who hailed from Elkhart, Indiana. This was their first trip West and they assured Connie they were enjoying every minute of it.

"This is such a lovely ranch," Miss Gladwin declared enthusiastically.

"Yes, isn't it," echoed Miss Parker. "And so Mexican! I love the atmosphere."

Connie's spirits soared. She had become so accustomed to complaints during the past day, that she had begun to think nothing about Rainbow Ranch was right. It was a pleasure to meet two dudes who were not difficult to please.

The teachers were delighted with their bedrooms. They confessed to Connie that they had never ridden horseback, but were dying to try it.

"We'll take a trip to Lover's Leap tomorrow," Connie promised. "And perhaps to the cliff dwellings."

Hearing the sound of clattering hoofs in the courtyard, the girl excused herself and hurried outside. Silvertail, minus a rider, was wandering aimlessly about near the corrals. Before Connie could reach the horse, Alkali came running from the barn and caught his bridle.

"Cecil must have been thrown!" Connie gasped. "Oh, I hope he's not badly hurt."

Alkali said nothing but a look of smug satisfaction came over his face.

Connie mounted Silvertail and rode out to learn what had happened. She had not gone far when she saw Helena approaching on horseback with Cecil trudging along beside her.

"I'm so glad you're not injured," Connie said in relief as she drew rein.

"It's not your fault that I'm not!" the youth snapped. "Why didn't you warn me the horse was vicious?"

"Silvertail isn't vicious," Connie replied. "But we did try to tell you that he has to be properly handled."

"It was your own fault, Cecil," said Helena with a shrug. "Why don't you learn to ride?"

Connie dismounted, offering to let the youth take her place while she walked.

"I'd not ride that horse again for a hundred dollars!" Cecil snapped. "And it's fortunate for you that I wasn't injured."

As Connie expected, the young man made a distorted report of the incident to his father that evening. Mr. Grimes did not take the affair very seriously.

However, the conversation was overheard by the two teachers. Inclined to be nervous, they immediately jumped to the conclusion that all of the horses at Rainbow Ranch were unsafe. It required the combined efforts of Connie, Alkali, Lefty and Jim Barrows to convince them otherwise.

Even then they were decidedly uneasy over the proposed trip to Lover's Leap and the cliff dwellings.

"Are you quite certain this beast isn't an outlaw?" Miss Parker asked Lefty timidly as he led up her pony the next morning.

"Ma'am, this hoss was raised on milk," the cowboy assured her. "She's so lazy she won't even swish flies."

Connie was hopeful that Cecil would not be a member of the party, but at the last minute both he and his sister decided to make the trip. Mr. Grimes and Mr. Postil, had planned a fishing trip to a nearby lake with Alkali serving as guide.

"We'll go first to Lover's Leap and then to the cliff dwellings," Connie announced.

"What a silly name—Lover's Leap," Cecil scoffed.

Lefty rode at the head of the party while Connie brought up the rear. Progress along the trail necessarily was slow for the two teachers could ride comfortably only at a walk. However, they enjoyed the scenery and Connie liked to answer their questions.

Cecil was annoyed by the slow pace and made frequent complaints about the heat. Nothing interested him save his own discomfort.

The party stopped for lunch at Echo Canyon where Lefty opened the packages of food packed by Marie and boiled coffee over an open fire.

"I hope there's really something worth seeing at the end of this trail," Cecil grumbled as they started on once more.

A little later they approached the summit of the steep incline. There Lefty halted the party.

"We dismount here and walk the rest of the way, folks."

"What?" demanded Cecil. "Up that mountain? Why can't we ride?"

"There's not room at the top to tie so many horses," Connie explained.

Everyone dismounted and Lefty fastened the ponies to a tree. Then they started the tedious climb afoot. The two teachers, both plump and short of breath, were very cheerful about it. When they reached the summit and peered over the cliff at the pool below, they declared they had not seen such a beautiful spot anywhere on their vacation trip.

"It's well worth the climb," Miss Parker asserted.

"So far as I can see, it's just a lake," said Cecil irritably. "And a pretty dinky one at that."

Connie told the story of the Indian princess who had leaped to her death. The teachers were awed by the tale, asking if it were really true.

"Of course it isn't," answered Cecil before Connie could speak. "You hear that same story everywhere. About how far down is the lake?"

"A little over sixty feet," Lefty replied briefly.

"Looks about half that distance to me," Cecil said speculatively. "I guess out West here they have to

exaggerate everything or it wouldn't make a good story."

"It really is that far down," Connie told him.

She was growing irritated with Cecil, and Lefty too was having difficulty in holding his temper. The spoiled young man had no right to ruin the trip for the other members of the party, yet that was exactly what he was doing.

"Once years ago I dived off here and I thought I'd never reach the water," Connie went on. "I did it on a dare."

"You jumped from this cliff?" Cecil asked incredulously.

"Yes," Connie admitted, "but it was a silly thing to do. I'll never try it again."

Cecil remained silent but the expression on his face disclosed that he doubted the girl's story. Somewhat nettled, Connie said quietly to Helena and the teachers:

"If you care to step over this way I'll show you another pretty view of the valley. On a clear day you can see the cliff dwellings from here."

The three women followed her a short distance away. Lefty and Cecil were left alone at the edge of the cliff. Connie paid no heed to them until a few minutes later when she was startled by the sound of their voices. The men were arguing in loud, angry tones.

"That's the last crack I'll take from you," she heard Lefty say in a deadly drawl. "Now it's your turn to take one from me!"

His fist shot out, connecting squarely under Cecil's jaw. It was not a hard blow, but the young man staggered backwards. He stumbled over a stone and the soft rock gave way beneath his feet. Lefty darted forward to save him, but he was too late.

With a terrified shriek Cecil tumbled headlong over the precipice.

CHAPTER XIII

Over the Precipice

Cecil's panic-stricken cry was muffled by a resounding splash as his body struck the pool below.

"My brother will drown!" screamed Helena hysterically. "He can't swim a stroke!"

Connie had rushed to the edge of the cliff. Jerking off her riding boots, she poised for an instant on the brow of the declivity. Then she shot out into space head foremost, turning slowly in mid-air so that she broke the water with the lower part of her body. The force of the fall sent her deep into the pool and even her heavy clothing did not protect her from the stinging lash of the blow.

Two powerful strokes brought her to the surface. Cecil was almost within arm's reach, sputtering and wildly thrashing the water.

Connie whipped an arm about his chest and towed him to the edge of the pool. She climbed out on a low ledge of rock and pulled him up after her. For a few minutes Cecil sputtered water like a lawn sprinkler. Then instead of thanking Connie for saving him he said wrathfully:

"I shall report this to my father. He'll have that cowboy of yours arrested!"

"I don't know what came over Lefty," Connie said soothingly. "He's usually very even tempered. You must have said something which angered him."

Cecil avoided the girl's glance.

"The fellow tried to drown me," he snapped. "But he'll pay for it."

"Lefty didn't mean to push you over the precipice, I am sure of that," replied Connie. "You slipped on the rock, and then it crumbled."

"I suppose you'll not even discharge him for this?"

"I haven't thought that far," answered Connie quietly. "Let's not discuss it now. We'll both catch our deaths if we sit around in these wet clothes."

"I'm so bruised and battered I can't walk," Cecil complained.

"You're lucky no bones are broken," Connie told him and added impishly: "it really is a sixty foot drop."

This time Cecil did not dispute her word. He followed her sullenly as she went ahead and parted the bushes.

They climbed from the pool-basin and circled the hill until they struck a trail. This led them back toward Lover's Leap but they had not gone far before they met Lefty and the three women.

"Oh, Cecil, are you all right?" called his sister.

"I'm still alive," the young man muttered. "No thanks to that brute!" He glared at Lefty.

"Cecil," the cowboy said anxiously, "I hope you don't think I pushed you off that steep cliff a-purpose."

"Oh, no," replied the youth mockingly. "I suppose you were just being playful! An old western custom no doubt."

"It was an accident, and I'm mighty sorry," Lefty said contritely. "Maybe I owe you an apology, and I'm makin' it now."

"I'll accept no apology from you," retorted Cecil. "You'll be reported to the authorities."

Connie shot Lefty a glance which warned him to say nothing more.

"Let's talk about it after we get back to the ranch," she said. "We'll have to postpone our visit to the cliff dwellings until later."

"I'll get the horses," Lefty declared.

"We may as well all walk along with you," replied Connie. "Cecil and I will freeze if we stand here."

Lefty tried to put his jacket around Connie but she passed it on to Cecil. He took it most ungallantly, and Miss Parker then stripped off her light sweater, insisting that the girl wear it.

"Cecil, I think you might thank Miss Carl for saving your life," Helena reminded her brother. "It was a pretty brave thing to do—jumping off that cliff after you."

"I did thank her," Cecil replied.

He had said no word of appreciation to Connie, but the girl expected none. If only he could be induced to forget the incident, that was all she asked. Somehow she must keep him from reporting the matter to the authorities.

As the party trudged along the trail, Lefty dropped back to walk with Connie. "I guess I've messed things up pretty thoroughly now," he said gloomily.

"Yes, you have, Lefty. Why did you strike him? It was inexcusable."

"I just couldn't help myself, Connie. That fellow has been gettin' under my skin ever since he came here. He just pulled one crack too many and I saw red."

"What did he say to you, Lefty?"

"Well, I don't just remember."

"Was it about me, Lefty?" Connie pinned him down. "Tell me the truth."

"Well, yes, it was," Lefty admitted reluctantly. "He made a remark I didn't like—intimatin' that everything you said was just a lot of apple sauce."

"It was very gallant of you to go to my defense. But I hardly think Cecil's remark called for such drastic action."

"It was the way he said it. And I've stood a lot from him, Connie. I just lost my head that's all. I'll pack up my duds as soon as I get back to the bunk house."

"Have I asked you to do that, Lefty?"

"No, but this places you in a bad spot. The only thing for me to do is to get out."

"I want you to stay, Lefty. Why, I couldn't run the ranch without you. Sometimes I feel you're the only person I can entirely trust."

"I've let you in for a heap of trouble, Connie. When old man Grimes hears what I did to that

sweetheart son of his, he'll make things hard for you. If I get out of the way he might not be quite so tough."

"I'm not afraid of Mr. Grimes, Lefty."

"Maybe not, but his money comes in mighty useful," Lefty answered dryly.

Connie knew that the cowboy was entirely right. It was a foregone conclusion that Cecil would give an exaggerated report of the incident to his father. The least she could expect would be that Mr. Grimes and his spoiled brood would depart, taking with them Mr. Postil, his small daughter, and perhaps the two teachers. Nor could she greatly blame anyone for leaving.

Connie came out of her reverie as she heard Cecil, who was far ahead, shout something back.

"Now what's the matter with him?" muttered Lefty.

"Where are our horses?" called the youth.

Connie and Lefty quickened their pace. When they came within view of the cedars where the ponies had been tied, they stopped short in amazement. The horses were gone.

"Now what!" exclaimed Connie.

Although they could see where the ponies had nibbled at the tree branches and trampled the ground, but there was no sign of the animals.

"This is just another evidence of gross carelessness!" said Cecil angrily. "The horses weren't tied well and they've run off."

Lefty's face grew very red but he managed to control his temper.

"It isn't logical that six horses would break away at the same time," Connie said quietly. "Besides, I'm sure they were well tied."

"Well, they're gone," said Cecil sullenly. "You can see that."

"How did they get away?" inquired Miss Parker.

"I don't know," admitted Connie soberly.

She met Lefty's gaze. Someone deliberately had turned the horses loose. They were certain of that.

The cowboy bent down to examine the soft earth. It was impossible to tell if there were alien footprints by the cedars for Cecil and the girls had tramped everywhere.

"Now what are we going to do?" demanded Cecil. "I'm freezing to death if that means anything to you."

"How far are we from the ranch?" asked one of the teachers anxiously.

"Over two miles," Connie replied. "I'm afraid we'll have to walk back."

"Walk?" Cecil cried furiously. "In these wet clothes? This is absolutely the last straw."

"First we'll build a fire and dry you out," Connie said. "Lefty, see if you can find some wood."

The teachers tried to help the cowboy, but neither Helena nor her brother would so much as pick up a stick. Cecil's temper sweetened a trifle after he had warmed himself by the big bonfire. But he took keen pleasure in showing Helena bruised marks on his skin. It did not seem to occur to him that Connie too might be in discomfort.

The girl drew Lefty aside to discuss the situation.

"Someone set those horses free deliberately," Connie said.

"Sure, they never walked away themselves."

"Who could have done it, Lefty?"

The cowboy shook his head.

"It might have been some smart Mexican kid," he said finally.

"Do you know what I believe?" Connie asked. "Someone is afraid I'll make a success of this dude ranch. It looks to me as if that trick was done for the deliberate purpose of making the guests leave."

"Pop Bradshaw is trying to start up in the dude business," Lefty said thoughtfully. "Maybe he got wind of how we smuggled Catapult into the rodeo grounds. I know Blakeman's been makin' it plenty tough for him ever since."

"Pop wouldn't do a thing like this," Connie replied slowly.

"We didn't think he'd double-cross his friends either. But he did. Maybe he's aimin' to get your dudes away from you, Connie."

"If they're all like Cecil he's welcome to them," answered Connie wearily.

The party began the long trek back to the ranch. Lefty and Connie, accustomed to walking, did not mind the rough trail, but the others found it trying. Helena had not worn suitable shoes. Her complaints were nearly as annoying as those of her brother.

At first the school teachers tried to be cheerful but soon they gave up the effort. And then to add to the difficulties, Miss Parker twisted her ankle.

"I don't think I can walk another step," she murmured. "Oh, dear, why did we ever come on this horrible trip?"

"There's only one thing to do," Connie decided. "Lefty, you go on ahead to the ranch and come back with some horses. We'll have a long wait here, but it's the best that can be done."

"I'll get back just as soon as I can," the cowboy promised.

He started down the trail but had gone only a few feet when he halted. Emerging from among the trees was a lone rider leading a string of horses.

"It's Jim Barrows!" shouted Lefty, waving his hat. "And he has our ponies!"

CHAPTER XIV

A Telltale Handkerchief

"Good old Jim!" murmured Connie gratefully as she saw the rider coming up the trail. "He's saved our lives."

Lefty hurried down the path to meet the man and help him with the horses.

"Everything all right?" asked Jim as he rode up. "I was worried when I found your ponies on the trail. I thought you knew how to tie a rope, Lefty."

Ignoring the thrust, the cowboy asked quickly:

"Where did you find the hosses, Jim?"

"Down the trail about half a mile. Couldn't figure how they all broke away."

"They didn't break loose," Lefty answered grimly. "Someone untied 'em a-purpose. You didn't see anyone on the trail?"

Jim Barrows shook his head.

"How did you happen to be over this way yourself?" Lefty asked curiously. "I thought you were wranglin' steers for Blakeman today."

Jim Barrow's eyes narrowed.

"You're not hintin' I turned those horses loose——"

"Now don't get touchy, Jim," Lefty said quickly. "'Course I wasn't hintin' at anything like that. I just asked a civil question."

"I came over this way today because I thought something might go wrong."

"Your bones sort of told you?"

"Well, I had a feeling. And it turns out I was right."

Lefty made no reply as he followed Jim up the trail, but he studied the man intently.

Connie had not heard the talk between the two cowboys. She greeted Jim warmly.

"What happened to you, Miss Connie?" he asked in astonishment, observing her bedraggled appearance.

"Oh, we had a little accident," she answered vaguely. "We're certainly grateful to you, Jim, for bringing our horses."

The man dismounted and helped the school teachers into the saddle. Unnoticed by all save Connie, a blue bandanna handkerchief dropped from his pocket. She thought that he would pick it up, but after the other members of the party had started down the trail, he rode after them, leaving the handkerchief lying on the ground.

As Connie rode past the spot, she reached low and swept it up. She would not have given it a second glance save that it reminded her of the handkerchief which the masked bandit had worn the night he robbed her of her rodeo earnings.

There was nothing unusual about a blue bandanna, however, for many cowboys carried them. Yet as Connie folded the bit of cloth she noticed that two initials had been stamped in one corner. But they were not the letters which the girl might have expected to see.

"J. R.," she mused, "that doesn't seem right. Jim's last name doesn't begin with an 'R.'"

Connie carefully examined the letters again to make certain that she had not mistaken a "B" for an "R."

"It's an 'R' all right," she decided. "Why should Jim be carrying a handkerchief marked like this unless he's passing under an assumed name?"

Connie had intended to return the handkerchief to the man, but now she thrust it into her pocket, and when she rode alongside a few minutes later, made no mention of finding it.

The girl did not know what to think. It was possible, of course, that Jim had come into possession of another person's handkerchief and was using it as his own. But that did not seem probable.

"Perhaps Blakeman was right about the man," Connie reflected. "From the very first he believed that Jim had a past."

Upon reaching the ranch, Cecil immediately inquired for his father. Learning that Mr. Grimes had not returned from the fishing trip, he disappeared to his room.

Connie changed her own clothing and then went to talk with Forest Blakeman. He had heard the story of the mishap from Helena, a version which strongly favored her brother.

"I take it you're discharging Lefty?" the foreman inquired.

"No," Connie replied, "he acted rashly, but it wasn't entirely his fault. Cecil had the ducking coming to him."

"If you'll excuse me for saying it, you're making a mess of this ranch," Blakeman told her bluntly. "I was against this dude idea from the first, but since you brought guests here, I don't believe in cooking up damage suits."

"Cecil wasn't hurt."

"He may claim differently. Miss Connie, the best thing you can do is to sell this ranch before the bank takes it over."

"I don't know of anyone who would buy it."

"If your price was right I might be able to find you a buyer," Blakeman said quickly. "But you couldn't expect any fancy figure."

"Who is your prospect?"

"Well, I'm not at liberty to say. But if you'd take, say five thousand dollars, I think I could swing the deal. That would pay off your bank note and give you something clear."

"This ranch is worth three times that amount at least," Connie replied. "I'll never sell unless I'm compelled to do it."

"If you wait very long you'll miss your chance," Blakeman warned. "The bank may sell you out, and

then you'll get even less."

Connie made no reply but turned away. She had seen Jim Barrows crossing the courtyard and wished to talk with him. The foreman followed her gaze.

"If you'd give me a free hand I'd send that fellow on his way," he declared.

"What do you know about Jim Barrows?" Connie questioned, pausing again.

"I told you what I thought of him the other day. They're saying in town that you've taken a fugitive from justice to shelter."

"Who said a thing like that?" Connie asked sharply.

"Why, it's common talk. If you weren't so blind you could see for yourself that he's not a square shooter."

"You don't really have any evidence against him?"

"I can't prove that he's wanted by the law—no. But I do know he's no hand for us. Why, today, he was supposed to be wrangling steers, and he walked off from the job."

"It was lucky for me that he did," Connie said ruefully. "But I think I'll have a talk with him."

"Don't expect him to break down and tell you his life history," Blakeman said with a trace of sarcasm. "He won't do it. The only thing I'd tell him would be to get out."

Connie did not answer. After the foreman had gone to the barn she stood by the corrals lost in thought. She did not know what she could say to Jim Barrows. Perhaps she might return the handkerchief and ask him to explain the initials.

Connie had seen the man disappear into the bunk house and she knew that the other cowboys were busy elsewhere. This would be her opportunity to talk with him alone.

She walked slowly toward the bunk house, dreading the interview. The door was half ajar.

As Connie paused, hesitating to rap, she saw Jim Barrows move across the room. He had not heard her approach. There was something about his manner which struck Connie as odd. Instead of rapping on the door, she waited and watched.

Barrows glanced out the window toward the barn, and then he crossed over to a battered chest which stood near Blakeman's bunk. The box belonged to the foreman, Connie knew, for she had heard Lefty joking about how Blakeman always kept his love letters locked in it.

To the girl's amazement, Barrows took a handful of keys from his pocket. He selected one and fitted it into the lock.

Connie had seen quite enough. She pushed open the door of the bunk house.

Jim Barrows whirled about and his hand went instinctively to his hip pocket. Connie noted the gesture and her lips tightened.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" the man laughed, relaxing.

"You were afraid it was Blakeman," Connie replied coldly. "Jim Barrows, may I ask what you are doing?"

"I guess you can see for yourself, Miss. I was trying to open this chest."

"Forest Blakeman's chest," Connie supplied.

"I reckon you're right." Jim Barrows grinned arrogantly.

"Why were you trying to open his chest?"

"Well, I just had a sudden itch to find out what was inside. Prying into things is a weakness of mine."

"It seems to be," Connie answered scornfully. "Jim Barrows, there are a number of things which you might explain."

She took the blue handkerchief from her pocket, offering it to him.

"You dropped this on the trail and I picked it up," she told him. "Is it yours?"

"It must be if you saw me drop it," he returned amiably.

"This may seem very amusing to you, but I don't see anything funny about it," Connie said, her anger rising. "This handkerchief happens to be marked with the initials 'J. R.' Perhaps you can explain that."

The expression of the man's face changed. He took the handkerchief from Connie, staring at the telltale markings.

"Barrows isn't your real name, is it?" Connie demanded.

"No," the man admitted after a long hesitation.

"Then tell me what it is."

"I can't do that."

"You're wanted by the law!" Connie accused.

"Do I look like a criminal?" the man countered, a faint smile playing over his lips.

"I believe you've been acting a part ever since you came here!" Connie went on indignantly. "That day I found you on the trail—I don't believe you were sick at all. You pretended you were broke and out of work, but I notice you have plenty of money now."

"You are very observing," the man replied very quickly.

"I've been very blind."

"I'll set your mind at rest upon one point. I am not a fugitive from the law."

"Then why are you using a name other than your own?"

"I have a very good reason—one which I cannot reveal."

"For all I know you may be the man who held me up at Eagle Pass," Connie continued heatedly.

"That's what Blakeman tried to tell me——"

"Oh, so you've been listening to him?"

"By your own admission you have good reason not to use your true name."

"And it is a *good* reason," the man returned with emphasis. "Connie, I want you to promise that you'll not say anything to Blakeman about this."

"Why should I protect you? You've given me no explanation for trying to break into his chest. In fact ——"

Connie's voice trailed off for just at that moment Lefty appeared in the doorway. He looked quickly from one to the other. But he gave no indication that he had overheard the conversation.

"Connie," he said significantly, "Mr. Grimes has been talking with Cecil. He wants to see you right away."

"I'll come," said the girl wearily.

She faced Jim Barrows once more. "There are still several things I wish to say to you," she told him gravely. "We'll finish our conversation after I have seen Mr. Grimes."

An Unpleasant Revelation

Connie walked slowly toward the ranch house, inwardly bracing herself for an unpleasant interview with Mr. Grimes. She found the old gentleman awaiting her on the veranda.

"I know why you wish to see me," she said quickly before he could speak. "I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened this afternoon."

"You risked your life to pull my son from the lake, young lady. I wish to thank you."

Connie was taken completely by surprise. Mr. Grimes did not look in the least angry.

"Why, didn't Cecil tell you——" she began.

"Oh, yes, my son said a number of things about this fellow called Lefty, but I finally got the true story out of him. He probably deserved the ducking."

Connie could scarcely believe that she had heard correctly. She had been expecting a severe rebuke. Her surprise was heightened as the old gentleman continued:

"Cecil has become a difficult problem of late. I dare say a few such experiences might serve to take some of the conceit out of the boy."

"Then you're not angry?" Connie gasped.

Mr. Grimes glanced quickly about to make certain that no one was within hearing distance of his voice.

"Quite the contrary," he declared. "I wish I had been there to see it myself. We'll just consider the incident closed."

"That's very generous of you, Mr. Grimes," Connie said gratefully. "Will you be staying on?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm thoroughly enjoying ranch life. And I think it may have a beneficial effect upon both Cecil and Helena."

Connie felt as if a great load had been lifted from her shoulders. After talking with Mr. Grimes for a few minutes she went back toward the bunk house. Meeting Lefty she paused to tell him the good news.

"The old gent is a real man," the cowboy declared admiringly. "Too bad his son can't be more like him."

"Yes, it is."

"Maybe a ducking a day would do him good just like the old man said."

"Perhaps, but don't you try it," Connie warned with a laugh. "From now on you're to keep out of Cecil's way as much as possible."

"Don't worry," Lefty rejoined, "I don't have any hankerin' for that sissy's company."

Connie returned to the bunk house to resume her talk with Jim Barrows. Now that she had thought the matter over she decided there could be only one course open to her. Unless the man made a satisfactory explanation for his strange actions she must discharge him.

Connie knocked on the door and, when there was no answer, pushed it open. The room was deserted.

She glanced toward the bunk occupied by Barrows. It was neatly made up but an Indian blanket, which the cowboy had bought from Lefty, was gone. Jim's meager belongings likewise were missing.

"Lefty!" Connie called.

The cowboy came quickly toward the bunk house.

"What's wrong?" he asked in surprise.

"I think Barrows has skipped out, Lefty. At least his things are gone. Did you see him leave?"

"Why, no, Connie. He was here the last I knew."

"Let's see if he's taken one of the horses."

They ran to the barn. One glance assured them that instead of a pony, Jim Barrows had appropriated the ranch car.

"That fellow certainly had his nerve!" Lefty exclaimed angrily. "What's the big idea anyway?"

"I'm afraid he was a crook," Connie admitted ruefully. "My suspicions were aroused and I made the mistake of letting him know. Now we're minus a car."

"I'll ride in to Red Gulch right away and report to the sheriff," Lefty promised.

After he had gone, Connie wandered back to the bunk house. Thinking that Barrows might have appropriated other property which did not belong to him, she made an inspection. Nothing seemed to have been taken. More from curiosity than for any other reason she tried the lid of Forest Blakeman's chest. It was still locked.

"I wonder what he does keep inside?" she mused.

"Well?" asked a sharp voice behind her.

Startled, Connie whirled around to see Forest Blakeman standing in the doorway. She laughed in confusion, realizing that the man easily might misinterpret her action.

"I was just looking about——" she began, but Blakeman cut her short.

"So I observe. You seem to be interested in my personal belongings."

Connie flushed at the accusation.

"I hope you don't think I was trying to break into your chest," she said.

"Oh, no!"

"Mr. Blakeman, I don't understand you at all. I came here because I wished to see if Jim Barrows had taken anything from the bunk house. He went off a few minutes ago in the car after we had a rather unpleasant talk together."

The foreman's countenance underwent a swift change.

"Barrows has gone for good?" he questioned. "Well, I'm glad you discharged him."

"Apparently I was wrong about him and you were right," Connie admitted ruefully. "He stole the

ranch car. I don't know what we'll do without one."

"Have you notified the sheriff?"

"Lefty went to Red Gulch to do it."

"Maybe it's just as well not to press the matter," the foreman said thoughtfully. "We're rid of Barrows and that's something."

"That doesn't bring the car back—or my money if he really did take it. Somehow it's hard to believe —"

"Now don't start cooking up sentiment over that worthless fellow," Blakeman interrupted quickly. "You have enough troubles without worrying over him."

"You're quite right there, Mr. Blakeman."

The foreman hesitated, and then asked with an abrupt change of tone: "Have you been thinking over what I said the other day about selling the ranch?"

"I've been thinking, but my answer is still the same. I'll never sell unless I'm compelled to do it."

"This is the eleventh," the foreman reminded her. "Have you talked with the banker lately?"

"I'm going in to Red Gulch tomorrow. I suppose I'll have to come to some decision after I've seen Mr. Haynes again."

"Well, let me know," Blakeman nodded, as Connie walked slowly away.

It was after nine o'clock that evening when a familiar car came up the lane to the ranch house. Hearing the sound of the motor, Connie ran outside.

"Why, Lefty!" she cried in delight as the car stopped with a jerk. "You found our automobile!"

The cowboy climbed out and started to untie his horse which he had led on a long rope behind the vehicle.

"Barrows didn't skip off with it after all," he told Connie. "I found the car in front of the drug store at Red Gulch."

"Did you see Jim?"

"No, I couldn't find him anywhere in town. I reckon he abandoned the car and maybe hopped a freight."

Connie asked Lefty if he had talked with the sheriff.

"Yes, but you know Old Daniels," the cowboy replied. "He's lazy as they come. Said he couldn't do nothin' unless there was a warrant for Barrows' arrest."

"I'm not sure I want to get out a warrant," Connie returned slowly. "I have no real evidence against him."

"That's what I figured," Lefty nodded. "So I reckon there's no more to be done."

In the morning Cecil and Helena complained that they had not yet seen the cliff dwellings. Before Connie could assign either Lefty or Alkali to escort them, the foreman volunteered to serve as guide. While the arrangement did not please Connie she could not protest for Helena immediately accepted Blakeman's offer.

After the three had ridden away, she took advantage of their absence to drive in to Red Gulch. Upon presenting herself at the bank she was admitted to Mr. Haynes' private office.

"Good morning, Miss Carl," he said pleasantly. "Have a chair."

Connie sat down, feeling very ill at ease. Mr. Haynes was watching her shrewdly. Already she suspected that it would be useless to make another request for an extension to her note.

Hesitantly, she explained her plan to launch forth into a dude ranch.

"I have seven paying guests now," she declared, "and within a few weeks I hope to increase the number. I'm sure I'll be able to pay off the loan in another three months."

"Miss Carl, I admire your determination," replied the banker, "but I must think about my depositors. I regret to say we cannot renew your note."

Connie arose, pushing back her chair.

"You refuse to give me a chance," she said bitterly. "And I know the reason! From the first you have schemed to take over the ranch. Through Pop Bradshaw you plan to gain control of the best land in the county!"

"You're quite wrong, Miss Carl," the banker answered quietly. "This rumor that we are taking over the Bradshaw place and running it as a dude ranch is quite unfounded. I have no idea who is behind the idea, but the financing has not gone through this bank."

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," Connie apologized. "I'll try to get the money by the sixteenth."

She turned quickly and walked from the room. As she opened the door, a tall man who had been standing at the writing desk near the private office partition, ducked his head and slipped out the side door of the bank.

"Why, that looked like Jim Barrows!" Connie thought.

Whoever it was, she believed that he had been listening to her conversation with Mr. Haynes. The walls were thin and she had not taken care to lower her voice. Undoubtedly, the man had heard every word.

Connie darted to the door. She looked up and down the street. The man was nowhere to be seen.

"It was Jim Barrows," she told herself. "He didn't want me to see him—that's why he ran away."

CHAPTER XVI

The Roundup

Connie spent a half hour searching the streets for the man, and finally abandoned the hunt. It was early afternoon by the time she reached Rainbow Ranch. Lefty met her by the corral gate.

"Well, how did the guests like the cliff dwellings?" she inquired cheerfully.

"Blakeman never took 'em there," the cowboy reported. "Instead they went for a ride down to the Rainbow River."

"But there's nothing to see on that trail!" Connie exclaimed. "It's just a tiresome, dusty ride! Why didn't he take the party to the cliffs as he was supposed to do?"

"Guess he wanted to be contrary," Lefty replied. "He never has cottoned to this dude idea. Can you stand some more bad news, Connie?"

"I've had so much already, I'm getting hardened to it. What is it this time? You didn't pitch Cecil in the lake again?"

"No, he's been real decent to me ever since that duckin'."

"What is the bad news, Lefty?"

"The two school marms left a few minutes ago. They took their luggage and went just as soon as they got back from the Rainbow River trip. Miss Parker told me to give this to you."

He offered a check which was made out for the exact amount owed by the women.

"But I thought they intended to stay at least two weeks more," Connie murmured, staring at the check. "Maybe they didn't like the trip."

"That was part of it," Lefty agreed. "They came in lookin' pretty hot and bothered."

"Do you know where they went?"

"Yes, to the Bradshaw Ranch. Said they had heard it was a lot better place."

"Someone has been talking with them."

"Looks like it all right. Pop had the nerve to come for them himself."

"He's no friend of mine any more," Connie said indignantly. "I wish I had been here."

"It wouldn't have done any good."

"No, I suppose not," Connie sighed. "I talked with the banker today, Lefty."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, you might know he refused to extend my note. All the way home I tried to think what I could do. Unless I sell there's only one way out. I'll have a big roundup and dispose of every Longhorn I own. What do you think of the idea?"

Lefty was silently chewing a blade of grass.

"We've been losin' money on cattle ever since Blakeman took over the ranch," he said slowly. "I think it's a smart thing to do, Connie."

"Then I'll talk with Blakeman right now," the girl declared. "There's no time to be lost. We'll start the roundup tomorrow."

Before broaching the subject to the foreman Connie asked the man for an explanation of why he had taken the party of dudes to the Rainbow River instead of the cliff dwellings.

"I figured it would prove more entertainin' to them," he replied with a shrug.

"After this I wish you would carry out my orders, Mr. Blakeman. But I'll say no more about it. I'd like your opinion now on another matter—I'm planning a big roundup."

She went on to tell of her idea, and was surprised when the foreman offered opposition.

"You couldn't sell your cattle at a worse time," he insisted. "And how do you aim to round up the herd without more riders? You've kept Alkali and Lefty pretty well tied up with the dudes."

"We'll let the guests help with the roundup," Connie declared gaily. "It should prove an exciting experience for them."

"A lot of help they'd be. Especially Cecil."

"Anyway, it will be a means of keeping them entertained. As for riders, we might get a few from the Slocer Ranch. Some of their cows will be mixed with ours and they'll probably want to do their own cutting-out."

"A roundup would take a couple of days," the foreman frowned. "Some of the cows have strayed into the canyons. It will be a hard job to round them all up. How will you feed the men?"

"We'll get out Dad's old chuck wagon," Connie said, her eyes dancing. "It hasn't been used in years, but it will be fun to see it roll once more!"

"And will you have Marie do the cooking?" the foreman inquired sarcastically.

Connie shook her head, refusing to take offense.

"We'll borrow Cookie from the Bar R Ranch and run everything in the grand old style. It should be a real roundup."

"That's what I'd like to see," boomed a hearty voice behind them. "A roundup!"

Connie turned to see Mr. Postil who had come up with his small granddaughter.

"You'll certainly have an opportunity, Mr. Postil, if you don't mind riding a horse," Connie laughed. "I'm going to start rounding up all my cattle tomorrow."

"And will you brand them?" asked the little girl.

"Only a few of the calves which I may keep," Connie answered. "Branding isn't as necessary as it was at one time, now that most of the free range is gone."

"I've not been in a saddle for twenty years," Mr. Postil declared, "but if you have a nice gentle horse I might try it."

"We have just the one for you," Connie promised.

"I'm going too," said the little girl.

"We'll let you ride in the chuck wagon with Cookie," Connie laughed. "Then you'll be perfectly safe."

News of the coming roundup spread swiftly. Somewhat to the surprise of everyone, Cecil and Helena both showed interest, and Mr. Grimes said he would not miss it for anything.

Immensely cheered, Connie got out the car and drove to the Slocer Ranch to ask the owners if she might borrow a few of their punchers for the big drive.

"I can let you have two of the boys," George Slocer promised. "We're short handed ourselves or I could give you more help."

"I'll get along all right with that number," Connie said. "That will give me five dependable men."

Her next call was at the Bar R Ranch. In passing Pop Bradshaw's place, Connie saw the two teachers and Enid sitting on the front veranda. She pretended not to see them. Putting on a burst of speed she drove past, her eyes glued on the ribbon of road.

Connie was cordially received at the Bar R. Cookie, the old colored man, who had flipped flapjacks in many a chuck wagon, grinned from ear to ear when he learned that his culinary services were needed for a roundup.

Connie took him with her to Red Gulch, there to select his own supplies for the trip. It was long after supper before they returned to Rainbow Ranch with the car loaded. However, the girl could not think of sleep, for many things remained to be done.

"I'll have to get the chuck wagon up from the field," she told Cookie. "I'll see about it now while you start unloading the car."

Connie looked about for one of the men, but Lefty and Alkali were both busy pitching hay to the horses.

"Have you seen Blakeman?" she asked.

"He was around here a minute or two ago," said Alkali.

Connie went to the bunk house but she could not find the foreman.

"Oh, well, I'll get the chuck wagon myself," she decided. "It will be easier than waiting for someone else to do it."

She went back to the barn for one of the work horses and harness. The chuck wagon had been left in the south field and she was relieved to find that standing in the weather had not damaged it. Hitching up, she towed it back to the ranch house.

As Connie closed the gate behind her, she was surprised to observe Cecil and Helena mounting horses.

"Are you going for a ride?" she asked as they came up. "It is a pretty night."

"We're on our way to see those famous cliff dwellings by moonlight," Helena declared. "Ever since we arrived you've been promising us a close glimpse of them. We've decided to do our own exploring."

"Oh, but it's so late to start out for the cliffs," Connie protested. "And it isn't safe for you to go alone."

"Nonsense," replied Helena impatiently. "We're not children."

"It's very easy to become lost on the trail. Besides, if you're taking part in the roundup you really should get some sleep. We'll have a hard day tomorrow."

"You sound just like a Granny," Helena laughed. "Cecil and I know how to take care of ourselves."

"Come on, Helena," urged the boy impatiently.

"If you're really determined to go, I'm going too," Connie said quietly.

"Then you'll have to catch up with us," Helena replied, digging her heels into her steed's ribs.

Connie hurriedly turned the chuck wagon over to Cookie, and saddling Silvertail, set off in pursuit of the boy and girl. She felt irritated beyond measure. It did not seem to matter to them at all how much trouble they caused. If left to themselves they would be sure to take a wrong turn in the trail.

Connie soon overtook the reckless pair. She had very little to say as the horses clattered over the stony road.

It was truly a beautiful night and soon Connie, falling under the spell of the big moon, could bear no resentment. Often when she was a child she and her father had visited the cliffs upon just such an evening. The recollection of the remarkable sight had lingered long in her memory.

Connie selected the South trail because it would give the best view of the cliff dwellings as they descended into the valley and climbed again to the other side. Emerging from a screen of pines, she reined in her horse and waited for Helena and Cecil who had fallen behind.

With a sweep of her arm she pointed across the canyon. In the moonlight the white rocks shone weirdly, and the dark squares, each one marking the prehistoric dwelling place of an ancient tribe, looked like somber eyes peering across the valley.

"Why, it's beautiful," Helena murmured.

Even Cecil was deeply impressed by the sight. For a long moment no one spoke.

Then Connie sat up very straight as she saw something move along the face of the cliff opposite them. For just an instant she thought that it might be a wild animal but the next moment she clearly distinguished the form of a man. He crept along the cliff trail, making his way toward an opening in the rocks.

"Who's there?" Connie shouted across the chasm.

There was no answer. With head bent low, the man fled into the dense bushes which lined the narrow trail.

CHAPTER XVII

A Night Prowler

"Who was that fellow?" Cecil asked in a frightened whisper. "Why did he run when you called?"

"I don't know," the girl answered. "We'll find out."

She urged Silvertail down the steep trail.

"Wait," protested Cecil in alarm. "We're unarmed, and there's no telling who that man may be. Maybe we ought to call off this trip."

"You and Helena ride back to the ranch," Connie urged. "I'm going over there."

"Then we'll stay with you," declared Helena with surprising courage. "After all, this was our idea."

The horses picked their way slowly and cautiously down the steep path. Soon they reached the bottom of the canyon and began the ascent. Connie kept her eyes on the trail above them which circled the cliff. She had seen no sign of anyone moving about.

"Let your horse have his head," she warned as the way became more treacherous.

Presently Connie called a halt. They tied their steeds to a pine tree and continued afoot. The trail became dangerously narrow, so that a slight misstep would mean a plunge over the sheer precipice.

"Let's not go any farther," Helena gasped. "I'm afraid."

"You and Cecil wait for me here," Connie commanded.

Leaving the pair huddling with their backs to the cliff, she hurried on down the trail. Connie knew every inch of it and had no fear of falling. But she glanced sharply at the overhanging bushes. Everything was still. Yet the girl had a feeling that her movements were being observed.

Using the crude steps which had been cut in the cliff by the ancient dwellers, Connie descended between two faulted rocks. As she picked up the trail again at the bottom, she saw something bright and shiny lying on the ground. It was a tiny silver knife.

With a murmur of astonishment she reached down for it.

"Why, that looks like Jim Barrows' knife," she thought as she examined it.

Connie remembered that the man had worn an ornamental silver knife fastened to his watch chain. Her reflection was a brief one for as she fingered the article, Helena gave a piercing scream.

Fearing that harm had befallen the girl, Connie thrust the knife into her pocket and scrambled up the cliff by means of toe holds cut there by the ancient dwellers. She ran along the trail until she caught sight of Cecil and Helena standing where she had left them.

"Oh, you're all right, thank goodness," she gasped. "When I heard that scream I was frightened nearly out of my wits."

"I saw someone moving in the bushes!" Helena reported.

"Where?"

Helena pointed to a group of shrubs some distance above them. Connie knew that it would be impossible to reach the spot without a dangerous climb. Unarmed, she had no desire to investigate.

"Let's get away from here," Cecil urged. "You can't hope to learn the identity of that prowler."

Connie did not mention that already she had gained an important clue. She felt certain the knife belonged to Jim Barrows. But why would he be investigating the cliff dwellings? Was it possible that he was living in one of the *kivas*, hiding there in fear that the law would overtake him?

She hesitated, wondering if she ought not to go back and make a thorough search. Helena read her thought and grasped her by the hand.

"Do let's go away from here," she pleaded. "Cecil and I were wrong about wishing to come in the first place. Please don't go back into that dark hole under the cliff. Something dreadful might happen."

"All right, we'll return to the ranch," Connie said. "I doubt that we could learn anything to-night anyway."

"Who do you think was hiding in those bushes?" Cecil asked nervously as they mounted their horses.

"Oh, perhaps a cowboy from Slocer's Ranch," Connie replied carelessly. "One of the boys might have come over here just to see the cliff dwellings by moonlight. Nearly every cowboy has a sentimental streak, you know."

"I hadn't observed it," Helena responded dryly. "It doesn't seem to me the man would have run away unless he were afraid of being recognized."

Connie did not trust herself to offer any comment as they began the descent into the valley. The discovery that Jim Barrows was lurking in the vicinity disturbed her more than she cared to have Cecil and Helena know.

For the most part the three rode in silence. The incident of the night had served to sober Helena and her brother and they had lost their superior airs.

Ascending the trail on the far side of the canyon, they turned their horses toward Rainbow Ranch. Connie was dead tired but a great many things remained to be done before she could feel free to turn in.

"Don't forget that the roundup starts tomorrow at daybreak," she called to Cecil and Helena as the couple dismounted and walked toward the house.

"We'll be up," Helena promised.

During Connie's absence Cookie had nearly finished loading the chuck wagon. The girl helped him complete the task and then went to talk with Lefty regarding details of the next day's work.

"Has Blakeman returned yet?" she questioned.

"No, he hasn't," Lefty admitted. "This is a fine night for him to streak off somewhere. Leavin' all the work. Connie, I reckon you know your own business, but if you ask me, Blakeman ain't never had your best interests to heart."

"I know he's opposed to this roundup."

"He sure is, Connie. That's why he's layin' down on the job."

"I owe Blakeman money," Connie said slowly. "If it weren't for that I'd let him go now, but as it is my hands are tied."

"Sure, I can see how it is," Lefty admitted.

Connie started to turn away, and then abruptly halted.

"Oh, Lefty," she said, "I wish you'd be particularly alert during the roundup. I happen to know that Jim Barrows is keeping close to the ranch, and I'm afraid he may try to make trouble."

"Jim Barrows?" the cowboy asked in surprise.

"I saw him tonight, or at least I think I did," Connie replied, and went on to tell how she had picked up the silver knife on the trail near the cliff dwellings.

Lefty examined the knife carefully.

"That's his all right," he said. "Wonder what Jim was doing around there?"

"I mean to find out as soon as we get this roundup off our hands, Lefty. But remember, keep a sharp watch tomorrow. We can't afford to have anything go wrong."

"I'll be on my guard," the cowboy promised. "And I'll tip Alkali off too."

Despite her great weariness, Connie awoke the next morning feeling completely refreshed. At the first sign of dawn she was down at the corrals helping rope horses. Besides those required for the guests, each rider would need two extras.

At four-thirty the cowboys from the Slocer Ranch galloped into the courtyard, announcing themselves ready for the big drive. The foreman assigned them to their duties and with Lefty and Alkali they rode off again.

By five o'clock the chuck wagon was on its way. Mr. Grimes, Mr. Postil and the little girl went with Cookie. Helena and Cecil chose to follow on horseback.

Connie knew that the dudes would prove more of a handicap than an aid in the roundup, but she was pleased to see how much interest everyone was taking. Most amazing to her was the change of attitude shown by Helena and Cecil. The pair actually seemed eager to win her approval.

With the chuck wagon established in a temporary camp, Connie rode away to cover the eastern portion of the range. For several hours she kept to the saddle, rounding up every stray steer. Far to the southward she could see a great cloud of dust which meant that Alkali and Lefty, who covered that section, had their herd on the move. The Slocer boys would be slower for they were searching the canyons.

Irrespective of brand Connie rounded up every steer she could find. Nearly all bore the mark of the Rainbow outfit, but there were a few strays belonging to the Slocers and Pop Bradshaw.

It was nearly sundown before Connie could drive her steers to the knoll where the other cattle grazed. Alkali and the Slocer boys were riding through the herd cutting out those which did not bear the Rainbow brand.

Connie went to the chuck wagon for a cup of hot coffee and a dish of steaming stew. It was the first food she had tasted since morning.

"You look all done in," observed Lefty who had thrown himself on the ground for a few minutes' rest.

"Oh, I'm all right," Connie declared. "It's been a wonderful drive! I had no idea I owned so many steers. If I get anything like a fair price, I'll be able to pay my debts and have a tidy sum left."

"You ought to go back to the ranch and get some sleep tonight," Lefty advised. "We can hold the herd without you."

"Perhaps I will after supper," Connie agreed. "Are the dudes having a good time?"

"Old man Grimes said he enjoyed every minute of it," Lefty reported, pouring himself another cup of coffee. "He and Mr. Postil took the kid and went back to the ranch a few minutes ago."

Connie could see Helena and Cecil riding with Forest Blakeman, evidently under the impression that they were helping him keep the herd under control. While she was eating they came up to the chuck wagon, flushed and excited.

"Oh, it's been wonderful!" declared Helena excitedly. "I'd not have missed it for anything in the world. Cecil and I are staying tonight to help hold the herd."

"That's fine," replied Connie—"we need riders."

She avoided looking at Lefty who had a pained expression on his face. Presently the cowboy arose, and saddling a fresh pony, rode out to relieve Alkali.

Cookie soon had a hearty supper ready and both Cecil and Helena did justice to it, making no complaint at the rough fare. They did not notice that both Connie and Alkali kept glancing at the slowly darkening sky.

"Looks like a storm blowin' up," the cowboy presently remarked.

"Yes," agreed Connie. "And the cattle seem to be growing more restless. We may need more riders before morning. I'm staying, of course."

"Is there any danger of a stampede?" Cecil asked eagerly.

"Reckon it would give you a real thrill to see one," Alkali commented dryly. "Well, maybe you'll get your chance."

After supper while Helena and Cecil sat around the campfire, Connie rode slowly around the herd. The cattle seemed fairly quiet. A few animals were on their feet but most of them were lying down. Lefty's discordant voice could be heard singing an old cowboy song.

Connie rode over to talk with him.

"How does the weather look to you, Lefty?"

"Not so good," he admitted, squinting up at the moving clouds overhead. "We'll have rain before morning. I wish we had a few extra men."

"The cattle seem to be quiet."

"Sure, they are now, but there's something in the air, Connie. You can feel it. When the storm breaks, I'll be plumb surprised if they don't start rattlin' their hocks."

Connie went back to the campfire knowing that it was wise to get as much rest as possible. She

warned Cecil and his sister that a storm was coming, but both elected to remain. They spread out their bed tarps near the chuck wagon.

Connie fell asleep almost at once, but in a short while she was awake again. The air had grown cold. It was pitch dark.

Connie arose and tossed a log on the fire. She could not see the herd to the southward but she heard the rumble of hoofs. The steers were on the move again.

"I ought to be getting out there," Connie thought. "There's going to be trouble a-plenty."

Cookie had left the coffee pot on the bed of coals. She poured herself a cup of the strong brew, trying to get the sleep out of her eyes.

As she sipped the coffee she heard a horse pounding across the hard ground. Enid Bradshaw rode into the firelight, springing from the saddle.

"Connie," she said breathlessly, "there's going to be a bad storm, and your cows are sure to run. I came over to help if you need me."

"Thank you," replied Connie coldly, after a moment of silence. "We don't need any help."

"I know how you feel toward me," Enid said earnestly. "You think Pop and I have plotted to ruin you."

"You did take two of my guests away," Connie returned. "But in business and love they say all is fair."

"Connie, you must believe me—I didn't have anything to do with it. I never wanted my father to start the dude ranch in competition with you."

"I believe you, Enid," Connie said slowly. "I'm sure you wouldn't lie to me. After all, why should I be offended? Your father has a perfect right to go into the dude business if he likes."

"He never wanted to do it either," Enid went on desperately. "But we've been so hard pressed for money. The part I can't forgive is that he betrayed you."

"What do you mean, Enid?"

"Oh, Pop isn't running the ranch at all now—another party has gained control—a man who means to ruin you."

"The bank?"

"No, Connie—someone you've trusted. Pop will never forgive me for telling, but I must! I can't stand by and see you cheated out of everything you own."

"Who is it?" Connie demanded.

But Enid did not answer for just at that moment the very heavens seemed to open. A vivid streak of lightning zigzagged across the inky sky, and a torrent of rain descended. Then the earth trembled, and the sound struck fear to Connie's heart. The herd had stampeded!

Stampede

"The cattle are running!" cried Connie. "The boys never will be able to hold them in this storm!"

"We must get out there and help," Enid shouted grimly.

This time Connie did not refuse her aid. Before she could saddle Silvertail, Enid vanished into the night. Cecil and Helena, awakened by the sudden downpour, called to Connie, but she paid no heed. Pulling on her slicker, she leaped into the saddle and followed Enid.

The rain was coming down in torrents and another brilliant flash of lightning momentarily revealed a surging mass of steers. The terrified animals were running away from the camp toward the canyon. The earth shook under the pounding of their hooves.

All thought of the important revelation which Enid had been upon the point of making at the time the storm broke, had been swept from Connie's mind. But she felt warmed by the girl's generous offer of aid. Enid really was her friend after all. In this emergency, any feeling of resentment had been forgotten. The stampede called for quick action and courageous riding.

Connie did not need to dig in the rowels of her spurs for Silvertail knew what was expected of him. She could feel his mighty heart pounding against her legs as he raced to overtake the leaders of the herd.

Connie bent low over Silvertail's neck, trusting that there were no fences or badger holes ahead. Should her horse stumble she would be badly injured if not crushed to death.

Through the rain the girl saw someone riding ahead of her. She could not tell who it was, but a man turned in his saddle and shouted something at her. She did not distinguish a word above the roar. Farther away a rider was firing his revolver into the air, trying to stem the tide.

Connie, Alkali, and the boys from the Slocer Ranch outdistanced the leaders of the herd, fighting valiantly to turn them. The cattle had run less than a half mile when they began to circle.

"They're starting to mill!" Connie shouted.

"We'll hold 'em!" yelled Alkali.

Connie could hear the crackling of horns rubbing together. Each flash of lightning revealed the cattle churning into a tighter circle.

A cowboy rode close to Connie, rain spouting from his sombrero. She saw that it was Lefty.

"Look out for another break!" he shouted. "They're millin' too close!"

Suddenly two dark forms dashed out of the herd.

"Get 'em, Silvertail!" Connie cried.

She jumped her horse at the animals, sending them scurrying back into the churning mass.

The rain had slackened and Connie was hopeful that the cattle would quiet down. They were not milling so closely now. The riders were getting them well under control.

Then from the other side of the herd a revolver cracked, spitting a trail of fire into the black void.

"Who did that?" cried Lefty angrily. "Someone's shootin' straight into the herd!"

Connie heard the cowboy shout Cecil's name, but she did not believe that any of the dudes had been responsible for the shot. She was quite certain neither Helena nor her brother were armed, and she doubted that they had ridden out to help stop the herd. One of her own men was trying deliberately to start another stampede!

Already the mischief had been accomplished. At the point where the revolver had been discharged the herd swerved and broke apart. The cattle had started to run again.

Determined to learn the identity of the person who had started the stampede, Connie spurred Silvertail. Near the spot where the revolver had been fired she caught a glimpse of a rider. It was too dark to see his face clearly.

Then a ragged streak of lightning brightened the sky. With a start Connie recognized her foreman, Forest Blakeman. She could not believe that he had been guilty of such a low, contemptible act. But even as she was assailed with doubt, she saw him raise his revolver and shoot again—straight into the herd.

A great fury took possession of Connie. In a flash everything became clear to her. She understood now what Enid had intended to tell her.

From the very first Forest Blakeman had plotted to gain control of Rainbow Ranch. That was why he had not favored the roundup, knowing that if she succeeded in marketing her cattle, he would never be able to force her to sell at his own terms.

"How stupid and blind I have been," she thought.

Connie rushed her horse straight at the foreman. He turned in the saddle and saw her coming. As a flash of lightning illuminated the sky, she knew that he recognized her.

"Drop that gun!" she shouted furiously. "Drop it, you traitor!"

Blakeman wheeled his horse and disappeared into the darkness.

Connie did not pursue him. She could not have done it had she wished for Silvertail was running with the herd. A shiver ran down the girl's spine as the realization came to her that they were heading straight toward the canyon.

At this particular point the cliffs were unprotected by fences or trees. And there was a sheer drop of several hundred feet to the valley below. The canyon could not be more than a quarter of a mile away. Blakeman deliberately had stampeded the cattle in that direction, hoping that the animals would run over the precipice and be killed. Unless she could turn them in time, her entire herd would be lost!

Turning the Herd

Connie leaned low in the saddle and rode as she had never ridden before. But terror held her in its grip. Time was so short—the cliffs so near.

A frenzy took possession of the girl. Everything she had in the world was at stake. If the herd went over the precipice she would lose every animal and her last chance to save Rainbow Ranch. She *had* to turn the herd even at the risk of her own life.

Silvertail was racing alongside the leaders now, but they would not swerve. On they ran straight toward the cliffs with the herd thundering behind.

Frantically Connie tore off her slicker as she rode. Folding it, she used it to strike at the leaders. Time after time she brought it down on the rumps of the Longhorns, trying to swerve them to the right.

Connie's heart pounded from the exertion and her breath came in gasps, but still she struck out with all her strength. The cliffs were very close now.

It was no use, Connie thought with faltering courage. They were doomed to go over, she and Silvertail with the cattle. She could not save herself by turning back now. The tide of cattle would sweep them on as surely as if they were caught in the swift-moving stream of a mighty river.

Then the girl became aware of another rider. Enid too was riding at the head of the herd, discharging her revolver and fighting desperately to check the leaders. Alkali and Lefty must be there too, loyal and true, risking their lives to help her.

New courage and strength came to Connie. A touch of her spurs sent Silvertail leaping after a rangy Longhorn at the very head of the herd.

With all her might Connie brought the slicker across the animal's face. He whirled to the right and the herd followed. Keeping Silvertail between the frantic animals and the dark precipice Connie uttered a little prayer. She hoped fervently that the cattle would turn at a sharp enough angle to avoid the cliff. A flash of lightning showed that her horse was running not more than thirty feet parallel to the brink.

As they raced along Connie felt the herd edging sideways toward the precipice, slowly pressing her mount closer and closer to destruction. Desperately she spurred Silvertail alongside the leading steer and slashed with her slicker at the animal's head. The steer swerved in the opposite direction carrying his blind followers clear of the brink. Connie's heart leaped. She had won!

Although the danger was past, the work was by no means done. It took a half hour of hard riding before the animals could be halted in their mad run. But at last they were milling again so that the cowboys could hold them by riding slowly around the herd.

Not until then did Connie have an opportunity to speak with Enid.

"You were wonderful," she told the girl. "I'll never forget it—never. You risked your life to save my cattle."

"I did no more than Lefty or Alkali or any of the boys," Enid answered quietly. "Besides, I owe you a great deal, Connie. I must tell you about Forest Blakeman. He has deliberately plotted to ruin you."

"I know," Connie responded. "I learned the truth tonight when I saw him shoot into the herd."

"Then he was the one who stampeded the cattle! What a criminal thing to do! But it is in keeping with his character."

"Tell me everything you know about Blakeman," Connie urged.

"Months ago he loaned my father money, and he has made trouble for us ever since. At the time of the rodeo he forced him to keep Catapult out of the show, expecting to win a large sum of money for himself. But something went wrong—"

"I know about that," Connie nodded.

"Pop didn't wish to deceive his friends but he had no choice. Oh, Connie, that was why I felt so ashamed to face you. I suspected too that Blakeman intended to ruin you, but I couldn't tell you without exposing Pop's part in the affair."

"Substituting another steer for Catapult wasn't such a terribly serious thing, Enid," Connie said kindly. "Please don't take it so hard."

"There's more to it than that. After the rodeo Blakeman came to our ranch and threatened my father. He made him do exactly what he said. Pop didn't want to start a dude ranch to rival yours. Blakeman arranged to have Miss Parker and her friend come to our place too. He wanted you to fail in your enterprise."

"I realize that now," Connie said bitterly. "Only a miracle saved me tonight. But why has Blakeman done all these things to me?"

"Because he's grasping and cruel," Enid replied. "Dude ranching is going to develop into a big thing out here, and your place is the cream of the lot. You have natural scenery and the cliff dwellings will draw a great many guests. Once you get started your business will grow by leaps. Blakeman has known that, and he's been determined to gain control for himself."

"I'm glad you came to tell me all this, Enid. It's cleared up so much misunderstanding."

"Then you'll forgive Pop and me?" the girl asked eagerly. "In our hearts we've wished you only success."

"Of course I forgive you," Connie returned heartily. "And now I have something disagreeable to do. I must find Blakeman."

Connie knew that the foreman had disappeared immediately after he had fired into the herd. Undoubtedly aware that she had recognized him, he had fled from the scene. He might have gone back to the ranch house to pack up his belongings. If she rode hard she might intercept him.

Connie did not say anything to Alkali or Lefty for they were busy with the cattle. But as she started

away, Enid rode after her.

"I'm going along, Connie," she declared. "It's not safe for you to face Blakeman alone. You don't know that man as I do. He might try anything."

"I imagine he's skipped out by this time," Connie replied. "But let's see if we can catch him."

The first rays of the morning sun were coloring the East as they rode across the range toward the ranch. When they were still some distance away, Connie drew rein and her companion likewise halted. They both had observed a lone horseman leaving Rainbow Ranch.

"That looks like Blakeman," Connie said. "He's riding off now."

"But he's not going toward Red Gulch," returned Enid. "He's heading for the canyon."

"Come on," Connie urged, "we mustn't let him get away."

The girls raced their tired steeds on toward the horseman. Apparently he did not observe their approach for he was traveling in the opposite direction and they were a long distance away. Blakeman was riding hard too, and they could not gain.

Presently they saw the man disappear down into the canyon.

"Enid, I believe he's taking the South trail toward the cliff dwellings!" Connie exclaimed.

"Maybe we ought to let him go. We'll never catch him now."

"Yes, we will," insisted Connie stubbornly. "He'll not be able to travel very fast down in the canyon."

Minutes later, their ponies breathing hard, the girls reached the top of the canyon. Mounting the other side they could see Forest Blakeman.

"He's going straight to the cliff dwellings!" Connie exclaimed. "I wonder why——"

She sprang from her horse, tying him to a tree.

"You're giving up the pursuit, Connie?" asked Enid in surprise.

"No, but I'd rather Blakeman wouldn't know we're following him. He's up to something, Enid, and I intend to learn what it is. I know a short-cut to the other side but the trail isn't wide enough for our horses."

Enid slid from the saddle and quickly tied her pony beside Silvertail. Then Connie led the way down the trail. Whenever they were within view of Blakeman they took care to bend low behind the bushes which overhung the path. The caution was unnecessary. The foreman never glanced back.

"He's making straight for the cliff dwellings all right," Connie observed a few minutes later. "We'll take this fork in the trail and circle, coming in from the other direction."

The girls lost sight of the man as he disappeared behind a wall of rock. Their own trail wound deeper into the canyon, past a spring which in days gone by had provided water for the cliff dwellers.

"We're following the path actually used by the women of the tribe when they came for water," Connie explained as the girls hurried along. "This is the shortest route to the cliff house, but it's a hard climb."

They had gone only a few steps, when in turning a sharp bend, Connie came to an abrupt halt. Tied to a pine tree on the slope was a pinto pony.

"That's not a horse from Rainbow Ranch!" Enid exclaimed in surprise.

"No," answered Connie, staring at the pony. "I never saw it before. It couldn't have been left here by Blakeman because he's on the other trail."

The girls looked quickly about but they saw no sign of a rider. Hastening on again, they climbed a rocky path toward the high cliffs. As they drew closer, they approached cautiously, keeping an alert watch for Forest Blakeman.

Presently they saw his horse tied up at the same point where Connie, Cecil and Helena had left their steeds the previous night, but the foreman had vanished.

"He must be somewhere in the cave back under the cliff," Connie whispered. "Perhaps down in one of the *kivas*."

"But what could he be doing down there?" Enid asked blankly.

"Let's get closer and see if we can find out," Connie urged.

They followed the trail upward, coming to a tunnel so narrow that they had trouble in squeezing through on hands and knees. Emerging at the end, Connie and Enid stepped out on a wide shelf. Just ahead were the ruined dwellings, built snugly under the lip of the cliff.

"Look!" whispered Connie.

She pointed toward one of the *kivas* at the far end of the shelf upon which they stood. A crude ladder leading down into the hole wiggled slightly as if someone were climbing on it. Then Forest Blakeman's head and shoulders appeared.

Although the girls were unsheltered he did not see them immediately. That was because he was engrossed in examining something in his hand. Connie saw that it was a roll of bills. As he put the money into his pocket she and Enid ran forward.

"Just a minute, Forest Blakeman!"

At the sound of Connie's voice, the foreman whirled around to face the girls. A look of fear gave way to one of insolent defiance.

"Well?" he asked brazenly.

"You have a great many things to explain, Forest Blakeman," said Connie grimly. "First, why did you stampede my herd?"

The man laughed harshly.

"Why did I stampede your herd?" he mocked. "I'd advise you not to make rash accusations without proof."

"I have it and that's why you tried to get away!" Connie cried. "And another thing—where did you get that roll of money which I saw you counting? You had it cached in the *kiva* and it's my money! Money that you stole from me that night at Eagle Pass!"

"You're crazy," muttered Blakeman, but his expression disclosed that Connie's accusation had been a true one.

"You were the one who held me up," Connie cried with conviction. "You've kept the money hidden here in the *kiva*, and that's why you never wanted anyone to come near this place. Give me my

money!"

Blakeman started to retreat. Connie and Enid followed.

"Give me my money," Connie repeated again. "If you don't—"

The foreman whirled around.

"I'll give you something else," he shouted angrily. "When you strike the bottom of the canyon you'll not be apt to carry any tales!"

He hurled himself toward the girls. Enid gave a piercing scream. Whether or not the man intended to push them off the narrow ledge the girls never knew for before he could touch them a cool voice rang out.

"Stand where you are, Forest Blakeman. And reach for the sky!"

Wheeling around, Enid and Connie saw Jim Barrows leap nimbly down from the rocks, his gun trained on the foreman.

The End of the Trail

The foreman slowly raised his hands above his head. Jim Barrows frisked him of his revolver and took possession of the roll of bills which he tossed over to Connie. She quickly counted the sum.

"There's exactly seven hundred dollars here," she reported. "Just fifty less than I lost."

"I reckon Kerrigan spent the fifty," said Jim.

"What did you call me?" demanded the foreman savagely.

"Jack Kerrigan—wanted in Texas for cattle stealing and on a few other charges. You've eluded the authorities very cleverly, Jack, but the law has caught up with you at last."

"Are you a government man?" Connie gasped.

"Reckon I am, Miss," the man agreed, without taking his gaze from the foreman. "Keep your hands up, Jack, and don't try any monkey business."

"I don't understand at all," murmured Connie in bewilderment. "I thought—"

"Just what I hoped you would," finished the detective. "If you had suspected who I was my entire purpose would have been defeated. I'll explain everything after I've taken this hombre to jail. March on down the trail, Jack!"

Connie and Enid, still somewhat dazed by what had happened, followed the two men. Barrows compelled the foreman to ride ahead of him down the trail while he kept him covered. The girls had a dozen questions which they wished to ask, but the detective seemed in no mood for explanations. He promised them he would return to Rainbow Ranch just as soon as he had delivered his prisoner to the sheriff at Red Gulch.

"I'm hopelessly mixed now," Connie confided to Enid after they had parted company with the detective. "To think that I believed Jim Barrows might have been the one who robbed me of my money!"

"I don't wonder you arrived at such a conclusion," Enid replied after she had heard of the various evidence which had come into her friend's possession. "So many things aren't explained even now."

But the girls did not have long to wait until all of their questions were answered. By the time they had changed into dry clothing and refreshed themselves with breakfast, Jim Barrows returned to the ranch.

"I'll start at the beginning," he declared. "First of all my name isn't Jim Barrows. Instead it is Jim Ragon."

"So that accounts for the initialed handkerchief which I picked up," Connie commented.

"Yes, and I suppose you've guessed that I came here for the deliberate purpose of getting a job. I had been tipped off that Blakeman might be the man I was after."

"You weren't sick at all that day I found you on the trail?"

"I'm afraid I was playing possum. I thought I might appeal to your sympathy if you thought I was down and out. So I waited for you on the trail. It was a mean advantage to take, but it did serve my purpose. You were kind enough to give me a job."

"Blakeman was suspicious of you from the very first."

"He didn't like me," the detective admitted, "but until today I am sure he did not suspect who I was. You understand now why I was trying to break into his chest?"

"You were after evidence."

"Yes, and I did succeed in getting a paper which definitely links your foreman with a crime committed in Texas. I could have arrested him yesterday but by waiting I hoped to learn more."

"Did you think that he was the person who robbed me at Eagle Pass?" Connie questioned.

"Yes, I felt certain of it. I thought that by keeping watch of him I might learn where he had cached the money."

Connie took a silver knife from her pocket, offering it to the detective.

"Here is something which belongs to you, I believe."

"Where did you find it?" he asked quickly.

"I picked it up last night on the trail to the cliff dwellings."

"I must have dropped it when I followed your foreman there," the detective responded. "I've been watching him ever since I started working here at the ranch. Finally I figured out that his secret trips to the cliffs must have some significance. Last night I searched the *kivas* without success. Today I lay in wait for Blakeman, as you know, with better luck."

"What will happen to him?" Connie asked.

The detective shrugged.

"Oh, he'll probably get twenty years if he pleads guilty. I have him locked up at the jail now. Late this afternoon I'm starting back to Texas with him."

"Then I may not see you again," Connie said regretfully. "You must forgive me for discharging you."

"You did me a service," the man smiled. "The only thing I worried about was that you might tell Blakeman I had been prying into his chest."

"I'll always be grateful to you," Connie said earnestly. "And you'll be remembered as the finest hand I ever had!"

"Maybe you'll see me again next summer," the man promised as he prepared to ride away. "I've taken a liking to this ranch. I'd enjoy spending my vacation here."

"We'll be looking for you back next year," Connie declared.

Later in the morning the girls rode to Red Gulch themselves. By that time the cowboys had driven the cattle to the stockyards, and the loading was nearly completed.

"Did we lose many animals in the stampede?" Connie asked Lefty anxiously.

"Only two," he answered. "You're a-sittin' pretty now, Connie. This shipment ought to net you a nice

amount."

"I'll not need very much of the money to pay off my bank debt," she told him gaily. "With the seven hundred dollars I already have, I'll make a first payment on the note. Then as soon as my check comes back for this stock, I'll settle it."

"Looks like you'll get a good market for your cattle too," Lefty declared. "You ought to have quite a bit left over."

"I can use it," laughed Connie. "Oh, I have wonderful plans! I'll remodel, and I'll buy thoroughbred stock. Perhaps I'll build a new wing on the ranch house and advertise for dudes!"

"Going into the business strong?"

"That's right," Connie agreed. "This morning Mr. Grimes said he intends to come back next year bringing Cecil and Helena. And he knows several other people he expects to interest in our place."

"I could do without Cecil myself," Lefty muttered.

"Oh, he's improving every day," Connie laughed. "In another year perhaps you'll make a real cowboy of him."

"Wranglin' dudes ain't my favorite pastime."

"Oh, that reminds me. Lefty, you're to have a new job—and if we do well, a new salary to go with it."

"What doin'?" the cowboy asked cautiously.

"You're to be the new foreman."

Lefty stared at Connie as if he could not believe his ears. His mouth widened in a grin.

"That's sure swell of you, Connie. I—I don't know what to say."

His horny hand reached out and grasped hers.

After leaving the stockyards, Connie went directly to the First National Bank. Mr. Haynes received her with a cordiality which was amusing to the girl. He gave her a receipt for the seven hundred dollars, assuring her that she need not worry about the remaining amount.

"Thank you," said Connie, "but I'll pay off the rest of my debt in three days."

And she was able to keep her word. The sale of the cattle netted far more than the girl had expected. Upon receiving the check in payment, her first act was to settle the note with the bank.

"Rainbow Ranch is really mine again," Connie thought with satisfaction as she rode slowly home.

Her gaze wandered toward the vermilion cliffs. She had never seen them quite so beautiful as they were at this moment, tinted by the last rays of the afternoon sun.

Behind her sloped the golden plain. Ahead in majestic splendor rose the painted mountains. Connie drew rein to gaze for a moment at the familiar scene. Then with a gay laugh she spurred Silvertail into a brisk canter and they raced home to Rainbow Ranch.

THE END



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CONNIE CARL AT RAINBOW RANCH ***

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