



The
RANCH GIRLS

AT
HOME AGAIN

MARGARET VANDERCOOK

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THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

The Ranch Girls at Home Again



BOOKS BY MARGARET VANDERCOOK

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"What Are You Talking About, Ralph Merritt?" She Demanded
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THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

The Ranch Girls at Home Again

—BY—
MARGARET VANDERCOOK

ILLUSTRATED BY
RALPH P. COLEMAN

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The Ranch Girls at Home Again

CHAPTER I

THE RACE

AN hour before sunset a number of persons were standing in a small group facing the western horizon. But although the prairie was covered with a crop of young grass, a pale green mirror to reflect the colors of the sun, they were not looking at the landscape but toward two figures on horseback, a girl and a boy who were riding across country as rapidly as their horses could carry them.

"Will Jack Ralston ever learn to be less reckless about her riding, Jim?" Ruth Colter inquired. "Since we returned from Europe it seems to me that she has grown more attached to the Rainbow ranch than ever before. Yet at about the time we were married, dear, do you know I had a fancy that Jack and Frank Kent were going to care for each other seriously. Of course, I was mistaken since he has never been to see her in almost a year."

Then with both hands held out invitingly, Ruth received a small pink and white bundle which Jim deposited in them with infinite care. For the bundle consisted of an absurdly tiny person measuring its early existence by weeks instead of months or years. And its face, though as delicately shell pink as the blanket enveloping it, yet bore a ridiculous resemblance to the tall man's in whose arms it had lately been borne.

A moment later and Jim Colter strode forward with a blond girl at his side. For by this time the two riders were almost within hailing distance, the girl's horse scarcely a neck in advance of her companion's.

"Carlos don't like Jack," Frieda Ralston remarked unexpectedly to her guardian, "so I do wish that she would not keep on doing things to irritate him. He perfectly hates to think that a girl can beat him at any outdoor sport and yet he rarely gets ahead of Jack. Indians are so strange and silent that sometimes I feel afraid he may try and revenge himself upon her for some fancied wrong. See, he is furious now at her having won their race!"

"Well, I expect Miss Ralston will be able to manage him;" Jim returned. "Nevertheless, the boy has not turned out as I had hoped; he is lazy and proud and extremely ungrateful. Sometimes I have half an idea of turning him off the ranch, and I came very near doing it the other day, only Jack pleaded for him. Because he is Olive's friend she seems sentimental about keeping him on here, at least, until Olive joins us. Bravo, Jack! Be careful, you hoyden, don't you know you are a grown woman!" he cried.

And with his tone divided between admiration and anger, Jim caught at the flying figure of a girl as she landed lightly on the ground at his feet. She had jumped from her pony while it was still going at full speed and then run along beside it until she was able to stop without losing her balance.

"I wish you would not behave like a circus rider, Jack," Frieda scolded. For at eighteen Frieda Ralston had become a far more dignified and reposeful character than her older sister, who was now past twenty.

Nevertheless Jack only made a slight grimace, calling back over her shoulder carelessly, "Carlos, see to my horse, will you, when it gets to the stable?" And then in a kinder tone, "Oh, never mind, I had forgotten; some one else can look after him. Of course you will be interested to hear the news from Olive—Miss Van Mater," she corrected herself. "I am going to tell the family at once." Then she walked on between Jim and Frieda, with an arm laid lightly across her sister's shoulder. And without replying Carlos followed the little party.

He was a beautiful slender Indian boy of about fifteen or sixteen, with skin the color of bronze, with straight dark hair and moody, unsatisfied black eyes—the same Indian boy who had formerly helped Olive to return to the ranch after her enforced capture by old Laska, and had afterwards sought refuge there himself. As a small lad, in spite of his pride and difficult disposition, the Ranch girls and Ruth had been fond of him, but since their return from Europe they had found Carlos a problem. He was unwilling to work like the other men, either on the ranch or at the mine, and was equally determined not to go to school except when forced into it. Indeed, so far as possible, the boy had insisted upon living in the midst of civilization like one of his chieftain ancestors. Oftentimes he chose to sit idly in the sun doing nothing, save perhaps to clean his gun or else gaze for hours at the sky overhead. Then again he might without warning disappear on a hunting expedition, taking any horse from the stables that he wished for his purpose, and usually returning with game or furs, which he sometimes bestowed on Jean or Frieda or Ruth, but never on Jack.

At the present moment his manner was absurdly dignified and haughty, since he particularly objected to being treated at any time as though he were a servant, and considered Jack's request in that light. However, as no one was paying the slightest attention to him, it was self-evident that he was longing to hear Jacqueline Ralston's news.

"Have you heaps of letters, Jack? Do please hurry and give them to us." Jean Bruce called out, walking away from the two young men with whom she had been recently talking. One of them was Ralph Merritt, the engineer in charge of the Rainbow mine, and the other a visitor from one of the neighboring ranches. For as Jack had always insisted, wherever Jean was to be found there also was a masculine admirer, even in a wilderness.

Over her shoulder Jack carried a small leather mail bag, which she now opened; but before drawing forth her letters she leaned over and glanced anxiously into the face of the small baby snuggled in Ruth's arms.

"Nothing has happened to Jimmikin since I have been away? He has not cut a tooth or anything, has he, Ruth?" she queried. And as the others laughed, the baby being at the present hour only about seven weeks old, Jack drew forth more than a dozen letters and began passing them around to the different members of her family.

"Here, Jean, of course there are more for you than for any of the rest of us, and in so many handwritings that it looks as if you kept a correspondence school for young men. And, Frieda, I am sorry I had to discover this was from Tom. But the youth does send you so many boxes of candy, I can't help recognizing the address. Ruth, won't you ask everybody please to wait here a moment for I have something really important to tell you." Then Jack's radiant face grew graver.

"I have at last had a long letter from Olive," she explained. "And a week after her grandmother's death the will was read." The girl glanced about her. Ralph Merritt and their visitor had walked off several yards, so that only the few persons interested were standing near.

"Of course old Madame Van Mater has made the curious will that we might have expected. For it seems that she has given Olive one more year to make up her mind whether or not she will marry Donald Harmon. If she does, of course they will then inherit the greater portion of the estate with only a few legacies to be paid outside. But if she does not decide to marry him—and here is the strange thing—at the end of the year another will is to be read, which will divide the

property differently. And no one knows just how, for this second will is sealed and in the possession of her executors. So Olive may finally be left penniless or she may receive everything, or else Donald may suffer the same fate. It is a queer and interesting state of things, isn't it?" Jack concluded.

"Yes, and pretty well calculated to make everybody that had anything to do with the old lady uncomfortable for another twelve months longer anyhow," Jim Colter replied frowning. "Funny how the old woman arranged to make her relatives and friends as miserable after her death as she had before it. It is pretty hard on both Olive and Donald. In the end I have an idea that the money will go to some charity."

In reply Jean slowly shook her head, turning over the envelopes in her hand with pretended interest, but with her thoughts plainly not centered upon them.

"Olive is very foolish," she remarked at length. "Really I can't see why she does not make up her mind to do as her grandmother wished. Don is a charming fellow and it is ridiculous not to appreciate the value of so much money. Why the longer I live the more important it seems to me!"

Too displeased with Jean's unexpected burst of worldliness to discuss the question with her, Jim marched a few steps away. Ruth was distressed, but being a woman she was not so unmindful of what lay behind the girl's apparently careless speech, while Frieda became immediately influenced by her cousin's point of view, just as she always had been since they were small girls. So it was Jack who was the one person in the group to take Jean's statement lightly, for she merely laughed, saying:

"Oh, of course we know that Jean is the really worldly person in our family, so we must watch and see how she lives up to her sentiments! Still you have not yet heard my most important piece of news. Olive has also written that she is completely worn out with all the business and worry of these last weeks and so she is coming to us at once. She asks if she may bring Miss Winthrop along with her for a visit?" Jack paused for a moment, looking inquiringly about at the faces of the others. "Of course she may," she ended. "It will be a pleasure to have Miss Winthrop, and besides I don't see how we possibly could refuse."

Frieda held up two white hands protestingly. She was not an industrious person and so devoted a great deal of her valuable time to her toilet instead of to more serious labors. "Oh, dear," she began, "it will be just like going back to Primrose Hall again to have Miss Winthrop staying in our house. Goodness, how

she will disapprove of me for having no ambition to improve myself as Olive does. I shall have to lead a changed life!"

"Thank Providence, then. Do ask Miss Winthrop to come on the next train," Jim chuckled, returning at this instant, while Ruth shook her head thoughtfully.

"Naturally it will be an opportunity for all of us to have a woman like Miss Winthrop for our guest," she declared, in a slightly worried tone. "But has it ever occurred to any one of you where we are to put her? The poor old Lodge is so crowded now with babies and girls and Jim Colter that we have not a single spare room. Oh, of course Olive can be tucked in anywhere, but——"

"Jim, do take your son and let us walk over and look at our new house," Jack at once suggested. "Surely there will be enough bedrooms finished by the time Olive and Miss Winthrop arrive, for some of the family, so that we may give ours to our guests. Funny how we cling to the dear old Rainbow Lodge in spite of our new grandeur."

Then Jack moved on ahead, leading the way through the grove of cottonwood trees almost up to the old house. She turned to the left and about an eighth of a mile farther along came to a slight elevation, recently planted with shrubs and evergreens. There, facing the little party, was a splendid pile of stone and wood that was evidently growing into an old-time colonial house.

For of course now that the girls were older and wealthier, and Jim and Ruth married, Rainbow Lodge was no longer suited to their needs. And as the Rainbow Mine still continued to yield a handsome income, the new house had occupied a great deal of the family's time and attention since their return from Europe. For it had been both Jim's and Jack's desire to build a wonderful colonial mansion here in their own beautiful Western country, where in times past men and women had been content with rude cabins. Since a colonial house meant to Jim Colter the beauty and dignity of the old Virginia homes that he remembered in his boyhood and since Jacqueline had long cherished a photograph of the place owned by her Southern grandfather who had been killed in the Confederate army, the new house was to be as nearly as possible a replica of the latter.

In the interest of discussing what the workmen had accomplished since their last visit to the new building, no one noticed that the Indian boy, Carlos, who had followed the others up to this time, listening intently to every word of their conversation, had stalked silently away as soon as Olive's name ceased to be mentioned. His face wore a more pleasing expression, and unlike his usual habit

he afterwards joined old Aunt Ellen in the kitchen, who was still the ranch girls' cook and devoted friend. To her he at once imparted the information concerning the expected visitors; then he retired to his own tent in the yard. For Carlos had absolutely refused to live in the ranch house with the other employees about the estate and had erected for himself an Indian tepee at some distance.



CHAPTER II

AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

ON a pile of boards in a great unfinished room Frieda Ralston stood facing—the unknown future.

In the family it was sometimes said that though on occasions the younger Miss Ralston could assume the airs of a social queen, at very many other times she was more of a baby than ever. For of course Frieda had not yet been touched by any of life's hard realities, and since her sister's recovery from her accident her way had been fairly plain sailing. For did she not have health, youth, plenty of money and an adoring family? What else was there to wish for? Thus far she had never taken any of her mild love affairs with the least seriousness and had no idea of "settling down," as she expressed it, for at least ten years to come. So what was there for Frieda to do but each day to grow fairer and more charming, like a lovely wax doll that had come to life and taken upon itself the airs and graces of a really grown-up person. Because Jack objected, Frieda some time ago had given up her former fashion of wearing her heavy yellow hair in a Psyche knot, and in these months at the ranch when no strangers were about had returned to her old childish custom of two long braids. On dress occasions, however, her coiffure, copied after a Paris model, could again be made bewilderingly lovely.

On this particular occasion Frieda had unfortunately neglected to attire herself for the rôle which she was about to play, as she happened to be wearing an old blue and white middie blouse and a short duck skirt with one long plait hanging over each shoulder.

"I wonder," she began at this moment, though no one chanced to be looking toward her, "which one of us will finally fall heir to this grand new house we are building? I have just been thinking, houses are not like clothes, meant for one person and to last through one or two seasons: they may last through many generations and no telling what changes in a family."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Jean, straightway whirling around to regard her cousin with astonishment and then striking an attitude of mock admiration. "Listen, everybody, please, Frieda is making a speech! She wants to know which of us shall become the royal family of Rainbow Castle. It is an interesting question, dear; I never should have thought it of you!"

Frieda hesitated, but the next instant went on quite seriously. "Of course it won't be you though, Jean, because of all of us, Ruth, Olive, Jim, and Jack and me, why I think you love the Rainbow ranch the least. You will never want to stay on in the West once you are married; that visit you made the Princess Colonna in Rome has completely spoiled you."

And now it was Jean's turn to endure the family laughter, and though she made no reply, she showed more annoyance than the accusation merited.

Still surprisingly thoughtful, Frieda continued: "I suppose that either Jim or Jack and their children ought to inherit the new house, for of course I am the youngest and have done nothing toward making the ranch a success as Jim and Jack have. Ruth, you and Jim would want Jack to have the place after she marries and has children, wouldn't you? And yet not long ago, do you know, I believed that in spite of loving the ranch best, Jack would be the first one of us to leave it for good. I don't think so now," she added hastily, catching an expression on her sister's face that she could not altogether understand.

But by this time Jack had marched across the room and was gently but firmly pulling Frieda down from her exalted position.

"I suppose hearing the news of old Madame Van Mater's will has gone to your head, Frieda darling," Jack protested. "But really no one of us wants to hear you arranging our futures and talking about our descendants, as if fifty years might suddenly pass away before tea time. Of course 'Rainbow Castle,' as Jean calls our new home, shall belong to the one of us who wishes it and needs it the most. But which of us that may be—well, in the words of Mr. William Shakespeare, 'that is the question.'"

Jack now turned to her cousin, Jean, who was standing before one of the unfinished windows looking out at the beautiful view. For the prospect from the new house was far lovelier than any outlook from Rainbow Lodge, since it stood on a higher incline and showed a wider sweep of the prairies.

"Jean," Jack asked, "I wonder if you happen to know where Ralph Merrit is?"

There is something Jim and I want particularly to talk over with him. I happened to notice he was with you last. Did he say whether he was going to have dinner with us tonight or with the men at the Ranch House?"

The other girl shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"Really, Jack, I don't see why I should be expected to know Ralph Merrit's plans because I was talking to him for ten minutes. But what is all this mystery about anyway? What is going on down at the mine? Ralph looks either as if he were working himself to death or as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. To tell you the truth, I believe he did ask me to tell you that he was going away for several days perhaps. He preferred to talk over matters with you on his return. But do come on home, Ruth," Jean finished crossly, "it is much too cold for the baby to be outdoors now the sun is down. And Jim and Jack always prefer to have their business secrets alone. I suppose we have no right to be interested. But of course there can't be any serious trouble at the Rainbow Mine while Ralph is managing things." Then Ruth, Jean, the baby and Frieda walked on ahead, leaving Jim and Jack to follow slowly behind. For in spite of the accusation in Jean's speech, her cousin had made no denial.

With her hand inside his, after the fashion she had as a little girl when anything about the big ranch troubled her, Jack gazed earnestly up into her old friend and guardian's strong and gentle countenance.

"I am right not to speak of this trouble Ralph Merrit is having with the men at Rainbow Mine, don't you think so, Jim?" she queried. "You see I don't understand the situation anyhow, and it all may come to nothing in the end. So any discussion does not seem to me fair to Ralph. Surely the men are only grumbling! Why next to you I feel that we owe our fortune to the splendid way Ralph Merrit has managed the mine. And you know you have always liked him better than any other young man we have ever known, better even than Frank Kent."

Jim cleared his throat. "Have I said that I had changed my mind about Merrit?" he demanded. "You are right, Jack; you just lie low and say nothing even to the men who may come to you with their complaints. In my opinion the trouble is this: The fellows at work on Rainbow Mine are most of them middle-aged men, kind of down-and-out miners and a hard lot, who have either given up the hope of discovering gold for themselves or postponed searching for it for a while so as to first make a good living out of us. Well, you see, compared to

them Ralph Merrit is a kid. And of course his being a real mining engineer graduated out of a college and placed as the boss over them makes the older men kind of sore. Then, besides paying our miners their regular wages we have been giving them a percentage also of the amount of gold that is taken out of the mine each month. There is still enough pay dirt for us to live pretty comfortable, but the men say we ought to be getting a whole lot more. Merrit isn't certain yet, he wants to make some more investigations. The gold that is a whole lot deeper down under the earth may prove either too dangerous or too expensive to get out. So at bottom I believe that is what the real grievance is, they want Ralph to hurry up. It is nothing to them to have us sink, say a hundred thousand dollars, in new mining machinery and maybe get nothing back. So they have been spreading ugly stories, say Merrit does not know his job and that he is too busy speculating and trying to earn a fortune that way for himself to care what becomes of the mine."

After this speech Jack kept silent for several moments and they were almost at the Lodge before she replied:

"Look here, Jim, don't be angry with me if I say something. Of course I know Ralph is doing the best he can for us at the mine. But about that other story—really you ought to try and find out if it is true. John Raines, one of the miners, said he wanted to tell me something; do let him tell you instead. Because, Jim dear, if once you believe in a person you know you believe in him forever, and yet maybe Ralph may have gotten into mischief. You see I should not wish to be prying into his private affairs, but it is as plain as the nose on your face to everybody but you that Ralph is in love with Jean and always has been for that matter, though I must confess he has been paying her a good deal less attention lately. And as for Jean, well I don't believe she will marry any one who cannot give her wealth and position; yet just the same it would be wiser to know the truth about Ralph. Couldn't you ask him to tell you? I believe he would. Oh dear me, I do hope we won't have a strike at the mine or any other kind of trouble."

"You sound pretty sensible, partner," Jim agreed, "maybe I had better look into things a little more. It never hurts any fellow to keep his eyes open. But let me tell you that I have never heard of a gold mine yet, whether it was a good one or a poor one, that did not keep on piling up trouble."

CHAPTER III

THE ENGINEER OF THE RAINBOW MINE

READERS of the Ranch Girls' Series probably remember that the first meeting between the members of the Rainbow Ranch family and Ralph Merrit occurred several years before, while they were making a caravan journey to the Yellowstone Park.

And Jean Bruce had been Ralph's original acquaintance. How many times since had they not laughed at the vision of the girl idly washing her hair in an outdoor stream with no thought of a stranger in many miles. Then there was the story of their first luncheon together with only Frieda as chaperon and Ruth and Olive's return, the storm, and Jim and Jack's disaster by the deserted mine. Within less than a week Ralph Merrit had appeared like an old and tried friend. And from the hour of his arrival to advise and assist Jim Colter in regard to the Rainbow Mine he had seemed almost like one of the family. Only twice had he left his work for any length of time—once to visit his mother and sister in Chicago, and the second time to say farewell to the Ranch girls when they sailed for Europe. His friends understood that a large part of his generous salary went each month to the support of his people, and that in his present position Ralph was not making his fortune so quickly in the West as he had hoped. But was that the reason why he had been taking so many short trips away from the ranch in the past few months and why he had recently changed so decidedly in his appearance and manner?

Though Jean may have had her own special reasons for observing these changes most, no one else was wholly blind. Could it be possible that Ralph Merrit's difficulties were graver than they suspected?

There is a possibility that Jack Ralston's and even Jim's faith might have been shaken had they been able to follow the young man's proceedings on the afternoon of their conversation about him.

He and the neighbor, who had simply been a visitor at the ranch for afternoon

tea, walked along without much conversation until they came to within the neighborhood of Rainbow Creek—that portion of the creek where important mining machinery had been set up and near which a shaft had been sunk, forming a narrow entrance into the Rainbow Mine.

As the hour for work had passed some time before, the place was now deserted and Ralph Merrit showed no interest in lingering in its vicinity. Yet the discovery of the surprising wealth contained in the Rainbow Mine had never ceased being a subject of interest, of speculation and oftentimes of acute envy to many of the ranch owners in that end of Wyoming, and the young man, Hugo Manning, who was Ralph's present companion, had only recently purchased a cattle ranch about ten miles away. He had come from the western part of New York State and this was his first sight of a gold mine.

Plainly Ralph was at first simply bored by the stupid questions that his neighbor asked of him. Then unexpectedly the young engineer's expression changed and his face flushed angrily.

"I hear that your famous Rainbow gold mine is panning out," the young man had remarked carelessly. "They tell me around here that you have already taken out all the gold that lies near enough to the surface to be of value. They insist that it is going to cost you more to buy new machinery and try out new methods of mining than the gold is worth. Better advise your friends to sell out while selling is good and before their mine loses its reputation."

Ralph made a queer noise in his throat that was half anger, and yet he did not positively deny the suggestion. "Oh, they say that, do they?" he exclaimed. "It's funny how much sooner strangers find out about your affairs than you do yourself! I don't believe Mr. Colter or Miss Ralston have yet had to complain of any lack of money. When that time comes then we shall decide what is best to do."

And Ralph started to move along, but his companion waited, hesitating for half a moment. "I say, Merrit," he continued, "if the Rainbow Mine owners should make up their minds that they want to get out, I wish you would let me hear the news first. Isn't it possible that they might be willing to take a lump sum down and not run the risk of losing what they have already got by investing in new machinery? I believe it mostly belongs just to the two Ralston girls. But a company of men, say in New York City, might look at the proposition differently. They could afford to sink a few hundred thousands easier."

Ralph nodded dryly and this time walked on so resolutely that his companion was obliged to hurry in order to keep alongside and to hear the answer to his request.

All the reply he received was: "Thank you; it is kind of surprising to meet a fellow who knows people who are willing to lose money."

But when at the edge of the ranch the two men finally separated, Ralph Merrit went on alone to the nearest railroad station. It was several miles away and few persons from the Rainbow Ranch ever attempted walking so great a distance. But Ralph had not ordered a horse for one reason because he did not wish to have a boy accompany him to bring the animal home again and also because he preferred not having any one know just where he was going. That there was discussion and ill feeling concerning him among the men at work on the Rainbow Mine he understood, although Ralph was not yet aware how unkind the criticism was, nor just what was being said.

By midnight he had finally arrived at his destination, Laramie, the largest city in Wyoming. He had then gone directly to a small, out-of-the-way hotel. But after his arrival, instead of getting immediately into bed as any tired, healthy fellow should, the young man dropped into a chair before his open window, sitting there most of the night. Now and then he dozed a few moments from sheer exhaustion, but the greater part of the time he stared out into the lighted streets below him, moody and restless and totally unlike the Ralph Merrit of former days.

If one trait of character had previously distinguished Ralph from the Ranch girls' other young men friends, it had been his practical common sense. Unlike Frank Kent and Donald Harmon, Ralph Merrit was a self-made boy, who had earned his own way through college and had afterwards suffered many disappointments and disillusion on coming West to seek his fortune. Upon taking charge of the Rainbow Mine and making the success of it, which he certainly had, for a time Ralph felt happy and satisfied. He was doing work which many an older man might have envied him. Then why had he recently become so disheartened and dissatisfied? It was true that the Rainbow Mine was not yielding so much gold as it formerly had and that he was beginning to feel fearful that the veins near the surface, which had held valuable ore, were now nearly worked out. Yet Ralph did not even try to pretend to himself that his nervousness and discontent were due to conditions at Rainbow Mine. No, his anxiety and despondency were entirely personal.

For in the past six months Ralph had been overtaken by an ambition that makes for more unhappiness and destroys the careers of more young men than almost any other vice. He had developed an overpowering desire to make a large fortune quickly, not by hard work or economy or any of the ordinary, slow methods for gaining wealth, but by some single, brilliant stroke of good luck that should make him a rich man at once.

Yet this represented such a curious change in Ralph Merrit's former nature, in his good sense and sound judgment, that surely some outside influence must have been at work to render him so unlike himself. What that influence really was Ralph Merrit alone knew perfectly well.

Now it is idle to deny that while under most circumstances a refined girl is an ennobling influence in a young fellow's life, now and then there may be exceptions to this fact as to all others. At the very beginning of their acquaintance Ralph Merrit had understood that he was falling hopelessly in love with Jean Bruce. But in the two years of her absence at school and in Europe he had fought the matter out with himself and decided that he had mastered his impossible fancy. During her short visits at the ranch they had remained especial friends as at the start, but nothing more. Now, however, since Jean's return to live at the Rainbow Lodge, Ralph had not only felt a return of his first affection, but an emotion that was very much stronger and more serious.

And he felt this in spite of recognizing that Jean herself had greatly changed. No longer was she the fascinating unspoiled girl of his early acquaintance; she was a far more worldly-minded and ambitious Jean than he could have imagined. She was also far prettier and more alluring from her experiences and opportunities, and there was no doubt but that she was constantly yearning for the companionship of distinguished people, for more society, broader social opportunities of every kind. During the past year at the ranch she had not been altogether contented. Their former life now seemed too simple and uneventful to her, she no longer had Jack's intense interest in outdoor amusements. Yet to Ruth's and her cousin's suggestions that she make a visit in the east to her friends, Margaret and Cecil Belknap, Jean would not listen. Of course she was happy at home, and whatever her family might say to the contrary they would be absurdly lonely without her. Moreover, did they believe that she would miss Olive's home-coming? But any other influence that may have been at work in the back of the girl's heart or mind she did not mention. And assuredly Ralph Merrit did not dream that his presence on the ranch could be in any possible sense an added influence.

For whatever Ralph's present weaknesses, he did not put the blame upon a woman. Jean had given him no false encouragement, had shown him no special favor. The fault was his, that moved by what he believed her attitude toward wealth, he had used the wrong method for obtaining it. He had not even given Jean the chance to say that his struggle was unwise or unnecessary, since he had been paying her far less attention recently.

At ten o'clock the next morning Ralph learned from his stock broker that instead of being nearer the fortune he so much desired, he was several thousand dollars farther away. And this loss represented almost the last dollar he had in the world.



CHAPTER IV

OLIVE COMES HOME

S OON after dinner Ruth and Jim Colter and of course the small son had retired to their rooms in Rainbow Lodge, leaving Jack, Jean and Frieda to amuse themselves in the living room until bedtime. A week had passed since their visit to their new house and tonight Frieda and Jack were busily studying over their original plans and discussing various alterations which they felt were absolutely necessary, while Jean, without seeming to regard them, was playing idly upon the piano.

It was not cold, and one of the front windows was partly raised with the blind drawn down; but a small fire was burning in the old fireplace, since the Rainbow Lodge living room was never exactly the same delightful abode without it.

Except for a few handsome, additional pieces of furniture and some odd pictures and china which the girls had brought home from abroad, there was no material change in the beloved room. For Ruth and the girls had the good taste to know that its primitive character with its decorations of bright Indian rugs and simple furnishings was far more suitable and beautiful than any alteration their money could bring. So the newer and more splendid furnishings which they had purchased in New York and in Europe had been safely stored away for the finishing of their new house. And this evening in their former familiar surroundings Jack, Jean and Frieda looked not unlike they had on that first evening years ago when Jack had returned from her original meeting with Frank Kent and before either Ruth or Olive had ever been seen at the Rainbow Lodge.

"But, Frieda dear, it will be far too expensive to make such a change as you suggest," Jack protested. "You know that we agreed to have the four big bedrooms and two baths on one side of the house and just one upstairs sitting room. Now if we try to arrange a private sitting room off from your room, it will either make your bedroom too small or else rob the rest of us. And another big bay window would cost hundreds of dollars more."

"Well, why not?" Frieda returned petulantly. "Here we have all been living quietly at the ranch for nearly a year and spending no outside money except on the house. It is only because you are suddenly growing stingy, Jack. I heard you tell Ruth that we had better not order as many new oriental rugs as we planned to

have. Mr. Parker says that he can add the extra space to my apartment without spoiling the effect of the house in the least. Do let me have him do it, Jack darling, please? You know you and Jean and Olive will often be talking about things in our big sitting room that you won't wish me to hear and I do want a tiny den all to myself."

Because Jack did not agree at once to her sister's pleading the girl at the piano ceased playing for an instant to glance at her cousin, and, surprised by her expression, did not look immediately away.

Jack was frowning and was a little pale. But she had been out all day riding over the ranch and talking to the men at the mine, and naturally might be expected to be tired. She had gone to her own room and undressed almost immediately after dinner, and as there was no possibility of any visitors arriving unexpectedly at the ranch, she was now wearing a lovely old Chinese blue silk kimono and had her gold brown hair in a loose knot on top of her head. Leaning over she suddenly kissed Frieda, who sat on the other side of their small table puzzling over the drawings for their new place.

"It isn't fair to say that I am stingy, baby," Jack declared, "when you know that our house is costing thousands of dollars more than we first expected. People say that is just what all houses do, yet just the same we have to set a limit somewhere. And of course I don't want you or Jean to worry, but there is a possibility that we may not get as much money out of Rainbow Mine in the future as we have for the past few years. And you know we have not a large fortune stowed away in bank. Besides, we have gotten into the habit of living pretty expensively and spending an awful lot of money thinking that our mine would hold out forever. Today Jim told me that frequently there were gold mines that ceased to yield almost altogether when certain veins had been worked out. I don't think he meant that this was going to happen to ours—only that our income might be cut down."

As Jack finished speaking Jean Bruce got up from her piano stool and came across the room to face her cousin.

"It's funny, Jack, that you let Jim give you all this information about affairs at the mine, instead of Ralph Merrit. It seems to me that Ralph must know more than Jim. And as he is head engineer you know you ought to get your information from him," she protested.

Rather wearily Jack leaned back in her chair; yet she answered without any

show of temper. "I thought you knew, Jean, that Ralph has not yet come back to the ranch. Five or six days ago he wrote Jim not to expect him for some little time as he had important business to look after. So you see I could not very well discuss business with him while he is away."

With a little shrug Jean turned to stare into the fire.

"Yes, but you could have waited until Ralph's return and then have had the conversation with him. Besides, it isn't only Jim who has been telling you that the gold in our mine will give out unless some new method for mining it is employed. No, it is the other miners who have been grumbling to both of you. I wonder if they can be dissatisfied with Ralph's management? But, Frieda, for goodness sake don't be a baby and don't worry Jack about spending more money on our new house than we can afford. Dear me, I wonder how we shall behave if suddenly we should become poor as church mice again. It would be my duty then, I suppose, Jack, to let you get rid of supporting such an expensive cousin by some means or other."

Already won over by her sister's argument, since Jack's judgment was almost always hers in the end, Frieda had left her chair and was sitting on the arm of her sister's, pulling softly at the loose coils of her hair and trying to rearrange them.

She and Jack both stared at Jean in surprise and consternation. What was the matter with her? Why should she talk in this absurd fashion? Had they ever felt or shown any difference between her and themselves in the right to everything they possessed? Something was making Jean unlike herself tonight.

Seeing the hurt and surprise in the other two faces Jean at once changed the subject.

"Jack, have you heard anything more about when Miss Winthrop and Olive are planning to come for their visit to us?" she demanded. "Just think, we have not seen Olive since our return from England! Won't it be splendid for you to have her with you again, Jack dear? Frieda and I are so dreadfully spoiled and lazy, we never do anything to help you about the ranch and only complain if things go wrong and we haven't more money to spend. I do wish somebody would show me how to be useful. I haven't even the beds to make now we have another girl to help Aunt Ellen."

Jack shook her head. "I am sorry you are bored. I wish I could think of something to interest you. You seemed to like the ranch when we first came back

and the work at the mine. The only word I have heard from Olive since her other letter was a short note in answer to my telegram that begged her to come at once. She said that she and Miss Winthrop had a lot of business matters to look after, but meant to run away as soon as possible. What in the world was that?" And Jack, who seemed unusually tired and nervous tonight, startled the other two girls by jumping up unexpectedly.

Jean had also heard the noise and turned in the direction from which it came.

"It is only that tiresome boy, Carlos," she explained. "I mean to tell Jim that I don't like his sneaking up here and peering into our window in that spooky fashion. Carlos can move more like a spirit than a human being anyway! But what has become of him recently, for now I think of it I have not seen him before for several days?"

"He has been away from the ranch most of the time," Frieda answered sleepily, "for I wanted him to do an errand for me the other day and could not find him. But Aunt Ellen says he has come to her for food several times and then has gone off with as much as she would give him. Somehow I'm fond of Carlos—he was such a queer, handsome little boy when he first came to us. I hope Olive will understand him better than the rest of us do. But dear me, what does he mean by coming in at the front door without knocking?" And Frieda also jumped up hurriedly. "I hope he is not bringing us bad news!"

Not only had the front door opened, which had not yet been locked for the night, but the door of the living room was mysteriously unclosing just half an inch at a time.

The three girls were seriously annoyed and Jack spoke sharply:

"Carlos, what do you mean by entering our room without asking permission? Unless you have something important to say I should prefer your waiting to speak to us until tomorrow."

A soft voice, which was not that of the Indian boy, replied: "But I can't wait till morning or not another moment, Jack dearest, when I have traveled across a whole continent to see you. And please forgive Carlos for my sake, because he and I have been planning this surprise together ever since I left Primrose Hall."

Afterwards Olive Van Mater could only get a few steps further inside the old Lodge living room, because Frieda, Jean and Jack at once flung themselves upon

her. And the tears were gathering fast in the girl's big star-like black eyes as she tried her best to explain the mystery of her arrival and to embrace her three friends at the same instant.

"You see, Miss Winthrop found that she could not leave home for some time yet and I was so tired and so nearly dead to see you that she would not let me wait until she could come. So I thought that I would rather surprise you than anything else I could imagine. I wrote Carlos when to expect me and to have a horse and carriage at the train. But the poor lad has been at the station apparently for several days, fearing he might make some mistake and that I should arrive without his knowing. But you brought me home safely after all, didn't you, Carlos?" And Olive disengaged her hand for a moment from the girls' hold to extend it to the Indian boy.

"Goodness, how you have grown, I haven't had a good look at you until this moment," she ended admiringly.

And surely Carlos made a handsome picture. In honor of Olive's homecoming he wore a soft shirt of some yellow material and a pair of clean khaki trousers with a bright sash knotted about his waist and a crimson tie at his throat. All the surliness had disappeared from his expression, his skin was like polished bronze and his eyes like shining coals, as he took his old friend's hand and for a moment pressed it reverently to his lips.

Then Jack removed Olive's traveling hat and long broadcloth coat, with every movement of her hands a caress.

"But please, Carlos and Olive," she demanded, "I don't pretend to be able to hear outdoor sounds as you can; yet I have fairly well trained ears of my own. Would you mind telling me how you managed to drive a rickety old hired carriage up to the very door of Rainbow Lodge with us in the living room and yet never a sound heard we?"

Olive laughed. "That is our secret, but if you must know, we did no such thing. Half a mile away I sent the driver back to the station and Carlos and I ran on tiptoes under the stars all the way home." The girl ended her sentence with a slight catch in her breath. "Then please to remember that we are both Indians, or at least I am almost one. And now won't somebody go and find Ruth and Jim, for I just must see the baby this minute even if he cries his eyes out the rest of the night."



CHAPTER V

THEIR RIDE TOGETHER

OLIVE and Jack had scarcely been alone for more than a half hour at a time since Olive's arrival almost a week before. But before ten o'clock this morning they had both started off on horseback with their lunch boxes packed, leaving word at home that they were not to be expected back until sundown.

First of all they yearned for a long, uninterrupted gallop together over the sweet-smelling, wild, rose-strewn prairies. For not since the very first year of Olive's life at Rainbow Ranch had they enjoyed this formerly well-loved entertainment. Soon after then had come Jack's accident, and until this year she had not been in entirely good health during any of their days at the ranch.

And the beauty of this special windswept, sunlit day was nature's gift to the two friends' reunion.

Jack rode a little ahead on her own horse, Romeo, which she had bought immediately after their return from abroad and christened "Romeo" in a kind of joking recollection of their visit in Rome. Of course, he was the fastest riding horse on Rainbow Ranch, but not a beautiful animal, since he had been chosen for speed and endurance rather than appearance. And in truth he was only a rough Western pony with sagacity and knowledge of the country, dignified by the name of horse simply because of his slightly greater size and length of limb.

Following close behind, her pretty nose almost able to touch the other animal's rough coat, came Olive's smaller mare, which Jean had named "Juliet" by reason of following Jack's horse about whenever they were permitted to graze in the open fields.

Juliet had been no one's special property, since she had been born on the place and no one had chosen her for personal use. So shortly after Olive's return the other three girls had escorted her to the stables and there solemnly presented her with "Juliet," avowing that no one else should have the privilege of using the

mare except with Olive's consent.

The two friends rode for more than an hour after leaving the neighborhood of the Lodge without speaking, except now and then to call attention to some particularly beautiful effect in the landscape. First they galloped to the farthest outskirts of the great thousand-acre ranch, which was still as carefully and scientifically managed as during the time when the Rainbow Mine was an undiscovered quantity and when the girls and Jim's living depended entirely upon its success. There were groups of cattle scattered here and there wherever the alfalfa grass was ripe for eating, and mares with young colts were allowed free pasture. But by and by when a far-off rim of hills could be seen, with their summits glistening with caps of snow and the sky above them so scattered with fleece-like clouds that snow and cloud seemed to touch and melt into each other, Jack slowed down for a moment, waiting for her friend to come up alongside her.

"Is it because I am a Western girl and all this means childhood and home to me that the country seems more beautiful and inspiring than anything we saw in Europe, Olive dear?" Jack asked.

And Olive looked into the other girl's face searchingly for an instant before replying. She had been wondering for a good many months why Frank Kent had never come to America to see Jack when on leaving England she had believed that he and Jacqueline were almost on the point of being engaged. Several times recently she had actually written and asked Jack why on earth Frank had not made his promised visit to Rainbow Lodge. Without really answering, Jack had always arranged to evade her questioning. "Frank was too busy, he was thinking of running for Parliament, he preferred waiting until Olive was also able to be at home, so that they might be there together once again." None of these replies had made a very profound impression upon the questioner. So today Olive had planned in her own mind to get at the real truth. Jack would not dare to refuse to answer her direct inquiry if once she had the courage to demand it of her. Positively she must know whether Frank's apparent indifference was due to a change in his own feeling or to an unreasonable request on Jack's part for postponing her decision.

Now at Jack's question, studying her friend's face, Olive feared that this last idea must be the true one. Love of her old home, the grip which the western country and atmosphere always had on the girl's character and affections—these must have been waging a winning battle against her former affection for Frank

Kent.

Must she ask Jack if this were true? No, Olive decided that she had best refrain until later in the day. For Jack was not at the present moment in the mood for confidences. She was just gloriously alive and filled with the physical beauty and splendor of the morning. Later on, when there had been opportunity for more conversation, Olive would make her query. For there were dozens of intimate personal things which she and her best beloved friend must get at the heart of before this ride of theirs together was over. So now Olive only laughed, and leaning over lightly stroked the neck of the other horse.

"It is only because you are such a pagan, Jack, that Europe seems too crowded for you," she answered. "Besides you know how dearly you finally learned to love the English country, although it was the direct opposite of all this! Doesn't its wonderful greenness, the splendid old trees and the flowers and cultivated beauty of the fields make up to you for the great wide spaces and the colors in your prairies?"

Slowly Jack shook her head, in reply, at the same instant taking off her soft brown felt hat and hanging it on the pommel of her saddle. "I don't know," she answered, drawing in a deep, quiet breath.

The past year of outdoor work and amusement on the ranch had brought back to Jacqueline Ralston the glow and brilliant, healthy color of her childhood. Her complexion was several shades darker than it had been the summer before, her cheeks more vividly rose and her hair lighter from exposure to the sun. Then Jack had again grown dreadfully indifferent to clothes since their return home, much to Jean's and Frieda's disgust and to Jim Colter's secret amusement. For quite forgetting their fortune and the fact that she was now almost ready to cast her first vote in Wyoming, Jack had returned to wearing the old brown corduroys or faded khakis of her youth, together with almost any soft hat which she happened to find convenient for her outdoor jaunts. And only when the other girls insisted, or Ruth pleaded, or guests were expected to dinner at the Lodge, would Jack return to wearing the pretty toilets which she had brought home from Europe. For not one single dress had she given time or thought to purchasing since then, although Jean and Frieda frequently amused themselves by sending east for hats and gowns.

So today, although Jack was actually the older and in times past had looked it, Olive would have been considered her senior. For one reason she was still weary

from the shock and strain of her grandmother's death and from the business difficulties resulting from her strange will. Then there was a last and final interview with Donald Harmon which even yet the girl did not like to recall. She was sorry not to be able to return his affection. Moreover, Olive's new riding-habit was of black cloth, which Miss Winthrop had ordered from a well-known New York tailor, adding to her appearance of age and dignity. Yet in spite of the elegance and decorum of her own riding attire, Olive did not feel the objection to her friend's as Jean and Frieda undoubtedly would have. For Jack's costume was eminently characteristic. Moreover, the old corduroy skirt and leather leggings and slouch hat were not unbecoming now that her coat was open showing the curve of her strong white throat.

It was equally characteristic of Jack when they finally reached the clump of trees where they were to have luncheon to jump first from her horse and then lift Olive as carefully down as though she had been her masculine escort. Afterwards it was she who led the horses to water, fed them and then tied them.

Coming back, she flung herself down on the ground by her friend and taking one of the girl's hands in hers kissed it, saying carelessly:

"Olive, child, did you hear any one or anything while I was away? I thought we were going to have a perfectly peaceful and uninterrupted day, but I have an idea that while I was looking after the horses I heard some one stirring about not so very far off. Still I may have been mistaken or it may have been a deer or a wildcat. This woods gets so much denser as one goes further into it. This is near the same place where I managed to break my poor little pony's legs several years ago. It was when we were making that horrid visit at the Norton's before it was finally decided that you were to come and live with us. I never have been able to think of having to shoot 'Hotspur' without its giving me the shivers." And Jack now took a small pistol out of a leather holster fastened about her waist. "I never go on a long ride with either of the girls without carrying this," she remarked carelessly, "but I don't believe I am ever going to like hunting again as I did when I was younger. That was one of the lessons I learned when I was ill so long—a greater respect for life, anybody's or anything's." Then the girl's voice grew suddenly hushed.

"Didn't you hear a slight noise then?" she whispered.

After a moment of enforced silence Olive shook her head. "No, or at least nothing of importance," she replied. "Of course these woods must have wild

game in them, since it is the only place with running water nearer than Rainbow Creek. But it is odd your having this impression now. Several times I meant to tell you and forgot—that while we were riding I kept having the idea that some one was following after us. Half a dozen times I looked around thinking that it might possibly be either Jean or Frieda. But I saw no one, so of course it must have been only a fancy."

"Well it certainly was neither Jean nor Frieda," Jack replied laughingly. "They have both grown too lazy for such a journey as we are taking. But come along, because if we are ever to get to your old Indian village and back again this afternoon, we must hurry."

For this had been the supposed object of Jack's and Olive's free day together. Soon after her arrival at the Lodge Olive had suggested that she would very much like to go back to the little Indian village where she had lived as a child with old Laska, and see if the woman and her son were yet alive. She desired also to pay a visit to her former teacher and first friend, who was still at work among the Indian children at the little Indian reservation school.

Before the two girls had finally arrived at their destination, it was Olive who discovered the ghost stealthily pursuing them. And it was he whom Jack must have heard in the woods.

Olive at once turned apologetically to her friend. "Don't be cross, Jack, and don't scold if I tell you something," she began unexpectedly. "But just now I saw at some distance behind us a brown shadow on a brown horse. So I'm afraid it is Carlos who has been trailing after us. But really it is my fault for having told him where we intended going. Probably he won't trouble us if we don't wish to notice him."

Frowning, Jacqueline returned: "I'm sorry to confess it to you, Olive dear, but really, Carlos is getting to be rather a nuisance to Jim and me. I do hope you may be able to influence him to settle down to some kind of work or study—to anything he likes. Neither Jim nor I care so much what except that his idleness is a bad influence among the men on the place. There is no use in my trying to do anything with him, for he has taken such a violent dislike to me. Frieda says that I am too much of a boss and it has offended the boy's dignity. But I shan't scold today since Carlos is only following us because he does not entirely trust me to look after you and adores you so that he does not wish you out of his sight."

Just as though four or five years had not passed with its crowded and ever

changing experiences, walking up to old Indian Laska's dirty hut alone Olive Van Mater found the Indian woman still sitting in her same open doorway, smoking the apparently identical pipe and clothed in the same old nondescript rags of former days with a brilliant Indian blanket across her shoulders. But at the sight of her beautifully dressed visitor the Indian woman showed not the slightest sign of recognition. Nor did she do anything further than nod and grunt several times in succession when Olive assured her that she had once been the girl "Olilie," who had lived with her from the time she was a baby.

Possibly Laska could neither understand nor believe what this charming American girl was trying to explain to her, but certain it was that she never once invited Olive inside her former home, nor showed the slightest interest in her, except to smile at the handful of small change that was bestowed upon her in parting. For of course Olive had long since ceased to feel any bitterness against the old woman, whose ignorance and greed had not been nearly so responsible for her past unhappiness as her own grandmother's careless neglect of her.

Olive's interview with her first teacher was such a great pleasure and satisfaction to them both, that except for Jack's insistence that it was already past time to go back to the ranch and that Olive and her old friend could now meet each other frequently, the two girls would never have started for home until nearly sundown. And as it was they were an hour later than they should have been in leaving.

They were not able to ride as rapidly as in the morning because neither of the horses was so fresh. So that by and by, just as both girls had wished, they fell into the first long, confidential talk they had enjoyed in nearly a year.

And there was so much to say! Olive had to repeat the strange terms of her grandmother's will and her own positive intention not to marry Donald Harmon, no matter what the second will might insist upon—even if it left her penniless.

Then Jack confided the present trouble at the Rainbow Mine. For during Ralph's continued and unexplained absence the miners had grown uglier, threatening that unless a new engineer was secured at once they would go upon a strike. Moreover, they would see that no other men be allowed to take their places. Already they insisted that there was not enough gold in the former veins to make Rainbow Mine worth working. A new manager and new machinery must be procured at once.

Just how to quell the disturbance and set things right neither Jim Colter nor

Jacqueline could decide at present. Of course they were awaiting with impatience Ralph Merrit's return in order to have a talk with him. But afterwards what should they do? Would Ralph be forced by the miners into advising them to buy more machinery before he knew just what should be done? This might sink all their capital and make them poor again.

"Really it is Jean and Frieda about whom I am worrying the most if we do lose our money," Jack frankly acknowledged. "For Ruth and Jim and I can be happy living as we used to do. But then of course the building of our new house must be completed, since the contract is already given for finishing it."

So the two friends talked on, and it was small wonder that the sun was sinking as, followed by the ever watchful Carlos, they finally rode up to the Lodge. But Olive had not yet satisfied herself in regard to the state of affairs now existing between Jack and Frank Kent.

In answer to a point-blank question Jack had simply replied that she and Frank had not been engaged to be married. Also that she had too much upon her mind at present to ask him to make them a visit. However, now that Olive had arrived, perhaps Frank would wish to come in a short time.



CHAPTER VI

THAT SAME AFTERNOON

SINCE a short time after lunch Jean Bruce had been alone at the Rainbow Lodge, except for the presence of Aunt Ellen and the housemaid. For at about two o'clock Jim and Ruth, Frieda and the baby had driven off to pay a long visit to some old-time friends. For Ruth had not entirely recovered her strength since the baby's birth and therefore Jim was unwilling to have her far away from him.

But Jean was not lonely, or at least not for the first few hours. She had letters to write—one to her New York friend, Margaret Belknap, and another to her adored Princess, who had never wavered in her interest and affection for the American girl since Jean's visit to her in Rome.

Then, at about four o'clock, Jean strolled over to look at their new house, which seemed to have been making tremendous strides in the last few days, now that the outside had been entirely completed. She had one or two suggestions that she wished to make to the architect about her own room and this was the best hour for having a talk with him, as she happened to know that he had been spending most of the day with his men. The architect did not superintend their house building more than two or three times a week. Determined to have their new home as beautiful and as harmonious as possible, the girls, Jim and Ruth had decided upon employing the most distinguished architect in that part of the country. Theodore Parker was a Wyoming man with his central office in Laramie, and yet his work on public buildings and his creation of certain types of houses for western millionaires had given him a reputation throughout the country. So it was scarcely possible to expect him to devote a large portion of his valuable time even to the construction of "Rainbow Castle." For Jean's laughing title for their new home had somehow clung to it.

The place would probably be almost, if not quite, as beautiful as many a palace, Jean thought, as she slowly approached the front entrance. This was to have a flight of broad, low stone steps leading up to it, while the base of the

house would be banked with low, close-growing evergreen shrubs.

For the outdoor work on their estate the girls had not consulted a landscape gardener, but they had studied many books and pictures of beautiful gardens and had then developed certain ideas of their own. In order to keep the view of the rolling prairies to the distant line of hills several miles beyond, the slope before the house was to be left unchanged. Here and there were flower beds in the carefully planted and tended blue grass lawn, which with constant watering and top soil might be persuaded to grow. But on either side and toward the back of the modified colonial mansion were to be the real gardens. Although the flowers had not yet been planted, bushes had been set out that were later to form green and blossoming aisles. In the preceding autumn a dozen or more large evergreen trees had been transplanted from the nearby forests, and zealously tended all through the winter, so that already they showed signs of growth.

Jean's interview with Mr. Parker was entirely satisfactory and the girl would have liked to linger and talk at greater length with the big, purposeful man, who seemed to bring to one of the noblest of all the professions the spirit of the artist, and the executive ability of the business man. But Mr. Parker was plainly too busy to give her more than a few minutes of his attention, although in their conversation they did wander from her errand far enough to permit their discussing a few of their impressions of Europe. And, oddly enough, the architect who had studied in Paris and traveled a great deal, had never been to Italy, the mother of much that is most beautiful in modern architecture.

A man of about thirty-five or six, Jean imagined he must be as she returned to the Lodge, and assuredly extremely good-looking, with his iron-gray hair, dark eyes and smooth face. One could hardly help wondering why he had never married.

At home once more, Jean suddenly had a sensation of feeling deserted and forlorn. What could she do to amuse herself? Although she insisted upon denying it to her family, certainly there were occasions lately when their former life did seem dull and uninteresting to her. Yet perhaps Jack was right in thinking that this was due to her paying no special regard to the things that were happening on the ranch itself. Should she take a walk now, or go down to Rainbow Mine to see if anything was going on? Ralph Merrit was still away, certainly for an unaccountably great length of time! And undoubtedly there was some kind of trouble brewing among the workers in the mine, though what it was Jean had not the remotest idea. Yet Jack and Jim had been plainly annoyed

and concerned over some disturbance, otherwise so many consultations between them and their workmen would have been unnecessary.

But at the present moment Jean did not find the subject of the mine of sufficient interest to persuade her to walk down to it in an effort to make her own investigations. Things would clear up soon enough without her troubling. For there had to be friction every once and a while where so many people were employed.

Yawning several times, Jean finally dropped into a hammock that had been swung for Ruth on the porch at Rainbow Lodge. She was holding a magazine in her hand and reading it fitfully.

Probably Jean would have assured you that she was wearing the oldest and simplest dress in her entire wardrobe and that she really had not made any kind of toilet for the afternoon. Yet with Jean Bruce pretty clothes and a graceful and pleasing fashion of wearing them were second nature. It is true her pale pink cashmere frock was not new and was made in a straight piece with no trimming save a round lace collar and a girdle of broad pink silk ribbon. Yet Jean had wound a ribbon of the same color about her dark brown hair, until her usual pallor seemed to be warmed by its glow.

For a half moment she must have fallen asleep, for she was awakened by thinking she heard some one coming toward the Lodge. The next moment Ralph Merrit stood beside her.

He looked entirely unlike himself; his clothes were untidy; he seemed not to have slept for a number of nights; his face was worn and drawn. Jean was startled into sudden pity and interest. For Ralph had always seemed so capable and so efficient and if things worried him, he had always kept them to himself.

Now as Jean struggled to her feet he only said: "How do you do, Jean. Will you tell me, please, whether Mr. Colter is at home or whether I may be apt to find him anywhere about the ranch?"

But Jean's eyes questioned, although her lips as yet said nothing, and the young man flushed.

"I must beg your pardon for my appearance," he began awkwardly, "but I have been doing some rather hard traveling and I have not yet been to my own quarters to fix up. I had no idea of running across you." Ralph stared hard for a

moment at the dainty girl slowly rising out of the hammock and then at himself. She was like the inside of a sea shell in her pink costume with her white skin and the pretty detached air she so often wore.

Ralph laughed uncomfortably and not very mirthfully.

"Won't you wait a minute, please?" Jean asked quietly. "Jim is not here and won't be for some little time perhaps. But I have an idea that you are hungry as well as tired and I have been longing for some one to drink afternoon tea with me." And before her companion could reply the girl disappeared.

Ralph Merrit fingered his hat uncertainly. He did not wish to remain and yet it would seem singularly ungracious to have Jean return and find him vanished. And since he had a confession to make, why not begin with her to whom it would be hardest to say it?

Ralph dropped into a chair on one side of a small rustic table and Jean and the tea party had both arrived before he lifted his eyes again. Under the influence of the tea, strawberries and cream and Aunt Ellen's hot scones, with Jean making herself as charming as she knew how to be, Ralph could not help forgetting for a few moments the things that were weighing upon him, while he enjoyed the gifts that the fates provided.

And Jean was truly kind, for she was shocked as well as a little bit frightened by Ralph's appearance. Naturally she was not unaware that he had once cared for her, even though he had not recently revealed it in any open fashion. And of course Jean felt that she had always regarded Ralph with the sincerest friendship.

She was hoping now that he would tell her what was worrying him as a sign that their old friendship was yet alive, when Ralph spoke.

"Jean, I might as well tell you now as a little later," he began, "it can't be delayed for any length of time at best. I am going to have to say good-bye to you all pretty soon."

Jean's hand shook a little, so that she first set down her teacup.

"You mean that you are having to go home for a visit. I hope nothing has happened to your mother or sister; I was afraid you were feeling troubled," the girl answered.

With the old decision that she remembered the young man shook his head.

"No, it is not that," he returned, "but simply that I am going to resign my position as engineer of Rainbow Mine. Fact of the matter is, I am not making good. The men don't like me, don't want to work under me, and things are in a muddle anyhow. My staying on would only embarrass Jim and Miss Ralston." (Ralph only called Jack by her grown-up title when he was considering her as his employer.)

"So you are going to quit just because things at the mine are no longer plain sailing. Is it because you have had a better position offered you? Then of course I am sure, even though it makes everything much harder for them, Jack and Jim would neither of them wish to stand in your way," Jean answered with intentional cruelty.

And the young man understood her. "That is not fair, Jean; you know those are not my reasons," he declared. "I am leaving to *save* Jim and Jack the trouble, not to make things more difficult. If I clear out the men will quiet down and perhaps they will get hold of some other engineer who will understand the present situation better. The truth is our old gold supply is giving out and we have got to find a different method of getting at the gold deeper down. I have been away studying how this might be done for the past ten days, but I have not yet made up my mind."

"Then stay on until you can decide, Ralph," Jean replied quietly, "or at least until you are certain that you don't know what to do. Surely you must know the situation at the Rainbow Mine better than any one else. I have been guessing that both Jim and Jack were worried, but you know they won't go back on you until the very last minute and not then unless you say the word. So I don't think I would let the other miners frighten me away. It seems to me that a man will never be able to manage other men if he turns and runs at the first approach of a storm. I should never have believed this of you, Ralph, of all people!"

With a little, quickly suppressed sound that was almost a groan Ralph suddenly dropped his head. "But a man isn't fit to govern other men if he can't govern himself, Jean," he answered.

Even the color of her pink gown did not now hide the pallor of the girl's cheeks.

"What are you talking about, Ralph Merrit?" she demanded a little unsteadily. "You behave as though you had robbed a bank or taken more than your share of gold out of the mine. I wish you would not be so absurd—I do hate

uncomfortable people."

The man got up. "I am sorry, Jean, and I did not mean to trouble you with my personal confession," he went on, "though I thought it only fair that I should tell Jim Colter. No, I have not been robbing anyone except myself and my own family, though the men may be saying even that of me soon," he added bitterly. "But the truth is that I have been speculating until I have lost every red cent that I have earned and I don't think a man who has been as big a fool as I have has the right to try and hold down a job the size of mine."

"You have been speculating!" The girl repeated the words almost foolishly, as though not understanding at first what they meant. Then she flushed angrily. "Ralph, what a perfect goose you have been! For goodness sake tell me what ever induced a sensible, level-headed fellow like we all believed you were to do such a stupid thing?" Jean demanded.

But this was the one question which of all the questions in the world Ralph Merrit could never answer Jean truthfully.

"Hush, never mind!" Jean interrupted hurriedly, for she could see what her companion had evidently not yet observed and that was that another man was at this moment approaching the house. His face had looked ugly and forbidding, but at the sight of Jean he raised his hat.

The girl recognized him as John Raines, a man of about fifty years of age and a kind of leader and spokesman among the other miners.

"Beg your pardon, Miss," he began stiffly, "but having just heard that Mr. Merrit has returned to the ranch, I want to ask him if he will come and have a little talk with some of us men. We've been waiting for this talk for a considerable time."

Ralph stepped down from the porch at once. "Certainly, I will come along with you now," he answered quietly. And then turning to Jean and with a gesture asking that she excuse him, the young man followed the older one. And Jean could not but notice how slender and boyish and, yes, how spent he looked as he walked behind the big, heavy miner, with arms and chest so powerful that he seemed able actually to have crushed the slighter man like a great bear, had he so desired.

What could the miners be wishing with Ralph that they must see him at once,

now when they knew that Jim Colter was not on the ranch?

Without trying to answer the question herself and only lingering long enough to fasten a dark coat over her light frock Jean hurried after the two figures, taking care, however, that neither of them became conscious of her presence.



CHAPTER VI

"COURAGE MAKES THE MAN"

THERE were as many as twenty men waiting to talk to Ralph Merrit within the vicinity of the Rainbow Mine. And they chanced to be standing close together near one of the big rocks that rose like a miniature fortress beside Rainbow Creek. After Ralph had entered the group, Jean managed without being observed to slip behind this rock where she was in safe hiding.

But just why she had followed the two men and what her motive was for concealing herself she did not try to explain to herself. Simply she had yielded to an impulse of fear, of curiosity and perhaps to some other instinct that was partly protective. One young fellow among so many older, rougher and more lawless characters! What might not happen to him?

And yet Jean Bruce had not her cousin Jacqueline's physical bravery nor determination of purpose, and moreover she had an openly expressed dislike of mixing herself up in the things which she did not consider essentially feminine. However, she had no idea now of letting anyone guess her nearness, not even Ralph Merrit himself.

Sitting down on the ground in a kind of scooped-out cave in a rock she could occasionally manage to get a glimpse of the miners, although at present while they were talking quietly she could only rarely catch a word or so of what they were saying, and not a sound from Ralph, who seemed the calmest and most self-controlled of them all. After a while she realized that John Raines, the man who had been sent to summon her companion, must now have been chosen as spokesman for the lot and was evidently making his voice sufficiently loud for them all to hear distinctly. And this of course included the unknown listener.

"See here, Mr. Merrit," John Raines began quietly, "us men have been talking things over among ourselves for some time past and we have done come to the pretty positive conclusion that we don't like the way you're running things at Rainbow Mine. And we thought it might be fairer to you, all told, just to mention

this little fact and to let you quit without any kind of rumpus or trouble for nobody."

Jean could not see Ralph Merrit's face or even his figure, he was so closely surrounded, but because he too was speaking so that his entire audience might hear, Jean understood every word.

"What's the trouble with me, Raines, as a boss?" he asked with such self-control and apparent lack of anger that Jean was both amazed and pleased.

Then there was a kind of low muttering among the other men and finally their spokesman went on:

"I guess you know most of our complaints pretty well by this time—we've been tellin' 'em to you long enough and hard enough. If this is a profit-sharing business, as you and Jim Colter and Miss Ralston said it was goin' to be, then you ain't gettin' gold enough out of the Rainbow Mine to suit us."

"But we are getting all we can, aren't we? You men aren't loafing with the work?" Ralph interrupted.

John Raines scowled. "That's senseless talk! You know what the trouble is; we have already gotten out most all the gold there is near the surface of the earth around here. Now what we have got to do to make it pay big again is to get more machinery and try different ways of working. And we want a boss to tell Miss Ralston and Jim Colter to get busy buying the new machinery and then to show us how to run it. We are not going to waste any more time around here on a few dollars pay a day."

From her hiding place Jean did her best to hear Ralph. Here of course was the time and place for him to make the same confession to the miners that he had recently made to her. For he did intend to do just what the men had demanded of him, resign his work and give way for a better man. Nevertheless, he evidently intended delaying a bit longer before making the confession.

"But I have explained to you men before this why I have not done what you ask," he went on, still in a reasonable tone of voice. "I told you that I did not feel certain that it was the *best* thing to do. We are by no means sure that there is enough gold below the present mine to make it worth while to go deeper. You men know what a lot of money the machinery for certain kinds of gold digging takes. It would probably eat up pretty much all the capital that the owners of the

Rainbow Mine have. And I don't want to tell them to buy this machinery until I am a lot surer that the gold is down there waiting to be hauled out."

John Raines glanced about at the faces surrounding him. It was easy enough to take his tone from their expressions.

"Then there is no use wasting any more of our time and yours in talk, Merrit," the older man announced in a rougher manner than he had before employed. "Your sentiments was pretty well known to us before you spouted them forth. And that's just the point! You don't know what ought to be done about things and we do. And we want a man to boss us that knows same as we. Now, young man, you just get out pleasant and the quicker the better."

All over her body, to the very tips of her ears, Jean felt herself tingling with sudden, overpowering anger. Why had Ralph Merrit not said what he intended saying before now? To resign at this moment in the face of this other man's insolence, which represented the same feeling in his companions, was to behave like a small boy at school who had been stood up in a corner and soundly thrashed by his schoolmaster and then made to apologize for his pains. Jean felt that she would never care to look Ralph in the face again. But he was speaking now for the third time.

"She Had Heard That Masterful Tone Before" "SHE HAD HEARD THAT MASTERFUL
TONE BEFORE"

"Have Miss Ralston and Mr. Colter told you that they wanted me to quit?" he inquired. "It seems like they would have mentioned the matter to me first. I have usually taken my orders from them and not from the men *under* me."

There was quite a different ring in Ralph Merrit's voice during this speech that made the girl behind the rock unexpectedly put up her cold hands to cool her hot cheeks. She had heard that masterful tone before, but not in some time.

"No, they ain't said nothing yet," Raines admitted. "But it don't matter; you got to quit just the same. You can't run a gold mine by yourself with all your 'book larnin,' and it's either you or us that gets out."

"Then it'll be you," Ralph replied in such a matter-of-fact and undisturbed fashion that Jean could hardly believe she had heard him aright, or else she must have been dreaming less than an hour before.

"Look here, fellows, don't be fools," Ralph went on, still showing no loss of temper. "The hour Mr. Colter and Miss Ralston tell me they want me to give up my job at the Rainbow Mine, that hour I go. And the minute I am really convinced that another man is able to do my work better than I can, that man gets my position, if I can persuade the Rainbow Mine owners to try him. But I've got to study things out here a little longer, I've got to make some new experiments and maybe kind of feel my way slowly toward deciding what had best be done. I have been away for the past ten days studying conditions at other mines and trying to find out some of the latest ideas in mining machinery."

But the other men were making no pretense of listening and were muttering and talking among themselves as a direct and intentional insult to the speaker. Ralph waited in silence, and Jean had an intuition that the end of the discussion was about to take place. The noises that the miners were making were ugly, vicious sounds entirely unfamiliar to the girl's ears and she had no conception of what they might portend. She had a sudden fear that they might mean some bodily injury to the younger man. Then would she have the courage to rush out to his defense as Jack undoubtedly would have, no matter what overtook her?

But she was mistaken in the form of her present uneasiness.

"You can talk that way here, if it makes you feel better, young fellow," one of

the other miners announced contemptuously, "but it ain't goin' to make a mite of difference in the way things has to go. We give you thirty-six hours' notice to get clear of Rainbow Mine, and if you don't, why you can stay around here and play by yourself as long as you like provided your bosses are willing to give up the gold-mining business. Because if you stay, we git out and that means there is not another miner going to be allowed down a shaft in this here mine."

"You mean," said Ralph, "that you are going to strike and make the other men boycott us. I don't believe your union will stand for it. You haven't got a kick coming to you about your hours of work, or your pay, or any of the conditions about the mine. And just because you don't think I've got brains enough for my job is no reason why you should strike. I want you to know, you fellows," and here Ralph's voice was no longer in the least conciliatory, but as firm and decisive as a judge's sentence, "I am a union man myself, but you must understand once and for all that if the Rainbow Mine owners agree to stand by me I am going to keep on with the job of bossing this mine. And I am going to keep on digging out the gold we can get with our old tools until there's a way of knowing what ought to be done next. But I think in the future it is going to suit me better to have another lot of men to work with me and I think I'll be able to get hold of them. You may go to your quarters now. I'll let you hear in the morning what Miss Ralston and Mr. Colter want to do."

And to Jean Bruce's immense amazement, though some of the men laughed rudely and others muttered threats and curses, the entire number after some delay and further discussion among themselves, walked off, leaving Ralph Merrit entirely alone. Notwithstanding, the miners were evidently unanimous in their intention.

Jean snuggled closer than before in her rocky alcove, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of their discovering her and so creating further ill feeling. Then after they had gone, and the last man of them was entirely out of sight, she still did not move. For Ralph Merrit had never stirred from his position and she did not know whether she even wished him to learn of her eavesdropping.

Ralph did not move and Jean was growing bored with her cramped position, now that events were no longer sufficiently exciting to make her forget herself. Besides, did she not really wish to let Ralph know just how she felt about him?

Curiously he did not turn around until she was within a few feet of him. Yet when he did, Jean laughed and clapped her hands childishly at the change in his

expression since their interview on the veranda.

"Why, Jean, where have you come from? You did not see anybody, did you, on your way from the house? This is not a place where you should be."

Jean nodded. "Yes, I did see everybody and heard everything. Please forgive me for being a horrid spy," she confessed, "but I was hiding behind that rock the whole blessed time. And oh, Ralph, I am so pleased and proud of you! Of course Jack and Jim will stand by you to the bitter end—I should dare them not to; but then nobody need ever accuse Jim and Jack of not enjoying a good, clean fight."

Jean put her hand through the young man's arm. "Do come on back to the Lodge with me. It is almost time for the others to be coming home. You must rest a while first and have dinner and then tell them what you intend to do."

A little dazed by the girl's unexpected appearance and by her sudden flow of words, and still deeply engrossed on what had just taken place, Ralph Merrit allowed himself to be led along for a few steps in silence.

"You must think I am a good deal of a turncoat, Jean, and don't know my own mind for half an hour," he said finally. "Maybe I haven't the right after all to get you people into trouble."

Jean gave the young man's arm a vehement shake. "You haven't got the right to be anything but—a man, Ralph Merrit!" she announced. "Goodness, you don't know how ashamed I was of you and for you a while ago! I suppose it is because I am such a coward myself, because I am so afraid of rough things and rough places, that I love courage more than anything else in the world."

"Do you, Jean?" Ralph murmured almost to himself. "Well, I have been a coward in more ways than one in these past six months."



CHAPTER VIII

THE MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE

FOR hours after dinner the family at the Rainbow Lodge sat in their big living room talking over matters with Ralph Merrit. Better than he had been able to explain to Jean he now made the present situation clear to his listeners. And by his frankness in acknowledging that he had not yet been able to make up his mind as to what was best to be done for the future of Rainbow Mine he restored Jim's and Jack's full confidence.

The discussion was absorbing; only Frieda, after an hour or so of what seemed to her a repetition of the same conversation, grew sleepy and now and then dozed for a few moments with her yellow head nodding uncomfortably.

Why stay awake longer when she understood the state of things perfectly? Ralph had said that they would probably have much less money out of the Rainbow Mine for a time. Later, if he saw his way clear by spending their capital and buying new machinery, they might become a great deal wealthier. And while naturally the first of this information was discouraging, the second idea had kept Frieda quite wide awake until ten o'clock. Earlier in the evening she had felt frightened at the thought of the miners striking and the trouble that they might be going to have on the ranch for the next few days; but Jim and Jack did not appear alarmed, so after a time her nervousness was partly allayed.

They both had declared that Ralph must not for a moment consider surrendering to the men; for apparently they intended not only to dismiss him but thereafter to run the Rainbow Mine with no consideration for its owners. It might take a few days for Ralph to get together another group of capable miners, but the delay was the only annoyance. For no one appeared to believe that the old men would make trouble. They were merely trying to bluff and threaten Ralph.

Jean, having seen with her own eyes the bitterness and dissatisfaction among the workers, was not so completely convinced. Nevertheless she said nothing of

her own doubt, not regarding her opinion in the matter as of special value. Moreover, she enjoyed seeing Ralph Merrit so sure of himself once more and so determined to swing things to a successful issue. It recalled the days when he had first been summoned to help them with his judgment as to whether or not Rainbow Mine contained sufficient gold to make it of importance. And what a change in their lives their wealth had created for them! At least Jean had previously believed this to be true, but studying the faces in the little group about her tonight she was not so sure of the others. Assuredly Ruth and Jim, who were sitting on a sofa with Ruth's hand slipped quietly and quite unconsciously inside Jim's, were not dependent for their happiness on the possession of a great deal of money. And there was Jack leaning both elbows on a small table nearby with her face in her hands, listening intently to every word Ralph was saying. Had she ever seen her cousin more animated or more interested? Well, she had always known that the mere spending of money had never given Jack the same degree of pleasure that it had her. It was "making things happen" that Jack cared most for, and now that difficulties were presenting themselves in regard to the Rainbow Mine, actually Jack seemed almost to be enjoying the prospect. Frieda was nodding, so that even she could not be very deeply concerned at the prospect of poverty, and Olive could certainly not be accused of being mercenary, since she was calmly turning her back on a large fortune rather than fulfil the conditions of her grandmother's will.

Jean smiled and sighed almost in the same breath. She could not pretend to any such highmindedness, she was afraid that she was the kind of girl whom she had heard people describe as "loving luxury like a cat." Certainly she did care more than she should for beautiful clothes, handsome houses, travel, society and everything that money alone could buy. And yet, after all, the wealth of Rainbow Mine was not hers: it belonged to Jack and Frieda, though they had always shared their income with her as though she had been their sister instead of their cousin. Whether their gold mine had now ceased to be of value or whether deeper down under the earth it should hold a larger fortune, was it not still her place to make her own future? With a start Jean came to herself. The clock had just struck midnight and Ralph had risen.

"As soon as things straighten out, Mr. Colter, I am going to ask you to let me send for two or three of the big mining experts. For of course you would want their opinion as well as mine. I will tell the men your decision in the morning. Thank all of you for your faith in me and good-night."

But Ralph's movement must have awakened Frieda, for she sat up suddenly

and yawned. "Who is it you are going to send for to come to the ranch?" she demanded unexpectedly. "Oh, I do hope some one who isn't a hundred years old. Why can't you ever ask a young man's advice, Ralph Merrit—you are young yourself?"

And then as everybody laughed, Jack pinched her sister's inviting pink cheek.

"What a foolish baby you are, Frieda Ralston," she declared, "I hardly think that Ralph's mining experts will be of the slightest interest to you."

After Jim and Ralph had gone out in the hall together and were talking quietly Jean slipped out after them.

"Don't you think, Jim," she asked, "that Ralph had better not go down to his old quarters to sleep tonight? You know his room is in the same house with half a dozen of the miners and of course nothing will happen, but I don't believe the men are exactly devoted to him and—" Jean put her hand coaxingly on the young man's coat sleeve. "Sleep on the divan in the living room tonight, won't you? We haven't a spare room, but I assure you it is most comfortable."

Jim nodded. "That isn't a bad idea, Ralph."

But the younger man shook his head, although his eyes thanked the girl for her interest.

"No, Jim," he said, "you and Jean are both awfully kind, but the one thing that the fellows I disagreed with today must not think is that I am in the least afraid of them. Oh, I realize I am up against a pretty tough proposition—they are not the kind to back down easily and are accustomed to getting their own way, but your faith and belief in me——"

Ralph stopped, his voice a little husky. "Good-night, Jean, and thank you." Then he turned to Jim Colter. "I wonder if you would mind walking a short distance with me. There is something else I must tell you that I could not mention in there tonight."

And as the two men disappeared Jean had a sudden feeling of thankfulness. How curiously things turned out. If she had not chanced to be on the porch at Rainbow Lodge that afternoon she might never have heard Ralph Merrit's confession. If the men had not summoned him for their talk just when they did, Ralph would have gone away from Rainbow Mine feeling that he had made a failure of his life and of his work.

And Jean's pretty brown eyes filled with tears. They had all been fond of Ralph for several years and would have been sorry to have him vanish out of their lives. She was glad too that he had recovered from the idea that he once had of caring for her more than the other girls. Or at least Jean believed that she was glad, for it is a very rare woman who can honestly rejoice at the loss of a lover, even though he continues to be her friend.

Out in the dark together Jim Colter put his great arm across the younger man's shoulder. "Yes, I know it is more serious, boy, than we pretended in there, but I'm with you to the uttermost and things will turn out all right. It may not hurt my girls to have less money for a while, though of course it would come pretty hard on them now to be poor, after we have taught them such extravagant tastes. But in any case, old fellow, the fault will not be yours and you must not take the result too seriously."

Ralph had not spoken, but he now braced himself and drew a slow breath.

"Look here, Jim, I didn't say all I ought to have said in there with your wife and the girls—somehow I couldn't. For I let you say you would stand by me and have faith in me when all the time I knew I wasn't worth it."

Then Ralph made the same confession to his man friend and employer as he had to Jean earlier in the day. He told him that he had been speculating steadily for the past six months. To Jim's question as to why he felt he had to grow rich in such a hurry, again Ralph made no reply. When the older man put out his hand to say good-night, Ralph Merrit held it for a moment longer than usual.

"Jim," he asked, "may I make a promise to you? This has been one of the biggest days in my life. I came home this afternoon pretty well down-and-out, intending to give up my work and pretty much everything I want to attain in the world. Then—well, wonderful, unexpected things began to happen. Now I hope I am a man again. So I want to promise, not so much you as myself, that I am going to cut this speculating business out absolutely and that I am going to keep on being a man if I can manage it, no matter what happens."

There was something in Ralph's words and in his manner that made Jim's blue eyes shine and gave the extra warmth and heartiness to the farewell clasp of his hand. Moreover, he had suddenly recalled a confidence that Jack had made to him in regard to Ralph Merrit's feeling for Jean. And if ever there was a man who knew how to offer sympathy and understanding to a discouraged lover, that man was Jim Colter.



CHAPTER IX

A DILEMMA AND A VISITOR

"GREAT SCOTT," muttered Jim Colter at the breakfast table some days later, "if there was only another man around this place to take care of you women, I would not let Ralph Merrit carry so much of this burden alone. It's getting past a one-man's game to manage our present affairs."

In return Jack shook her fist at him with what was not all a pretense of indignation. "Ruth, you may not object to hearing your husband speak of you as a burden," she protested, "but I can't say I ever like hearing that I am not able to look after myself. Oh, yes, I know what the family thinks of my vanity! But seriously, Jim, there isn't any danger, no matter what goes on down at the mine, of anybody's annoying us. You need not worry over leaving us alone. I am quite sure we don't need 'another man.' The ranch is too full of them already!" And Jack shrugged her shoulders in the face of her guardian.

But from her place at the head of the table behind a big silver coffee urn, Ruth looked at the girl in the seat next her who had just finished speaking.

"I am sorry to hear you say that, Jack," she began quietly, "because pretty soon we are going to have what you and Jim are pleased to call 'another man' as our guest at the Rainbow Lodge and one whom of all others I most wish to see."

Jack was puzzled, but Olive Van Mater, with a swift glance at the older woman, felt the blood leaving her face and her hands turning cold. Her lids drooped swiftly over her dark eyes and immediately she devoted herself to eating her breakfast, though all the while she was studying Jack's expression.

At this moment a diversion was created by the entrance of a very fluffy, blue-eyed person in a pale blue breakfast toilet, who after kissing Ruth slipped into a place next her sister.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, without any suggestion of real contrition, "but since

Jim makes us stay in the house so much lately there isn't any reason for getting up."

"Thank you, Frieda darling, for the pleasure you take in our society," Jean murmured, setting down her coffee cup in mock indignation. "I am sure that each and every member of your family feels grateful to you for your flattering suggestion. But since we are of no interest to you, perhaps you would like to hear that Ruth has just said we are to have an unexpected visitor—a man!"

Frieda first helped herself to the entire pile of griddle cakes. "I suppose everyone else has nearly finished," she remarked by way of explanation. And then: "Oh, I suppose the visitor is one of those tiresome men who is coming to help Ralph about the mine. I do wish things would quiet down, because as soon as our new house is finished Jean and I are dying to have a houseparty. Ralph said himself that his mining engineers were too old to be any fun—the youngest one is past thirty!"

"Yet I am still able to get about at that age, Frieda Ralston," Jim Colter protested.

At this instant Jack shook her head. "We are being very impolite to Ruth by talking so much," she declared. "Ruth was going to tell us about a new visitor and of course we are desperately anxious to hear. Who is he, Ruth, a stranger or an old friend? And where are you going to find a place for any one else at Rainbow Lodge?"

Purposely Ruth waited a moment in the silence that followed.

"I'll give you three guesses," she said finally.

"Peter Drummond and Jessica! Wouldn't it be splendid if they came to us on their wedding trip?" Jack answered immediately.

"No," Ruth answered.

"Tom, the chocolate-drop boy!" Jean exclaimed, laughing at Frieda's sudden blush.

But Olive Van Mater had put down her knife and fork and was looking quietly at Ruth. "May I have a turn at guessing, please?" she asked in her usual gentle fashion. "Isn't our visitor to be Frank Kent?"

And then as Ruth nodded with a smile of pleasure every pair of eyes at the table immediately turned upon Jacqueline Ralston.

And Jack's cheeks grew suddenly a deeper pink, like the heart of a pink rose, for she was too surprised for the present to be self-conscious.

"You must be mistaken, Ruth dear," she insisted. "Frank hasn't written me; I haven't said that he could come." And then seeing what her words suggested, she went on in greater confusion, "I thought he was to wait until our house was finished or until later in the summer or until some time," she ended lamely. "I don't understand."

"Perhaps Frank will explain to you, dear," Ruth replied carelessly. And then turning toward the other girls:

"You see Frank has been writing me about his visit for several weeks. But he and I both wanted his coming to be a surprise. He has said that he could not endure waiting longer to see his dearest friends. So a week ago when he arrived in New York he telegraphed me to know when he could come to the Rainbow Ranch and of course I said 'at once.' I rather think he may be here some time this afternoon. You won't have to worry now, Jim, about taking care of your wife and family, for Frank will——"

But Frieda was clapping her hands together with much more pleasure than that slightly selfish young person usually showed.

"Oh, I am so glad, Jack. We do like Frank better than any one we know, don't we? And if you don't, I am sure Olive does," she persisted.

Jim got up from his place. "I don't like this fashion you have, Mrs. Colter, of corresponding with gentlemen and not informing your husband, but just the same I am delighted that Kent is coming to us. It's amazing what a fine fellow he is for an Englishman, and certainly we owe him a lot. When a man marries at another's house—and such a wedding—it's hard work getting even with him!"

Out to the door Ruth followed her husband.

"I am dreadfully uneasy about this trouble at the mine. I did not dare show how much I am worried before the girls. But you must tell me just what the conditions are, Jim. You know we don't believe in marriages where the woman is shut out from facts," Ruth insisted.

For half a moment the man hesitated. Then he kissed the little woman who had to stand on her tip-toes to be on a level with his chin.

"I don't tell you the facts, Ruthie dear, because I don't know them," he answered. "How can I tell what a lot of crazy, obstinate men are going to do? But evidently the miners who deserted us have managed to intimidate the other mine workers in this neighborhood. Ralph has not been able to get hold of any men who want to work for us, and things at the mine have been idle for some time, as you know. So far, all we have been able to do is to have the cowboys do picket duty down at the mine so as to keep the other fellows from wrecking our machinery or blowing us up. There, don't turn white as a sheet, Ruth! I don't believe that the old miners are that anxious to injure us; yet we have to be on the look-out. Merrit has got to be away all day today hunting for men, so I must be on the job. Sorry I can't meet Kent, but you'll see that he is looked after all right and I'll be with you at dinner tonight. I'll bring Merrit with me if I can persuade him—he is apt to be pretty well fagged."

The greater part of the day the four girls spent together in the garden near the Lodge. It was a lovely June day, with the air full of the scents of innumerable wild flowers. And everything within the immediate neighborhood of the Lodge was as peaceful and undisturbed as though the mine were a hundred miles away. Jean and Jack at least half a dozen times confessed to the desire to walk over to the mine and see what was taking place; but since Jim had given strict orders against it they did not quite dare.

A part of the time they spent helping Frieda gather great bunches of violets from her old violet beds, which had never been allowed to die out, until the Lodge was finally filled with them and the big living room was fair and fragrant enough for any festival.

Then, when other amusements failed, there was always the new house to be investigated. It was now so nearly completed that when things quieted down at the mine again, if they were still to have a sufficient income to meet expenses, the moving into the new home was to take place.

While the other three girls were rummaging about making suggestions Jack managed to slip quietly away. She went directly to Ruth, who was in the nursery with her little son. And as Jack was never used to evasions or to trying to get her own way by indirect methods, she asked immediately:

"Ruth dear, may Olive and I drive to the station and meet Frank Kent this

afternoon? I have a special reason for wishing to be there. You see, dear, I don't want Frank to think that I am not delighted to see him or that I have put off his coming to us because I had forgotten him. You knew he had been wanting to come for a long time, didn't you?"

Ruth nodded. "I had guessed it, Jack, though I did not know positively until Frank's letter to me. Nor do I know now why you put off his visit. I am not asking you to tell me," she added quickly. For, observing the sudden look of reserve on the girl's face, she appreciated that it must be respected. "Frank merely said that he wanted to see us so much, and I did not see how his coming could fail to give pleasure. You don't mind, do you, dear?" Ruth concluded, wondering if this might be the moment for confidence.

Although still keeping her clear, almost transparently honest gray eyes on her friend, Jack flushed.

"Yes dear, I do want Frank, now that Olive is here," she replied. "I meant to write him and ask him just as soon as things were quiet at the mine again. Now may we go to meet him?"

Ruth looked worried. "I have been wondering what we ought to do about going to the station all morning," she returned. "Of course some of the family must meet Frank or he will feel deeply wounded, but I can't leave the baby and yet there seems no man about the place to go with you girls. Jim has taken possession of everybody."

Jack kissed Ruth on the hair and then bent over and looked at the baby with a new expression of wonder and reverence. She had always been much more afraid of the "little Jimmikin" than the other girls.

"Don't trouble over things a minute, Ruth. You know the danger that Jim is fearful of for us is what may happen here on the ranch. But we shall be leaving the ranch as soon as we drive through the gate. Moreover, we can take Carlos with us for an escort; he is only a boy, but he will do perfectly well. And if we don't take him, it won't make much difference since he would be more than likely to follow us. As far as I can see he trails constantly after Olive like a faithful dog. It would annoy me, but I don't believe she has even noticed how much he does it. I wonder what the boy's exact reason is? Nevertheless, as it gives Carlos a regular occupation, I suppose we should be grateful."

CHAPTER X

CROSS PURPOSES

OLIVE was not so unconscious of the Indian boy's attitude toward her as Jack believed. Indeed she could not well be. And now as the three of them drove together to the station she was pondering on whether or not she should confide her experience to Jack. But Jack was not sympathetic toward Carlos, for with her intense and forceful nature it was hard for her to understand the boy's idleness and dreaming. Therefore to tell her what had recently occurred would doubtless make her prejudice the deeper. For she was almost sure to regard the boy's behavior as impertinence and to wish to send him at once away from the ranch.

Yet though Olive herself was annoyed, she did not wish matters to go so far as that. For she had a peculiar appreciation and pity for the Indian boy's difficulties which no one else could so readily have. Had she not been raised among the Indian people and did she not comprehend their shy, proud natures? For white people to realize that the Indian, even in the midst of his overthrow and degradation, still considers himself their superior is an almost impossible conception. Nevertheless Olive knew this to be true. The white man's religion is to the Indian less full of visions and of dreams. An educated Indian writes:

"When we plant our plumes where the shrines are, our first prayer is for good thoughts—that our children may be wise and strong, and that the God of the sky may be glad of us. I have listened to the mission talk many days, and nothing in the words of the missionary is more white than the thought which we plant with the prayer plumes on our shrines."

Neither does the Indian, though of course there are exceptions in his race as in all other things, have the respect that we feel he should have for the advantages of our education. What more does it teach him of the woods and the fields, of the beauty and imagery of nature, of all that he cares to know? Of a boy who had been to a government school an Indian says:

"He comes back to his people and knows that if he lives there it must be as

his father lived—except that now he has more cultivated tastes to satisfy, and no further means or methods of earning the price of them. To plant the corn, herd the sheep, hunt the rabbits, take care of his share of his own village—these are the life-work of the Indian. The schools teach him to do that no better than his fathers did it before him. He is taught to read and write, and he asks 'for what?'

"The cities of the mesa have no books, and have never felt the need of them. Why should he read of the American life he lives apart from?"

Therefore Olive understood that though the boy Carlos might not be able to express himself in this fashion, in his heart of hearts this was exactly the way that he felt. Why should he study what Jim Colter and the girls wished him to learn? Books and figures had no possible interest for him or relation to the life which he meant to lead. His world was the outdoor one, among the animals and birds, under the new moons of each succeeding month, and lifting up his eyes and his heart to the sun when he wished to be glad.

To work like the other men did about the ranch, digging under the earth or plowing in the fields! This was not for the son and the grandson of many chieftains! It was not merely laziness on Carlos' part that kept him from making himself useful, but the feeling that any such labor as he might be expected to do was beneath his dignity. Therefore the boy could never really get into his mind the idea that the white people were his masters, although in a vague way he knew that they felt themselves to be. It was this thought that was always the foundation of Carlos' sullenness and lack of gratitude.

So Olive realized that the Indian boy's letter to her, which she had found at her door one day hidden among a bunch of prairie roses, had not been written in any spirit of presumption or audacity. Had she not at one time seemed to be an Indian like himself? Had she not lived among them, eaten their food and spoken their speech? And was it not for her sake that Carlos had left his own tribe and taken upon himself many of the ways of the white man? The boy had cared for his "Princess Olilie" always, but in years past he had been a boy and felt as one. Now he was a man!

All this and more Carlos had put into his note. Olive remembered it at the present moment almost word for word, for it had touched and hurt her at the same time. Although Carlos was too young to mean all that he had said, she knew that with his queer nature he must suffer from her reply.

For he had written:

MY LADY OF THE LONE TRAIL:

Are you not weary of the life and the ways of the white women and men? Are you not tired of having your soul shut up between four walls of wood with no vision for your eyes by day and no night wind to touch your cheek as you lay asleep? You and I have grown older now; there is no one in any Indian tribe to hurt us. Have I not stayed quietly here waiting and watching for you, learning many things which I have hated, that we might not fail to understand each other? For my love for you is as the Tu-wa-ni-ne-ma, the sand of the desert.

Therefore will you not come away with me back to the wonderful, free outdoor world, where we lived together for a little while when both of us were children. Under a tree in a dim forest I shall build for you such a nest as only a man shall build for his mate. Then in the day time I shall plant corn while you weave the beautiful Indian blanket, which the Indian Laska taught you to make. And in the night we shall listen to the little night bird of the desert, the Hoetska. But both day and night we shall be alone and away from these people who do not understand me as you do and who will never love you as I do.

Whenever you will come with me, I shall have two horses waiting.

Olive stole a glimpse at Jacqueline's face. For a quarter of an hour they had been sitting beside each other, and yet neither one of them had uttered a word. But certainly she should not tell Jack of Carlos' unhappy and impossible letter. For Jack might be amused, she might be angry, and certainly she would be resentful.

No, Olive decided that she must keep the boy's secret inviolate. Some day she would have a chance to see him alone. Then she might be able to explain how far she herself had traveled from the old Indian days—how she could never again love the things that the boy did, nor endure the life which he wished to lead. Besides, Carlos was only a boy, while she was almost a woman—at least a good many years his senior! Perhaps she might even tell Carlos that it would be best for him to go away from Rainbow Ranch, back to his own people where he could live with Indian boys and girls of his own age. There was the Indian

village not far off to which she herself might return after a few years. For one of these days the Indians were to have a teacher who *could* understand their point of view as well as that of the white people. Perhaps Carlos might by that time be married to a girl of his own race and be able to help her with her chosen work.

But she must not speak of this idea to Jacqueline either, for the suggestion always made her friend unhappy. It was odd how utterly devoted she and Jack were and how intimate; yet they did not often speak of the deepest desires of their hearts to each other. Not once had Jack voluntarily mentioned Frank Kent's name since their return from the visit to Lord and Lady Kent the year before.

Was Jack in love with Frank? Olive could not make up her mind. Because if she were, what was standing in the way of their engagement? Of course Jack could never have dreamed of her foolish, impossible affection for Frank, who had never been anything except her good friend. Olive was quite certain that she had never by any sign betrayed herself. She believed that she had entirely recovered from her former feeling, and was hoping with all her heart that Jack and Frank would now find out that they truly loved each other.

But what was making Jacqueline so unusually quiet? Olive's slender hand slipped into her friend's larger and firmer one, and Jack's fingers closed over it lovingly.

They were now almost at the depot and Frank Kent's train would be due in another quarter of an hour. If only Jack would not look so pale and reserved—she was not nearly so pretty as usual! Her face was white and her eyes had dark shadows under them. Jean and Frieda had insisted that Jack wear a new silk suit that had recently been made for her, but it was not half so becoming as her old brown corduroys or faded khaki; neither was her cream-colored straw hat with its single brown rose so picturesque as the ranch hat in which Frank had first seen her.

Olive sighed, and the sigh attracted the other girl's attention.

"I have been a dreadfully stupid companion, Olive dear. Forgive me," Jack murmured penitently. And then: "How pretty you are looking! Frank will be so glad to see you, I know!"

At this moment Carlos stopped the carriage and pair of horses before the station platform, where both girls got out without time for further speech. Yet all this while Jacqueline had been thinking: "If Olive still cares for Frank after this

year of absence I am sure that her feeling will never change. So if this be true I shall tell Frank that I do not care for him enough to marry him. Olive has had too unhappy a life for me to add to her unhappiness. Surely when Frank believes that I do not love him, he will find out what Olive means to him and how immeasurably she is my superior, in beauty, brains, sweetness and everything that counts. Then he will know that he has liked her best all along!"

Nevertheless and in spite of all her excellent reasoning as the whistle blew announcing the approaching train, Jack caught her breath. She hoped that Frank would not be angry with her for having refused to let him come to Rainbow Ranch for almost a year. Could she dare to pretend that she had forgotten the conversation which they had had in that last ride together between the hawthorn hedges of an English lane?

When Frank Kent came down the steps of the train with his grave, handsome face flushed with eagerness—and something else—it was Olive Van Mater whom he found waiting for him alone on the platform. With all his old delightful friendliness and charm of manner he greeted her, dropping his luggage to hold both her hands close for a moment.

Yet Olive to save her life could not at once be equally friendly and natural. For what in heaven's name had become of Jacqueline Ralston at this critical moment? As the train drew in, she had been standing close by her side. Here she was approaching them at last, holding out her hand stiffly, with a frozen smile on her face.

"Awfully glad to see you, Frank; you are looking very fit after a trip across the continent. Sorry not to be here when your train got in, but I had to attend to something about the horses. Give me your check and let me see after your trunk. Everybody at the ranch is well and tremendously anxious to see you."

Frank smiled. Holding on to his trunk check he followed the girl a few yards to the spot where his trunk had been thrown out. Olive waited alone to watch his bags.

"Hope you will be more enthusiastic over seeing me yourself, dear, when I have a chance to talk to you," Frank remarked in the quiet fashion that always had its effect on the girl's ardent nature. "You are glad, aren't you?"

And while Jack nodded, not entirely trusting herself to speak, Frank laughed, saying: "Here comes a porter. I'll have him carry my stuff to the carriage. It is

like you, Miss America, to wish to start out by taking care of me. But if I am an Englishman and too much accustomed to being waited upon, at least I won't endure that!"



CHAPTER XI

A DINNER PARTY

DINNER at Rainbow Lodge on the evening of Frank Kent's arrival was sufficiently gay and delightful to make up for many preceding weeks of quietness.

For not only was Frank's appearance an unexpected pleasure to the entire family, but a few hours before sundown Ralph Merrit had returned home with an old friend of his, whom quite by accident he had met in a nearby town and persuaded to come with him for a short visit at the ranch. Henry Tilford Russell was to be a new experience to the four girls, since never in their wandering either at home or abroad had they met any other young man in the least like him.

Before bringing his guest up to the Lodge for dinner Ralph had managed to escape from him for a few moments in order to see Ruth privately and to explain to her a few of his friend's peculiarities, so that no member of the family need be unnecessarily surprised. For one thing, the stranger was inordinately shy, disliking girls more than anything in the whole world. In fact Ralph was at last obliged to confess that had his friend guessed how many maidens he would be obliged to face at dinner, gladly would he have preferred starvation to joining them. But since Russell had asked no uncomfortable questions, Ralph had not felt in duty bound to forewarn him. Then, as his guest was about thirty years old, according to Frieda Ralston's calculations he was much too elderly anyhow for the Ranch girls' consideration.

Yet notwithstanding all these drawbacks Ralph Merrit had been exceedingly anxious to bring his friend to the Rainbow Ranch. For in spite of the young man's shyness and social awkwardness, he was exceptionally brilliant, and was regarded almost a genius in his chosen line of work. Henry Tilford Russell was the assistant professor of ancient languages in the University of Chicago and Ralph had known him there in his own student days. However, he had recently suffered a breakdown from overwork and was now in the West on a trip for his

health. But the fact about his former friend over which Ralph Merrit was particularly enthusiastic and desired to have Ruth impart to the girls, was that of his own free will Professor Russell had chosen the life of a student. His father was a wealthy and prominent Chicago lawyer, at one time the American Ambassador to Greece, so had the son desired he might have followed the idle existence of most other rich young men.

In the midst of seeing that the baby was safely stored away in his silk-lined crib and that the table was set for extra guests, and that Aunt Ellen prepare a specially good dinner, Ruth had no time for extended conversation with the girls. She did manage to mention to Jean and Frieda that Ralph had brought home a stranger to whom they were to try to be agreeable. But this bit of information was almost swallowed up in the more important news that Ralph had at last succeeded in getting hold of a new set of men and that work on Rainbow Mine was to begin again within the next day or so.

Then, soon after, Frank appeared, and everything else was forgotten in the welcome to him.

Just as though he had been her older brother and Frieda a little girl, Frank kissed her, insisting that she had grown, although at eighteen Frieda certainly considered herself quite past the growing stage.

Introduced to the new baby, Frank did not seem in the least nervous or abashed as most men are by such very tiny persons. Indeed, he apparently had overcome all his old reserve and shyness and without this was simple and charming, as persons of high birth and breeding are most apt to be.

Fifteen minutes before dinner Ruth had positively to force the four girls to dress. Then, as Jim was getting ready at the same time, she had a few moments alone with Frank Kent.

"You know what I have come for, don't you, Mrs. Colter—Ruth?" Frank began with the directness that the woman had always admired in him.

Ruth made no pretense of not understanding. "It would be hard for all of us, and I don't see how Jim would be able to get along on the ranch without Jack," she replied. "For you see he and Jack really are like 'partners,' their old name for each other. But if it is for Jack's happiness you know how we should all feel. But, Frank, I feel I must warn you that Jack won't be easy to win, and it is because I care for you so much that I hope you will not be discouraged. She is

not just like most girls, and——"

Frank nodded. "I have understood that all along," he interrupted. "Still there is one thing, Ruth, that you do not know. Last summer I persuaded Jack to confess that she did care for me. Yet she insisted that there was something, she could not explain to me what it was, that stood in our way—some barrier that had to be broken down before she could consent to marry me. What it was I don't know and that is one of the things I have come half way across the world to find out. Can you guess of any possible obstacle to Jack's feeling for me?"

In a puzzled fashion Ruth Colter drew her delicate brows together. Frank's remark had startled and surprised her. "No, not unless it is her affection for us and the ranch," she replied.

Before another confidence could be exchanged, Jim had stamped into the living room, looking bigger and more splendid than ever, suggesting the strong wind from his own beloved prairies. A few moments later Ralph Merrit and his guest followed, and afterwards Olive, Jean and Jack.

Perhaps because she remembered that Frank had always liked her best in white, Jack wore a plain white silk dress cut square in the neck and with no trimming but the girdle and little ruffle of lace. It was a dress which she had owned for over a year, and Frieda was annoyed with her for wearing it on the evening of Frank's arrival. Notwithstanding, as there was no time to change after her sister's protest, Frieda finally conceded as Jack left the room that she did look fairly well. For the truth was that no one of the older girl's more elaborate toilets could have suited her half so well.

Jack was pale and not altogether sure whether she was the more happy or unhappy over Frank's presence, yet somehow her unusual pallor was not unattractive, with her burnished brown and gold hair and the healthy scarlet of her lips. Then in some indefinable fashion Jack's expression had recently grown gentler, indeed tonight her manner held a certain timidity, giving her one of the charms that she sometimes lacked.

Both Olive and Jean were also simply dressed, since their dinner party was an impromptu one and entirely informal. Olive had on a lavender muslin with a bunch of Frieda's violets at her waist, while Jean was dressed in a pale yellow voile frock with primroses embroidered upon it.

Ralph Merrit frowned and then tried to smile as Jean came forward to shake

hands, congratulate him and meet his guest, "What right had a poor fellow even to dream of a girl so fitted by beauty and grace to every high position? Suppose by some miracle Jean should in time learn to care for him, what would he have to offer her? Here was Frank Kent (and Ralph was perfectly aware of Frank's intention), and if Jack cared for him she would have all the things of this world that Jean so frankly loved, wealth, a high social position and one day an old English title."

But while Ralph Merrit was continuing to pursue this wholly futile train of thought, Jean was every now and then glancing toward him demurely from under her heavy shaded brown eyes with a look which he perfectly understood.

"What in the world is the matter with your friend, Mr. Russell?" the look said plain as any words. For Jean was doing her level best to talk to the stranger and in return for her efforts he would not even turn towards her.

On first being introduced to Jacqueline the Professor had turned crimson to the tips of his large ears, though in a measure he had been prepared for one girl, since Ralph had mentioned a "Miss Ralston" in connection with the ownership of the Rainbow Mine. Later the meeting with Olive had added resentment to his confusion. Why had Merrit not warned him of what he would have to endure? Jean was an impossible third. Why, no such misfortune as meeting with three girls had overtaken him since he reached the great womanless West! For though the West did have its tiresome quota of females, so far he had managed to escape speaking to any of them except on strictly business matters.

Well, he was in for it now, and would have to endure the evening as best he could; yet already he had made up his mind to escape as soon as daylight came in the morning.

Jean's well-meant efforts to make herself agreeable to Ralph's friend were entirely wasted; yet after dinner was announced the young Professor found himself more at ease. For fortunately he had been placed on Mrs. Colter's left and next him was an empty chair—evidently for some member of the family not at home he thought with a suppressed sigh of relief.

Overhearing Frank Kent ask some question of interest in regard to the mine, Professor Russell forgot his embarrassment sufficiently to add several questions and comments of his own. And it happened to be during one of his own speeches that an unexpected movement near him made him glance toward the empty chair.

"Great Scott! Was this a big wax doll about to take her place next him?"

Yet, though the doll was struggling with the chair and evidently trying to draw it out from under the table, it never occurred to Henry Tilford Russell to render her the slightest assistance, in spite of the fact that she was smiling at him appealingly out of the very largest and bluest eyes he had ever seen.

The lateness of Frieda Ralston's entrance did not appear to have surprised her family, who were entirely accustomed to it; however, the magnificence of her dinner toilet plainly did. For whatever had inspired Frieda to dress up as she had? It was small wonder that she was late.

Even in the midst of her duties as hostess Ruth Colter's gray eyes widened and it was on the tip of her tongue to scold Frieda for her foolishness. Yet, recovering herself in time and recalling the presence of their guests, she said nothing.

With a faint suggestion of reproach Jack shook her head at her sister, while Jean and Olive openly smiled at each other. So the situation would have passed off without any unpleasantness if it had not been for Jim Colter. When would Ruth teach Jim that he was not to tease the Ranch girls before strangers just as if they were tiny children?

With real astonishment and some mock admiration Jim stared at the latest comer, at the same time giving a characteristic chuckle and low whistle. Then, in spite of the fact that Jack, who was sitting near, gave his foot a warning pressure, he exclaimed:

"What in heaven's name, Baby, does all that finery mean? You aren't going to a ball later on this evening, are you, and forgotten to mention it?"

Then, with everybody at the table staring at her, Frieda felt her lips beginning to tremble and her eyes fill with tears, as at last she slipped into her place. Why should her appearance create so much comment? She had dressed up because she wished to and for no other special reason.

Often in the past year when things at the Lodge had been dull for a long time she had amused herself in trying on her pretty clothes. No one had ever objected before, but now, just because there were strangers, or at least one stranger, present, she had to be made the object of family criticism and ridicule. If only they were alone Frieda felt that she would like to tell Jim and everybody just

how hateful they were. For of course there had been no thought in her mind of Ralph's guest when she had put on her blue *crêpe de chîne* dress with its low neck and elbow sleeves and floating chiffon draperies. The costume had been a present from her sister, Jack, who always could save more of her income than she or Jean. She had only wished to find out whether it was becoming to her and that was why she had also taken so much time and care in fixing her hair. Certainly she knew that Ralph's guest would be as old as the hills—Ralph had plainly stated that he would be.

Frieda gave a little start, which she promptly repressed so that no one should notice it, when she heard a pleasant voice whispering unexpectedly close to her ear:

"Don't mind their teasing you; I think you look—just jolly."

And in reply Frieda smiled tremulously upon the newcomer.

He was old, just as she had expected—his hair was already beginning to grow thin upon the top of his head. He was slender and delicate looking and of only medium height, yet his eyes were certainly the brownest and almost the kindest that she had ever seen, in spite of the fact that they had a kind of absent, far-away expression even while they seemed to be fastened upon her.

"Thank you," Frieda returned a second later, having by this time regained both her lost dignity and self-possession. But this time the younger Miss Ralston found their latest visitor displaying a curious eccentricity. Now he was plainly laughing at her. Naturally Frieda could not have dreamed that Professor Russell, whom Ruth had finally concluded to introduce to her, considered her a little girl of about fourteen. Otherwise, not for anything in the world, would he have made the speech which he first addressed to her.

The truth was that this old-young Professor was extremely fond of children and only objected to girls after they had grown up. Then because he was so shy himself he had a keen sympathy for embarrassment in other people. So it was to these two causes that Frieda owed his friendliness.

Nevertheless, as she was entirely unconscious of this fact, Frieda continued to talk to him very calmly and comfortably during the entire meal. He did appear surprised over an occasional remark of hers, but as he hardly ever answered, Frieda guessed that this might be his method of revealing his appreciation of her attentions. Actually the two of them were out on the porch with every one else

vanished from sight for the moment before Professor Russell entirely awoke to the fact that, though his companion was still extremely young, she could not exactly be regarded as a baby.



CHAPTER XII

TWO CONVERSATIONS

"J ACK, you have not played fair with me; what is it that has happened?" Frank Kent asked quietly.

It was an hour since dinner time at the Lodge and Frank had so insisted upon Jack's taking a walk with him that without rudeness she had not been able to refuse. It was an enchanting June night, warmer than usual in that part of the western country, and with a moon that shines perhaps nowhere on this earth with exactly the same wide radiance.

Jack and Frank had walked down the tall aisles of cottonwood trees near the house and were now standing a few yards on the farther side of them in a clear and revealing light. At Frank's words the girl flinched as he had known that she would. For just that reason he had chosen them, since nothing could hurt Jacqueline so much or make her come so immediately to her own defence as any suggestion that she had not played fair. Other girls might not suffer so greatly from this accusation; but honesty, candor and a kind of straightforwardness, which some persons are pleased to think as masculine traits, had always been Jack's leading characteristics. Now, however, though her companion waited impatiently for her reproach or her denial, for a moment he heard neither.

"I am so sorry, Frank, that you feel in that way about me," Jack began finally. Then, almost in a whisper: "I have not intended to be unfair to you. I—I had not promised you anything."

Jack was not looking into Frank's face as she spoke, but at the silvery whiteness of the ground beneath her feet.

"But nothing has happened, if you mean that I have become either angry or disappointed in you," she added timidly.

Difficult as the girl had anticipated this conversation might be, it was more trying than she had expected.

What could she say? How could she truthfully present the situation to Frank, as it appeared to her, without putting Olive in an impossible position? Because in spite of Olive's denial through the message to Jean at the close of the last Ranch Girls' book, Jacqueline was still firmly convinced that her friend felt so great an

affection for Frank Kent that it was influencing her whole life. Did it not explain why she absolutely refused to consider Donald Harmon's proposal of marriage, in spite of Don's devotion and her grandmother's expressed desire? Moreover, even if Olive did not like Donald sufficiently well to consider marrying him, why should she insist that she intended devoting her future to teaching the Indian children?

To Jack Ralston such a career suggested pure martyrdom. Olive might do anything else in the world that she liked, even if her grandmother left her no inheritance. For there was Miss Winthrop, who regarded Olive almost as a daughter and who would do everything possible for her. She might have almost any happiness and yet Olive actually talked as if she meant to do what she had so long said she intended as soon as she was a few years older and the proper arrangements could be made.

Jack bit her lips until they positively hurt. Actually she felt a shiver of repugnance at the idea of going away with Frank to every happiness if her going involved leaving her dearest friend to such a fate. Could she ever really be happy with this thought in the back of her mind?

No, Jack decided once again that she was far stronger than Olive and better able to look after herself and to bear, if need be, both loss and loneliness. Besides, had she not had many joys in the past and Olive for many years so few? Surely if Olive still cared for Frank, as she believed, in a little while there need be no further doubt of it. In that event it must be her duty to tell Frank that she did not love him and would never consent to leave the ranch for his sake. After that Frank would undoubtedly turn at once to Olive, who had always been his friend and upon whose sympathy he could surely count. Olive, too, was so much prettier, her nature so much gentler and sweeter, she would make a far better wife. Frank might be angry with her at first, Jack acknowledged to herself at this moment, but he would be more than grateful in the end.

Jack laid her hand pleadingly on the young man's coat sleeve.

"Frank," she asked more wistfully than she herself realized, "won't you promise not to talk about your feeling for me for a time? Won't you just stay on here with us at the Rainbow Ranch as you used to do and let us have a happy time together? I am worried about such a number of things. Perhaps the money in Rainbow Mine is going to give out and we may have no further income from it. Then there is this strike of our miners. Jim and I don't say a great deal about it

to the others, but we are so afraid the old men may resort to violence when we try to get things to running smoothly again and that Ralph or some one else may be seriously hurt. Don't you see that I just can't think about anything else now?"

"No, Jack dear, I can't honestly see why your having all these worries and annoyances can affect your knowing whether or not you return my love. It is not as though I had never spoken of it—you have had a whole year to decide. But if you wish me to wait longer, of course I shall do as you ask. Only please don't let it be too long."

Then before the girl could reply she and her companion had both started, and instinctively Jack clutched at the young man's arm.

The next moment she gave a relieved laugh.

"I don't see why I should jump in that fashion just because we heard a slight noise behind us," she apologized. "I suppose other people have just the same right that we have to be outdoors enjoying the moonlight."

Jack then turned around, looking back into the grove of cottonwood trees. "Jean, Olive, Frieda," she called lightly, but when no one responded, thinking no more of the incident she moved on a few steps.

"Come on, Frank, let us have a real walk, it is too lovely to go back to the Lodge so soon. I want to ask you such a lot of questions and about your mother and father and Kent Place," she pleaded.

Frank's attention was not to be so easily diverted. For several moments he continued staring at the spot where undoubtedly he had heard the noise of light footsteps only a few seconds before. The sound had come from the neighborhood of the trees nearest them; but why did no figure emerge into the light or move off again in the opposite direction? The night was so bright and the air so clear that no one could have escaped without being either seen or heard. But Frank was too interested in the prospect of a longer time in the moonlight alone with Jacqueline to waste a great deal more thought upon a possible intruder. Once again he glanced back, but as no one was in sight, he and Jack were soon deep in an intimate and happy conversation.

Notwithstanding, neither the girl nor the man were mistaken in their original impression that some one had been in their neighborhood during at least a part of their conversation. For when they were both safely out of sight a slender figure

stole from behind one of the largest cottonwood trees and ran off with the fleetness and noiselessness of a wild creature. There was an ugly expression on the face—one of resentment and suspicion and yet of so great unhappiness that the other emotions might have been forgiven.

For the Indian boy, Carlos, fifteen minutes before had just concluded a conversation with the only person in the world for whom he felt any real affection. And foolish and mistaken as his dream had been, it hurt no less to find it shattered.

A few minutes after dinner, when all the family were together on the veranda at Rainbow Lodge, Olive had several times noticed Carlos hovering about in their vicinity, now on a pretence of bringing a message to Jim Colter which might as easily have waited until morning, then asking some perfectly unnecessary question of her. And finally with the persistence and stoicism of his race he had planted himself like a slender and upright column against a side of the house, deliberately to wait until he could have his way.

There was not the slightest use of pretending that Olive did not understand what his intention was. Carlos wished to talk with her, wished to have an immediate answer to the letter which he had lately written her. Moreover, she feared that unless she gave in to him he might show some trace of his feeling before the assembled company.

Quietly Olive slipped over to Ruth Colter.

"Ruth," she whispered, when no one was paying any especial attention to either of them, "I have something rather important that I must say to Carlos. He is here now waiting. Do you think it would make any difference if I go and talk to him for a few moments? We won't go any distance from the house, just to some place where no one may be disturbed by us."

And Ruth agreed to the girl's request without considering it seriously. To the older woman Carlos was only a child, sometimes rather a difficult one it was true, but at any rate only an idle, mischievous boy, whom the Ranch girls in their usual impulsive generosity had befriended and in a measure adopted. But that Carlos should think of himself as a man and actually have the impertinence to consider himself in love with Olive, Ruth simply could not have believed had she been told the truth at this moment.

So Olive, pretending to go to her own room for a scarf, had afterwards stolen

out of a side door and come close up to where the Indian boy was standing.

"Carlos," she said kindly, "I would rather you did not linger about the veranda because you wish to speak to me. If you will come away with me for a little distance we can talk. I received your letter and you want to know what I think of it?"

Without a word the boy nodded, but he followed the girl for a few yards until they were standing ankle deep in the shimmering green foliage of Frieda's violet beds which were not far from the Lodge. And although in the path a few feet away there was a small bench where the girls often rested after their work among the flowers, Olive would not consent to sitting down.

Slowly and patiently as she could, she explained to Carlos the utter impossibility of his feeling for her. In the first place, he was a boy while she was a number of years his senior. Then he was completely mistaken in his idea that because she had been raised among Indian people she cared for their life or habits. Not for anything on earth would she return to their simple and primitive existence. Because Olive was essentially gentle and because her sympathy and understanding of the Indian boy's nature was a matter of experience as well as kindness of heart, she did try to take the sting away from the present situation so far as she could; yet she felt obliged to be firm, for there must be no repetition of Carlos' foolish letter to her. He must appreciate that she was fond of him because he had once befriended her in a difficulty, and that she was grateful and would always be interested in his welfare. But to care for him in any other fashion was absolutely out of the question. Never again must he even dare to refer to the subject.

Notwithstanding her resolute attitude and the arguments which she had used so forcibly, at the end of their conversation Olive did not feel sure that Carlos was as entirely convinced of the absurdity of his desire as he should have been. For she had spared him the one course open to her that might have brought him to his senses—sheer ridicule. Therefore when Olive was back in her own room alone and undressing for the night, since she had not felt in the mood for rejoining her friends, she wondered if she had been altogether wise. Certainly she had not liked Carlos' manner, and two remarks of his near the conclusion of their talk had left her very angry.

"It is Miss Ralston who has turned you against me," he had muttered sullenly. "She don't like me, she don't understand. She thinks I am no more than a servant

about her place. If it had not been for her you might have stayed always in the wilderness with me when both of us were children. Then you would never have known of your people nor learned to love the stupid white man's world. Miss Ralston is my enemy; therefore I hate her." And with these words Carlos had drawn up his lean, boyish frame with the majesty of a deposed king.

Olive's sudden wrath had humbled him for the moment at least; yet just before she turned to go he had said again with equal passion, although his manner was quieter and more subdued.

"Then if it is not Miss Ralston who has come between us, there is some one you care for. I wonder if it can be the far-away guest and friend, who arrived this afternoon by the iron trail of the prairies?"

When Olive did not answer but walked quietly back to the Lodge, Carlos stood for a time like a bronze statue, silent and unmoving; then swift as a shadow he threaded his way between the cottonwood trees, actually observing Jack and Frank from the beginning to the end of their conversation, although hearing little of what they said.



CHAPTER XIII

A VISIT TO RAINBOW MINE

TWO days later, as things were once more in working order at the Rainbow Mine, Ralph Merrit suggested that Jim Colter bring Ruth and the girls and Frank Kent down to see how things were going. And soon after luncheon the little party started.

A trip to the mine was actually like an expedition to a foreign place, so long a time had passed since the family had been allowed in its vicinity, and so of course everybody was in especially fine spirits. It was well to have Rainbow Mine running again and a relief to find that the striking miners had yielded to circumstances so much more readily and peaceably than their first threats suggested. They had influenced the mine workers near at home to have nothing to do with Ralph Merrit's management; nevertheless since the arrival of his new force the atmosphere about Rainbow Ranch had remained serene and untroubled, so that evidently the strikers were not to be heard from.

True, a single ugly letter had mysteriously appeared at daylight this morning left before the door of the new foreman, but except for mentioning it to Ralph, the man had paid no further attention to it. And Ralph, in the interest and excitement of getting things into working order at the mine, had given it less consideration than it deserved. For the annoyance was not so much in the threat of trouble that the letter contained, as in the puzzle of its being found at the quarters built for the Rainbow Mine workers, which were not far from the old Ranch house. No outsider had been seen anywhere about the great ranch either on the preceding day or night.

Jim and Frank and Jack walked on ahead in order that they might have a few moments' conversation with the new miners; for no one had yet gone down the shaft into the mine. Before lunch they had been going over the machinery and seeing that the elevators for the men and for the ore were in good working order.

Now Ralph Merrit was insisting that he be lowered first into the mining pit

and that his new men with their hammers and chisels and other mining paraphernalia follow after him. However, observing that Ruth and the other girls were coming nearer he went forward to speak to them. Not since the evening when he and his friend had taken dinner at the Rainbow Lodge had he seen any one of them.

"We are awfully pleased, Ralph, that affairs are straightening out so comfortably," Ruth began. "I think we owe you a vote of thanks." She had not known what had been making Ralph Merrit so unlike himself for the past few months, since neither Jim nor Jean had seen fit to confide Ralph's weakness to any one else; but she did recognize the change for the better in him today. She had never before thought of Ralph as specially handsome, yet he looked so fine and capable; his expression was so full of energy and ability that instinctively Ruth held out her hand.

"Go in and win, Ralph," she added, half laughing and half serious. "I don't just know what it is that you are fighting for, except to make more money for the girls who don't deserve it. But whatever it is I am going to put my money on you, even though betting is against my Puritan traditions; for you'll win in the end. Why, Ralph, you look like the famous statue of 'The Minute Man' near Boston, except that you have not his gun or knapsack. You're just as typical an American fighter and just as ready for action."

Crimsoning like a small boy at unexpected praise, Ralph crushed Ruth's hand in reply until she had to repress a cry of pain.

"I'm not worth the powder to blow me up if you really knew the truth about me, Mrs. Colter; but just the same any kind of fellow likes a compliment now and then, and I don't remember when I have had one," he returned.

A movement of Jean's graceful shoulders and a single glance from her demure dark eyes made the young man swing half-way around to face her.

"You are not disputing that statement, are you?" he demanded. "Why shouldn't a fellow like a compliment as well as a girl?"

Jean slipped off the big pink straw hat she had been wearing and with the velvet ribbon about it, swung it on her arm like a basket.

"Oh, I am not disputing *that* part of your statement if you please, sir," she answered. "I am only regretting that you have forgotten all the other

compliments which you have received in the past. For when I remember how many I have bestowed upon you lately, it is discouraging to think what a failure I have been in trying to make myself agreeable."

Just why recently, indeed ever since their conversation together that afternoon on the veranda at the Lodge and later here in the shadow of one of the great rocks, Jean Bruce had been trying to make herself particularly agreeable to Ralph Merrit and to win back his former attention and friendship, the girl herself did not know. On her return from Europe, after a few months at home, she had certainly discouraged Ralph's devotion, feeling instinctively that his affection for her had now become more serious than in the past when he had looked upon her as only a half-grown girl. For Jean did not wish to be unkind or unfair, and assuredly Ralph had none of the things to offer her which she desired. Perhaps because of this she had talked more of wealth and of worldly ambitions than she might otherwise have done. And Ralph had either understood her intention or else had recovered from his former affection, for in the past few months, during his foolish and futile struggle for money through speculations, he had entirely ceased making love to her or treating her in any way differently from the other girls.

At heart Jean was essentially a coquette, one of those girls and women who, having once gained a man's admiration, cannot bear to find themselves losing it. And surely Jack and Frieda and Olive had often accused her of this vice.

Now, knowing that Ralph cared at present more for the successful working of the Rainbow Mine than for anything else, Jean pointed with apparently the deepest concern toward the group of new men.

"Tell us about the new miners, won't you please, Ralph," she asked, "their names and where some of them came from—anything you know? They are a splendid-looking lot of fellows!"

But at this moment Frieda interrupted the conversation to ask a question. "Who is that thin man over there all by himself in the blue overalls and old hat? Why isn't he with the others who are being introduced to Jim and Frank and Jack? I wonder if Jim knows him?"

Then, quite unaccountably, Ralph Merrit appeared extremely uncomfortable.

"See here, Frieda, I might as well tell you, for you would be sure to find out anyhow if I didn't. That fellow isn't one of the new miners. He is Russell, the

friend I brought up to the Lodge with me to dinner the other night. You see——"

But Frieda's eyes were widening and in truth the other three women seemed almost equally surprised.

"But I thought Professor Russell had gone away from Rainbow Ranch," Frieda protested, "why he told us good-by the night he left and said that he would have to be off so early the next morning that he could not see any of us again."

Ralph nodded. "I know," he conceded in some embarrassment. "And you're still to think he has gone if you please. Don't any one of you go near enough to Russell to speak to him or he will probably die of confusion before your eyes. I am afraid I forgot he was around and he is under the impression that he is safely disguised. You see the truth of the matter is this. When Russell got me away from the Lodge the other night there is nothing he did not say to me for having taken him unprepared to a place where he had to meet four girls. He declared it nearly killed him and he had every intention of sneaking away from the Ranch house the next morning on foot rather than suffer the chance of meeting any one of you again. He is an awful ass, but just the same he is a tremendously clever fellow and I was awfully anxious to show him the mine and he wanted to see it almost as much. So I persuaded him that he could just stay on at the Ranch house with me for a few days, letting you believe he had disappeared until he saw how things down here looked and worked. I assured him no one of you ever came near the men's quarters, but now he is hanging around the mine waiting for me as I promised to take him down into the pit as soon as we start work. Don't scare him to death beforehand."

Ruth and Jean and Olive laughed, and Olive said sympathetically:

"Poor fellow, I can feel for him. I used to feel so shy that nearly all strangers made me wretched. But I don't see just why he should be so specially severe upon girls?"

"Because he is a goose," Frieda returned so sententiously that every one else laughed. So plainly was she offended at her own failure to charm their strange guest a night or so before.

It was time for Ralph to say good-by. Arrangements at the pit shaft had been made so that the first elevator could be lowered into it. He then waved his hand in farewell to his friends, as he and the new foreman of the mine and the odd-

looking figure of Henry Russell climbed on to the elevator.

"I shall go away before they come up again, so that foolish fellow won't even have to look at me," Frieda remarked scornfully, as without any hitch or delay the car slowly disappeared into the bowels of the earth.



CHAPTER XIV

THE EXPLOSION

THE new crowd of miners were anxiously waiting about the mouth of the pit shaft, which led down into the deepest excavation that had yet been dug in the neighborhood of the Rainbow Creek.

There were other openings, but because this was the largest, Ralph Merrit had desired that his workmen begin their labor here. For by extending and deepening the passages in the lower part of this shaft he hoped to make important discoveries of new veins of ore. And once convinced that a quantity of new gold was actually to be found under this ground the young engineer had no idea of giving up before he had devised some intelligent and not too expensive method of bringing more wealth to the surface of the earth.

Not many feet from the company of men Jack Ralston and Frank Kent were standing together talking of some detail in connection with the work, while Jim Colter was hanging over the pit opening in company with the men who had charge of the lowering and raising of the mine elevator.

Evidently Ralph Merrit and his two companions had made a safe landing below, for shortly after their disappearance there was a signal, and slowly the lift traveled up into the daylight again, now ready to take on another lot of passengers.

"Steady, no crowding," Jim Colter called out as the next relay stepped hastily forward. "Merrit will want to start things going in the tunnel before you descend."

One man had already gotten aboard, while another had one foot extended toward the platform, when suddenly from underneath them there came a tearing, splitting noise and then a muffled roar like the instantaneous explosion of a thousand guns.

The passengers in the elevator fell on their knees and all around the opening of the pit there was powder and blackness and a fall of stones like a swift rain of meteors.

By accident Ruth Colter's back happened to be turned away from the scene at the mine, so that the first sound she remembered hearing was her husband's hoarse shout of horror and then as she turned the sight of his great form lying prostrate on the ground with Jack and Frank trying to drag him away from danger.

But when Ruth would have rushed toward him, Olive and Frieda held her fast, and the next instant a wave of weakness and darkness so overwhelmed her that she had no strength to move.

When she opened her eyes she could see Jean's face, white as a sheet, dancing before her and hear her saying:

"Jim isn't hurt, dear; only stunned by his fall. See, he is on his feet again giving orders. And Jack and Frank must be all right, they were not so near. But what could have happened, what caused the explosion? It's the men down inside the mine who must be horribly hurt. Ralph——"

But Jean shook with such nervous terror that Frieda's arm encircled her, and the next moment the four women moved nearer the place of the disaster.

They were just in time, for at the moment of their approach, although Jim Colter's face was so black that you could hardly distinguish him, with his forehead bleeding from an ugly wound and his clothes torn and burnt, he was giving orders like the general of an army and like trained soldiers the miners were obeying him.

"I'll take four of you men who will volunteer to go down inside the mine with me. I don't know what has happened, but we are pretty apt to find things serious. It sounded like a dynamite explosion and there may be another. Fortunately for us the elevator is above ground and we can lower it. Some of you see that stretchers are brought here. Jack, keep your head and get hold of a doctor at once. I hope we may need him," the man added grimly, as he swung his great length aboard the small car, his companions crowding close against him.

Unmindful of the awed silence that had followed the noise of the explosion, unmindful of the two score of rough strange men, Ruth breaking away from the

girls now ran forward crying:

"Jim, you can't go down into the mine first. I can't let you. There is the baby and me, you must think of us and of the girls. You may be horribly hurt."

She was near enough now so that she could look straight into her husband's blue eyes and something in Jim's expression calmed her instantly. Then for the time he too seemed conscious of the presence of no one else.

"Don't be frightened, Ruth, I shall be all right, dear, and back again with you in ten minutes perhaps. But in any case, girl, don't you see I have got to go down before the others? This is our mine and two of the men down there are almost boys."

Some quiet order Jim then gave and slowly for the second time the lift sank down toward the dark abyss under the earth. For Ruth had made no other sound or protest, only keeping tight hold on Frieda's and Jean's hands. Olive had gone with Jack and Frank Kent in the direction of the Rainbow Lodge.

To the watchers at the pit opening after the elevator had landed the second time there was a moment when they believed that they could hear voices below. Then the waiting seemed interminable. In point of fact only a few moments more had passed before the signal indicated that the car must be drawn up again.

And this time it was Jean Bruce who covered her eyes with her hands.

There was a grinding of the cables and then an unmistakable groan, so it was not only the faces of the women that blanched whiter. Many of these miners were middle-aged men who had been in mining disasters where many hundreds of lives were at stake. Now, since no further disturbance had followed the first brief explosion, they realized that only the three men who had first gone down into the pit had been injured. Yet it was nerve-racking not to be able to foretell whether these three men would be brought up alive or dead.

Jim Colter and one of his helpers were standing upright in the car and Jim held in his arms a limp, crumpled figure, unconscious, his blue overalls charred and blackened, his absurd old hat quite gone. Indeed, the grave and learned professor of ancient languages looked like a broken slip of a boy in the big man's keeping.

There on the floor of the car another figure was resting. The face was upturned to the light and though the eyes were closed the expression of the

mouth showed that the man had not fainted but was suffering great pain.

Frieda touched Jean Bruce on the arm.

"It is not Ralph, but the new foreman who seems to be very badly hurt," she whispered. "Look, the other men are carrying him off. I can't tell about Ralph's friend, Mr. Russell. But where is Ralph? Why hasn't he come up with the others?"

And this last question of Frieda's was being echoed in the minds of the waiting woman and girl.

Why had Jim brought up two of the wounded men and left the third, their oldest friend, still in the depth of Rainbow Mine? It was impossible not to believe that Jim had done this because these men were not too badly injured to be helped.

For he had now placed his burden on the ground and was examining the young man with the skill and care of a surgeon, while some one else bathed the face. A stretcher had been secured for the foreman who was now being taken to his own quarters to await the coming of a surgeon.

"Jim," Ruth Colter put her hand on her husband's shoulder and her face was almost as white and strained as it had been during her last speech with him, "the elevator is going down again and you are not going with it. Tell us, please, what has happened to Ralph?"

Without waiting to hear her guardian's answer Frieda suddenly burst into tears. Of course she had been dreadfully unnerved by the recent accident and now this uncertainty about their friend, besides the sight of their new acquaintance stretched out there at her feet as though he were dead when the last time she had seen him he had been eating his dinner, was more than she could bear.

"Ralph? Great Scott, I am a brute, Ruth, Jean, Frieda!" Jim Colter exclaimed. "Why didn't I tell you at once? Ralph isn't badly hurt at all; he is bruised and burnt and shaken up, but nothing more, so far as I could tell. So of course he insisted that we bring up the two other fellows first. It's a plain miracle that there's anything left of the three of them. So far as I could understand somebody had fixed a bomb down at the end of the pit shaft, but the thing was clumsily made and only half went off. Ralph said they were blown about a good deal and

the atmosphere was pretty thick, but unless the new foreman has been injured internally there was no great harm done. I think this young man has nothing more serious the matter with him than a broken leg. And I expect we shall be able to mend that for him at Rainbow Lodge."

At these words Henry Russell opened his eyes, but whether because of Jim's suggestion or the pain he was enduring, or whether because the sight of the girls, he groaned aloud and then closed his lips again.

"I don't think he wants to be taken to the Lodge," Frieda suggested mournfully. "You see he wants us to think he has gone away."

Then possibly because Ruth's and Jim's nerves had both been strained almost past endurance for the past half hour they laughed aloud at Frieda's speech.

Jean had slipped away and it was her white and yet happy face that Ralph Merrit saw first as he came back into the world of daylight again. There, though he was staggering and nearly blind and covered with blood and grime from the shock he had just received, he found Jean's hands before any others and held them close for a moment while she murmured:

"I am so glad, so glad; it is because you have some big work to do in the world that you have been saved, I am sure, Ralph."

A moment later Ralph was quietly accepting the congratulations of his workmen, while he tried to explain to them just how the explosion had taken place. That the bomb had been placed down the shaft by one of the former miners there could be no shadow of doubt.



CHAPTER XV

AN UNFORTUNATE DISCUSSION

"**B**UT why won't either Jean or Frieda come with us?" Olive asked a week after the unfortunate accident at the Rainbow Mine. With a surprise that she did not pretend to hide Jack Ralston turned to look at her friend.

"I thought I had explained to you, dear," she protested, "that Jean said she felt it her duty to write a long letter of sympathy to the Princess Colonna. You see she only heard yesterday of the death of the old Prince and though she does not feel that the Princess will be exactly inconsolable (he was so much older and they thought so differently about many things), yet of course Jean has to say that she is dreadfully sorry and is there anything she can do and all that. It would not surprise me in the least if the Princess came west and made us a visit. I told Jean to invite her. She was born in this part of the country and I rather think she will be glad to get away from Rome while she is in heavy mourning. It is a pity she did not have a son, isn't it? The title will have to go to her husband's nephew, Giovanni Colonna. You remember he and Jean were such good friends."

But although the two girls were walking along side by side toward the stables back of the Rainbow Lodge, it was plain that Olive Van Mater was not listening with any real interest to what her companion was saying.

"Then why won't Frieda ride with us?" she expostulated. "I am sure it has been ages since we four girls had a long ride together and it is a wonderfully beautiful morning. What has become of Frieda lately anyhow—I almost never see her except at meal times?"

With a laugh Jack Ralston laid her arm lightly across her friend's shoulder.

"Poor Olive, to have only my poor society! But, dear, we have not had but one other ride together, the one that we took to the Indian village soon after your arrival. Does it bore you so dreadfully to have only me as a companion? You must not come with me then, simply because I asked you. I can get one of the

boys to ride over the ranch with me; perhaps Carlos would be willing to do that much! I don't know what has happened to Frieda, but the child is making a perfect martyr of herself. That poor young Professor seems not to wish anyone to do things for him except Frieda or Ruth. You know he perfectly hates the sight of the rest of us. And as Ruth is so busy with Jimmikin and the house she can't nurse him a great deal. So he just lies in his room, which is Frieda's by the way, and moans and groans until Frieda comes to amuse him. What do you think I beheld our baby doing the other day? Reading him some dreadful article on Egyptian Hieroglyphics from a learned magazine. She hadn't the faintest idea what it was all about and she looked like a big yellow butterfly imprisoned in a dark place. I am sure I am awfully sorry the erudite young professor had to break his right leg in the depth of Rainbow Mine and that we have him on our hands for six weeks or more—almost as sorry as he is I expect. Still I am not going to have Frieda sacrificing herself to him much longer. I mean to tell her tomorrow that it is quite unnecessary. He is a dreadfully spoiled person."

"But wouldn't Frank have enjoyed this long ride with you this morning, Jack?" Olive repeated, still refusing to take any interest in what Jack was saying, but instead clinging obstinately to her own train of thought. "I am sure Jim would have let Frank off from the trip with him if he had known that you had to take this long ride to hunt up the lost mares and colts."

Jack nodded, but her expression was hurt and puzzled. "Of course Jim would have let Frank come with me or would have come himself if he had known of the trouble. But both Jim and Frank were away before I heard of the loss. Besides, it does not make any difference, for I am sure I have ridden over Rainbow Ranch looking up our lost horses and cattle ever since I was fourteen or fifteen years old. But if you think the ride may be too long for you, please don't come, Olive. I shan't be in the least hurt if you don't feel like it. Kiss me good-by and go back to the Lodge. Ruth will be overjoyed at your return and I'll be perfectly all right with Carlos."

But although Jack Ralston spoke so cheerfully and in such good temper she was not truthful in pretending that Olive's present attitude was not hurting her feelings. The truth is that she felt that Olive had not been exactly the same toward her since Frank Kent's arrival. And if Jack had needed any further proof to add to her past conviction this was sufficient. Always before, Olive had loved her better than any one else, even more than she did her friend, Miss Winthrop. And Jack was certain that she had done nothing to make Olive angry or to wound her—she herself was so utterly unchanged in her own affection.

What a hopeless, horrid puzzle it all was and of all persons was not Jacqueline Ralston the most inadequate for straightening it out? She had no methods but those of frankness. If only she dared ask Olive how she actually felt.

But Olive would hardly have been able to explain to her, because in these last few weeks the girl had not understood herself. Before Frank Kent's coming to the Rainbow Lodge she had been sure of having entirely recovered from her past fancy for him. Had she not fought it all out in those final weeks in England when she had realized the extent of Frank's devotion to Jack and the impossibility of her own position? And now—well, whatever turn events might take, Olive felt the fault would be largely Jacqueline's. For why did Jack fail to return Frank's affection? Why did she continue to treat him with such disregard and yet keep him lingering on at the ranch? Really Olive wondered if her own emotion was not now one more of sympathy for Frank and impatience with Jack. Surely Frank was too fine a fellow from every point of view to be trifled with. And no one would ever have suspected Jack of being a girl of such a character.

Olive again looked closely into her friend's face and what she saw there for the moment disarmed her. Of course she was more angry with Jack than she had ever dreamed it possible that she could be and yet she had not meant to wound her over this small question of their having another ride together to search for lost stock. Perhaps this very morning Jack might be in a humor to confide in her the cause of her mysterious conduct. She must have some vital reason, it was so unlike her to be cruel or not to know her own mind.

"Of course I won't go back to the Lodge," Olive finally protested. "For I do wish the ride immensely; it was only that I thought it might be a pleasure for the others too."

And to this half-hearted apology the other girl made no reply.

A few moments later, having arrived at the beautiful new stables built within the past year at the Rainbow Ranch, Jack and Olive found their two horses already saddled. And a little while after, finding the Indian boy, Carlos, at his own tent door, the three of them mounted and rode away.

Now riding with Jacqueline Ralston over their great thousand-acre Wyoming ranch to seek for cattle or horses that had gone astray was apt to be fairly strenuous, and no one unaccustomed to riding should ever have thought of attempting it. Yet Olive had done the same thing dozens of times in the years

when she had first come to live at Rainbow Ranch, and on starting out this morning had no idea of growing tired before her friend did.

The first part of their trip was easy enough, for although Jack cantered along fairly rapidly she made no detours, only keeping a careful lookout in all possible directions. For she had no thought of finding the lost mares and their young colts anywhere within the immediate neighborhood of that part of the ranch which was apt to be ridden over oftener than the more distant fields. And Carlos had been asked to make the few necessary excursions whenever a rise in the landscape or a group of trees or rocks made a possible hiding place.

But a short time before midday the three riders came to a distant part of Rainbow Creek, where the character of the ranch land changed and where there were frequent hummocks and sand hills and great boulders split into natural caves and canyons. This part of the creek had no connection with the Rainbow Mine but was sometimes used in an emergency as a drinking place for the stock, although the stock was not supposed to wander here without guidance, as there were many ravines and dangerous places where especially the young cattle or colts were apt to be injured.

Here the riding under Jacqueline's guidance became more difficult and fatiguing. For not only did she leave the ordinary beaten trail, but she made her horse pick his way along what appeared an utterly impossible track over rocks, in the deep loose sand, now following a partly dry creek bed and occasionally splashing through water so deep that it reached almost to her riding boots. For another hour Olive followed, not realizing her own exhaustion, but wondering why her breath should be coming in such short gasps and why her back should ache in such an unaccountable fashion.

Curiously enough it was Carlos who first discovered Olive's predicament. For the past ten minutes he had been riding as close by her side as was possible under the conditions, not speaking a single word, but examining her closely with his small, burning black eyes. And when Olive, without being conscious of it, turned a shade whiter, even then he did not speak to her but instead rode silently forward until he was opposite Jack.

"All women have not the strength of men!" he began sullenly. The girl stared at him in amazement, not guessing what he meant.

Then Carlos grew angry and his words came faster than usual. "If you think more of lost animals than of her whom you call friend, it is well that you should

go on until she falls. Have I not often heard and now see with my own eyes that there are squaws who care nothing for their own sex."

Half rising in her saddle Jacqueline Ralston lifted her riding whip, and almost before realizing what she was doing she had struck the Indian boy sharply across his lean shoulders.

"You are not to speak of American women as squaws, Carlos. How often have Mr. Colter and I told you that you were never to do it? And, moreover, you are to understand that I will not endure your impertinence. What has happened to put you in so evil a mood?" Jack asked more quietly now, sorry for her own loss of temper. For she realized in a small measure just how keenly an Indian feels the degradation of a blow from an enemy, unless he is able to return it with increased vengeance. And Jack had no illusion about Carlos' attitude toward her. He had turned a kind of ashy white under his bronze skin and his body had quivered once and then become perfectly tense, not from the force of the blow, which had not cut deeply, but from his own passion.

However, before either the boy or Jack could speak again, Olive had ridden up between them, grieved and frightened over her friend's action and wondering what could have occurred between them in so short a time.

"Jack dear, what has Carlos done or said?" she demanded quickly. "It was not fair of you to strike him, knowing that he could make no defense."

Instantly Jacqueline Ralston felt her face flushing with a swift rushing of hot blood to her cheeks until her temples pounded and her eyes flashed. Never before in their entire acquaintance had she remembered being really angry with Olive. Yet had she not borne a good deal already that day and for several weeks beforehand in Olive's indifference and critical air toward her? Now in this trouble she had just had with Carlos, Olive was immediately taking the Indian boy's part without even asking her for an explanation. Nevertheless a second glance at her friend's face made her instantly control her own emotion, appreciating at the same time what Carlos' impertinent speech to her had meant.

"You are tired, Olive. I am so sorry," she replied at once, instead of answering the other girl's question. "I did not realize how hard we had been riding, or that you are out of practice after a year in New York while the rest of us were here at the ranch. We'll have luncheon and rest and then maybe you'll feel better."

Jack nodded curtly to Carlos to assist Olive in dismounting while she slid off

her own horse without help. Then she put her arm about the other girl, leaving the boy to lead the three horses. In a little while she and Olive had found a flat rock shadowed by a cliff from the sun. Here Olive sat down while Jack opened up their luncheon boxes and made the necessary preparations. But all the time she was reflecting upon what she had best do or say to the Indian boy. She was sorry that she had struck him, although still extremely angry at his manner and speech to her. If Carlos had felt worried over Olive's exhaustion it would have been simple enough to have told her in a more polite fashion. The truth was that she and Jim were both getting extremely tired of the Indian boy's presence on Rainbow Ranch. She would talk over this incident today with her guardian and ask him if he felt that she owed Carlos an apology. If he did she would make whatever reparation she could and after that they would try and find another home for him. But at present she was still too annoyed to wish to have the boy near her.

"You can find water for our horses and tie them somewhere not far away, Carlos," Jack ordered, leaving Olive and walking a few yards across the sand to where the boy stood, still sullen and resentful in his manner. "Then ride on for another half hour and see if you can find any of the lost mares or colts. When you return we will have lunch saved for you."

And so Jack Ralston temporarily dismissed the difficulty confronting her. For in any case it was disagreeable to have Carlos staring at them while she and Olive ate, and she did not wish him as a companion at their luncheon.

Carlos' society could hardly have increased the discomfort of their meal. For Olive was either too weary or too vexed to wish to talk, and Jack in too strange a tumult of feeling.

Then suddenly, as the two girls were sitting there together in the warm, caressing sunshine, hardly more than a few feet apart and yet sundered by leagues of misunderstanding, it seemed to Jacqueline that she could no longer endure all that she was suffering for her friend, unless Olive made some sign that her sacrifice was worth while. For Jack made no effort to hide from herself, however much she concealed it from other people, that each day of her life she was learning to care more and more for Frank Kent, for his love and his complete understanding and sympathy with her temperament. She knew that she had many faults, but she also knew that Frank was aware of them and forgave them. However, there was one fault that she did not have and it was not fair that she should bear the ignominy of it. She would no longer hurt and confuse the

man she cared for by her apparent inability to make up her mind.

Jack's full red lips closed more tightly than was usual to them as she lifted her head, showing the firm line of her throat and chin. Then she took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders and glancing with her wide open, heavily fringed gray eyes directly into the eyes of her friend.

Olive was more rested, was less pale, but was evidently still as much estranged from her. And though the conviction had come upon her suddenly, Jack felt convinced that this was the appointed moment when she must wrest the truth from the other girl. She hated herself for her own stupidity in not finding out by more subtle means and scarcely knew now what she intended to do or say. It was as if she stood on the bank of an icy stream with the shore of truth on the other side, a shore which by some method she must reach. Therefore, with Jacqueline Ralston's disposition, there appeared but one means. Boldly she must plunge in, no matter what the result.

"Olive dear," Jack began abruptly, not looking at her friend, but at a small smoke-colored cloud over in the western sky, "I know you are angry with me about Carlos and I am sorry. He was impertinent, but I don't suppose you would think that justifies what I did. But it is not about what happened just now that I want to talk. You have not felt like you once did for me for several weeks—not since Frank Kent came to the Lodge. Would you mind telling me why?"

To Jack's directness of thought and speech her friend by this time should have grown accustomed. And indeed until now Olive had always loved and admired Jack for it. But today she was tired and her head ached and this unexpected question had taken her completely by surprise. The girl's dark cheeks flushed richly and her ordinarily gentle expression changed.

"Jack, you are absurd!" she answered irritably. "What right have you anyhow to consider that my feeling for you has any connection with Frank Kent? What does Frank mean to me?"

Now if only Jack had been content with this answer or had possessed some of Jean Bruce's tact and resourcefulness! She had neither. So her gray eyes darkened and her face grew white and unhappy.

"Forgive me, Olive," she murmured, humbly enough for proud, high-tempered Jack, "but that is what I, oh, so much want you to tell me. For sometimes I have thought that perhaps you do like Frank just a little bit more

than an ordinary friend. And if it is true, dear, don't you feel that we have been close enough to each other to have you make me your confidant?"

It was very gently put, after all, and therefore Olive should not have been so wounded or so angry. However, and perhaps because there was so much of truth in the other girl's suggestion, Olive was both hurt and embittered.

"You have not the shadow of a right, Jacqueline Ralston, to say a thing like that to me," she returned with the passion and protest of a too sensitive nature. "How dare you sit there and calmly suggest to me that I am in love with Frank Kent when you know perfectly well that he cares for no one in this world but you. Do you suppose that I have no pride and no self-respect?"

And then, dropping her head in her hands, Olive began crying, hardly understanding her own tears, so much were they a combination of pain and of petulance. For the questions she had just put to Jack were the very ones that she had so often asked herself. And if she had found no answer to them, how could any one else?

But Jack did not attempt making a reply. For a moment she was silent, feeling miserably conscious of the failure she had just made. For had she not merely succeeded in mortifying her friend without arriving one bit nearer the truth which she sought?

But by and by Jack laid her hand caressingly on the other girl's dark hair. "Don't cry, Olive please," she begged. "You know what a stupid person I am and how often Jean and Frieda think I do and say the wrong thing. Here comes Carlos and when he has eaten his lunch you must let him take you back to the Lodge. You are too tired to ride any farther and I can manage very well by myself, or else you can send one of the stable boys this way to find me."

Without making a reply Olive continued to sob, only now a little more quietly, and in the meanwhile allowing Jack to make all the arrangements for her return home. It was unfortunate perhaps that she also paid so little attention to the Indian boy, who was sitting within a few yards of her, pretending to eat. In reality he was either keeping his eyes fixed moodily upon her, or else turning them upon Jacqueline Ralston with such an intensity of dislike that had she been aware of it, she must have been vaguely disturbed.

A little later Olive and Carlos started home together. In farewell Olive simply nodded her head to Jack, showing no other sign of forgiveness or affection; but

she had only ridden for a comparatively short distance when she was as bitterly sorry and as ashamed of herself as Jack had previously been, and at the moment would have liked to turn back. She realized that she had been both unreasonable and unkind. What could have been the matter with her? Surely her fatigue must have had something to do with it, for people were rarely sensible when overtired. Jack had not intended breaking down the barrier of her reserve for no reason but idle curiosity.

Then suddenly Olive's hands tightened on her bridle reins and her black eyes softened. How unutterably blind she had been for so long! For was not Jack's recent question to her the keynote of the whole puzzling situation? Jack certainly must fear that she cared more for Frank than she should. Would this not perfectly explain her attitude toward him since the beginning of his love-making? Olive quickly recalled the final weeks of their visit in England, then Jack's repeated efforts to thrust her into Frank's society and so to evade him herself! Then since Jack Ralston's return to the ranch had she not resolutely refused to let Frank Kent come to see her until Olive was also at the Lodge?

Sudden and relieving tears rolled down the girl's hot cheeks, which she did not for the moment attempt wiping away. How like her quixotic Jack to refuse to accept her own happiness at the price of her friend's! And how near she, Olive, had come to permitting Jack to sacrifice all three of them to her mistaken sense of loyalty and love!

Well, tonight Olive intended straightening everything out by answering the inquiry to which she had refused to reply to before. For in the light of her present revelation had she not at last felt a weight lifting itself from her own heart and a clear vision come to her mind? Let her measure her affection for Frank Kent by that which she felt for Jacqueline. Why she loved Jack a hundred times better than she ever could Frank! Jack had been her first friend: all that she was she really owed to her. If only she did not have to wait an hour longer before making three persons happier than they had been in many weeks!

Half-way around Olive turned her pony's head. But no, she was too tired to go back to Jack and besides they could have no intimate conversation under the present circumstances. Moreover, it had been growing much warmer in this last half hour, in spite of the fact that every once and a while there were unexpected gusts of wind blowing the sand into her own eyes and her mare's. The truth was that she should never have consented to leaving Jack. She should have insisted on her going home at the same time with them. Ruth and Jim Colter would both

be annoyed at the idea of Jack's riding about the ranch alone, and any one of the men whom she might send back to look for her would probably be several hours in searching and perhaps never discover her at all.

For the first time in half an hour Olive Van Mater glanced across at the boy, Carlos. He had not spoken a dozen words to her in the course of their trip, so how could she dream that all this while he had been turning over and over in his mind the bitterness of Jack's insult? Then not only was his animosity a personal one, but on coming back from the needless errand upon which he had been driven away, had he not found his one time Princess in tears and such sorrow that she had not yet ceased from grieving? Her trouble could have but one source. Perhaps Miss Ralston had even dared wound her in the same way that she had him! And then Carlos had clenched his teeth, continuing more rigid and doggedly quiet than before. For of course he should soon be revenged for both of them! The only thing was to wait until his opportunity came.

"Carlos," Olive said unexpectedly. "I am almost back at the Lodge now and will have no difficulty in going the rest of the way alone. But I wish you would go and find Miss Ralston. Tell her please to come home at once, that I want to speak to her about something most important. And I think you had better hurry, for I am a little bit afraid that a storm is coming up."

Possibly Olive had expected a demur. If so she was mistaken, for without replying the boy wheeled his horse and started back in the direction from which they had just come.

CHAPTER XVI

A DESERT STORM

PERHAPS no one except an Indian could have found Jack so swiftly, and yet Carlos was engaged in the search for her over an hour. For the girl had gone some distance beyond the place of their last meeting and still had found no trace of their lost stock.

She was vexed for a moment at Carlos' reappearance, but gave no sign. Indeed she managed to say "Thank you" when he briefly explained that he had taken Olive near enough home to have her make the rest of the journey without an escort and then that she had sent him back to continue the hunt. Not a suggestion did he give of Olive's real message for Jack to return home immediately.

A girl with Jacqueline Ralston's knowledge and experience of western life should have required no such message had she taken her usual normal interest in her surroundings. For there was a sufficient forewarning of what was approaching for her to have understood. Nevertheless, for once in her life Jack was almost completely oblivious of the landscape and of the conditions of the sky and atmosphere. For her conversation with Olive had made her more unhappy and puzzled than she had previously been, since she had surely succeeded only in making the tangle harder for any one of them to unravel.

Now and then, as she continued her ride beyond the end of the Rainbow Creek and into the broader sweep of their prairie lands, the girl almost forgot the original object of her day's excursion, only feeling that more than anything she desired to be outdoors and alone. So that instead of leading the way as she had done in the morning she now allowed the boy Carlos to take his own trail, following without much thought close behind.

By far the larger portion of the broad area of the Ralston ranch was cultivated land, to the extent that the fields beyond the Lodge were most of them planted with alfalfa grass and other grains according to their fertility. Occasionally there were barren spaces of land where the sands from the desert had settled too deeply for any growing thing, and as these were at the outermost edges of the ranch Jim Colter had left them undisturbed, waiting for a time when there should be less work nearer home.

Therefore when Jack suddenly discovered her horse ploughing heavily through one of these sandy stretches she realized that they were farther away from Rainbow Lodge than she had appreciated. And certainly it was now time to turn back. She was afraid that she could hardly manage to arrive at home before dinner time and that would mean a scolding from Jim, who would hardly consider the rescue of a few lost mares and colts a sufficient excuse for making the rest of them uncomfortable and uneasy.

Jack smiled a little ruefully, checking her horse and allowing him a few moments of rest. She had not even that good excuse to take home with her, for she had not seen a trace of the stray stock and had really scarcely looked for them since luncheon. But then Carlos must have been more attentive—she was really surprised at the boy's apparent interest since he rejoined her. He had taken the entire initiative. Even now he was some distance ahead and going too fast for his horse's strength in such difficult ground.

"Carlos, Carlos," the girl called as loudly as possible. Then she patted Romeo's neck with swift penitence. Ordinarily she was quick to remember the comfort of her own mount, but today she had been most extraordinarily selfish. However, it was odd that in spite of his long day's travel her horse did not seem to wish to stand still even for a moment. He kept pawing the earth, sniffing and turning half way round in his eagerness to start for home.

The mystery needed only a little time for solving. All afternoon in a subconscious fashion Jack had realized that the air was unpleasantly hot and stifling and that the sun had not been shining since luncheon. The little cloud which she had first noticed in the west, a queer funnel-shaped cloud, had been constantly growing larger. Of course it meant a storm, but it was still far enough away not to be immediately alarming. However, they must get home as soon as possible, and Carlos evidently had not heard her cry.

Twice again Jack shouted his name, but as he did not turn his head she touched her pony lightly with her riding whip and rode after him. She regretted now that she had allowed the boy to get so far ahead of her, for her own few minutes' delay had naturally increased the distance between them. Yet Jack did not feel that it would be fair for her to turn back without informing her companion. It seemed almost cruel to force her jaded horse at such a pace through the loose sands; yet how else could she ever hope to catch up with her escort? Carlos did not usually show such poor judgment with his own steed.

Then finally it occurred to the girl that the Indian boy was refusing deliberately to answer her as a punishment for their trouble earlier in the day. If this were true she was foolish to waste any more time and energy in pursuit of him. She could get back home alone long before bedtime by allowing her horse to walk for a part of the way. Then if the storm should overtake her, she would not be far enough from the Lodge to have it make any serious difference. As for her scolding, well, Jack felt that she would have to accept that as philosophically as possible under the circumstances. For Jim would have a double grievance, since he did not like any one of them to ride for any distance with only Carlos as a companion.

Shrugging her shoulders, too tired really to be angry again that day, Jack called once more. This time, to her surprise, Carlos actually rose in his saddle, pointing with evident excitement toward some indeterminate objects at a little distance off. Jack could not see what they were, although she guessed at once. After all, their hard day's work had not been in vain! Carlos had assuredly discovered the lost stock. True they must have wandered beyond the confines of the Rainbow ranch, since Jack was familiar enough with their own boundary line to know that Carlos was even at this instant passing beyond the wire fence which circumscribed it.

Their stock oftentimes got outside the ranch by mysterious methods of their own. Therefore if Carlos believed that he saw the mares they had been searching for the entire day, it would be foolish to turn back without them. It was unfortunate that the heavy cloud in the west seemed to be driving toward them with so much greater speed in these last fifteen minutes. Still if it should reach their vicinity before they could get the lost mares and colts into some kind of shelter the animals must perish. For the mares would never desert their young and the colts could never endure the force of the wind and the great blankets of sand that would probably sweep over and cover them.

Jack was not mistaken in one point of view. She knew, as only a Westerner could, that the storm approaching was not rain, but wind, and that it might mean a sand storm in the desert.

A saner judgment however would have suggested that Jacqueline Ralston start back home at once, leaving Carlos to follow her. But she appreciated the tremendous difficulty that the boy would have in rounding up the frightened animals alone and forcing them into some place of refuge. Really, it never occurred to Jack not to help. She had been so accustomed to just such work on

the ranch from the time she was a small girl.

So on she rode now, straight after the Indian boy, perhaps for an eighth of a mile or more beyond their boundary, yet still the loose thick sands which were whirling and eddying in gusts at her horse's feet.

And always Carlos kept as far as possible ahead.

Jack finally came to a position where she found out the mistake which she believed both she and the Indian boy had innocently made. The dark objects ahead of them had been only a group of close growing sage bushes that they had mistaken for the lost stock. Crying out once more to the boy to turn back, Jack now made no pretense of waiting to discover whether or not he heeded her. For the wind was blowing more fiercely, bringing with it the heat of a sirocco, and the sand was pouring into her eyes and ears, almost blinding and choking her. Beyond her there were small sand hills and ravines where a few moments before the earth had lain smooth as a carpet.

Jack perfectly understood that the full fury of the storm had not yet reached her vicinity. Her effort must be to get beyond the sand plains, back if possible to the neighborhood of Rainbow Creek, where behind one of its great rocks she might find partial shelter.

But her heart was pounding uncomfortably and her fair skin felt as though it were being pricked by innumerable needles. Moreover, Jack was frightened. She knew just what a sandstorm meant on the western prairies. She was not far from the edge of a portion of barren lands that formed a kind of miniature desert, and the worst of the situation was that she herself was very tired and that through her own selfish forgetfulness her horse was even more so. Every foot of the way the girl strove to encourage the exhausted animal. Yet it was impossible to make real headway in such a soil while buffeted by such a gale.

Then Jacqueline Ralston heard a strange noise and, as she had heard it once before in her life, she must have recognized it had not her other senses also added their warning.

The roar and rush behind her were seldom equalled by any other kind of tempest.

For half an instant rising in her saddle the girl glanced back. Carlos was not far off now and spurring his horse remorselessly.

For beyond the boy at no great distance and driving rapidly forward was an immense dark yellow cloud. The peculiarity of this cloud was not merely in its color, size and shape, but that instead of being overhead it almost touched the surface of the land.

The girl slid off her horse.

"Down, down," she said quietly, pulling hard on her bridle. And then as her horse's knees touched the ground before him, Jack flung herself face downward, clutching at the loose earth for endurance and strength.

The cloud would be upon them in another moment with terrible destructive force. For not alone did it represent the fury of the wind, but was formed of a mountain of sand driven before it.

A sound, which the girl guessed must have come from Carlos, suggested that he was following her example. Yet she dared not look back to see. Now the sand storm was upon them.

The thunder and terror of it are past understanding.

One chance only Jack believed they had for their lives. If the sand cloud was sufficiently high above the earth not to touch them they would be safe. Otherwise they would be driven before it like chips of straw. But of any actual, conscious sensation which she suffered as the cloud passed over her, Jack was not aware. She knew that she was praying the instant before, but at the time itself she only clung the closer and sank deeper down into the earth, which is the final refuge of us all.

The moment following, however, the girl felt as if she had been bruised and beaten by a thousand furies. Her body ached with fatigue, her tongue felt scorched and swollen and her eyes smarted with intense pain. There was no further danger; storms of this character come with one terrible driving blast of wind and then go straight on in their course.

Jack blinked and stirred sufficiently to turn over and see that her horse was safe. As well as its master a western broncho understands how to meet strange weather conditions that would bring destruction to any other animal.

With a sigh of thankfulness the girl then stretched herself more comfortably along the ground, resting one elbow in the sand and leaning her head upon it. For Carlos and his pony were equally safe and evidently not so frightened as she

was, for the boy was already staggering toward her dragging his horse by the bridle.

The girl was not yet able to speak. Yet she watched Carlos with indifference and entirely without suspicion as he came to within a few feet of her and reaching downward pulled her horse on to his feet again.

The horse staggered and Jack had half an inclination to ask the boy to wait a little while before forcing him to stand. However she did not seem to have strength enough even to make this protest. Nor did she speak at first when she saw Carlos leading the two horses away from the place where she was resting.

What on earth did the boy have in mind to do? It was useless to try to brush the sand from the horse's coats and there was no water near enough to give them each a drink.

Jack frowned, then she not only sat up but rose quickly on her feet. For Carlos had mounted his own pony and without a word to her was riding away, taking her horse with him. The girl called, but again the Indian boy was afflicted with the curious deafness that had affected him all afternoon. Then Jack ran after him, stumbling and crying as she ran. But she was far too exhausted to make much headway and still Carlos would not glance around. He was not even going in the direction of the Rainbow Ranch.

Just how long her futile chase actually continued Jacqueline Ralston did not realize. So long as she could manage to keep the boy in sight she followed him, floundering in the sands and uncertain of her direction. However, when he was so far away that she could no longer see him, Jack sat down again. What annoying freak had possessed Carlos to ride off with her horse without offering any explanation? Well, he would doubtless return within a short time, so there was nothing to do except wait.



CHAPTER XVII

OLIVE'S REMORSE

BACK at the Lodge Olive undressed and lay down upon the bed for a short rest. Afterwards, when she felt that Jack must surely have received her message she rose and put on the lavender frock that was the other girl's especial favorite.

Olive was by this time no longer tired, but in better spirits than she had been for several weeks. For in less than an hour, perhaps, things would be entirely cleared up between herself and her best friend.

"Dear old Jack, was there ever anyone else in the world quite so generous or so absurd? Did Jack really think that she had the privilege of bestowing her lover upon her friend, simply because she was under the impression that the friend desired him? What would Frank have had to say in the matter?"

Then Olive blushed. Possibly after all she had been more absurd in allowing herself even for an hour or a day to think that she cared for a man as far beyond her reach as the moon. Let her be honest with herself at least! Had she not actually shed tears in secret? And this when from the very beginning of their acquaintance, Frank Kent had always been her only loyal and devoted friend and nothing else. Well, matters would soon be sensibly adjusted.

In the living room Olive found Ruth and Jean sewing, but in reality devoting by far the greater portion of their time to admiring the baby, who from inside his crib was placidly surveying the world with the dignity of a philosopher.

"Where is Jack, Olive?" Ruth inquired at once, frowning and glancing toward an open window. "It is so hot I am afraid we are going to have a storm and I have been reproaching myself all day for letting you girls start out on such a wild goose chase this morning. Why on earth did Jack not send the men after the stock?"

Jean looked up from her work. "Oh, don't worry about Jack, she has been

doing this kind of thing ever since she could walk or ride and she began both at about the same time. I believe Jack did send one of the cowboys off in one direction while she and Olive and Carlos took the other. But you know most of the men have gone with Jim and Frank to a round-up a good many miles off. I wonder if they will be back in time for dinner?"

During this speech the door of the living room had slowly opened and Frieda in a white muslin frock with a big book under her arm had quietly entered. Her cheeks were flushed and her expression so uncommonly serious, that remembering Jack's story of her younger sister's devotion to the Professor, Olive smiled.

However, Frieda's first remark was an odd one.

"I am sorry if you have left Jack and Carlos together, Olive," she began, puckering her white brow. "I don't believe any one in this family realizes how Carlos hates Jack. I think if he could he would like to do her an injury. You see she tries to boss him and he perfectly loathes having any one dare interfere with him. Then Carlos is so lazy and Jack has no use for any one who is lazy, except me. I wish she would come home. If I had not promised Mr. Russell to go on reading to him I should go out and look for her."

Frieda walked over to the front window and the next moment Ruth had joined her. They both stood staring ahead of them hoping for a sight of the familiar brown figure on horseback. For Jack usually rode up to the house with such a splendid rush toward the end that even under ordinary circumstances a vision of her was worth while.

"Don't be tiresome, Baby, and frighten Ruth," Jean expostulated.

Olive said nothing, but slipped out of the room and hall into the garden. It would not be worth while to trouble the others with the story of the difficulty between Jack and Carlos that morning. Nevertheless it was not pleasant to recall the expression on the Indian boy's face during their ride home, nor his long silence. Of course he rarely spoke to other persons, but ordinarily he engaged in long confidences with her, talking of the birds, wild flowers, any outside thing which he saw and loved.

Surely in ten or fifteen minutes more the two wayfarers must return. In the meantime Olive would not go back to join the others as it would not be wise to communicate her own nervousness to them. So for the next quarter of an hour

she walked up and down outside the Lodge, making several trips to the stables to see if the stable men had any suggestions to make and to inquire what they thought concerning the possibility of a storm. For there was little use in trying to argue the truth away. The atmospheric conditions were strange and depressing. Unless the wind changed, driving the single black cloud in an opposite direction, something out of the common was sure to occur. If only Frank Kent or Jim Colter or even the cowboys belonging to the ranch were at home, in order that they might go out and look up the wanderers!

Finally Olive sent the two men who took care of the private stables to reconnoiter. Then on her way back to the Lodge she found Jean hurrying in the direction of the Ranch house.

"I want to find Ralph Merrit and ask his advice as soon as possible," Jean explained. "It is so late now he is sure to have quit work at the mine. Ruth is convinced that we are going to have a cyclone and is nearly frantic over Jack and Jim and Frank, all away from home. Yet I hate having Ralph start out alone—he does not understand what the weather out here means so well as the rest of us, even if he has been here a good many years now. But I must confess I wish that Frieda had not made that uncomfortable speech about Carlos' disliking Jack so much. I am afraid it is true. Oh, Olive, what a pity it is that you happened to leave them!"

This was the only word of reproach that any member of the Rainbow ranch family made to Olive Van Mater during all the excitement and distress that came afterwards. And of course Jean did not mean her words to carry a sting—they were only an obvious exclamation.

Nevertheless Olive did not require outside censure to make her suffer as keen remorse as was possible to her sensitive and devoted nature. For she knew herself to be far more responsible for the day's catastrophe than any one would ever dream.

Only the edge of the sand storm swept the neighborhood of the Rainbow Lodge. Half a mile from the house it veered in its unaccountable way, carrying its destructive force straight across the adjoining ranch, wrecking half a dozen valuable buildings and killing a large number of cattle. Yet it came sufficiently near the Lodge for everybody inside the house to understand what was happening, even if Jim Colter and Frank Kent and a dozen of the cowboys had not ridden home furiously only five or ten minutes before, having raced the wind

storm across the prairies and come off victorious. Both looked fairly worn out, as they came clanking into the living room, still in their riding clothes and boots and covered with a fine coating of yellow sand.

"Jehoshaphat, but it is good to be indoors!" Jim exclaimed at once, putting his arm about his wife and gazing around him. "It is a good thing Frank isn't a tenderfoot, even if he is an Englishman. For if that sand storm had struck us—well, I am not going to put on airs. I have been a ranchman now for a good many years, but I never feel very hopeful that anybody such a gale hits is going to come out alive." Then perhaps in answer to the thought in the mind of every person in the room Jim ended abruptly: "Where's Jack? Hasn't she manners enough to say 'howdy' to two fellows who have nearly ridden themselves to death?"

Following his speech, Jim was not immediately aware of the peculiar strained silence in the room, although Frank knew instantly that something had occurred in which Jack had a part. Under the western tan of the past few weeks his face whitened. But he set his teeth and straightened his broad shoulders. For his was a strength of will and of character worthy to match with Jack and capable of longer endurance.

For a moment no one seemed to dare to answer Jim's question. And then it was not Ruth or any one of the three Ranch girls who replied, but Henry Russell, who had hobbled into the living room on his crutches, forgetting his terror and dislike of girls in his effort to offer his friendly sympathy, and incidentally, though he himself was not aware of it, to keep the lovely blond doll of his first acquaintance from making herself more miserable than necessary.

"I, I am afraid Mrs. Colter and—and the others are feeling a little uneasy about Miss Ralston," he murmured. "She went out this morning with the Indian boy, Carlos, to ride over the ranch and she has not come in just yet. I have told them that she certainly must have taken refuge with a neighbor or else that the storm has not come within her vicinity. They tell me that these western siroccos are very freakish."

But neither Jim Colter nor Frank had heard anything except the first part of their visitor's speech.

Afterwards Jim paid no attention to any one in the room except to lean over and kiss Ruth. "We will find her in a little while, don't worry. Jack is always getting into scrapes and being grown up seems to make little difference," he

remarked grimly as he marched off.

But Olive clung desperately to Frank Kent's arm as he tried to follow him.

"Please let me speak to you a minute alone before you go," she pleaded. Then when they were out in the yard and away from the others she put her hand on Frank's arm and looked at him with an earnestness which he did not in the least understand.

"When you find Jack will you please give her this message from me," she asked. "Tell her that she has been making a dreadful mistake all along and that there is nothing in the world that will make me so happy as to hear of her engagement to you. Please tell her this when you first find her, don't wait until you are at home again."

With a rather unusual show of emotion Frank pressed both of Olive's hands in his. "You believe that Jack really cares for me?" he demanded.

And then as Olive bowed her head without replying he mounted a fresh horse, riding away in the direction that Olive had indicated.



CHAPTER XVIII

JACK SURRENDERS AT LAST

"The Stars Had Disappeared and Beyond the Universal Grayness There Was Now a Faint Rose Light" "THE STARS HAD DISAPPEARED AND BEYOND THE UNIVERSAL GRAYNESS THERE WAS NOW A FAINT ROSE LIGHT"

IT was almost dawn when Frank Kent believed that he heard a faint answer to his last shouting. He was several miles from the outskirts of the Rainbow Ranch and in a neighborhood where he might least expect to find the girl he sought. But every acre of the ranch had been thoroughly gone over during the night, and still the men under Jim Colter's leadership were continuing the search along the track swept by the storm, but without finding a trace of Jack or the Indian boy or of the two horses which they were known to have been riding.

So, independently of the others, Frank had recently decided to try a new neighborhood, not because he had any faith in its being the right one, but because he felt that he must work alone. It was unendurable to continue longer hearing the other men declare that there was little chance of finding Jack or Carlos alive. For had they not been within the track of the sand storm they must certainly have returned home before this. Now Frank plunged on in the direction of the recent sound, although he had heard nothing a second time in reply to his continued calling.

Deep in his heart he was devoutly grateful that the dawn was finally breaking. The stars had disappeared, and beyond the universal grayness there was now a faint rose light. A moment before a western lark had risen before his aching eyes, poising, fluttering and then sailing straight overhead, singing its song of praise at the approach of the sun.

So Frank in a measure could behold the objects ahead of him, though among them he saw nothing to suggest Jacqueline Ralston. He was riding over flat country with little before him but sand and low scrub plants. And there were no

signs of a horse's hoofs having lately struggled through it. Finally, however, Frank got down off his own horse and, stooping low, examined some faint tracings in the sands. He had not been trained to making observations of this sort and even with the best of scouts it is difficult to find footprints, in so fine and shifting a soil. Nevertheless when Frank straightened up again his face was less haggard and discouraged. For he had found a suggestion of a girl's riding boot printed in the sand and now and then in curious circles there were other such impressions.

With her head resting on a sand dune as though it were nature's pillow Frank at length came upon the girl. And even when within a few feet of Jack it was impossible to tell whether she was asleep or had fainted—or whether her silence and rigidity meant something worse. Yet the girl's expression was too worn and exhausted for the last great mystery; it had not the ineffable peace that comes after nature's final surrender. Even before he could touch her Frank had recognized this.

Quietly he began bathing her face with water poured upon his handkerchief from the water flask which he had carried all night in his pocket. Jack's own little water jug told its own story, since it was lying empty at her side, drained to the last drop. Then, when the girl's heavy lids fluttered slightly, Frank poured water between her scorched lips. Her first sign of consciousness was when she put up her hands to try and cling to his flask that she might have more. Yet the man drew it away, telling her to keep quiet and close her eyes for a few moments longer. Afterwards he allowed her another drink of water and then a few drops of beef tea from a smaller bottle, which Ruth Colter had given him.

Finally, with Frank's arm about her, Jack managed to sit up.

"I am so glad it was you who found me, Frank," she said a moment later. "All night I have thought you would come." She did not even try to walk or to explain what had happened, but let Frank lift her up on his horse, where she leaned against him in utter weakness and dependence, while the horse started slowly toward home.

The ride needs must be a long and fatiguing one even though aid reach them before their arrival at the Lodge. And Jack's pulse was still too faint to have her suffer further exhaustion. But after a while Frank leaned over, pressing his lips against the girl's heavy gold brown hair which had become unloosened from her long wandering and hung in two curled braids down her back.

"Are you glad I found you because you care for me, Jack?" he whispered, feeling that it was not altogether fair of him to ask such a question at such a time, and yet too impatient to wait.

The girl answered, "Yes" quite simply. A little later she added like a child: "Besides I knew you wouldn't scold, Frank. And of course I have been foolish and headstrong. I don't seem to know how to grow up. You'll ask Ruth and Jim not to make me explain to them until I have rested."

Frank smiled, but felt a curious lump in his throat—this new humility and dependence were so unlike Jack. Unconsciously the arm that had been holding her up closed more firmly about the girl's figure.

"Jack, Jack," he murmured, leaning low down until his lips were not far from her ear. "I have waited so long, I can wait no longer. You have just said that you cared for me, and for the second time I have believed you. Then you mean, you must mean that you are willing to be my wife."

For just an instant the girl's body quivered as though with a weakness beyond her power of control. The next moment she was shaking her head quietly and firmly, and although her companion could not see her face he heard her whisper, "No," with a measure of her old decision.

"Very well then," Frank returned just as firmly, "you shall never be troubled by my asking you that question again. As soon as possible I shall go home to England."

Once more the girl's shoulders trembled as if she had been struck an unexpected blow, but she made no reply. Frank realized that he was not playing fair and that she should not be troubled further.

For five or ten minutes more they rode on in complete silence, while Jack felt herself growing weaker and weaker. She was ashamed to be such a burden and yet only her own will power and Frank's arm were sustaining her.

A little later and Jack had again to be put down on the ground in a half fainting condition. By this time they had passed beyond the stretches of sandy desert and were in one of the outlying meadows of the Rainbow Ranch, not far from a branch of their creek. As Jack was almost unconscious Frank was able to bathe her face more comfortably, pushing back the tangled hair out of her eyes, that she might look more like the girl he loved. Then he shut his lips close

together and his chin became squarer and his jaw firmer than ever Jacqueline's had been in her most obstinate days.

"I have just told a lie," he said to himself and yet rather grimly. "For of course I shall go on asking Jack to marry me until she finally consents. If she did not care for me that would be another matter and I should be a cad to annoy her. But there can't be any other barrier real or fancied that is big enough to come between us permanently."

Then, as Jack opened her eyes for the second time, and sat straight up as though vexed with her own weakness, Frank had a sudden recollection of Olive's strange message to him when he had first started on his search.

"Tell her it has all been a dreadful mistake and that there is nothing in the whole world that will make me so happy as her engagement to you."

"What could Olive's words mean? Who had made a mistake? Had Jack been under some cruelly false impression?" Frank was utterly mystified. Yet he held out his hand. "Come, dear, we will walk for a few minutes," he said gently, "and I will lead the horse. You will feel less stiff and tired with a little exercise. See, the daylight has come. How beautiful and fragrant the world is!"

Some change in Frank's voice, or in his manner—the girl did not know or care to think what the change might mean—made her take the hand held out so quietly toward her and hold it close in her own cold fingers. How exquisitely she could always be at peace with Frank, how perfectly he understood things without having them explained to him! After all, he was not going to be angry with her because of her unreasonable and unkind behavior. She had felt his anger a little more than she was willing to endure in her present state of exhaustion.

So Jack looked overhead with more of her accustomed sparkle and animation than she had yet showed. The sky was a radiant rose color, so deeply pink that it cast its reflection on the ground at her feet. They were near a group of trees and the birds were beginning to waken one another with mild reproaches and then sudden bursts of eloquent song.

"Frank," Jack began pensively enough, "I never saw a more wonderful dawn. But do you happen to have anything in your pocket more substantial than beef tea? I have not had anything to eat since yesterday at noon and I think perhaps I am dying of hunger."

With a laugh her companion let go her hand, drawing a package from his pocket. "Ruth gave me this at midnight along with the beef tea, but I have not been interested enough to see what was in it," he explained.

Greedily Jack tore open the bundle and had devoured a large chicken sandwich before good manners even suggested her sharing the luncheon with its owner. Afterwards Frank also confessed to being hungry, and so they walked on toward the Lodge like happy, runaway children, almost safe at home again.

Yet while he talked and laughed and ate Frank Kent was not forgetting Olive's words nor her final injunction to him. "Please tell her what I say when you first find her. Don't wait too long," she had begged.

"Jack, dear," Frank began casually in the midst of something else they had been discussing, "there is something I want to ask your forgiveness for before another five minutes have passed. Because I don't think I can hold out much longer. Back there on horseback when you were nearly dead with fatigue I was angry with you and told you that I never meant to ask you to marry me again. That was the most untruthful speech a man ever made! Because if you are too tired to listen I may have to wait until you have rested a little while, but not any longer. You know you care for me, dear. You are not the kind of a girl who would deceive a man by your words or your manner after all these years of friendship! There is some mystery that is keeping you from showing me your real feelings. I can't guess what it is. Yet Olive must think so too, for she told me to tell you that you had been making a dreadful mistake about something or other, heaven only knows what! And that our engagement would make her happier than anything in the world."

Jacqueline Ralston stood ankle deep in the rose-touched meadow grass with her straight-forward, honest gray eyes looking into the blue eyes of her companion.

"Did Olive tell you to say that to me? Did she really and truly seem to mean it?" she asked wonderingly.

Frank Kent nodded, not trusting himself to speak, nor wishing to lose an instant's vision of the girl's face, or an inflection of her voice.

Jack had been pale before; but now her face had flushed with such a look of exquisite gentleness and surrender, that in spite of all she had recently endured she had never been so beautiful.

Then it was like her to say with self-evident sincerity: "Of course you are right, Frank dear, I could not hide how much I cared for you even though I have done my best. It will be hard for me to leave the ranch and the people I love, but it would be harder to stay on here—without you!"



CHAPTER XIX

RAINBOW CASTLE

SOME weeks had passed, and it was now early fall at the ranch. But another change had taken place besides that of the seasons, for Jim and Ruth and the Ranch girls had moved away from the old Lodge into their splendid new home.

To everybody's satisfaction, however, the Lodge was not deserted; for Ralph Merrit had changed into it from his old quarters, and his friend, Henry Tilford Russell, was still with him—not that the young professor had become an invalid owing to his accident at the Rainbow Mine, for his broken leg was completely healed. But as he had come west for his general health somehow the Rainbow Ranch seemed to hold more curative properties than any other place. And Ralph was delighted to have his society. The youthful professor of ancient languages appeared to have recovered in a measure from his previous prejudice against girls, or at least he was able to find the companionship of the four Ranch girls endurable.

The move to the big house had been somewhat hastened for several reasons, the most important being that Jacqueline Ralston and Frank Kent were to be married during the first part of October. Frank would not consent to returning to England without Jack. He insisted that she was far too uncertain a quantity to be left alone in her beloved western lands, since her prairies were his most dangerous rival. Moreover, as he had promised his father to stand for a Liberal seat in Parliament that same winter, Jack was needed at Kent House to aid him in winning his election.

Now it seemed that all of the intimate friends that the girls had acquired in their two years away from home, had suddenly decided to pay visits to the Rainbow Ranch. Among them were the Princess Colonna and her nephew, Giovanni, who, because of the death of her husband without heir, had inherited the Prince's ancient title.

Miss Katherine Winthrop had finally arrived, and her presence seemed to

compensate Olive for the loss of a good deal of Jack's companionship; yet when the two friends were able to be together without any one else, they were as intimate and as devoted as at any time in their lives. And though Jack never referred to the subject of their unfortunate conversation, she could find no trace in Olive of unhappiness or regret.

It is true that Miss Winthrop and the girl, who was like a peculiarly devoted and sympathetic daughter, spent numbers of afternoons in the nearby Indian village discussing Olive's desire to become a teacher to the Indians when she was old enough and sufficiently well trained for the task. For the older woman was wise enough not to oppose the girl's present fancy as Jack had done, only insisting that she wait until she felt sure of her own fitness.

But although Olive had frequent talks with old Laska, who never could entirely connect the charming young American lady with the child she had persecuted, there was a new member of the village community with whom Olive would have no conversation. And this was her once devoted friend and admirer, the Indian boy, Carlos.

After Jacqueline Ralston's home-coming, when she had the opportunity to explain her unaccountable disappearance, it was Jim Colter who at once armed himself with a short whip and demanded that the business of punishing Carlos be left entirely to him. Yet, notwithstanding her long night of wandering about in the sand, too weary and too stupefied to find her way home or to believe that the boy would not eventually return with her horse, Jack immediately became Carlos' defender, finally persuading her guardian to punish the boy no further than by not permitting him again to set foot on Rainbow Ranch. She also confessed her own share in the day's difficulties, taking a part of the blame upon herself by insisting that if she had not struck the boy he would never have attempted so ugly and dangerous a revenge.

Jim and Frank, though at last agreeing to Jack's wish, did have one interview with Carlos. But though they came away leaving the boy frightened and submissive, he never was brought to confess just what he had intended in riding off with Jack's horse. Perhaps during the long afternoon he had vainly been trying to think of some form of vengeance and then at the last moment the idea of stealing Jack's horse and deserting her had come like a sudden inspiration. Or perhaps the boy had meant to return—no one ever knew. He had gone on with the two horses to the nearest Indian village and never again left it for any other home. For the effort to civilize Carlos had been a vain one and he cheerfully

reverted to the habits and companionship of his own race.

Nevertheless, he did not go unpunished, although no one ever knew in what his punishment consisted. But the refusal of Olive's further friendship was a sorrow which the Indian lad endured in silence to the end of his days. For he never married and was that very rare figure among his people—an old bachelor, looked after by old women and the squaws of other men. And this when half a dozen Indian maidens would gladly have mated with Carlos. For he was unusually handsome and was always admired and revered by his own nation.

At the time they moved into the new house Ruth and Jim and the girls were feeling particularly happy and prosperous, because, not long after the announcement of Jack's and Frank's engagement, Ralph Merrit had made discoveries of fresh supplies of gold in Rainbow Mine. Also, he had devised the long-sought-for method by which the gold could be extracted without too great danger and expense. He had not trusted entirely to his own judgment and experience, for three of the greatest mining experts in the West had been sent for, who were open in their praises of Ralph's idea and plan, predicting a big future for him and offering him opportunities with them should he ever care to leave the Rainbow Mine.

But this new "pot of gold at the end of the rainbow," Ralph had straightway announced was to be his particular wedding gift to Jack and Frank. Certainly he had no idea of deserting his old friends, now that he was again able to prove his usefulness. So he was working on in apparent contentment when the Princess and the young Prince appeared. Then once more his dream faded and it was hard for Ralph not to think of his work as mere drudgery in which the labor was almost all his and the large rewards for others.

For like lightning out of a clear sky, soon after the Princess Colonna's installation in their new home, even before Ruth or the girls had become accustomed to her presence, with entire formality she asked Jim Colter's consent to Jean Bruce's marriage to her nephew, Giovanni, the young Prince Colonna. When Jim was only barely able to express his surprise and consternation at such a suggestion, she explained to him a complete understanding of his feelings, that this method of procedure in a question of marriage was the custom in Italy, her nephew's country. Therefore the young Prince would never dream of speaking to Jean without first obtaining her guardian's approval. Nevertheless, Mr. Colter must not believe that there was any lack of affection on the Prince Colonna's part, for he had never ceased thinking and talking of Jean from that first hour of

their meeting in the Pincio Gardens in Rome.

In reply to the Princess, Jim could only flush and stammer, saying that he would prefer first talking the matter over with Mrs. Colter before giving his answer. For the truth was that Jim really wished to shout aloud his refusal to consider such a proposition even for five minutes. Jean to marry a wretched little Italian youth, no taller than she was herself, when she might have almost any clean, hard working American fellow! It was bad enough for his adored Jack to be going away with an *Englishman*, but then Frank Kent was different!

Nevertheless, Jim understood that the reply which he really wished to make was not altogether fair and certainly not courteous to their guests. Ruth must at once find some way of clearing up the situation.

So soon as her husband had explained the matter to her Ruth was under the impression that she did see a way. With the Princess' and the Prince Colonna's consent she herself would first speak to Jean, letting them hear later whether Miss Bruce was willing to listen to the Prince's suit.

Of course this was the best way out! Jim sighed with relief at his wife's suggestion, for neither he nor Ruth had the faintest idea that Jean would do anything but refuse even for a moment to consider the Prince or his offer. Ruth believed that she had always understood Jean better than any one of the four Ranch girls.

Without comment the girl heard of the young nobleman's proposal, and instead of declining, she asked to be allowed to consider it. In the meantime the Prince and his aunt were to remain at the Rainbow Ranch in order that Jean and the young man might learn to know each other better.

They were frequently together and very soon the state of affairs was no secret to any member of the family, or to their closest friends. And although a number of persons were puzzled, no one said a word to Jean. Could it be possible that she was going to marry solely for position? No one believed that she could have come to care so deeply for the young Italian prince in so brief a time.



CHAPTER XX

A PARTY AT THE NEW HOUSE

THE society people in that part of Wyoming within the radius of the Rainbow Ranch were deeply interested and some of them a good deal excited over the fact that an American-Italian Princess and an Italian Prince were being entertained in their midst.

For some time previous to the coming of their guests Ruth and the girls had planned giving a large evening party. Originally the idea had been to make it a kind of house-warming as well as a formal announcement of Jack's engagement. But as Jack begged not to be made specially conspicuous in regard to the invitations, they were finally issued by Mr. and Mrs. Colter asking that their friends do them the honor of meeting Miss Katherine Winthrop, the Princess Colonna and her nephew, the Prince Giovanni Colonna, on a certain September evening. According to the desires of the Ranch girls the entertainment was to be both a reception and dance, for the new home was large enough for both. For while the older guests were talking to one another in the music room and library, the big living room could be used for dancing.

It was about six o'clock on the afternoon before the ball when the four girls in dressing gowns of various shades slipped through the wide colonial hall and entered the big parlor. Frieda dropped into a chair set close against the wall and sighed deeply. Her yellow hair had been washed only a few hours before and was now in a big loose knot on top of her head, though it kept breaking forth into delicious curls about her white forehead and neck.

In answer to the sigh Jack sat down on the floor at her younger sister's feet. "Isn't everything all right, Baby? Isn't the room as lovely as you expected?" she asked anxiously. For although Jack had always been unusually tender and devoted to Frieda, she was even more in these days, with the thought of leaving her so close at hand.

Again Frieda sighed, but this time she explained herself. "It is more than all right. It is more beautiful than I ever expected any place belonging to us could be. Not that I did not love the dear old Lodge, but this house is, well—different. Isn't it dreadful that you are going away so soon, Jack, dearest, after all our work and planning? It will never seem just like home without you."

With a sudden movement Jean crossed the room, placing her fingers lightly upon Frieda's lips.

"We have promised Jack not to say anything like that, Frieda dear," she protested, "at least not tonight. We must all have the happiest evening of our lives, one that none of us shall forget."

The younger girl glanced up at her cousin wistfully with a question on her lips, but instead of asking it she clapped her hands softly together.

"See that lovely light coming through our stained-glass window! Isn't it like a rainbow! Oh, I hope it means good luck just as it always has in the past! And somehow it makes this room more beautiful. I did not dream anything could!"

Naturally Frieda was prejudiced and an enthusiast, and yet she had ample reason for her point of view. For a moment there was an unusual silence as the four girls looked around them. Consciously or unconsciously they realized that these next few weeks were to mark important changes in their lives. For after they had slipped by things could never be exactly the same. Jack would be married and that would represent the first important break, and after that—well, they were not little girls any longer, for even Frieda had lately shown unmistakable signs of being grown-up.

The walls of the long room were hung with western smilax and since the party was to be a typical American one, the girls had been wildly extravagant and used American Beauty roses for the decoration. Now the air was fragrant with their rich and penetrating perfume. The old colonial mantel was banked with them, and garlands of green swinging from one white column to another had big baskets filled with roses suspended between the posts. The room itself was fifty feet long and three-fourths as broad. All the woodwork and the walls were a warm gray. The greater part of the furniture had of course been removed and a white tarpaulin covered the hardwood floor, but in the bay window there were palms and vases of roses and an old-fashioned colonial sofa, besides several chairs. Also there were occasional chairs along the walls for the older persons who might care to watch the dancing. The music was to be concealed in the hall behind a bank of evergreens just beneath the wide mahogany stairs.

"Well, if there is anything more that can be done to make this place more attractive, I am sure I don't know what it is," Jean insisted at last. "And I am especially glad that we asked Mr. Parker to come tonight. Because of course he may have built more expensive houses than ours, yet I am quite sure he has

never made one more attractive. Besides, he is awfully nice. Gracious, girls, who is that knocking? Ruth thinks we are being nice and obedient and lying down until seven."

But Olive had walked over to the closed door and opened it half-way.

"Don't be alarmed," she laughed back. "It is only the flowers Frank is sending us for tonight. Let's open them now and see what choice he has made. Ruth told him about our dresses, so that he could not make any serious mistake."

Almost concealed by four great boxes reaching as high as her head, Olive came back to where Jack was sitting and placed them in a great pile before her.

"You give them to us, Jack dear, since they are from Frank," she urged.

The first was marked with Frieda's name, but as she took the top off the box and lifted out a card her cheeks turned suddenly crimson.

"These are not from Frank after all," Frieda remarked with a pretense of unconcern, "Mr. Russell says that I was so kind about reading to him when his leg was broken that he asked Frank as a special favor to let him send me my bouquet for tonight." Her fingers fumbled nervously at the tissue paper and her eyes were downcast, since she did not specially care to have any one staring at her at this moment. She could imagine Jack's puzzled and slightly worried expression and Jean's and Olive's teasing looks. For the absurd friendship that had developed between the solemn young Professor and Frieda was one of the ill-concealed jokes in the family.

"What do you suppose that a man who dabbles in Egyptology for an amusement would send as a bouquet to a baby?" Jean inquired mockingly. "Possibly a lotus flower, for there are learned persons who declare that Cleopatra was a bewildering blond lady," and Jean pulled at Frieda's yellow curls.

The next moment along with the other girls she gave a cry of admiration. Who would ever have suspected the Professor of such exquisite taste? For in some way he had managed to make his bouquet suggest the girl to whom it was offered. For it was formed of hundreds of tiny forget-me-nots set close together and encircled with small white star-like flowers.

Jean's roses were the deep pink color that she always loved and Olive's were a wonderful golden yellow. But Jack hesitated a moment before opening her box, which was the largest of the four and curiously heavy.

Half guessing how she felt Olive laid her hand lovingly on her friend's.

"Take your flowers up to your own room and look at them first by yourself if you would rather," she suggested. However, Jean and Frieda both raised a storm of protest.

And Jack laughed. "It isn't that I am such a bashful person that I don't want you to see even the flowers Frank has given me—I would not be so absurd," she confessed. "But I have an idea that perhaps Frank has put something more than flowers in my box. And I don't think I shall ever, ever be able to wear them. Oh, children, what made me fall in love with an Englishman and one who may inherit a title? Certainly I shall never be able to live up to it!" Doing her best to hide her nervousness Jack buried her hot cheeks in a great bunch of white jasmine flowers; but Frieda's fingers were pointing inexorably to a white velvet jewel case which still remained in the flower box half buried in evergreens.

With a smile Jack picked it up, touching the spring. On the satin shone a miniature crown of diamonds and pearls and an exquisite necklace of the same jewels.

"Gracious," Frieda gasped, "I didn't know Frank Kent was a millionaire! Why he always has declared that he was a great deal poorer than lots of American fellows! I wonder if he has been deceiving you all this time, Jack, to keep you from marrying him for his money."

"Goose!" Jack laughed; but Frieda's absurdity relieved the situation. "Don't you know that these jewels are heirlooms in the Kent family, that they always belong to the wife of the eldest son? I told Frank to wait until our wedding day; but he seemed to wish me to wear them tonight. I don't believe I possibly can, they are too lovely—and somehow they don't seem to suit me."

Olive placed the tiara on Jack's gold-brown head. The girl's gray eyes were shining softly, her head was tilted back the least bit and a rich color flooded her cheeks and lips.

"I don't think Frank need be exactly ashamed of you, Lady Kent," Jean murmured with teasing affectation. And then: "You funny Jack! Is there any other girl in America who would not care more than you do for Frank's splendid position and all the rest of it? Not for a single instant do I believe that you gave it a thought! Dear me, I wish your own sweet cousin were so high-minded!"

"Girls," said a reproachful voice suddenly, "is this the way you keep your sacred promise to me to rest until dinner time? Go back to your rooms instantly," Ruth Colter scolded. Yet she was hardly an impressive figure with her hair rolled up in a tight knot and a light shawl thrown over her kimono. "I heard such a terrible chattering in here that I was afraid a collection of magpies had gotten in an open window and thought they had come upon an enchanted garden." Here Ruth ceased talking suddenly, having caught sight of the beautiful ornament on Jack's hair.

"Gracious, dear, what a wonderful possession! Do let me see it more closely," she asked. "But take it off first and then come here and kiss me. A diamond tiara is hardly appropriate with a dressing gown and I can't bear to see you looking so regal and so far away from the rest of us."

And with a break in her voice, Ruth put her arm around Jack and then led the small procession forth from the room.



CHAPTER XXI

MAIDS AND MEN

"You Would Have Married Me Anyhow" "YOU WOULD HAVE MARRIED ME ANYHOW"

"I WOULD give a great deal to have my people see you tonight, Jack," Frank Kent whispered several hours later.

True to her promise Jacqueline had dressed before the others and come down for a few moments alone with Frank. And it was small wonder that the young man was proud of her. She had on a pure white tulle dress made over silk and no ornament except the string of pearls and diamonds about her throat. For she had persuaded Frank to let her wait until after their marriage before wearing the more conspicuous jewels. Somehow she felt that the tiara would look out of taste and inappropriate among her old friends and neighbors. The bouquet of jasmine flowers with their darkly shining green leaves were resting in her lap.

"Your people will see enough of me, Frank, before very long," she answered. "How glad I am that they already know me and that they do not object very seriously to our marriage! Of course they must have preferred your caring for one of your own countrywomen, but——"

"You would have married me anyhow, wouldn't you, dear, even if they *had* objected?" Frank asked and then laughed at himself. "That's a dreadfully unfilial speech, but I expect every man likes to feel that the girl he cares for would have stuck to him through every kind of obstacle—poverty, obscurity, the world's misunderstanding. Not that I have much doubt of you, Jack. You are giving up more than most people realize in turning your back on the dear old ranch and your beloved family. But we'll come back as often as possible and have them come to us, and after a while Ruth must let Frieda be with you for a year or so. She is my little sister, and honestly I don't quite like her intimacy with this fellow, Russell—he is much too cranky and old." Frank had taken Jack's hand and was touching it to his lips when she made a quick though silent signal. She

and Frank were sitting in the bay window almost hidden by evergreens and at this moment Ruth and Jim, the other three girls and their guests were entering the ball room.

Olive wore a yellow crêpe dress and carried the yellow roses. Jean was in deep pink, her costume of shimmering satin and lace, and had one of Frank's flowers in her dark brown hair. Her bouquet was not the same that it had been two hours before, when she had first removed it from its wrappings; for now encircled by Frank's roses were a dozen purple orchids.

"Do you think, Frank, that Jean intends—" Jack whispered softly, inclining her head toward her cousin to indicate what she meant to say. Then when her companion made no reply, fearing to be overheard, she continued. "It is Jean I am most worried about. How can she make up her mind to marry a foreigner instead of an American? Just look at the Prince and then at Jim or Ralph Merrit. He is so little and so dark and so kind of different. Even that scar on his face from a duel he once fought makes me have almost a dislike for him, though I know it is foolish of me."

"But Jean isn't really going to marry him!" Frank protested.

This time Jack nodded uneasily. "I am afraid so; indeed she almost told me that she intended to accept him; and I suppose she means to do it this evening. I wish I could have said something to influence her, but I did not dare. Besides, it would have done no good. You know Jean might have said that I too was marrying a foreigner and had no right to say anything to her. Only the difference is that Jean does not love Giovanni—and then an Englishman isn't the same and —"

Frank was now smiling over Jack's effort at an apology and explanation. She had slipped her hand into his and was holding it fast. At this moment a splendidly handsome figure marched across the floor with surprising swiftness and now stood looking down upon the girl and man with an expression that was a combination of wrath, sympathy and devotion.

"Jacqueline Ralston," Jim began so unexpectedly that to save her life Jack could not restrain a guilty start, "have I not told you and Frank Kent at least a dozen times that I would not have any stealing off by yourselves or any spooning until you were safely away from the Rainbow Ranch? It is bad enough, Kent, when I think of your taking my 'partner' from me and leaving me to look after this great place without her. But I tell you I can't stand *looking* at you doing it."

And Jim gave a mournful sigh that was part pretense and part reality.

Its effect was to make Jack at once jump to her feet and throw her arms about him, regardless of his immaculate shirt. Then she ran for protection to Ruth.

Happiness had made Ruth grow a year younger each month, her husband had stoutly declared, and though this statement was not strictly true, she did look very little older than the four Ranch girls as she stood waiting to receive their guests tonight. For the girls and Jim had insisted that she discard her nun-like fondness for gray and drab colors at least for this one evening and wear white. So Ruth's costume of heavy white corded silk with silver trimming was both youthful and becoming.

On one side of the hostess stood Miss Katherine Winthrop, looking singularly handsome and imposing in a gray satin evening gown trimmed with duchess lace and with a bunch of Frieda's violets at her waist. Olive was next in line, and then Jean, while on Ruth's other side the Princess Colonna was made more radiantly fair by a wonderful black gown and a diamond star in her hair. Jack stood beside her, and then Frieda.

The Princess seemed far more at ease and better able to appreciate and make herself popular with the hundred or more visitors than Miss Winthrop. For the Princess appeared almost to have forgotten, for the time at least, the years spent in the formal society of Rome and to be remembering only her own early girlhood in this same western country. A large number of the guests were traveled and cultured persons, the owners of large ranches and estates; but Jim had asked that all of their old acquaintances be invited regardless of wealth and position, so that there were many interesting figures who appeared as "western types" to Miss Winthrop, but whom the Princess immediately understood and enjoyed.

Indeed during the evening Jim Colter, who had never liked the Princess Colonna nor felt entirely comfortable in her presence, confided to Ralph Merrit that maybe a Princess could after all be a real live woman, though he hoped to the Lord that Jean Bruce was not going to undertake the job. Ralph had little comfort to offer either to Jim or to himself in return for this confidence. For everybody in the ball room who had heard the gossip concerning Jean and the young Prince had no doubt of its ultimate outcome. And naturally they marveled over two of the Rainbow Ranch girls making such distinguished marriages.

Perhaps Jean was not altogether displeased with this gossip, for she certainly

danced with the young Prince most of the earlier part of the evening. The exact number of her dances Ralph Merrit could have told, although he was not conscious of having counted them. For except for dancing once with each one of the four Ranch girls and once with Ruth, he had spent the rest of the evening watching the dancers from a safe corner. For some reason or other he seemed not to feel sufficient energy for anything else.

It was a few moments after eleven o'clock that same evening when the Princess Colonna, feeling a hand laid lightly on her arm and turning, discovered Jean Bruce alone. The girl seemed to have grown suddenly tired and pale.

Fortunately the older woman's companion suggested at this moment that she might like him to get her an ice, so that she and Jean were uninterrupted for a moment.

"I wonder if you could come somewhere with me for a little while, where we could talk without any one else seeing us?" Jean pleaded. "I know you will think it strange of me, Princess, but all of a sudden it seemed to me that you were the only person in the world whom I could ask a certain question. And I must ask it of you before another hour has passed."

Jean spoke quietly and with entire self-possession; yet there was no doubting the girl's earnestness or her necessity.

Instantly the Princess slipped her arm through Jean's with the affectionate intimacy which she had always felt for her and the woman and girl together left the room. Providentially for their opportunity to be alone, the greater number of guests were now in the supper room. So without much effort Jean found two chairs at the end of a long veranda which had been enclosed for the evening's use and made into a kind of conservatory. There they appeared to be quite free from interruption.

The older woman sat in the shadow, but could see the girl's face plainly. And though she could hardly guess what question Jean might wish to ask her, she was not altogether uncertain of the subject uppermost in the girl's thoughts, so thoroughly had her nephew taken her into his confidence.

"Princess," Jean began, but she was not looking at her friend. Her eyes were seeing nothing, she was so deeply engrossed. "I wonder if you will tell me if you were happy in your married life? Oh, yes, I know that sounds like an impertinence; but I do not believe that you will think of it in that light. You

understand I would ask you for no such reason. The Prince was a great deal older than you, but then you were very good friends and you had a splendid title and people everywhere looked up to you and were proud to meet you. I remember how dreadfully impressed we girls were when we first saw you on board the steamship. It did not seem to us then that a Princess could be like other people. And none of us ever dreamed of knowing you as an intimate friend. Those days when I was visiting you in Rome it seemed so wonderful to me that you, an American woman and a western girl like me, could be a leader in European society!" Jean drew a long breath. "Of course it never occurred to me then that any such chance could ever come to me. It sounds like a fairy tale and yet my own family don't understand how I can care so much for position and a title and all that it must mean."

"I *understand*," the Princess finally replied when Jean had given her opportunity to speak, "but there is one thing or at least one person whom you have not mentioned, my nephew, Giovanni. Do you care for him, Jean?"

In answer the girl, whose clear pallor was one of her noticeable characteristics, flushed hotly. "I like him very much, he is most kind, he——"

"You mean that Giovanni is entirely devoted to you and that you regard him as a friend. I see," the Princess finished softly. "And you think that after you marry him you will learn to care more for him because you would most enjoy his title and all it could do for you. I wonder just what Giovanni would receive in exchange for all he has to give?"

For a moment the older woman took the girl's cold fingers in her own.

"I don't mean to hurt your feelings, dear, or to seem unkind. But you have asked me to talk to you tonight because you believe that better than any one else I can understand and appreciate your ambition and your emotions. And you are entirely right. I know just what you are thinking, just what you have been saying to yourself over and over ever since I asked your guardian to permit you to marry my nephew. I know because I have passed through almost exactly the same experience. So I am going to talk frankly about my marriage to you tonight, Jean, though I never have and probably never will again to any one else as long as I live. You see, I, too, was a Western girl, only I was a great deal poorer in the beginning of my life than you have ever been. And then my father and mother were plainer people. But one day when I was about twelve years old my father began making a great fortune, and when I was fourteen, as is the way

in this western country, he was many times a millionaire. In those days the West was not what it is now, so as my mother was ambitious for me and believed I was going to be a pretty woman I was sent East to school. Later on I went to Paris and studied there, and then to Italy, so that I might learn several languages. Now and then I used to see my father and mother, but not often. They did not enjoy Europe and I seemed to have so much to learn there was little time to stay at home. One or two wonderful summers I spent here in the West with them, loving this country and its people almost as your cousin Jack does. But by and by, when I was traveling in Italy with some rich American friends, I met the Prince Colonna. He asked me to marry him and I—well, I thought about things pretty much as you are doing, dear. I wanted to be a Princess; I thought it the most romantic, wonderful fate possible for a plain American girl with nothing but some prettiness and her money to exchange for fairyland. True, my Prince was old, but I liked him and I thought we would be better friends after we married. I believe we were. But, dear, I was not happy. I have missed the most wonderful thing that can come into one's life, for by and by I found that the people with titles were nothing but ordinary human beings. The people who count most, or at least who count most to me, are the people who do things for themselves, who have made their own way and their own positions, like so many of our big American men. Often I was very lonely and sad and often sorry for a decision I made years ago when I was even younger than you are tonight."

The Princess let go Jean's hand which she had been holding.

"Isn't there any one here in your own country, Jean, whom you like better than you do Giovanni, whom you would a great deal rather marry if he had the same position to offer?" she inquired.

For a moment the girl made no answer. Then she said faintly: "Yes, Princess, there is, though I have never confessed it to anybody in the world except you, and scarcely to myself. For you see it is not only the other man's lack of money and position that comes between us, but Ralph does not even care for me. Some time ago he did, I think, but I was not very kind to him then, and now for months and months he has been nothing more to me than a friend. So I can see that his feelings have changed entirely. I thought if I went away with Giovanni I too would forget. It is hard to be right here on the ranch and have to pretend and pretend all the time that I feel toward him just as I used to when I was a little girl."

"Jean," the older woman's voice had quite changed and was now both cold

and stern, "I wonder what kind of a partnership you think marriage is? Do you think that when men go into business together that one brings everything to the firm and the other nothing? For that is what you wish to do with Giovanni. You must play fair, child. Why do you consider that an Italian is different from other men? Giovanni is young; he is not unattractive. Unless you loved him, you would soon learn to hate each other. For his sake if not for yours I could never approve of your marriage."

But before Jean could reply the Princess had laid a restraining touch upon her. "Some one is coming toward us—a stranger, I think. We had best talk of this another time."



CHAPTER XXII

OLD FRIENDS AND SOMETHING MORE

JEAN did not recognize the newcomer at once. Then she held out her hand, trying to speak naturally.

"Mr. Parker, I am so glad to see you. I was afraid you were not coming back at all. Princess, Mr. Parker built our new house. Mr. Parker, this is our friend and guest, the Princess Colonna."

The tall man bowed politely. "I was told to bring you and the Princess Colonna back to the ball room if you would consent to come," he returned.

From out of the shadow the slender, blond woman rose quietly, taking a few steps forward. "I shall be most happy to go back with you, Mr. Parker," she replied. And then standing within a few feet of her new acquaintance she stared at him curiously.

"Theodore Parker, it isn't fair of you after all these years to have me recognize you when you have forgotten me. It makes me think that I must look a great deal the older!"

But with a laugh the woman held out both hands, and now standing in the light that fell from a yellow shaded lantern the Princess' face and figure were in plain view.

"Beatrice, the Princess Colonna! Why of course I have known your name always. How stupid of me not to have thought! But I could never have dreamed of meeting you out here in Wyoming. The Prince, your husband?"

"He is dead," the woman answered. And then turning to Jean: "It is odd, dear, but Mr. Parker and I have known each other a very long time. It gives me great happiness to see him again and makes me think of that girl I have been telling you about. Won't you come back to Mrs. Colter with us?"

But Jean shook her head and the man and woman moved away, leaving her alone.

It was in this same place that Ralph Merrit, also trying to steal away from the guests, found her ten minutes later.

Left to herself, Jean had been crying softly, although she could not exactly have explained the cause. Life was such a jumble—one wanted so much and had so little! Then often the very thing that had seemed fair and desirable turned to bitterness and regret! Well, to one thing she had at least made up her mind—she would not marry Giovanni. Yet she had promised to give him an answer within the hour.

Hearing Ralph's step she started nervously. And then with the familiarity of old acquaintance she frowned upon him.

"I thought you were the Prince Colonna," she began crossly.

Ralph stiffened. "I am sorry that I am not. I had no idea of disturbing you. But I'll go and find your Prince if you like."

"He is not my Prince; don't be stupid, Ralph, and do please sit down. I don't see why you feel it so necessary to avoid me recently."

"Don't you?" Ralph answered. Then for several moments he said nothing more. However, though he did not appear to be looking, he had a clear enough vision of Jean's face, her dark eyes swimming in unshed tears, her heavy lids and the pallor of her cheeks.

"Jean," Ralph swung himself around swiftly and Jean saw the firmness of his lips, the decisive outline of his jaw and his high, almost noble forehead, "if there is any one in this world, I don't care who or what he is, who has done anything or said anything to make you unhappy, why if I can, won't you let me help to straighten things out. You said just now that the Prince Colonna was not your Prince. Perhaps you were only angry at my tactless way of expressing things, but if there is any trouble between you—" the young man hesitated.

"But there isn't—not the slightest," Jean replied with the familiar shrug of her shoulders and that demure expression about the corners of her mouth and in her brown eyes that her old friend remembered so well. "The truth is, Ralph, that I am tired of your and of other people's pretending that you believe the Prince Colonna and I are engaged to each other. Because we are not, and never will be."

This was as unreasonable and inconsistent a speech as any girl could well manage to make.

"Thank the Lord!" Ralph replied, so unconsciously and so sincerely that, as he was not looking toward her at the moment, the girl allowed herself to smile.

"I don't see why you should be so glad, Ralph?" she murmured.

"Oh, don't you?" Ralph answered between his teeth. "Then to the best of my ability I'll tell you, Jean Bruce. I love you, I always have loved you from the hour I saw you drying your hair by that brook in the wilderness, say a thousand years ago! So now if you are not going to marry this Italian youth, why it gives me a longer chance to keep on working and working until I have something to offer you that you wish, money, position."

Swiftly the girl rose, laying her fingers gently against the young man's lips.

"Don't say those last words to me again, Ralph. I feel tonight that I never, never wish to hear them again. You have the thing already I want most in the world if you are willing to give it to me. Why haven't you understood in these last few months? I couldn't exactly propose to you, could I, dear?" Jean questioned demurely.

Ten minutes afterwards Jean, with a rose-colored shawl wrapped about her shoulders, arm in arm with Ralph, was walking about outdoors, forgetful of the autumn coldness, of the guests who were asking for her, of everything in the whole world except her own happiness. Finally she was surprised by seeing two other figures approaching them who were equally oblivious.

With a low laugh Jean drew herself and her companion into the shadow.

"Jack and Frank!" she whispered. Then, as the other girl and man were nearly opposite them, "I thought you both promised Jim not to do this sort of thing, at least not tonight, Jack Ralston," Jean began unexpectedly. "Yet I am glad to have found you alone, because I want to tell you first that I am very happy. I don't want other people to know it just yet, but I too am going to be married."

There was a note in Jacqueline Ralston's voice as she replied that to save her life she could not conceal.

"I am very glad for your sake, Jean darling," Jack answered. "You know how much I shall hope for your and Giovanni's happiness."

"Giovanni's?" Jean's manner now suggested unutterable reproach. Ralph Merrit stepped forward and stood close beside Jean.

"Hasn't any member of my beloved family sense enough to guess that I have always cared for Ralph, or at least I have always cared for him in the past six months," Jean protested. "It is only that I have had to do desperate deeds to make him care for me."

But the girl's next words were smothered in Jack's embrace, while Frank was giving Ralph's hand such a squeeze that though it was considerably hardened from labor, it was difficult for him not to wince.

Then the four young people were so interested in one another that they paid no attention to two other persons who were seen coming toward them, until they finally discovered one of them to be Frieda. She was looking more ethereal than ever in a long pale blue silk coat with a chiffon scarf about her blond head, and was accompanied by the Professor.

"Whatever are you doing out here? It seems very rude to our guests," Frieda murmured reproachfully. "I am sure Jim and Ruth will think it very rude of you."

"But, Frieda, baby," Jack protested, "aren't you and Professor Russell also out here, as you call it? I can't see that we are much more to blame than you."

Frieda gazed upward at the serious young man, who returned her glance with such solemn gravity that Jack felt a shiver of apprehension, while Jean stared at the new-comers closely, as if trying to solve a puzzle.

"Oh, no, it is not the same with us," Frieda answered serenely. "You see Ralph and Jean are not engaged at all, and you and Frank have been engaged such a long time, Jack, so you ought to be used to it by now. But Henry and I, why we just become engaged half an hour ago, so of course we like to be out in the moonlight together," Frieda ended conclusively.



Five years have passed away and Jacqueline Ralston is now "Lady Kent" with a small son of her own to inherit the title, while Frank is a well-known Liberal member of Parliament. But they still make frequent trips back to the old Rainbow Ranch, which Jack, in spite of her affection for her new home, has

never ceased to love better than any other place on earth.

And these home-comings of Lord and Lady Kent and the small "James Colter Kent" are usually the signal for a foregathering of all the four Ranch girls with their husbands and families under the great sheltering roof of "Rainbow Castle."

For no one of the girls now lives continuously at the Ranch, which is still left to Jim's devoted management. As much as possible of their time Jean and Ralph and their small daughter, Jacqueline, spend with them—partly in order that Ralph may continue to supervise the working of the Rainbow Mine which has not yet failed in its output of gold. Ralph Merrit has recently become one of the best known mining experts in the United States, so that his advice is constantly being asked both in this country and abroad. And wherever he travels Jean and her little girl accompany him, for Jean has become one of the most devoted and absorbed of wives.

After the entirely surprising announcement of Frieda Ralston's engagement to Professor Russell on the night of their ball at the ranch, Jack, Ruth and Jim Colter seriously opposed her marriage. In the first place, Frieda was too young to know her own mind; Professor Russell was more than ten years her senior and they had not a single taste in common. So by and by Frieda was brought to consent to having her engagement postponed. Afterwards she spent one whole year in England with Jack, seeing as much of society and young men as her sister could arrange for her. Nevertheless, to everybody's surprise, Frieda stuck to her original choice and two years after her engagement became Mrs. Russell. She is exceedingly happy.

So far Frieda has no children, but lives with her husband's parents, and as he is an only child, they continue to spoil and adore her. Also the grave young professor, who has never outgrown his first impression of Frieda as a glorified doll, still treats her as if the least harshness would utterly destroy her.

Olive Van Mater is unmarried and already insists upon calling herself an old maid. She is not devoting her life to teaching the Indians, although she has partly fulfilled her old dream. At the close of the year, when her grandmother's final will was read, to the immense surprise of every one, Olive inherited one-half her large fortune, the other half being divided among the Harmon family. For the will announced that if any girl was able to show such self-will and such disregard of wealth as Olive had shown, should she fail in the interim to marry Donald, that therefore she alone deserved her grandmother's inheritance. As this

money was far more than Olive wanted or needed, she was thus enabled to found an agricultural school among the Indians, which was to teach them to combine their old knowledge with the new discoveries of science and so to make life happier, if possible, for a misunderstood race.

Yet Olive was to marry in the end an artist whom she finally met while visiting Jack and Frank at Kent House. The young man was poor and unknown then, but his first success was won with a painting of the head of his beautiful wife and daughter.

Possibly Jim and Ruth might have been lonely now and then at the old ranch, except for the fact that in the course of time they had four daughters of their own besides Jimmikin and each one bore the name of one of the former Ranch girls.

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

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