

The Adventure Girls
At K Bar O

Claire Blank

1936

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THE ADVENTURE GIRLS At K Bar O

By
Clair Blank

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The Adventure Girls at K Bar O

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CONTENTS

| | | |
|-------|------------------|---------------------|
| I | ARRIVAL | 7 |
| II | ROBBERY | 14 |
| III | GALE'S ADVENTURE | 20 |
| IV | DISCOVERY | 33 |
| V | PURSUIT | 41 |
| VI | GHOST CABIN | 54 |
| VII | LANDSLIDE | 70 |
| VIII | PRISONERS | 81 |
| IX | ON THE TRAIL | 90 |
| X | RUSTLERS | 106 |
| XI | SURPRISE | 119 |
| XII | GONE | 128 |
| XIII | RESCUE | 139 |
| XIV | TRAPPED | 155 |
| XV | CAPTURE | 166 |
| XVI | ALARM | 175 |
| XVII | REVENGE | 189 |
| XVIII | PREMONITION | 204 |
| XIX | HELP | 214 |
| XX | REWARD | 225 |
| XXI | ADIOS | 240 |

The Adventure Girls at K-Bar-O

Chapter I

ARRIVAL

The thing that went under the name of automobile wheezed into the ranchyard and rattled to a halt. With creaks and groans in every joint the car discharged its six very dusty, very weary occupants.

At the same time, the screen door of the ranch house banged shut and a flying figure descended on the new arrivals.

“Oh, Gale, but I’m glad to see you,” the girl from the ranch house declared hugging the foremost one of the visitors.

Gale Howard returned the hug with equal warmth. The two were cousins, and Gale and her friends, The Adventure Girls, had traveled West to spend the summer on the K Bar O Ranch, owned by Gale’s uncle.

“But don’t tell me you traveled all the way West in that!” Virginia Wilson murmured aghast, when the introductions and first greetings were over.

“We wouldn’t have lived to tell the tale,” declared Carol Carter. “I never knew a car that had so many bumps in it.”

“We came West to Phoenix on the train,” Gale explained. “It was there we bought the car and drove up here.”

“You wouldn’t think we bought it second hand, would you?” Janet Gordon murmured.

“No,” Phyllis Elton agreed with a twinkle in her eyes. “It looks as though we made it ourselves.”

The last two of the new arrivals, Madge Reynolds and Valerie Wallace, who had been busy unstrapping luggage and tumbling bags onto the ground, turned now to the ranch girl.

“What shall we do with our stuff?” Madge asked.

“I suppose you will want to change from your traveling suits,” Virginia suggested, “so just bring along what you want now. Leave the rest here. Tom can bring it in later.”

Tom was her elder brother and as the girls walked toward the ranch house he crossed the yard from the corral. Behind him came Gale's uncle. Virginia called her mother and more greetings and introductions followed.

"But how did you manage to leave home without a chaperon?" Virginia asked from her position on the bed in the room shared by Gale and Valerie.

"It was all we could do to get away without one," a laughing voice in the adjoining room declared, and Janet appeared on the threshold.

"Finally our parents decided that Gale and Valerie, being the only sane and level-headed ones among us, could be trusted to see that we behaved properly," Carol added, hanging over Janet's shoulder.

"That shows how much they really know Gale and Valerie," added Janet mischievously. "If they had any sense at all, they would have appointed me guardian angel of the troupe."

"Then we would never have gotten this far," Valerie declared, struggling to pull on a brown riding boot.

"Yes, Virginia," Gale laughed, "when we did let Janet drive for a little while, she ran us into a ditch, went the wrong way on a one way street in a little town below here, talked back to a policeman and nearly landed us all in jail."

"Yes, we had to let Gale drive thereafter for self preservation," Carol murmured.

"That is all the gratitude I get," Janet mourned in an injured tone. "I do my best to make our trip a success and you don't appreciate me."

"What? Aren't you dressed yet?" Phyllis demanded as she and Madge entered the other girls' room. "Slow pokes!" she teased.

"Yes, do hurry," Janet pleaded. "I want to get outside and see the horse I'm to ride."

"I'll wager you don't even know what side of a horse to get on," declared Carol as the latter two disappeared into their own room.

"Well--ah--um--we won't go into that," Janet evaded.

Virginia laughed and the other girls smiled sympathetically.

"Don't mind anything they say," Madge advised Virginia. "They don't mean a word of it."

"I gathered that much," Virginia said, rising as Janet and Carol returned, this

time fully dressed and eager to get outside.

The Adventure Girls were dressed alike in brown breeches, leather boots, and khaki shirts with brown silk ties to match. Some of them wore crushable felt hats while the others carried them. They had been delighted with the prospect of spending a summer in the open air on the ranch, looking forward to unknown adventures with keen anticipation. The six had dubbed themselves the Adventure Girls when on school hikes and outings they had usually managed to stir up some kind of excitement. It was their desire to spend their summer becoming better acquainted with the country out here, rather than spend their months free from school in loafing about home. They wanted to get out in the air, see new wonders, and enjoy new adventures.

When, in response to a letter from Virginia, Gale had suggested to the other five girls that they come West and spend the summer in Arizona it had seemed delightful and intriguing, but not probable. Gradually the girls had won round parental objections and collected the things they would need. Now they were here, with a full summer of freedom before them.

The K Bar O Ranch was one of the biggest in the state. This the girls did not fully realize until later, when they began to ride around the countryside. Henry Wilson, Virginia's father, dealt in cattle and his herds were large and of the finest stock. There were horses too, and it was these that the girls were most interested in.

Virginia led the way to the corral. Tom was there, talking to a cowboy and when he saw the girls, brought up three saddled mounts, the cowboy following with a string of four more. The western ponies were sturdy little animals, sure-footed and fast.

The girls claimed their mounts and Gale and Valerie, already experienced riders, mounted their horses immediately.

Janet looked her horse over with speculative eyes. "Well, horse," she said, "I think we are about to become better acquainted and I hope you are as nice as you look."

"They're all tame," Tom assured the girls, assisting Carol into her saddle.

"Hey," Carol called to Janet. "You'll never get on that way!"

Virginia had her horse and by the time Tom had helped Janet into the saddle, the girls were moving forward. Virginia rode ahead with Gale, the two setting their ponies at an easy trot over the trail.

“We won’t go far,” Virginia said, “it will be supertime shortly and I know you wouldn’t want to miss it. The lunch you had wasn’t very substantial.”

“And this Arizona air certainly gives one an appetite,” Gale declared. “What’s that?”

They had come to the crest of a hill and in the green valley below could be seen a slowly moving herd of the K Bar O cattle. But it was not to the cows that Gale called her friend’s attention. Off to the left had sounded a series of sharp explosions, as a fusillade of rifle shots.

Virginia had grown a little pale under her tan, and the hand that gripped her horse’s reins was clenched tightly, but she summoned a smile for Gale’s benefit.

“Just some of the boys having target practice, I reckon,” she said easily.

But Gale was not to be deceived. Target practice would not cause Virginia to appear suddenly so nervous. However, Gale did not press the subject at the time. She knew if there was something wrong at the K Bar O she would know it before long.

Chapter II

ROBBERY

“I’m going into town, ride along?” Virginia asked, coming into the ranch house living room the next morning.

“I will,” Gale said immediately.

“And me,” agreed Valerie.

“Did you say ride?” groaned Janet. “On a horse?”

“Of course,” Virginia laughed.

Janet made a wry face and with the greatest care eased herself into a chair piled with cushions.

“Not this morning, my dear Virginia. I don’t believe the horse likes me.”

Carol laughed from her position before the fireplace. “For once in my life I agree with Janet. You won’t get me on a horse today.”

“I shall stay right here, too,” Madge murmured. “Somehow I appreciate comfort this morning.”

“I’ll go with you,” Phyllis said, “if you will go nice and slowly.”

Accordingly the four mounted and rode away, leaving the other three comfortably fixed with books and magazines. It was almost an hour’s ride into the little town of Coxtton at the pace the girls went, but they enjoyed it. They found a lot of things to talk about and besides they were in no great hurry.

“I’m going to get me a rope,” Gale proposed as the girls left their horses and mounted the sidewalk. “If I’m going to be a westerner, I’m going to learn to rope.”

“And I want a pair of gloves,” Valerie added.

“I have to see a man at the bank on business for Father,” Virginia said, “do you want to come along? Or do you want to do your shopping and meet me here in a few minutes?”

“We’ll meet you here,” said Gale. “We won’t get lost,” she added with a smile,

taking in the few stores and buildings on the single street the town afforded.

“No danger,” laughed Virginia. “See you here then.”

With a cheery wave of the hand she was off across the street. The girls sauntered along, regarding the stores and one of two lounging cowboys with interest.

“I wish we’d seen an Indian,” murmured Phyllis. “Just to prove that we are in the West.”

Valerie laughed. “I doubt if you would know one if you did. They don’t wear war paint any more, you know.”

“Of course I’d know one,” Phyllis said indignantly. “I--look, there is a general store. Perhaps you can get your rope in there, Gale.”

The girls mounted the single wooden step to the store and stepped into the queerest conglomeration of articles they had ever seen. It developed that Gale got her rope, Valerie got her gloves; in fact, they could get anything they wanted. Even postcards, of which they took a goodly supply.

There were few people on the street when they left the store. An automobile drew up before the bank and two men stepped out, a third remained at the wheel.

“Guess Virginia hasn’t come out of the bank yet,” Phyllis said, looking the length of the street and not seeing the western girl.

The three of them strolled to the bank and waited outside. Suddenly from inside the bank came the sound of shots and a scream. Two men appeared in the doorway with drawn revolvers. One man faced the crowd on the street, the other the people in the bank. The people on the street had become tense, fearful.

Valerie grasped one end of Gale’s rope and sprang across the pavement. Gale, realizing immediately her friend’s intention, grasped her end of the rope more securely. The bandits, running from the bank to their waiting car, tripped headlong over the rope. The first man’s gun flew one way and the black bag in which was the money from the bank flew the other.

Phyllis reached over, picked up the gun, and leveled it calmly at the bandits. Valerie secured the black bag. It had been alarmingly easy and so quickly done that the spectators did not at first realize that a robbery had been committed and foiled almost on the same instant. Then there arose a buzz of excited talk while two men stepped from the group of spectators and took charge of the thieves. Unnoticed, the car that had been meant for the bandits’ means of escape, sprang away from the curb and was gone in a cloud of dust.

In the bank all was disorder and excitement. One of the shots that had been fired was lodged in the teller who had attempted to resist the thieves. His condition was not serious, however, and he was able to add his incoherent story to the other tales told by the people who had been present.

Virginia, when she joined the girls to go home, was flushed and excited.

“You certainly acted quickly,” she declared admiringly. “The town owes you a vote of thanks. They would have gotten away sure if you hadn’t tripped them.”

“Catching bandits is just one of the things we do,” laughed Phyllis. “You ought to really see us in action.”

“I had use for my rope before I thought I would,” Gale said smilingly. “I haven’t even learned how to use it yet--when we catch two bandits.”

Back at the ranch the three of the Adventure Girls would have said nothing about their part in the robbery, but Virginia promptly declared them heroines and told with harrowing details every bit of the robbery, including the shooting of the bank teller.

The girls who had remained at home were utterly chagrined to think that they had missed any excitement whatever and promptly began to think of means to have some more.

Chapter III

GALE'S ADVENTURE

The Arizona night was cool, the sky studded with stars. In the living room the girls from the East were toying with the radio and dancing. Gale and Valerie stepped out onto the porch into the cool darkness. Walking a short distance from the house they were enveloped in silence, interrupted only now and then by the noise from the radio. They sauntered to where a giant pine tree spread its sheltering branches overhead.

Valerie coughed as she leaned against the sturdy trunk and a sympathetic gleam entered Gale's eyes. The girls all knew that Valerie's health was not of the best, and it was hoped that this month they were to spend here in Arizona would do her good. She liked fun and excitement as well as any of them, but she could not stand too much. She needed to build up a stranger constitution and her friends were sure the western air would help as no medicine could.

"Nice, isn't it?" Valerie asked dreamily.

"So quiet!" Gale agreed. "It would be a relief to hear a noise."

In the distance a coyote howled mournfully and the girls shivered. Arm in arm they strolled toward the corral.

"I wish Virginia's parents would let us take that camping trip," Valerie said. "It would be fun."

At supper Janet and Carol had proposed a camping trip which the others received with enthusiasm. The idea was to take their horses and camping equipment and go camping up in the mountains, or down across the desert to Mexico. The girls, Virginia included, and Tom were decidedly in favor of it, but Mr. Wilson had demurred. It was dangerous, he said, for a party of young people to go camping about the hills just now. Too many bandits and disturbances along the Mexican border. However, the girls had refused to drop the subject.

"Are you sure it wouldn't be too much for you?" Gale asked anxiously. "You can't do too much, you know."

"We could take our time," Valerie answered. "I think it would be good for me,

sleeping in the open air and all.”

The girls had been walking along the corral fence and now stopped in the darkness. Around the corner from them two men were talking. The girls recognized the voices of Mr. Wilson and Tom.

“I tell you it would be a perfect cover for Jim and me,” Tom was saying excitedly.

“But I don’t want to run the girls into danger,” Mr. Wilson insisted.

In the darkness Gale and Valerie exchanged wondering glances. Their curiosity was caught and without realizing they were doing so, they eavesdropped.

“No one would know,” Tom continued. “We could act as guides for the girls and at the same time perhaps discover a clue to the hideout of the rustlers.”

“But it is dangerous, Tom,” Mr. Wilson said slowly.

“Listen, Dad,” Tom said earnestly. “The rustlers have been stealing your cattle and a lot of other people’s for a long time, haven’t they?”

“Yes.”

“You admit that if a stop isn’t put to this robbing, soon it will ruin you?”

“I’m getting desperate,” Mr. Wilson agreed heavily, “But I can’t permit you or Jim or any of those girls to run the risk.”

“But I tell you there isn’t any risk,” Tom argued. “No one would ever suspect us. Even the girls won’t know. We will be just a camping party.”

“But if someone should find out what you are doing--you would have no protection, there would be nothing you could do.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Tom said. “Don’t you see, Dad? It is the best way to attempt to find the bandits. They would never suspect a party of girls.”

The two voices trailed away as Tom and his father moved toward the cowboys’ bunkhouse. The girls stood perfectly still until they saw the bunkhouse door opened and closed again behind the two.

“Well,” Valerie said, “it appears we are to be lures for rustlers.”

“I knew there was something wrong here at the K Bar O,” Gale said thoughtfully as the girls walked toward the house. “So it’s cattle thieves. No wonder Virginia’s mother and father look constantly worried. Even Virginia herself seems to be always watching for something when we are out riding.”

“We’d better say nothing to the others,” Valerie said as they mounted to the porch.

“No,” Gale agreed. “If Uncle finally agrees to let us go on the trip, we are not to let on we know what Tom and his cowboy friend are up to.”

“Just keep our eyes and ears open,” murmured Valerie.

The next morning at breakfast Tom announced to the girls that his father had agreed to the proposed camping trip. The news was received with whoops of joy from Janet and Carol. Gale and Valerie exchanged a quiet glance.

“We’ll take two tents for you girls,” Tom continued. “Jim, the rider who is going with us, and I will sleep in blankets. We’ll leave tomorrow.”

A clatter of hoofs and shouting outside brought them all away from the breakfast table. A rider was flinging himself from his weary horse. Both the rider and the horse looked played out.

“What’s up, Bert?” Mr. Wilson asked, striding from the ranch house and confronting the rider.

The others eagerly crowded forward, intending to miss not one word. From the man’s appearance and the appearance of his horse something important had happened.

“The two fellows who robbed the bank the other day broke outa jail last night and got clean away!” the rider said, mopping his face with a handkerchief. “I been out for hours with the Sheriff and his posse lookin’ for the trail. Didn’t come this way, did they?”

Mr. Wilson shook his head. “If they did, Bert, we didn’t see ’em. Come in and have some breakfast?”

“Shore will,” the man replied gratefully. “A fella gets all fired hungry ridin’ around.”

“Didn’t the thieves leave any trail at all?” Tom asked when the man had joined them and they were all seated once more about the table.

“Wal, son,” the rider said, “we figger they separated, one goin’ north and the other south. Leastways, they were seen apart. Hank Cordy saw one tryin’ to swim the creek. He chased him but the fella got away. That was the short, dark haired one. The tall one was seen ridin’ out this way.”

“If he passed the K Bar O none of us saw him,” Mr. Wilson declared.

“Wal,” the man sighed as he pushed his chair away from the table and the rest followed him into the ranch living room, “that was shore the most appetizin’ meal I ever ate. Reckon now I’ve got to be gettin’ along.”

“We’ll let you know if we see anything of the robbers,” Tom called after him.

Madge and Phyllis declared their intention of writing letters while Carol and Janet rode with Tom and Virginia out to the valley where the largest of the K Bar O’s herds was grazing. Valerie was not looking so well this morning and the other girls had coaxed her to lie down for a while. It would be a tragedy if she were not well enough for them to go on the proposed camping trip the next day.

Gale, rope in hand, found her way to the corral where Jim, she knew him by no other name, the cowboy who was to accompany the girls on their trip, was waiting to give her her first lesson with the use of her lasso. She learned first to make the slip knot, how to coil her rope, then how to grasp it for throwing.

“I never knew there was so much to it,” she declared after an hour had flown by.

“It won’t take you long to learn,” he assured her.

A little while later Mr. Wilson appeared and had an errand for Jim to do. Gale wandered off by herself across the valley and up the hillside. The sun was warm and it was tiring work climbing through the grass and tangled undergrowth, so when she came to a tree which offered a large patch of shade from the sun she sank down to rest. Pretty soon she lay back, her arms under her head, gazing up at the little spot of blue sky that she could see through the branches of the tree.

Gale did not know when she fell asleep or for how long she slept, but when she opened her eyes the sun was blazing down into her face. It must be hours she thought instantly since she had sat down here to rest for a few minutes. Then the thought of what had awakened her made her prop herself up on an elbow and gaze around.

Her throat went suddenly dry and a half smothered scream rose to her lips. It had been a heavy pressure on her right leg that had brought her back from her dreams, and now as she looked down at her foot horror overcame her. Its scaly body wound about her boot, the flat head swaying from side to side, was a huge rattlesnake. Gale dropped back on the grass with closed eyes, trying to erase from her mind the sight of that reptile, the bite of which meant death.

What was she to do? Scream? There was no one about to hear her. She was too far from the ranch house to summon help by calling aloud. Raising her head a few inches she took one look and let it drop back again. The gimlet eyes of the

snake were coming closer. It would not be long before it struck, or had it done so already? It could scarcely send its poisonous fangs through her heavy boot, she reminded herself desperately. But what was she to do? Nothing, she told herself hopelessly, a sinking in her heart. There was nothing she could do. She might struggle for her freedom, but she could not hope to avoid the darting, poisonous fangs of the snake. It would surely strike soon, and when it did----

She caught her underlip between two rows of white teeth to quell the groan of helplessness. Tears of impotence sprang to her eyes. If only there were something she could do--some way she could---- Was it her imagination or did she hear a sound? Quickly she raised her head and a voice spoke from behind her.

“Don’t move! Keep quiet!” the man, for it was a man’s voice, commanded.

Gale wondered hysterically if he expected her to do anything else. She couldn’t move if she wanted to. Terror made her lifeless.

“Please hurry!” she murmured.

A revolver shot was her answer and when next she looked down at her boot she shivered. The sight of the headless, mutilated body was sickening.

“Don’t look,” Jim whispered as he lifted Gale’s boot clear of the snake. “Did it bite you?”

“I don’t think so,” Gale murmured fighting to control her nerves. Now that it was all over she felt as if she must scream. It was the natural reaction and as she stood up she leaned weakly against the tree. “How did--you happen--along just in time?”

The cowboy replaced his revolver in the holster at his belt. It was the first time Gale had noticed that he wore a gun. How lucky it had been for her that he did!

“I came lookin’ for you for some more practice with yore rope,” he drawled, as he sometimes did.

“You saved my life,” Gale said gratefully.

“Shucks,” the cowboy said, flushing deep red. “How did the snake ever come to wind itself about yore leg?”

“I was asleep,” Gale said. “I’ll never forget the sight of that snake when I awoke. It was horrible!” She trembled involuntarily.

Jim patted her shoulder with clumsy kindness. “Do you reckon you can come

back to the house now?”

“Of course,” Gale said and turned to follow him down the slope, sternly keeping her eyes away from that slippery, scaly, headless thing lying in the long grass.

“Do you always wear a gun, Jim?” she asked. “I never noticed it before.”

“No, Miss Gale, none of us cowboys do,” he answered. “Guns belong to the old, bad West. But here lately we been havin’ trouble and I kinda got used to havin’ one along when I go ridin’.”

“Probably on account of the cattle thieves,” Gale said to herself. Aloud she said:

“Trouble? What kind?”

“Oh, like these bank robbers,” he said evasively. “There’s always somebody willin’ to steal and honest folk have to protect themselves.”

“How did they get out of jail?” she asked as they reached the bottom of the hill and started along the trail to the ranch house.

“Sawed clean through the bars on the window,” he answered. “Probably had help from outside.”

“Has the Sheriff discovered either of them yet?”

“I reckon not. The Sheriff is good at trailin’ crooks, but these fellas are probably experienced in hidin’ out. I ’spect they’re almost to the border by now.”

“Which way are we going to travel tomorrow?” Gale asked.

“Up into the hills would be the prettiest country,” he answered.

At the corral fence they separated, Gale going on to the ranch house and Jim into the cowboys’ bunkhouse. The girls were on the porch, Janet and Carol perched at perilous angles on the railing, Virginia and Valerie on the top step, and Madge and Phyllis in chairs.

“Where have you been?” Janet demanded.

“What’s wrong?” Valerie asked.

“Wrong?” Gale questioned. She did not realize that her recent experience with the deadly rattlesnake had left her face pale and a tinge of shadow in her eyes.

“You look as though you had seen somebody’s ghost,” Carol declared.

“I came near to being one,” Gale answered, squeezing between Valerie and Virginia.

“What do you mean?” Madge asked. “Did you meet the bank robbers?”

Gale described with all the terrifying details her adventure with the snake and the girls were all speechless with amazement. When she had finished they regarded her wonderingly, fully appreciating what a close call she had had.

“I’ll bet that was the only rattlesnake in this part of the country for weeks,” Virginia declared. “But you would have to meet him.”

“Hereafter you don’t go off by yourself,” Janet said determinedly.

Gale laughed. “You needn’t caution me now. One experience is enough. You can be sure I won’t fall asleep like that again!”

Chapter IV

DISCOVERY

The ranch house was astir early the next morning. The girls dashed about in mad last minute haste. Horses were saddled and waiting. The few necessities the girls were taking were rolled in slickers and strapped behind their saddles. Tents, cooking utensils, and eating supplies were loaded on two pack horses which Tom was to lead behind his own mount. As the girls were about to mount, Mr. Wilson called Gale and Phyllis over to where he was giving some last minute instructions to Tom and Jim.

Mr. Wilson handed a small caliber revolver each to Gale and Phyllis.

“What----” Phyllis began wonderingly.

“I think you ought to have them for protection,” Mr. Wilson explained. “Against rattlesnakes--and jack rabbits. I’m trusting you two with these because I think you are the steadiest ones.”

“Gale knows about the rattlesnakes,” Tom said smiling. “I’ll bet she would have given a fortune for a gun yesterday.”

“I’ll say I would,” Gale said with a shudder. “But we will have to have some target practice, so we know which end of the gun to aim.”

“Tom can take care of that,” Jim interposed, “he’s right handy with a gun.”

“I don’t like this,” Phyllis said to Gale as the girls walked back to their horses. “Why should we need guns for protection? We are going on a peaceful trip.”

“What with bank robbers running loose,” Gale smiled. “We might be glad we have them.”

The guns were stored in the girls’ slickers and soon the party was ready to start. They waved gay farewells to Mr. and Mrs. Wilson as their horses trotted down the trail. Jim rode in front to guide them and directly behind him came Gale, Virginia, and Valerie. The other three Adventure Girls followed and Tom brought up the rear with the pack horses.

The sun was slowly creeping higher in the sky pouring its warm rays on the

world below. Three hours after their start the party halted for luncheon which they ate cold from their saddle bags, pushing on immediately. Jim had a camping place in mind and he wanted to make it in plenty of time to pitch their tents by the light of day.

Gale and Virginia watched Valerie with growing alarm. The girl was looking paler and more tired with the passing of the minutes. But Valerie was too plucky to call a halt on her own account. Once she swayed visibly in her saddle. Gale, reining her horse in beside Valerie's, put an anxious arm about her friend.

"Too tired to go on, Val? Just say so. Jim won't mind camping right here."

"No, don't stop because of me," Valerie pleaded. "I'll stick it out."

She would stick it out, Gale agreed admiringly, but it would take all her courage to do so. Certainly Valerie deserved to conquer the ill health that was robbing her of so much of the zest of living.

The horses mounted to the ridge of a hill and there Jim called a halt. He gestured with his arm to the valley below where a cool stream of water dashed over rocks on its way to join a bigger tributary.

"There's our camp site," he said, beaming, "and we've made it with a good hour of daylight left."

"Thank goodness we made it at all!" Janet said vigorously, voicing the relief most of them felt. "I'll be as stiff as a board tomorrow."

"I was going to suggest that we camp all day tomorrow," Virginia added. "It looks like a nice spot, water and everything."

"As you say," Tom said cheerily. "Let's get going, Jim, down to our camp site. I want to get settled and smell something cooking over the fire."

It took them about ten minutes to work their way down to the little stream and when they descended from their horses there was a chorus of groans. All of them were stiff from their positions in the saddle. It was worse because it was the first time most of them had ever ridden all day.

"Get the tents up first," Virginia proposed. "You and Jim can do that, Tom, while we gather some wood for a fire."

After Tom and Jim had unsaddled the horses they set about erecting the girls' tents. It was not long before a fire was crackling cheerily and bacon was spitting in a frying pan over the blaze.

Directly the tents were erected and the girls' beds made with a blanket spread over pine boughs, Valerie lay down utterly worn out. Gale brought her supper and then left her alone to fall asleep early and get as much rest as she could. The others gathered about the campfire, despite their weariness, to talk and to sing songs. Tom had his harmonica and it seemed the fire gave him inspiration for he played until the others begged for mercy.

As Gale and Phyllis lay down on their bed of boughs in the tent with Valerie, a coyote howled dismally in the distance. From afar came an answering cry.

"I'll never get used to that noise if I stay here a hundred years," declared Phyllis. "It will keep me awake all night."

But five minutes after she had spoken Gale heard her regular breathing and knew she was asleep.

The next morning the girls were awakened by the aroma of coffee and by Tom banging on the frying pan.

"Wake up, sleepy-heads!" he roared.

The girls tumbled from their tents stiff and only half awake. The cold creek water, dashed in their faces, though, served to put life into them with its tingling properties. Breakfast was more delicious than they had ever remembered that meal to be. Perhaps it was the invigorating air, the exercise of the day before, or the excitement prevailing over this trip, but they all had big appetites.

"What are we going to do today?" Virginia asked.

"I am going to rest, rest, and rest some more," Janet said loudly, as if daring someone to contradict her. "I shall never, never forget that ride yesterday."

"I'm going to do the same," Valerie declared. She was looking a little weary this morning, but she seemed in good spirits.

"Me likewise!" vouchsafed Carol.

"Well, I think I'd like to take a walk," Madge said. "How about it, Virginia?"

"Just the thing," Virginia declared.

"Jim and I are going to follow the creek a ways and see if there could possibly be any fish in it," Tom said.

The latter two started off and Madge and Virginia started to walk along the creek in the opposite direction.

“Let’s cross the creek and see what’s over the hill on the other side,” proposed Phyllis to Gale.

The two crossed the creek on a series of stones placed just right for the purpose. From the other side they waved gayly at their remaining camp mates and started forward. Here the undergrowth was thick. In her hand Gale held the gun Mr. Wilson had given her. It was not her intention to be confronted unprepared by any more rattlesnakes. Jim had explained the working mechanism of the little gun and Gale was sure she knew enough about it not to hurt herself at least.

“Oh!” Phyllis jumped as something darted across in front of them.

“Only a jack rabbit,” Gale laughed.

“You never can tell,” Phyllis murmured, treading through the grass more warily. “I knew of a man once who tread on a snake.”

“That’s not as bad as finding one wound around your leg,” Gale declared. “Look, what’s that up there?”

Half hidden by a growth of cactus and tangled vines, yawned a dark cavernous hole.

“Let’s investigate,” proposed Phyllis. “It rather looks like a cave. I didn’t know they had caves in Arizona.”

“I know there were a lot of huge subterranean caves discovered in 1909,” Gale answered. “But I don’t know in what part of the state they were. Phyllis, look!” The last words had come with a gasp of incredulity.

They were closer to the cave now and could clearly see the man who stood in the opening. He was gazing away from them, toward the other side of the valley.

“One of the bank robbers!” Phyllis gasped.

The man, as though he had heard her, turned and looked in their direction. The next minute he had turned and disappeared into the cave.

“C’mon,” Phyllis said excitedly, “let’s see where he goes.”

The girls covered the few remaining yards to the cave in a run. Once at the cave, caution overtook them. The desperado might be lying in wait for them, and it would be well for them to proceed slowly and carefully.

As they entered the mouth of the cave, darkness, black and impenetrable, dropped on them like a cloak.

Chapter V

PURSUIT

Gale's left hand clasped tightly in that of Phyllis and with Gale holding her gun tightly and ready for instant action should the need arise, the two walked forward. They tried to make as little noise as possible, but though they walked on tiptoe, the sound echoed back to them dully. The ground underfoot was rough and uneven. On both sides of them the earth walls were damp and cold. The air was heavy and musty and the girls shivered as they tried to walk bravely forward. From up ahead of them came a sudden sound as of a boot heel striking against stone.

"There he is!" Phyllis said in a sharp whisper. "What'll we do?"

"Follow him and see where he is hiding," Gale returned.

Slowly and with the utmost caution the girls crept forward. Once when they came to a turn in the passage they were unprepared for it and stumbled into the wall. Thereafter as they walked along, Phyllis kept one guiding hand against the wall. Suddenly her hand came in contact with something round and small set in a large niche in the wall.

"Hold on, I've found something, Gale," she said. "I wish we had a flashlight."

"What is it?"

"I guess it's a candle. It *is* a candle, and it's been lit recently, too, because the end is still warm and the wax isn't hard yet."

"Keep it, maybe we'll find some matches," Gale laughed.

They came to a turn in the passage and for a moment a little speck of light showed ahead of them. But suddenly it flickered and died out.

"I'll bet it was another candle," Phyllis whispered. "But if that was the man we are after who blew it out, he is awf'ly far away from us."

Gale stood still and Phyllis stopped also. Over and about them was silence. As they stood there they seemed to imagine all sorts of sounds, footsteps, whispers from unseen antagonists, scurrying of mice in the passageway.

“I don’t like this,” Phyllis said nervously. “Let’s go back to camp and get Tom or Jim.”

“If you will lead the way out,” invited Gale.

“You mean to say we are lost in here?”

“Well, I haven’t the faintest knowledge in which direction the entrance lies,” Gale said candidly. “Do you?”

“It is back of some place,” Phyllis said uneasily. “We’ve got to find it.”

“We’ve got to find it if we want to get out,” Gale agreed. “Suppose we turn around and walk the other way.”

A mocking laugh arose from somewhere in the passage and echoed loudly and weirdly. Both girls shivered from the ominous tone of it. They walked along, Phyllis’ hand against the wall to guide them, but soon her hand touched empty air.

“There’s a turn here,” she cautioned.

“It’s a cross passage,” Gale said. “Passages on both sides of us, but which one do we take?”

Again that taunting laugh rumbled from behind them.

“Whichever way we go, I hope it is away from him,” Phyllis declared trembling. “That laugh gives me the jitters, it is so melodramatic. Soon he will be telling us we are in his power.”

Gale laughed nervously as the girls continued along the right hand passage. Phyllis stumbled wildly over something and shrieked madly as her exploring fingers came in contact with something cold and hard.

“What is it?” Gale demanded.

“It f-feels like a s-skull,” Phyllis murmured with difficulty.

“Don’t be silly,” Gale said, repressing a shudder. “Probably only a rock. Come along, the girls will begin to worry about us soon.”

“They would worry more if they knew we were lost in here,” Phyllis declared.

They walked on for what seemed hours, straining their eyes into the darkness for that bit of light which would mean they were near the entrance, straining their ears to catch unfamiliar sounds.

“G-Gale, do you really think we will find the way out?” Phyllis asked after a long while.

“Of course,” Gale said staunchly, with far more cheerfulness than she felt. “We can’t stay in here forever.”

“No,” Phyllis said and her voice shook uncontrollably. “Soon we would starve.”

Gale, her own nerves on edge with the darkness and their hopeless search for the opening, recognized the hysteria in her friend’s voice. But before she could remonstrate, there arose that maddening, taunting laugh.

“Gale,” Phyllis said hysterically, “I can’t stand it! I can’t! If we don’t find the entrance soon, I’ll----”

Gale shook her sternly. “Phyllis! Pull yourself together! Don’t you see, that is just what he is trying to do, get us rattled? Of course we’ll find the entrance. We’ve got to, but for goodness sake don’t go to pieces now. Wait until we get back to camp and then we’ll scream and tear our hair.”

The picture of the two of them screaming and tearing their hair was a little too much for Phyllis’ sense of humor and she laughed jerkily.

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” she said, Gale’s arm about her shoulders, “if Relentless Rudolph would stop laughing.”

“That’s a good name for him,” Gale smiled.

They stood together in the darkness, trying to fathom a way out of their predicament.

“Gale, do you suppose----” Phyllis began.

“What?” her friend encouraged.

“This sort of thing was what your uncle was thinking of when he gave us those revolvers?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” Gale said slowly.

“I wish I had mine now,” Phyllis wailed. “A lot of good it does us in my slicker.”

“I’ve got mine,” Gale reminded her, “but we haven’t seen anything to shoot at yet.”

“Why do you suppose he, Relentless Rudolph, is trying to scare us so?” was Phyllis’ next question.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Gale answered. “Unless he is trying to scare us so we will be afraid to send the police after him.”

“Not much chance,” Phyllis said indignantly. “I’d like to lead the police here, myself. If this cave didn’t give me the jitters,” she added. “Let’s get going--some place.”

Hand in hand they started off again. This passage had a more hollow sound than the others. Their footsteps, for they no longer bothered to tread silently, sounded like thunder in their ears. The ground was getting more uneven and suddenly they bumped ignominiously into the wall.

“That’s the end of that,” Phyllis said in a tired voice. “We’ll wear ourselves out before long.”

They went back the way they had come and when they came to the cross passages, chose one going in the opposite direction. Their steps were lagging, and their eyes burned from straining them to catch one glimpse of daylight.

“Phyllis! Look! The entrance!” Gale cried joyously.

“Hurray! Let’s run!” Phyllis said eagerly.

All their tiredness was gone now. They raced eagerly for the patch of light ahead of them and burst out upon a valley of green.

“I was never so glad to leave any place,” Phyllis said, sinking down beneath a tree and leaning wearily against the trunk. “Rest a couple of minutes and then we’ll go back to camp.”

“Phyllis,” Gale said slowly, gazing about them first this way and then that. “This isn’t the same place where we went in.”

“No,” Phyllis agreed thoughtfully, after looking around, “it isn’t. Don’t tell me we’re lost again! At that,” she said calmly, “I’d rather be lost out here in the open than in those underground passages.”

“Come on,” Gale said impatiently, “we can’t sit here all day. We have to find the camp.”

The sun was high overhead. It was hours since they had left their camp site. What must the others be thinking? Had Tom or Jim started out to find them?

“Maybe we could stay here and let ’em find us,” Phyllis said, relaxed and lazy.

“We can’t stay here,” Gale said decidedly. She hit upon a sudden inspiration to make her friend bestir herself. “We are too close to the cave, the bandit might

pursue us,” she added smilingly.

That was enough. Phyllis jumped to her feet and started to climb over the uneven ground through the trees. At the top of the rise they saw their camp nestling beside the little creek in the valley. The subterranean passages they had been in led directly through the hill which they had started to climb earlier in the day. From where they stood now, they could see the partly hidden entrance which they had first discovered. On their way down the hillside they took particular care not to go near the mouth of the cave, lest they should see and be seen by the bank bandit.

When they returned to the camp the others greeted them with mingled exclamations of curiosity and thankfulness.

“We had about decided that you were lost,” Carol declared.

“You would have been right----” Gale began.

“Hold on!” Phyllis exclaimed. “Who is that with Jim?”

The girls saw Jim approaching the campfire where they were all gathered, and with him was the man who two days before had brought the news of the escape of the bank bandits to the K Bar O.

“Are you still hunting for the escaped robbers?” was Phyllis’ eager question the minute the two men came within hearing distance of the girls and Tom.

“Shore!” he answered promptly.

“Well,” Phyllis smiled over the sensation she knew her words would create, “we saw one of them this morning.”

“You what? Where? Are you sure it was one of them?” The questions poured from all present.

“Oh, we’re sure all right,” Phyllis said. “He scared us out of a month’s sleep. I’ve christened him Relentless Rudolph the way he followed us and laughed at us.”

“Followed you? Laughed at you?” Janet echoed. “What *do* you mean?”

“Explain yourself,” urged Carol.

So while the others listened Gale let Phyllis tell of their morning’s adventure. Phyllis recreated vividly with words the suspense they had felt while fumbling around in the dark of the passages. The other girls were quite beside themselves with excitement when she had finished.

Armed with flashlights and the revolvers they always carried now Tom followed Jim and the special deputy into the cave when Gale and Phyllis had shown them the entrance.

The girls returned to the camp to await the return of the three and their prisoner. They had no doubts that if the bandit was still in the cave, the three men would find him and bring him back to face justice.

“But there might be another exit to the cave that you don’t know about,” Virginia mused to Phyllis and Gale. “Even now he might be miles away.”

“Well,” Phyllis said uncomfortably, remembering the thief’s laughter, “the farther he stays away from me, the better.”

“I hope nothing happens to Tom,” Virginia said with a worried frown for her brother. “If there is any danger, he is bound to rush right into it.”

“Don’t worry,” Gale consoled her, “Tom is old enough to take care of himself. While we are waiting, I’m going to have some target practice so I’ll know how to handle this revolver.”

“A good idea,” Phyllis declared jumping to her feet. “We’ll have a shooting match.”

Virginia tacked a large piece of paper to a tree and paced off twenty-five feet. From her mark Gale tried her luck at hitting their target. When she had finished they discovered that one of her six bullets had just nicked the edge of the paper. The others had gone clear past the tree. Phyllis was not even as lucky. None of her tries was successful.

“You couldn’t hit a barn door if you were inside the barn,” Carol teased.

“You couldn’t do any better!” was Phyllis’ spirited retort. “Give us a chance, we’ll show you.”

The sun fell farther and farther in the west. The girls nervously idled away the time, keeping anxious eyes on the hill opposite where they expected Tom and his companions to reappear. But the minutes flew and the others did not come. The sun dropped from sight, leaving a trail of glorious colors in his wake. From the east, night like a pearly gray blanket covered the sky.

Virginia sliced bacon in the frying pan over the fire. Gale made coffee and soon inviting aromas of their supper drifted on the air.

“The smell of food will bring Tom if nothing else does,” Virginia declared

laughingly.

But it grew later. Darkness with its impenetrable shadows closed down. The girls huddled about the campfire, watching the fantastic shadows the flames threw over the tents. They had had their supper and put aside things to be warmed when the others returned.

“Do you suppose they could have gotten lost like we did?” Phyllis asked after a long and heavy silence.

“They had flashlights,” put in Madge. “They shouldn’t have.”

“Ah, but you don’t know that place!” Phyllis shivered, “It gives me the creeps to think of it.”

“What’s that?” Virginia cried suddenly.

They listened attentively. A stick cracked as a heavy foot trod on it. In the fitful firelight’s gleam they could see three shadowy figures crossing the creek.

“Tom?” Virginia called uncertainly.

“All safe,” Tom’s hearty voice assured her.

“But where is the bandit?” Valerie asked excitedly.

“That’s what we’d like to know,” grumbled Tom. “We searched that place all through but there was no one in there.”

“But we did see him,” Phyllis insisted. “He must have escaped before you got there.”

“That’s what we figgered,” Jim put in. “We found footprints of a man, but escaping the law seems to be that fella’s strong point.”

“He won’t escape all the time,” murmured the deputy. “We’ll catch up with him some day.”

The girls, Virginia and Gale, warmed the supper for the three men and before they all turned in for the night, the deputy took his leave, declaring he could not spend the night at their campfire, but had to be miles away by morning.

The girls slept peacefully and dreamlessly, storing up energy for the day’s ride ahead of them, for it was Tom and Jim’s plan to continue on to a new camp site the next day.

Chapter VI

GHOST CABIN

“Ah, me, the joys of camping in the open!” Carol said to the world at large.

Rain had been steadily pouring down on the file of riders since early morning. Clad in shining slickers they were riding on through the downpour. It was decidedly uncomfortable and to make it worse, they had had to have a cold lunch because everything was soaked and neither Tom nor Jim could make a fire. Such conditions had led to Carol’s declaration.

The others smiled but Janet was the only one who grumbled in reply.

“When do we get to this cabin, Jim?” she called over the heads of Gale, Valerie and Virginia.

Jim knew of a cabin where he promised them they could spend the night in comparative dryness and warmth. It was an old miner’s shack, long since deserted by its owner, but no matter how ramshackle and tumbledown, it beckoned as a heavenly haven to the wet, weary riders because it promised shelter from the rain.

“In ’bout an hour, I reckon,” Jim replied. “Mebbe less.”

“I hope it’s less,” Gale murmured to Virginia.

Her cousin smiled at her. “Feeling disgusted with camping in the open? I wouldn’t blame you. This isn’t a nice experience for newcomers to our state.”

“It isn’t me,” Gale said with a surprised glance, as though the mere thought of her own comfort had never entered her head. “It’s Val. She’s looking rather--peaked.”

“She’s bearing up marvelously well,” Virginia replied with equal concern. “I hope today isn’t too much for her. I don’t want to spend more than one night in this cabin Jim is taking us to.”

“Why not?” Gale asked.

“Well,” Virginia shifted uncomfortably, “I--just don’t that’s all.”

“Come on, out with it,” Gale said gayly. “Don’t go keeping secrets from me. Is

the place haunted?" she asked hopefully.

"It's known as Ghost Cabin," Virginia said reluctantly.

"How interesting!" Gale declared. "Tell me more! How did it come by that name?"

"It is near the entrance to an old silver mine," Virginia explained. "Years ago this region was thought to hold valuable silver deposits. Some miners came and camped here. The owner of the cabin worked his mine for a year or so. Some people said he made a lot of money out of it. I don't know. Anyway, the miner was found murdered in his cabin, supposedly killed by thieves."

"Where does the ghost come in?" Gale wanted to know.

"The miner is supposed to come back to his cabin at night to wait for the thieves who murdered him," Virginia told her.

"Cheerful thought," Gale grimaced wryly. "Do you suppose he'll come tonight?"

"I don't know," Virginia said doubtfully, albeit a bit hopefully. "It would be fun, wouldn't it, to meet a ghost?"

"A lot of fun," Gale agreed dryly. "I'm not particularly fond of the things myself. I'll have to pass this tale on to the others."

While they rode, Gale, with Virginia's help, told the rest of the Adventure Girls the story about the cabin to which they were going. They were a little dubious about the night and its outcome, but all agreed it would be highly exciting. Tom and Jim promptly declared the tale a myth, that there were no such things as ghosts.

"You're just trying to spoil our prospect of an exciting evening," declared Janet loftily to Tom. "I shall look for ghosts just the same."

"Go ahead," he grinned, "and may you find a lot of them."

"Oh, not a lot," she said hastily. "One healthy one is about all that I could handle."

"We'll all be there to help you--handle him," Carol assured her friend. "Don't tell me we have finally reached our goal!" This last as the party rounded a clump of trees and through the rain saw a low, ramshackle cabin ahead of them. A little distance from the cabin was a shed and Carol demanded to know what it was.

"Entrance to his mine," Tom replied, "Don't go near it or you will probably fall down a shaft or something."

Carol frowned on him. "I will not fall down anything," she declared with dignity. "See that you don't," he laughed. "Come along, Ambitious," he urged one of the pack horses who was lolling behind.

Jim was the first to approach the cabin and when they crowded behind him there were mingled exclamations of disgust and disappointment. A layer of dust lay over everything and there were dirt and filth in abundance. But the sight of a fireplace and plenty of dry wood ready to flame up at the spurt of a match heartened them somewhat.

"First of all," Jim said, "I'll sweep the place. There's a makeshift broom over there in the corner. You all wait outside."

So there was nothing for the others to do but go back out into the rain until Jim and Tom could restore the place to some semblance of cleanliness.

"We'll tie the horses back of the cabin," Virginia proposed, to keep them busy.

"Feeling tired?" Gale asked anxiously of Valerie as the two walked side by side, leading their mounts.

Valerie nodded, forcing a smile. "No worse than you, I expect."

Again Gale felt a thrill of admiration for her friend who was so cheerfully determined to fight her way back to strong, ruddy health.

"The minute the cabin is respectable, you shall sit down and not stir again tonight," she declared.

"I'll help get supper," Valerie corrected.

"No you won't," Gale said.

"But I want to," Valerie insisted. "I don't want the girls to wait on me. I didn't intend to be a burden when I came on this trip and I won't be one!"

"Darling, you could never be that!" Gale said tenderly. She continued humorously: "Here we want to give you service and you won't have it. I wish somebody----"

"All clear," Tom called, and there was a sudden rush of wet figures for the poor sanctuary of the tumbledown shack.

A fire crackled cheerily in the fireplace and the tired riders were gathered around it gratefully, yielding to the comfort of its warmth and to the laziness a good supper had instilled in them.

“And still no ghosts,” Madge sighed, leaning her head cozily against Janet’s shoulder.

“No, and I can’t say that I miss them,” that individual added, stifling a yawn.

“It has stopped raining,” Jim volunteered from his post at the door. “Tom and I will put up a tent outside for the night.”

“You girls can roll in your blankets on the floor here in front of the fire,” Tom continued. “We----”

All of them came to attention. From somewhere, they were not certain of the exact position, came three slow, measured knocks.

“Ah, the ghost has arrived!” murmured Carol.

“Where was he?” demanded Virginia. “It sounded as though he were beneath the floor, but the place has no cellar.”

“It came from the ceiling,” contradicted Phyllis.

“Do you really think it is a ghost?” whispered Janet.

The others motioned for silence as the knocks were resumed. Three more were followed by a low, gurgling scream that rose and wavered on the night air, dying slowly away. The girls exchanged glances, their faces white and troubled. Tom was frowning fiercely. Jim’s eyes were darting about the room to find the source of the ghostly knocks and scream.

“This isn’t funny any more,” Janet said fearfully.

“Do you think we can stay here all night?” Valerie added.

“It will take more than knocks and a scream to scare us away,” Virginia declared staunchly.

“But suppose it is the old miner come back to wait for the thieves?” Carol began. “What are----”

Her voice died away as the distinct rattling of chains filled the air.

“All the desired sound effects,” Tom growled.

“It seemed to come from right under our feet,” Gale declared.

“Rattling chains indeed!” sniffed Phyllis. “We can be sure it isn’t a real ghost now. He has too much to be true. Somebody is trying to scare us.”

“You’re right,” Jim agreed.

“But where is he? Why can’t we see him?” demanded Virginia.

“He can’t be on the roof,” Tom said thoughtfully, “there is no cellar----”

“He certainly isn’t here with us,” Carol declared. “There goes that scream again!” She shivered. “It gives me the creeps. Do you suppose he could be on the outside?”

“No, he isn’t anywhere in sight,” Jim said firmly, returning from a quick circle of the cabin.

“We haven’t heard him for some minutes now,” Virginia said encouragingly. “Maybe he has gone.”

“Just a slight intermission,” murmured Janet calmly.

They waited, but nothing happened. Tom and Jim set a tent up before the cabin. The girls spread their blankets before the fire, all but Valerie. The girls had insisted that she take possession of the low bunk the cabin afforded. It would be slightly more comfortable than the floor.

She was tired, but rolled in her blanket in the silent cabin, Gale found she could not sleep. All desire for sleep had left her and her mind was active. The other girls were sleeping, she supposed Tom and Jim were too, out in their tent. But her ears magnified a thousandfold each crackling of a log and each creak of the floor sent expectant shivers along her spine. She realized then she was waiting for the ghost of the cabin to return. She was sure he would. No self-respecting ghost would stop after such a mild attempt to frighten them away if he was really anxious to be rid of them. But who was it that was playing ghost? The bank bandit? Hardly. Whoever it was, why did he want people to stay away from the cabin? From where she lay, she looked around at the room. She could see nothing that anyone might wish to keep from prying eyes.

Quietly she threw back her blanket and stood up. Tiptoeing, she went to the door and stepped outside. Stentorian snores were coming from the little tent. Tom and Jim were in dreamland. Smiling, she leaned against the door and stared up at the stars overhead. The storm had cleared and there was not a cloud in the sky. The stars hung low like brightly lighted lanterns. The moon cast its silver light on the earth, causing huge black shadows under trees and behind the cabin and the shanty set apart.

Standing in the darkness, the wind ruffling her hair, gray eyes alight with a hint of the brightness of the stars in their depth, Gale sighed with sheer enjoyment of the scene. She had never before realized that a spot such as this, away from the

noise and the people of the world, could be so lovely. It was almost like standing on the edge of the world. Behind her towered high and mighty mountains, before her lay a sea of moon-swept valley. Born and brought up in the little town of Marchton, Gale had known some outdoor life, but never the breathless beauty and limitless quiet of a night in Arizona. Quiet had she thought? Far away a coyote howled and yet another. She shivered. The sound was so--uncivilized. The cry of that animal was like a call straight from the wild untamed world of which she knew nothing.

Gale was staring at the dark little shanty that Tom had said was doubtless the entrance to the old miner's mine. She wondered if the man had ever realized his dream of great wealth, the dream he doubtless had when he settled here and began to dig. A shadow, a moving shadow, had detached itself from the spot of darkness which was the shanty and was going toward a thick clump of trees. Instantly Gale stiffened to attention. Who was it? Certainly it was no ghost, for no ghost was ever so solid. Was it the one who had tried to frighten them from the cabin? Certainly he had not tried very hard. Perhaps he was coming back later for a second attempt. Were there more mysterious men in the shaft to the mine? Gale had a sudden impulse to call Tom or Jim to investigate that shadow. No, she would investigate it herself, she decided. The man was out of sight now, lost in the blackness of the trees and she moved forward.

It was not far from the shadow of the cabin to the protecting darkness of the shanty and Gale covered it quickly. She did not want to be seen by that other sleuthing person. She preferred to do her detecting unseen and unknown. Her exploring fingers found the latch, consisting of a nail and a piece of string, and in a minute the shanty door swung to behind her. It was dark and silent in here. From her jacket pocket she took a small flashlight. Ever since she and Phyllis had been lost in the cave she had carried her light with her, rather than leaving it rolled in her slicker. Now she was glad she had it. The little circle of light revealed a pair of worn wooden steps leading downward. Gale listened intently and when she heard nothing that indicated another's presence, descended into the passage. It was nothing like the big coal mines she had read and seen pictures of. It was merely a tunnel that had been hewed out of the ground with pick and shovel. If the ground had once held a fortune of silver, it gave no evidence of it now. She had to stoop, so low was the ceiling, as she picked her way along over rocks and débris.

Suddenly the thin ray of light from her lamp wavered and she noticed that it had grown dim. The battery was growing weak and would not last much longer. She

switched it off. She must save it so she would have at least enough light to find her way back to the entrance. That was where she made her mistake. Creeping along in darkness, she did not see the black hole ahead and when her foot touched empty air, fell head foremost down--down--several feet.

For a moment she lay stunned with the unexpectedness of her fall. Too, the jar of landing had knocked all collected thought from her head. Slowly she sat up and felt for an injury. Nothing but bruises, thank goodness. She had dropped her flashlight and had to feel out with her hands along the damp earth until she found it. She hoped fervently that the drop had not put it entirely out of commission. No, when she pressed the little button, a feeble ray of light shot out. The light was bright enough to see that she had fallen into a pit of some sort that stretched away out behind her into darkness which the lamp would not penetrate.

She got to her feet and endeavored to shake some of the dirt from her clothes. It was a risk to go forward without a light, but a glance at the wall of dirt and rock had shown her that she could never hope to climb up to where she had been before her fall. There was no course but to explore this passage here and to hope that that mysterious shadow did not decide to come back into the mine immediately. But perhaps he had friends in here, friends that would not welcome her intrusion. The very thought that any minute she might stumble upon some mysterious, fearful unknown made her nervous and she proceeded with greater caution.

Gale endeavored to readjust her sense of direction, which had been somewhat confused with her fall, to find in what direction this passage led. If she was correct, and she believed she was, it should lead across to directly beneath the cabin where her friends were sleeping. In that case, the man she had seen might have been the "ghost" who with his mysterious knocks and screams had frightened them. But, remembering the fall which she had had, how did he get down to this lower passage, and once down here, how did he get up again? She had not been able to find any means of gaining the higher level. She halted and switched her flashlight on again. The light was failing rapidly and she dared to keep it on only a moment. But in that moment she had switched it overhead and seen the row of four or five boards which she was sure were part of the floor of the cabin. She sought a rock and hurled it up against the boards, ducking as it rebounded back at her. She followed it with another and then another.

"The ghost is back again," said a nervous voice which she recognized as Janet's.

Certainly it was the floor of the cabin and she had discovered how the ghost had

done his mysterious knocking. His voice from here would have been clearly audible to them, too, just as she could hear the girls now.

“Gale’s gone!” she heard Valerie cry in alarm.

“Gone!” the others echoed.

She was just about to call out to reassure them when a sound in the passageway behind her made her hold her breath in suspense. Someone was coming along the tunnel. That must mean that the mysterious ghost had returned to do some more of his haunting. With quick and as quiet steps as possible, she retreated back the way she had come, and directly toward that unknown. Standing flattened against the earth wall, her heart thumping so she was sure he would hear it, Gale waited for the ghost to pass her. He did so, actually brushing against her in the darkness. He carried no flashlight and it was this fact alone that had saved her from discovery. Evidently he knew his way about in the darkness.

Aided now by fear, she sped along the narrow, low tunnel to where she had had her fall. The man certainly had not been in here when she fell, hence there must be some way he had entered since. She had to find that entrance to gain her freedom. Now that the others had discovered her absence, they would be alarmed and a search would be begun. She must get back and reassure them. She must also send Tom and Jim to find this mysterious stranger.

Flashing on the last faint rays of her flashlight, she saw the wall down which she had fallen and against it hung a crude rope ladder. So this was how he entered and left this lower tunnel! With one foot on the ladder, she slipped her flashlight into her jacket pocket. It had failed entirely now and she would have to depend on her memory to lead her to the entrance. It took but a few moments to climb the ladder and once at the top she pulled it up behind her. That would keep the ghost in the lower passage until Tom and Jim could come along and investigate him. There must be some reason why he “haunted” the cabin with his mysterious knocks.

Swiftly as possible she went along the tunnel and after several minutes stumbled against the steps leading up to the door.

Chapter VII

LANDSLIDE

“But I can’t understand how he got out!” Gale said again with a puzzled frown. “I purposely pulled the ladder up behind me to keep him in there.”

“There must be another way out that’s all,” Tom said.

“He’s gone and now we shall never know who the ghost was,” said Janet.

Tom and Jim exchanged a fleeting glance that only Gale seemed to see.

“Well, Gale gives a good imitation of a spook,” was Carol’s declaration. “Imagine, throwing rocks at the floor to scare us all out of our well earned sleep.”

“I was only demonstrating how it was done for my own satisfaction,” Gale laughed.

The nine of them were jogging along on their horses. They had had their breakfast while they discussed the disappearance of the ghost. For the man whom Gale had thought imprisoned in the lower tunnel had gone when Jim and Tom let themselves down on the rope ladder. They had not explored the tunnel to its full length so they were not sure, but they surmised that there must be another exit some place along the passage and it was this that the mysterious stranger had used. They had all endeavored to go back to sleep, but their rest was fitful and broken. They had eaten an early breakfast and now, two hours later, found them picking their way through cactus and undergrowth to the distant hills.

“Git along little dogie, git along, git along,” Janet sang lustily.

“I wish I had brought some cotton,” Carol commented darkly, “for my ears,” she added at Janet’s curious glance. “Then I wouldn’t have to listen to you sing.”

“Oh, you don’t appreciate a good voice when you hear it,” was Janet’s retort.

“A good voice, I do,” Carol declared, and moved her pony so that Gale was between her and Janet. “But who ever told you----”

“What? Not another musical person?” Madge demanded as Tom blew vigorously on his harmonica.

“If riding affects them like that,” Virginia laughed, “it is time we called a halt. What do you say, Jim?”

“For ten minutes,” Jim nodded.

They fell from their mounts, grateful for the respite. Tom promptly stretched out on the ground, his hat over his face to shut out the sun. Jim led the horses to a little stream of water as the girls stamped the stiffness out of their cramped legs.

“Where’s Jim?” Virginia wanted to know at the end of the allotted ten minutes for Jim was not in sight. The horses were standing ready for their riders, but they could not proceed without the guide.

Virginia went over and poked her brother into wakefulness.

“What’s the matter?” he asked drowsily.

“Jim hasn’t come back yet,” Virginia informed him, “and if we don’t get started, we won’t make our next campsite before dark.”

Tom stretched lazily. “Well, stay here an’ I’ll find him.”

Gale and Virginia mounted their horses and the others did likewise.

“You know, I’m either going to wear the horse out or he is going to wear me out,” Janet declared with a grimace as she lowered herself into the saddle. “I’m afraid it is the latter.”

They waited for fully fifteen minutes before either Tom or Jim came into sight. The horses had caught the impatience of their riders and were fidgeting to be off.

“We thought you had deserted us for sure!” Virginia declared. “Where were you?”

To Gale it seemed that the two men had the air of conspirators. There was a gleam in their eyes that had not been there before. The minute they came within earshot of the girls they stopped talking and came on silently.

“Virginia,” Tom said immediately, “we want you to lead the girls to Bear Rock and have lunch. Wait there for us.”

“But where are you going?” Virginia demanded.

“Jim has found a trail that looks strange so we are going to follow it,” Tom explained. “But we’ll catch up to you at Bear Rock. You camp there until we come, understand?”

“No,” Virginia said firmly. “I don’t understand. What is so strange about this

trail? Why can't we all ride that way?"

"We couldn't follow the trail with all of you along," Tom declared. "It would be obliterated in no time."

"But, Tom, if we get lost up here we could never find each other again," Virginia continued.

"But Miss Virginia, you've been to Bear Rock lots of times," Jim put in. "Yore Dad would want us to follow this trail, too. It shore looks mighty strange. You won't get lost."

"You don't know what you might be getting into," Virginia said. "I think you should let that trail alone and mind your own business."

Tom shook his head, tightening his saddle strap.

"We're goin' so you might as well save your breath. See you at Bear Rock," he added as he and Jim swung their horses about and were off in a cloud of dust.

The girls stared after them in surprise, then Virginia, with a shrug of her shoulders, turned her horse and led the way at an abrupt angle from the road taken by Jim and Tom. Gale undertook to bring up the rear with the pack horses. As the girls jogged forward, Phyllis rode directly behind Virginia with Janet and Carol following. Valerie had dropped behind with Gale.

"Do you suppose that mysterious trail was left by the bank bandits?" Valerie murmured in a low tone to her friend.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Gale answered. "You know, Val, that is what they are really looking for. I believe that is why Jim has a definite camping place in mind for each day and doesn't let us loiter much along the way. He and Tom must think the rustlers and robbers are connected."

Valerie nodded. "Do you think the bandit might have been the man you saw at the mine last night?"

Gale frowned. "I don't know. I've been thinking about that. It might have been, but I can't be sure because I didn't get a close enough look at him. He might have been using the cabin as a hiding place."

"That's why he tried to scare us away," added Valerie. "I believe that's it!"

"What are you two chattering about?" Janet wanted to know.

"About having broiled rattlesnake for supper," Valerie retorted. "I've heard it is very good with mustard."

It was but a short ride to Bear Rock, so named because a huge boulder so resembled the head of a ferocious grizzly. Once there, the girls dismounted and gathered wood for a fire. They would eat a cold luncheon, but insisted on at least having hot coffee to drink. The horses were tethered and the girls gathered about the fire. Seated on stones, for the ground was still damp from the heavy rains of the day before, the girls waited for the two men to join them. They drank their coffee and had long finished their lunch before the clatter of hoofs reached them and Jim and Tom rode up.

“We’ll have a new campsite tonight,” Tom said at once. “Jim and I want to do a little more sleuthing so we might as well go along and camp when it gets dark, no matter where we are.”

“That’s better than leaving us behind at any rate,” Carol declared. “I’m rather anxious to get a look at this trail.”

“Just a lot of hoof marks,” Tom answered blandly.

That was all it proved to be and the girls were disappointed. They didn’t know what they had expected to find, but certainly more than this. Unexperienced in trail reading they didn’t realize what a wide, easy-to-read trail had been left. If they had, they might have been suspicious. Even so, Tom and Jim, western bred and experienced in trailing both men and animals, should have been suspicious. But they weren’t.

In the northern region of Arizona are plateaus broken by high mountains. Between the foothills of a high range was a winding trail and it was this that the Adventure Girls and their friends followed, winding in and out through forests thick with pine trees and cottonwoods, jack rabbits darting across the trail, making the horses prance and rear, and the girls getting so weary they could hardly stay in their saddles.

At last Jim called a halt beside a small stream. The sun was sinking swiftly. Darkness was creeping into the east. When they had pitched their tents and supper was started, the girls took time out to admire the scenery of their surroundings. They were camped on the base of a rugged plateau broken in two by a narrow pass through which they proposed to ride on the morrow. Overhanging the pass was a huge boulder, balanced precariously on the edge of the jutting cliff.

“Just one push is all that needs to block up that whole pass,” Tom declared.

“Let’s hope nobody pushes it tomorrow when we are going through there,”

commented Janet cheerfully.

“Let’s see what is on the other side of the mountain,” proposed Gale to Valerie.

“All right,” she agreed readily, getting up from her knees where she had been putting another piece of wood on the fire.

“Or are you too tired?” Gale asked suddenly, remembering that Val couldn’t keep going as incessantly as the rest of them.

“Of course I’m not too tired for that short walk,” Val said stoutly. “Come along.”

“When supper is ready give us a halloo,” directed Gale as the two started out.

“You’re taking awful chances,” Carol declared mischievously, “we might eat all the supper without you.”

“You had better not!” Gale warned laughingly.

The two walked leisurely, enjoying the glorious hues of the sunset. In the west the sky was a maze of colors as the last rays of the sun flashed on the banked clouds. The gurgling of the little stream by which they walked was the only sound other than that of their footsteps that they heard. Yet Gale had the uncanny feeling that eyes were watching them. Once she turned to look back at the others in camp. They were all busy with something or other. No one was watching her and Val. Yet that peculiar feeling persisted.

Directly beneath the overhanging boulder they paused to look up at it. It hung menacingly over them. They took a few steps forward when something made Gale look up again. Certainly her eyes had not played a trick on her! The rock had actually wavered. It was falling!

“Run, Val, run,” she shouted, at the same time grasping her friend’s arm and pulling her along.

“What in the world----” Valerie began.

“The rock--it’s falling!” Gale panted.

Thereafter she did not need to urge Val to exert speed to get away from the spot toward which the rock was rushing. The two of them flung themselves forward while certain destruction hurtled down almost on them. The boulder crashed into the earth with such force that it half buried itself. On top of it poured earth that had been loosened in its descent.

“What if we had been under it?” gasped Val when the girls, at a safe distance, viewed the wreckage behind them.

“We would look like pancakes now,” Gale said humorously. “With that landslide, can you tell me how we are going to get out of here for our supper?”

Valerie looked around. What they had thought was a trail leading through the mountains was just a trail that led to the basin here, a valley on all sides of which rose steep hills. Their only means of entrance and exit had been through the pass, and now that was effectively stopped.

“I wish we would have waited for supper,” Gale said, attempting to keep lighthearted.

“You can join us,” said a suave voice behind the girls.

They whirled and were grasped in rough hands.

“Well, two are better ’n none, eh, boss?” a rumbling voice laughed. “Maybe we couldn’t get ’em all, but these two will do us.”

Both Gale and Valerie struggled, but what was the use? They were soon subdued, not too gently, and led away, their hands tied behind their backs, to a cabin, hidden entirely from the trail in a clump of trees.

Chapter VIII

PRISONERS

“What are you going to do with us?” Gale demanded, summoning as much courage to her voice as she could.

In the untidy, sparsely furnished room on the first floor of the cabin the girls faced their abductors, three of the most dangerous, most crafty looking individuals they had ever seen. It was with a pang of fear that both Gale and Valerie recognized the leader as one of the bandits who had robbed the bank in Coxtton.

The leader leered at them with a wide grin. “You, my fine young ladies, are to be our safe ticket across the border.”

“You mean--to hold us as hostages?” Gale asked.

“Call it anything you like,” he retorted. “We’re goin’ to put the proposition up to your friends. If they don’t agree, you don’t go back to ’em--that’s all.”

“You wouldn’t dare to harm us!” Gale said staunchly.

He laughed and exchanged glances with the other two men.

“Take ’em upstairs, Mike,” he ordered, and stamped from the cabin.

None too gently one of the other outlaws pushed the girls before him to where a makeshift ladder led to a loft above the first floor. They entered through a trap door and it was slammed shut after them. A rusty bar slithered into place and they were prisoners.

Gale endeavored to stand upright and sat down again abruptly as her head bumped against a beam in the ceiling.

“Well, we’ve landed ourselves in a fine mess, haven’t we?” she grumbled.

“What are we going to do, Gale?” Valerie asked.

Gale heard the tremble in Val’s voice and frowned gloomily. It was all her fault that they were in this predicament. If she hadn’t suggested the walk they wouldn’t be here now, they would be back with their friends eating a good supper.

“The first thing seems to be to get loose,” Gale said, keeping her voice perfectly normal. “Can you get your hands out?”

“No,” Val said after a few moments of futile struggling. “They made a good job of it.”

“Back up against me,” Gale directed, “and let me see if I can get the rope off your hands first.”

Valerie did as directed, but it was impossible. Not able to see the knot and working under such a handicap was too hard. Gale had to give it up. Below them everything was silent. Had the men really gone to the camp of the girls’ friends as they said they intended to do? If so, there must be a way out of the valley other than climbing over all that newly fallen rock and dirt. The landslide hadn’t blocked them in then at any rate! If once they got out of this cabin, Gale knew they would be all right. She had the means in her possession to guarantee safe conduct of their abductors--or so she thought.

In the wall just above their heads was a window, large enough for them to squeeze through Gale reflected when she saw it. Large enough to squeeze through if once they got their hands free and could open it.

“Gale--even if we get free what will we do?” Valerie asked. “The window will be too high from the ground to jump. Then, too, those men will be back soon---”

“If we get free,” Gale gritted through clenched teeth, tugging at the rope, “things will be simple. I’ve got my revolver in my boot.”

“You haven’t!” Val gasped.

Gale laughed. “Sure I have. I haven’t been without it since my uncle gave it to me. I intended to save it for rattlesnakes--but now we’ve got something else to use it on.”

“You wouldn’t actually shoot one of them, would you?” Val asked.

“What would you do?” Gale retorted. “With enough provocation, I s’pect I would. After all, they’re bandits--and we’re not exactly safe in their hands.”

“You’re right!” Val said with sudden spirit. “Shoot the whole three--they need it. I wonder when they will be back?” she added tremulously.

Gale had gained her feet, keeping her head low this time so as not to bump it, and standing with her back to the window, her exploring fingers had encountered

the window catch.

“Ouch!” she said suddenly.

“What’s the matter?” Valerie demanded.

“This window catch--it’s as sharp as a knife.” Endeavoring to turn the catch, her finger had been cut by the edge of the lock. “Sharp as a knife,” she murmured again under her breath. “Hold everything, Val!” she cried excitedly.

It was an awkward, uncomfortable position Gale had to assume in order to be able to work the edge of the rope that bound her hands together over the catch. It was tiring and so slow, but it was accomplishing the task. The threads of the rope were being cut through and in a few moments she would be free. When finally the rope fell away, her arms were stiff and her wrists sore from where the rope had cut into the flesh. Then it was only a matter of minutes until she had Val free, too.

“Listen!” Val said, rubbing her wrists to restore circulation.

The sound of heavy footsteps and the murmur of voices drifted up to them. The three men reentered the room below and the girls held their breath. Almost subconsciously Gale secured her tiny revolver from the top of her boot and grasped it ready in her hand. But the trap door did not lift. No one came up to see if they were safe.

“What are we going to do now?” Valerie whispered frantically.

Gale went to the window and looked out. A porch had been added to the cabin and the roof sloped away from the window where she stood. With a protesting squeak the window swung inward when she opened it. The girls waited lest the faint noise attract the attention of their abductors. But the voices continued in their indistinguishable hum and in a minute Gale was through the window on the roof. She helped Valerie and the two of them clung to the window sill. Inch by inch they eased themselves over the short roof to the edge. There, Gale lay face downward and hung over.

“You’ll fall!” Valerie hissed, holding firmly to her friend’s belt.

“Shshsh,” Gale cautioned. “Are you good at sliding down a pole? Well, whether you are or not, you’re going to. I’ll go first and catch you,” she added humorously. “But don’t you fall on top of me!”

Gale restored her revolver to her boot and swung her legs over the edge. For once in her life, Gale was thoroughly glad for her athletic training and gymnastic

ability. Cautiously she transferred her hold from the edge of the porch roof to the pole around which her legs were locked. She lowered herself inch by inch, with some little damage by splinters, to the ground.

“All right!” she called up to Valerie.

Her friend’s legs appeared over the edge and in another minute Val had begun her descent of the pole. In a short time she was beside Gale and the two joined hands to run from the scene. But at the same moment, the cabin door was thrown open and slammed shut again behind the leader of the three men. He did not see the girls, but as they attempted to step back into the shadow of the trees, Gale stepped on a twig. It cracked as loudly as a pistol report in the silence.

“Run, Val, toward the pass,” Gale said, her hand on her friend’s arm, urging her along.

“But you----” Val protested.

“I’m coming,” Gale said. “Go on,” she urged. “I’ll stop him from following us.”

The leader was coming toward them now, to investigate that mysterious noise among the trees.

“Who’s there?” he called. “Stop or I’ll shoot!”

But the girls sped off through the trees. A bullet whistled through the leaves above their heads and abruptly they zigzagged from their course. They could hear the bandit crashing after them. They stumbled on, covering the ground as rapidly as they could. Somewhere ahead was the pass that had been blocked that afternoon, but surely they could find some way past or over it. Beyond the pass lay their friends and safety. The thought lent new vigor to them. Another bullet sped past them.

Gale whirled and fired point blank at the shadow of their pursuer. A groan was her reward and the chase was effectively stopped. The shots had summoned the other two men who were thrashing about in a vain attempt to find the cause of the shooting. By the time they discovered their companion, the girls were farther away.

Val had reached the blocked pass and was already endeavoring to climb up and over the landslide when Gale caught up with her. Gale assisted her chum as much as she could, for she could see that Val was nearing the end of her endurance. They were forced to rest to catch their breath several times, and each time they feared that the three bandits would be on their heels. But silence

seemed to have settled over the valley and the cabin they had left behind. They heard nothing as they reached the rise of ground and began their slippery slide down the other side.

Halfway down they met Tom and Jim, who were making an attempt to climb over the boulder and find the girls, and also to fathom the mystery of the shots they had heard.

By the time the four arrived at the camp, Tom and Jim were supporting Valerie. The excitement had buoyed her up, but now that the suspense was past, Val was utterly worn out.

Chapter IX

ON THE TRAIL

“Did you kill him, I hope?” Janet asked with keen excitement.

Valerie was in her tent asleep while Gale, after a substantial supper, told the others of what had happened to them. She had come to the part in their escape when she stopped and fired at the bandit when Janet voiced her opinion.

Gale shivered. “I hope I didn’t,” she declared. “I wouldn’t care to be a murderess.”

“I think there is not much danger of that,” Tom reassured her. “Those fellows are pretty hard to kill.”

“We were all nearly frantic,” Virginia said, a fond arm about Gale’s shoulders. “First we saw the rock fall and then when you didn’t come back--we didn’t know what to think or do!”

“That’s something else,” Gale said, “that rock didn’t fall of its own accord. It was pushed.”

“Are you sure?” Carol demanded.

“I saw the man,” Gale said positively. “Something, I don’t know what, made me look up just as we were walking under it.”

“That something saved you from being smashed flatter than a pancake,” Janet said wisely.

“But who would push the rock?” Madge asked wonderingly. “Those men didn’t actually want to--murder you, did they?”

Gale laughed nervously. “Let’s hope they didn’t; they might try again.”

“Hereafter none of you go wandering away by yourselves from camp,” Jim said sternly. “To-morrow Tom and I will go see those fellows, since they didn’t come to see us,” he added grimly.

“But you----” Virginia was beginning when her voice died away into silence.

The thunder of hoofs echoed down into the valley to them. All eyes turned up to

where the rim of the mountain was silhouetted against the moonlit sky. Three black mounted figures were picking their way slowly across the trail. In a moment they were swallowed up in the blackness of a forest as they made their way down to the valley some distance from the Adventure Girls' camp.

"Three of them," Tom murmured. "Evidently you didn't kill that fellow after all, Gale."

"And I'm afraid we won't be able to get a look at them tomorrow," Jim added. "We'll follow their trail of course to see in what direction they are heading. I think, Virginia, you had better lead the girls back to the K Bar O. There is too much danger in these hills."

"Nothing doing," Janet interrupted, flatly. "We like danger and we don't want to go home. If you follow the bandits, so do we!"

"I'm afraid we're all agreed on that," Gale nodded.

"So you see it is useless for you to argue," Virginia added, as Jim opened his mouth to protest.

"But Dad wouldn't like it, Virginia," Tom said with a frown. "Jim and I are responsible for you girls. If anything happens----"

"Nothing will," Carol assured him. "We all bear charmed lives. We shall return to the K Bar O when our trip is over just as we started out," she declared.

"But what about Valerie?" Madge put in. "Do you think she can stand a lot of hard riding?"

Gale grew thoughtful. "She came through tonight with never a protest. I believe Val can stand a lot more than we give her credit for."

Later, lying on her bed of pine boughs beside Phyllis, Gale thought of Valerie again. It had been strenuous, climbing down from the roof and later fleeing through the underbrush and over that huge boulder had been particularly wearying, without considering that they did it all on top of a day's riding. Val had borne up marvelously well. True she had been near collapse at the end, but then she herself had not had much vitality left and she had always been stronger than Valerie. Yes sir, Val was in a much better physical condition than when they had started for the West.

The morning, however, found Valerie not as robust as Gale's optimistic thoughts had pictured her. Breaking camp was delayed until lunch time in order to give Val the benefit of a few more hours rest. After luncheon, the party saddled and

mounted their horses. After a while, Jim picked up the trail of the outlaws and they followed it a short distance. But the bandits had evidently suspected a chase and rode their horses into a stream. From there all trace of trail was wiped out.

Sunset found them miles from the scene of the girls' adventure. Supper was prepared and after it had disappeared they sat about the campfire telling stories or singing songs. They retired early and were up with the first rays of the sun.

Day after day they followed the same procedure. Their skins were getting tanned and their appetites were enormous.

"I never thought I could eat so much," wailed Janet, after a particularly hearty meal.

"You'll look like a baby elephant when we get back home," prophesied Carol encouragingly.

They rode like regular westerners now, and every day they appreciated more and more the beauty of the country through which they rode. If Jim had planned on showing them the loveliest scenery, he was running true to plan. The girls had never realized before that nature, untamed by man, could be so lovely. They never realized that just to sit and gaze at a sunset could bring such a thrill. In every way the country was affecting them. Physically they were healthier than they had ever been. Their mental outlook was brighter, more cheerful. Here in limitless space, amid tall mountains, they felt more drawn to one another. Their friendships grew and flourished.

One day they camped close to the mighty Colorado River that flows through the Grand Canyon. The cliffs of sandstone and limestone, almost a mile high, were so rugged and majestic as to fill the girls with awe. All the colors of the rainbow were in the rocks and under the influence of the sun and the shadows cast by it, formed pictures of entrancing beauty, pictures too beautiful to ever be put down on canvas. Rain and wind had sculptured the cliffs into bewildering and fantastic forms which added to their brilliant coloring.

"Doesn't it make you feel tiny?" murmured Janet, scarcely above a whisper, afraid to disturb the great hush that hung over the Canyon.

"The Canyon was first seen by white men in 1541," Tom told them. "The Colorado River where it runs through the Canyon there is three hundred feet wide, and in times of freshets it's a mighty torrent."

"You sound like a traditional guide book," Janet told him.

“It’s wonderful,” Valerie murmured, voicing the feelings of all of them.

Another day found the Adventure Girls and their friends examining the colossal stone tree trunks of the Petrified Forest. Here they found more to awe and surprise them. Still another day found them at the rim of the Painted Desert, the desert with its multi-colored plains alive with somber, purple shadows.

“I’m overwhelmed!” Carol declared. “From now on I shall be a strong advocate of See America First!”

Valerie had out the little sketching block she always carried with her. With a strong talent for sketching and limitless subjects on which to try her skill, Val rode with her pencil and pad in her hands nearly all day. She wanted to take back home sketches of the spots that interested her most on this trip.

“I’ll never be able to make it look as beautiful on paper as it really is,” she sighed. “No one could really hope to.”

“I’d like to have one of the sketches you made of the Canyon the other day,” Gale said. “I intend to frame it and keep it as a memento.”

“Isn’t it funny, Gale,” Val mused aloud, “how you never miss anything until you’ve seen it.”

“You might feel as though you miss something,” Gale agreed, “but you don’t know what it is.”

“I shall miss all this a lot when we go back East,” Val declared, looking about at the Arizona sunset. “Everything is so--big out here. I feel awf’ly small. When I think of the silly things we quarrel over in school and the things we think we can’t get along without in the city, it makes me ashamed of myself.”

Gale laughed. “If you lived out here long enough, I’m afraid you would have a bad inferiority complex.”

“No, but don’t you feel that way?” Val demanded. “Tomorrow we start for Monument Valley near Kayenta. That’s one hundred and seventy-five miles from the nearest telephone. Imagine what that means! Back home we don’t think anything of a telephone because nearly everybody has one.”

“Yes, and just think, I haven’t had a chocolate soda since I came out here,” chimed in Janet, coming up behind them. “I hope I shall survive.”

“You look as though you might pull through,” Valerie laughed.

“Come and get it!” Tom called and there was a concerted rush for the makeshift

supper table.

Day after day they rode through cañons and winding intermittent gullies, shallow basins, and dry washes. They followed trails through thick sagebrush and cottonwoods, over dry beds of streams and sunken deserts, marveling how the dull gray and olive of the sagebrush and trees mingled. They learned that many of the mountains were extinct volcanoes and admired the brilliant colored sandstone and shale formations. Once or twice they ran into heavy thunderstorms that turned dried-up streams into rushing torrents of muddy swirling waters.

They explored with keen interest Monument Valley with the spire-like rock of El Capitan at its head, and its fantastic flat topped pillars rising thousands of feet into the air. A day's ride from Kayenta the riders came upon Betatakin, one of the most interesting, although least known, of the cliff dwellings, standing silent within its mammoth cave.

"Just think, hundreds of people lived and died here a thousand years ago," Virginia commented.

"I'm glad we don't live in houses like these," Janet said, as she climbed up the worn stone steps to the next level. "I've no desire to climb all these steps every time I want to go home."

"If you walked in your sleep it was just too bad," added Carol, looking back down at the stones over which they had come.

"It gives me an appetite," Madge complained. "When do we eat?"

"The sooner the better," put in Phyllis.

For hours the girls prowled around in the dark houses of the cliff dwellers, taking their time to examine everything of interest. The next day they resumed their riding, heading south toward the K Bar O.

During the days Gale and Phyllis had a lot of practice with their revolvers and now could succeed in coming fairly close to the bull's eye every time they tried. Gale, too, was becoming proficient with her rope. Jim spent hours teaching her and she proved an apt pupil.

Riding with Virginia behind Jim as they swung along the trail, Gale was looking up at the trees and the blue sky, thinking how she would hate to leave all this when it came time for the Adventure Girls to go back East.

"Look out, Jim!" Virginia screamed suddenly.

There was a snarl and a streak of yellow leaped from the low-hanging limb of a tree. Jim's horse reared wildly and plunged away as its rider was dragged from the saddle by the impact of the cougar's weight.

For a second none of the riders could do anything but check their mounts. All the horses threatened to run away and careened wildly, almost unseating their riders. Meanwhile, Jim was thrashing about on the ground, struggling for his life while his companions watched helplessly.

"Quiet, boy," Gale said, a soothing hand on her trembling pony's neck. With her other hand she unfastened her rope.

"Look out, I'm going to shoot," Tom said, raising his rifle to his shoulder.

"Don't!" Carol cried. "You might hit Jim."

"But the beast is killing him," Janet said with a shudder. "Somebody do something!"

Despite Carol's warning, Tom discharged his gun and succeeded only in frightening the ponies more. Jim was fighting madly to keep the sharp claws and teeth away from his face and throat.

Once more Gale spoke to her pony and patted him reassuringly. He jerked nervously under her hand, but he was by far the quietest one of the beasts. During the days in the saddle Gale had learned the tricks and tendencies of her mount and she had instilled a trust in him for his rider. Now, though he longed to flee from this spot with its danger, he stood quietly obedient to her voice and touch. In her hand Gale held her coiled rope. Tom had dismounted and handed the reins of his horse and of the pack horses to Carol and was edging nearer to those thrashing figures on the ground. Virginia, too, had dismounted.

At the first opportune moment, Gale's rope slithered out and fell over the two. The loop caught a hind leg of the cougar. Immediately it tightened and the snapping teeth were diverted from Jim to the rope about its leg.

"Go it, boy!" Gale urged her horse.

The horse darted forward. Behind her the rope pulled the cougar clear from Jim. The pony sped down the trail, its rider bent low in the saddle, the rope dragging the squirming, struggling mountain lion over the stony ground. Gale did not slow her mount till she was sure that the animal was dead. Then she turned her horse and trotted him slowly back to the group.

Tom and Virginia were busy with Jim. The cowboy's shirt hung in ribbons, and

the flesh of his shoulders and arms was streaming with blood. He had a long scratch along his cheek, but otherwise he was safe and sound.

“Never thought that rope trainin’ would come in so handy,” he grinned at her. “Reckon I owe you a heap for pullin’ that fella offa me, Miss Gale.”

“Is he dead?” Janet asked tremulously with a glance for the dust covered thing at the end of Gale’s rope.

“If he isn’t, he ought to be,” Gale replied, dismounting. “Are you hurt much, Jim?”

The cowboy insisted that they should not stop their day’s ride on his account. After Tom’s first aid treatment had been administered and Jim remounted his horse, they started forward again. Tom had cut the cougar loose from Gale’s rope and pulled him to one side of the trail.

“That’s what I like about the country out here,” Janet said to no one in particular. “Always something doing. Any time at all you might step on a rattlesnake or get jumped on by a ferocious animal. Nice country!” she declared with a grin.

“Pleasant thoughts you have,” Carol laughed. “It’s no worse than back home. There we have to dodge street cars and taxi cabs.”

“Give me the taxi cabs,” Madge murmured. “They at least give you a warning.”

It was late when they stopped for their camp. Riding and excitement had whetted their appetites and while they ate, Tom and Jim told them of other experiences each had had with animals in the surrounding country. Jim took the whole affair as all part of the day, and refused to declare himself a bit thrilled over it.

“At least we’ll have something to talk about when we get home,” Phyllis smiled.

“We’ve got a lot to talk about,” Valerie declared. “We’ve met nearly everything the West can produce, haven’t we?”

“Nearly,” Virginia laughed. “Do you feel like going home now?”

“No!” came unanimously from all the girls.

“Well, whether you like it or not, we are,” Tom declared. “Tomorrow we get back on K Bar O soil. Two more days and we’ll be at the ranch house.”

“We’ve got to go home, our supplies are running low,” Virginia explained.

“Can we go on another trip then?” Carol asked immediately.

“If we have enough time,” Valerie commented. “The days have gone so quickly.

We'll be going home soon."

"We'll refuse to think of that," Phyllis said firmly. "Let's hear some more of your experiences," she suggested to Jim and Tom.

For another hour while the fire crackled and shadows danced over the tents and figures around it, Jim entertained them with memories of the range lands. Valerie and Phyllis retired first. After them went the other four girls. Gale alone remained beside the fire with her cousin and the cowboy.

"Tom----" Gale began hesitantly.

"Yes?" Tom encouraged, tossing another log on the fire.

"That trail we passed just before we camped--was it the bandits'?" she asked.

Tom and Jim exchanged a fleeting glance.

"What made you think of them?" Tom asked.

"Before we started on this trip," Gale said, "Valerie and I overheard you and your dad talking about rustlers. We didn't mean to listen, but we did. Had that trail today anything to do with them? I thought you both looked worried when you saw it."

"We were worried," Jim admitted. "It was a fresh trail and the same men who held you prisoner that night in the hills, made that trail. We thought we had lost them sure, but it doesn't look that way."

"What are you going to do?" Gale wanted to know.

"Nothing," Tom said promptly. "We are going to take you girls safely back to the K Bar O."

"The bandits are probably making for the border into Mexico," Jim murmured. "The Sheriff and his men will catch 'em."

Tom laughed. "They haven't done much catching so far. I'll bet the bandits get clean away."

"Then there is nothing to worry about," Gale said.

"No, nothing to worry about," agreed Tom.

When Gale had entered the tent she shared with Valerie and Phyllis, she went immediately to sleep and did not know that long after she retired, Tom and Jim talked seriously and long about the possibility of meeting the rustlers before they reached the ranch safely.

Chapter X

RUSTLERS

“Oh, how I love to get up in the morning,” sang Janet between yawns as she stumbled from the tent with Carol close behind her. “Hullo, are we getting company?”

Two cowboys on dust covered, lathered ponies had dashed into the camp circle and pulled their mounts up short beside the campfire. Jim who had been on his knees poking at the ashes to stir the flames to life got up slowly with a wide grin of welcome. Tom joined the four and Virginia, coming from the tent, greeted them also.

“Let’s get an earful,” Carol proposed. “Evidently they are riders from the K Bar O.”

“Then ya didn’ see anythin’ of ’em?” one of the new arrivals was murmuring to Tom.

“Not a thing, Lem,” Tom replied with a serious frown. “How many did they get?”

“Close to a hundred head, I reckon,” Lem declared viciously.

“By now they are across the border,” Virginia murmured. “Why did you look for them up here near the hills?”

“A couple of the boys went toward the border,” Lem’s partner answered. “We found a trail leadin’ up this way.”

“They didn’t pass near here or we would have seen them,” Virginia said again and her brother and Jim nodded in agreement.

“Then we got to be goin’ farther,” Lem said remounting his pony.

“But can’t you wait and have a bite of breakfast?” Tom wanted to know.

“Not now, son,” Lem replied. “We’ll eat a cold snack from our saddle bags. We want to find those birds before the trail is gone.”

“Wish you luck,” Jim sang out as the ponies darted forward.

“Who were they?” Phyllis asked as she, with Gale and Valerie, appeared.

“Riders from the Lazy K,” Virginia answered. “Rustlers stole close to a hundred cattle last night. They were following them.”

“But they didn’t bring the cattle up this way, did they?” Carol put in.

“No, but the boys figured some of the riders came this way. I hope they catch ’em,” Virginia said viciously. “We’re probably due for a raid tonight.”

Jim and Tom said nothing as they busied themselves getting breakfast ready. Whatever thoughts they may have had on the subject, they kept to themselves.

Breakfast was eaten, for the most part, in silence. Even when camp was struck and they started on their way again, there was not the usual light-hearted banter and teasing. Each one realized that the situation at the K Bar O and other ranches was coming to a head. Rustlers had been busy too long. Now the ranchers were acting. Instead of going to the ranch for safety from rustlers and bandits, it seemed that the girls were running into more trouble. Jim led the way, silent and foreboding. Tom brought up the rear with the pack horses. He too was silent and grim. It was their attitude that brought home to the girls just how serious the situation was.

Along about noon Jim’s horse developed a limp that necessitated their moving more slowly. After deliberation they decided to camp for the rest of the day and night. Perhaps by the morrow Jim’s horse would be well again and they could travel at an increased pace. Now there was an undisguised desire to get back to the ranch house prevalent with all of them. Things were undoubtedly happening there and the girls wanted to be in on the excitement. They thought it high time the ranchers got busy and did something about their stolen cattle. The authorities had failed to capture the thieves so it was up to the ranchers themselves.

After camp was made Val took her sketching board and went off by herself to draw. Gale had not unsaddled her horse and now she mounted him for a ride.

“Not that there is much to see,” Virginia laughed when Gale started out. “Just sagebrush, rocks, and trees.”

Gale liked to be alone sometimes and now she did not feel the need of the companionship of any of her friends. Once in a while the other girls thought her a little strange when she went off by herself. But there was nothing strange about her. Gale was the sort of person who is not dependent upon other people. She could spend a whole day by herself and not be bored with her own company. She couldn’t see why some people had to always travel with a crowd, always have a

lot of other people with them. She could enjoy a walk, a movie, or a ride just as much alone as with others. Of course it was fun to travel with a group, but she enjoyed a day all to herself quite as much. When she was alone she could really think.

Gale reined her horse in and looked back at the valley she had just left. She could see all her friends like moving spots against the dull gray and olive background. On the other side, the way she faced, a long flat plain stretched out to the right while on the left was a forest of cottonwoods and fir trees. There was a narrow trail leading down from her position on the crest of the hill through the woods and she urged her horse forward. As she rode, she had to bend low in the saddle to keep from being slapped in the face by low hanging branches. Occasionally she saw a rabbit or a squirrel, but for the most part everything was still.

Her horse was young and frisky and jogged along with light, prancing step. Gale was enjoying herself hugely with no thought of the passing of time. Her surroundings were quiet and inspiring and, as usual with Gale in such circumstances, she was dreaming of a thousand and one things other than the present. When the girls got back to Marchton they would start their last year in the Marchton High School. The next year they started college. As yet the girls had not firmly decided on the school to which they would go after high school days. They were concerned now with ideas of what to do and be when they were finally all through with school. They all firmly resolved that they wanted careers, but just what those careers were to be was a little undecided. Of course it was understood that Val would continue with her art. She was really the only one of them all that had a talent of any kind to which she could cling. Long and repeatedly the girls had discussed the subject of careers. What *could* they be? Artists? Only Val could do justice to that branch of work. Actresses then? Well, perhaps Phyllis would go in for the Drama. Madge, Carol, and Janet were totally at sea, as was Gale herself.

Gale had always thought she might like to be a doctor. But just the thought of all the years of study and preparation ahead of her was a little disheartening. She liked the study of medicine and had always been interested in it. At first she thought of being a nurse, but now she didn't like that idea. The thought of being a doctor was much more intriguing. Doctors led such fascinating lives, she thought. In her rush of enthusiasm and ardor she didn't reckon with the long, tedious hours the doctor devotes to his patients, nor the fact that he has little free time for himself. Then, too, she would like to be a sculptor. She liked to model

things in clay and she was sure she could chisel interesting things from marble if given the chance. She sighed and urged her horse along a little faster. It was really quite a problem deciding what to be. At any rate, whatever she went into, she wanted to go into it full of enthusiasm and willingness to work and do her best. She had no intention of idling her life away. She wanted to do something, to be somebody, to be proud of her achievements whatever they might be. She was resolved that she would forge ahead to success and make a name for herself. After all, why not? Other people had started out with nothing and made themselves famous.

A huge drop of water on the back of her neck brought her back sharply to the problem at hand. Riding along and musing with herself, she had not noticed the dark clouds that had gathered overhead from nowhere. Now as her horse came out into an open clearing, rain began pouring down. She could not hope to get back to camp before the worst of the storm broke. If this heavy downpour continued, she would be drenched in a minute. Wildly she looked about for shelter of some kind. Through the trees to the left she saw a log cabin, not much of a building, but enough to afford shelter in the storm. To the rear she found a sheltered hitching post where she tied her mount and ran back to the main cabin.

One step inside she stopped and glanced around. She had had the strangest premonition when she stepped over the threshold. It was as if she had a warning of something dreadful about to happen. The room--there was only one--was empty of all but its meager furnishings, a table and two makeshift chairs standing before the fireplace. A saddle and rifle lay in one corner. On the table were a few dirty dishes. Someone had been here lately, if they were not here now. She had seen no horse when she tethered her own, but there was a saddle and, more ominous still, the rifle. Where was the owner?

The rain was teeming down outside and she went to the window to stare out. A regular cloudburst! Tomorrow a lot of the little streams they had passed would be raging, swirling rivers. She was glad this cabin had been here or else she would have been drenched. She smiled as she thought of how her camp mates might be receiving this sudden rain. They would no doubt be huddled in the waterproof tents, but nevertheless they would be fuming with disgust. It was no pleasure camping out when it rained. She looked up at the gray skies, impatient to be off and away from this cabin that filled her with that strange, unreasonable fear. Why should she feel fear the moment she stepped into the place? There was no one here. Not a thing to frighten her. Yet she was filled with a strange uneasiness. Evidently her horse had felt it too, for when she had tied him he

whinnied faintly and nudged her arm with mute appeal. She had thought nothing of it at the time, but now it came back to her with ominous warning. Animals had keen instinct and the horse had felt a distrust of this place. She wished heartily it would stop raining so she could go on. She didn't want to get wet and she didn't want to stay here.

She shook her shoulders impatiently and went over to inspect the rifle in the corner. Probably she was imagining things. It was the first time she had let her imagination make her afraid of anything. She was being silly she told herself again sternly. Most likely this cabin had been deserted for a long time. But when she picked up the rifle she knew that wasn't so. The rifle was clean and recently oiled. Too, it was loaded. It was the same make rifle as Tom carried in his saddle sheath and quite without knowing why she took the cartridges out of the barrel to examine them. At the same moment she looked up through the window to the trail she had so recently left for this shelter.

Terror gripped her for a moment. Horsemen were issuing from the thick growth of trees and there was no disputing the identity of the first man. It was the bank bandit who had held Val and her prisoners in that other cabin. She dropped the rifle over the saddle where it had been and looked about wildly for a means of escape. Were they close enough to see her if she slipped out of the door? Of course they were! In the rear wall was a window. She placed a chair beneath it and a moment later was squeezing through the opening. Rain or no rain, she preferred to get wet to remaining in the cabin to receive those men. How had they managed to elude the Sheriff and his men so long? Were the bank bandits connected with the rustlers who had been stealing cattle from the K Bar O? Gale made a shrewd guess that they were.

When she jumped from the window to the wet earth Gale ran immediately to where her pony was tied and, slipping her arm through the reins, led him back into the woods to the rear of the cabin. She was sure the thick growth of trees and brush would shield them from view and that proved to be the case. The trees overhead were a little protection from the rain, but even so, when she had been in the open five minutes she was soaked. She had left her slicker in the camp and now she wished fervently she had let it remain rolled behind her saddle. She heard the thunder of hoofs and sound of voices as the men she had eluded dismounted at the cabin and entered it. Surprised, she looked down at her hand. She still had the two shells from the rifle clutched in her fingers. She had departed in such haste that she didn't have time to replace them; indeed, she had not even thought of them. Now she shoved them deep into her breeches' pocket

and huddled beside her horse.

It would be better to get into the saddle and ride than to stand here in the rain, but she was sure the sound of her horse's hoofs would be clearly audible to those men in the cabin and they would be sure to investigate. Too, she had an idea. It would be a big help to her uncle if she could, in some fashion, determine if these were the men who were stealing cattle from the ranchers. Perhaps, now that she had stumbled upon their cache, she could spy on them and learn something of interest to the authorities. It was worth trying. She would wait until it grew dark and then sneak up and endeavor to listen to their conversation and to obtain a glimpse of the men within the cabin.

Her horse whinnied softly and she put an admonishing hand on his muzzle while her heart raced with apprehension. Suppose one of the men heard him and came to see---- But they were undoubtedly too busy and besides, they might think it one of their own horses. Still, it would be best to be on the safe side. She led her horse farther into the woods and there tied him to a cottonwood. She was hungry. She remembered she had had only a light lunch but she remembered, too, that she had put something in her saddle bag just in case she wanted an afternoon snack. It came in handy now. She found two lumps of sugar, also, which the horse promptly snuggled from her hand.

Another thought came to her and she bent down to her boot. Her little revolver still nestled in its customary place. She might have use for it tonight, she reflected. Suppose the men were the rustlers and suppose she did make sure of that fact. How was she to notify the authorities? By the time she got back to her camp and told Jim and Tom and they summoned the Sheriff or some of his men the rustlers would have ample time to get away. What was she to do? With a shrug of her shoulders she dismissed the thought. Everything would take care of itself she was sure.

Chapter XI

SURPRISE

The rain had stopped. Darkness was over the world and stars blinked solemnly from their heavenly nest. The rain had brought coolness and a light wind that stirred the leaves of the trees.

Round the campfire were gathered all the girls but the absent Gale. Tom was collecting firewood and Jim was making sure the horses were secure for the night.

“Where do you suppose Gale can be?” Janet asked again.

“I wonder,” agreed Phyllis. “This is the first time in my acquaintance with her that she ever missed a meal.”

“I’m beginning to be worried,” Virginia confessed. “I don’t see why she stayed away so long.”

“You don’t suppose--something could have happened to her?” Valerie asked hesitantly.

“What for instance?” Madge demanded.

“Well, her horse might have run away or----”

“Nonsense!” Carol said crisply. “Gale’s horse is the tamest one of the bunch. I’ll bet she is having an adventure and a high old time.”

“But where can she be?” insisted Valerie.

Minutes passed into hours and hours passed and still that question was not answered. The camp was thoroughly alarmed now. They were certain Gale was in trouble or had lost her way in the strange country. Any number of things might have happened, and their thoughts ran rampant. The girls could see that Tom and Jim were as disturbed as they. For the last half hour Jim had, almost lovingly, been cleaning his revolver. There was something ominous in just the sight of him toying with his weapon. What was he thinking?

“What are we going to do?” Valerie asked finally.

It was time for the girls to retire for it had been planned to ride early on the

morrow. But now, with Gale missing, their plans were interrupted. None felt that she could sleep if they did go to bed.

“You girls might as well go to bed,” Tom said practically. “Jim and I will wait until dawn and then go out and pick up Gale’s trail. It would be no use going now, for we could find nothing in the darkness.”

They realized that he spoke the truth but still it was hard to sit idle when they were longing to know what was happening to their comrade. Reluctantly Madge, Carol, Janet and Virginia went to their tent. Valerie and Phyllis followed slowly to theirs. Tom and Jim rolled in their blankets by the fire, close together so they could talk in low whispers. The light wind stirred the flames and sent them reaching high into the air. A moment more and they died down to smouldering embers. Silence gradually settled down over the tents and those two Indian-like figures on the ground.

The camp was asleep or so it seemed. Not one occupant of the tents or Tom or Jim saw the two figures that stood on the outer edge of the circle of light and smiled over the serenity which gripped the camp. Big, burly men they were, used to hard riding and hard living. The leather chaps they wore and their heavy khaki shirts were covered with dust. About their waists hung heavy holster and cartridge belts. Figures of menace they were, menace to the peace of the Adventure Girls’ camp. In their eyes, cold and relentless, was reflected the low, burning embers of the campfire as the two took in every detail. They seemed to have no desire to disturb the sleeping campers, just to note the lay of the land, as it were. When their silent inspection was finished they turned and melted into the darkness from whence they had come.

In the tent she shared now with only Phyllis, Valerie lay wakeful and restless. Her thoughts were contemplating a hundred and one things that might have happened to Gale. The two had been friends for a long, long time and now the thought that her chum might be in trouble or danger, perhaps, made Valerie long to be off to her assistance. She lay staring at the black tent roof. Beside her Phyllis lay calm, breathing regularly, already in the land of dreams. Valerie wished she could smother her own troublesome thoughts and go to sleep. Tom and Jim knew what they were about and if they said it was no use hunting for Gale before morning, there simply was no use that was all. She realized that they could scarcely find a sign of Gale in the pitch blackness of the Arizona night. They thought that Gale might have lost her way and could not return to the camp. Valerie seriously doubted that. Gale could find her way about better than any of them. She seemed to possess a sixth sense that enabled her to remember

any route or trail of open country that she had once taken. Valerie was sure Gale had not lost her way. Instead, there was some other reason why she hadn't returned to the camp.

Valerie's memory was particularly fresh with scenes of the night she and Gale had been prisoners of the bank bandit. Had something similar happened to Gale tonight? There was scarcely any other reason she should stay away from camp. Valerie wondered if Gale still had her little revolver with her. At least she had some little protection with that.

Valerie sat up and ruffled her hair restlessly. A moment later she stood at the open tent flap. She could see Tom and Jim rolled snugly in their blankets. What was that? For an instant she thought a shadow appeared on the other side of the camp circle. A minute later she changed her mind. It must have been a sudden spurt of the fire that threw a flickering shadow over the sagebrush. She stepped out and let the flap close behind her. There was no use to waken Phyllis or the others just because she couldn't sleep. She breathed deeply of the cool night air and marveled at the thrill she felt. It was a thrill to note the difference in herself. How changed she was since the first day they had camped in the open. The sun and the usually dry air had wrought wonders, wonders that had seemed impossible to even Valerie herself. She had often wondered if she would ever feel the glow of vigorous health. Now she felt like a new person. That annoying cough had entirely disappeared. She wondered if the other girls realized what a transformation had taken place within her. It had been a severe struggle, the hardest battle she had ever fought, but she had won. The weeks of riding and camping, eating and sleeping outdoors, had tanned her skin and put a sparkle in her eyes. Too, she had gained weight. No more was she utterly exhausted at the end of a day's hard ride. No more were the other girls livelier than she. Now she felt equal to any situation that might arise.

She had walked from the camp a ways to drink in the beauty of the night. Unconsciously she had taken the same route Gale had ridden earlier in the day. Ahead of her was the rise over which Gale had gone. Valerie strolled along. The moon came out and threw dark shadows under the trees and brush. Glancing up suddenly, Valerie was startled. She was sure she had seen a figure step behind a group of trees ahead of her. She laughed at her own fears. Nervousness wasn't usually one of her traits. It must be that Gale's disappearance was preying on her mind. She was beginning to imagine ominous sounds and sights. She frowned at the thought of Gale and kicked an unoffending pebble from her path. She might as well go back and try to sleep. There was no use wandering about like a lost

sheep. If the others discovered her absence they would be alarmed and there was no cause to create a disturbance.

She decided to walk to the top of the rise and take a look at the plain that stretched away to the right. She liked to see the plains in the moonlight; it all looked as though the earth had been sprinkled with silver dust. Then she would go back to camp, probably to lay awake until dawn, she thought darkly. It was no use to argue about it. She worried about Gale and about what might have happened. With rustlers and bank robbers in the vicinity, what might not have happened? Too, there was something about Tom and Jim that made her apprehensive. They seemed to be waiting for something. Their whole attitude was one of preparedness, but for what? Did they expect the outlaws to come to the girls' camp? The men would hardly do that she thought with a smile. Why should they?

She came to the rise of ground and stood there in the moonlight, overlooking the plain. For a moment her eyes were somewhat dazzled by the brilliance of the moonlight. Then she discerned a low cloud of dust rolling along the horizon. Small dark figures she discerned. What could it be? She knew, Jim had told them, that a herd of the K Bar O was somewhere off there to the right. But were the riders moving the cattle tonight? They were moving swiftly, too, she could tell.

Another thought occurred to her and her eyes narrowed with suspicion. Could it be rustlers? Rustlers stealing another herd of K Bar O cattle? It was possible, she declared to herself. The regular riders would scarcely be moving the cattle so swiftly so late at night. There was no reason they should. On the other hand, if it were rustlers, and if it were K Bar O cattle, where were the regular riders? Didn't they keep a close watch these nights when there was such danger in the air? If she were Gale's uncle, she would put extra men on in an endeavor to catch the thieves. Suppose there was trickery among the hired hands? Suppose one of the riders whom Mr. Wilson trusted was in league with the outlaws? It was quite possible. The man could very easily fix it so the rustlers would have a clear hand. Was that what was happening? She frowned thoughtfully. At any rate, she was sure that it was rustlers moving K Bar O cattle and she was going to tell Jim and Tom about it.

She turned and her heart froze in her throat. Before her two men stepped forward to block the path. Rough hands seized her and she was lifted bodily from the ground. Kicking and squirming she let out a piercing scream to summon the help of her camp mates. Just one scream, no more was she allowed. She was roughly

and effectively silenced and carried to where two horses stood docilely among the trees. Her captors mounted and she was swung up in front of one of them across the saddle. It was no use to fight. Her captors were much stronger than she and there was no course but to submit in stormy but, she hoped, dignified silence as the two horses started away.

Chapter XII

GONE

Phyllis reached out a hand. "Awake, Val?" But when there was no answer and her hand encountered empty air she sat up alarmed. "Val?" she called softly. Still there was no answer and Phyllis went to the tent flap and stepped out. Everywhere was silence. "Val!" she called again.

"What's the matter?" a soft voice spoke behind her and Virginia joined her.

Phyllis smiled. "Can't you sleep either?"

"No," Virginia answered. "But--Val. Where is she?"

"She isn't in the tent. I thought she might have stepped out here," Phyllis said with a thoughtful frown. "But I don't see her. I wonder where she can be?"

"Probably went for a walk," Virginia smiled. "I suppose she was thinking of Gale. I wish it was morning," she added uneasily.

"What do you honestly think has happened to Gale?" Phyllis asked.

"I wish I knew," Virginia said with a sigh. "I wish I knew," she repeated.

"Will you two chatterboxes please go to sleep?" Tom yawned from his blankets. "Regular night owls, that's what you are."

"We can't sleep," Virginia said, seating herself cross-legged on the ground beside her brother. "And there is no reason you should either," she added mischievously.

"Go away!" her brother implored. "We have to get up at dawn."

"Anything wrong?" Jim asked, sitting up and shaking off his blanket. "Girls all right?"

"Val has gone for a walk," Phyllis informed him. "How long ago I don't know."

"I wish----" Virginia was beginning when she stopped.

From the darkness behind them came a piercing scream. It echoed like thunder through the sleeping stillness of the valley. It brought the remaining girls tumbling from their tent. The four by the campfire exchanged startled, incredible

glances.

“That was Val’s voice!” Phyllis said with an effort.

“Come on, Jim!” Tom was already disappearing into the sagebrush. Behind him was Jim and the girls trailed after. No one proposed to be left alone in camp.

But, uncertain as they were of the exact spot from whence the scream had come, they thrashed about in the darkness finding nothing. Finally Tom held up a commanding hand for silence.

“Listen!” he ordered.

There was borne to them on the night air the pounding of hoofs. For a time they were heard and then the sound died slowly into silence.

“Horses!” Janet said incredibly. “But who--why--who screamed?” she demanded.

Jim was off at top speed for the spot where the horses must have been when they started. When the rest joined him he was bending over examining hoof marks with the aid of a burning pine faggot. He stamped the torch out when he saw the girls and turned to lead the way back to camp. There he bent serious glances upon all of them.

“Tom,” he said finally, “saddle your horse and ride to the ranch for yore father and some men. Don’t lose any time about it either. There’s something mighty funny goin’ on up here and we’re goin’ to need help.”

The girls exchanged frightened glances.

“What do you think, Jim?” Virginia asked.

“I think, I know,” he corrected himself, “those riders we heard were the bandits we’ve been runnin’ across ever since we came on this trip. I think they’ve got Miss Valerie just as they’ve probably got yore other friend.”

“You mean--Gale?” Carol asked in a whisper.

“I shore do and unless we do something mighty prompt there’s no tellin’ what’ll happen.”

Tom had hastily thrown his saddle on his horse and now he led the creature into the circle of firelight. In his hand he carried his revolver. Gravely he handed it to Virginia.

“You might need it before I get back,” he said.

“But you----” Virginia protested.

“I’ll get another,” he said calmly. “You’ll stick to the camp, Jim?” he asked turning to the cowboy.

“I can’t do nothin’ until you and yore Dad come,” Jim replied. “One wouldn’t have a chance against a couple of those fellows.”

“Right you are!” Tom agreed and swung himself into the saddle. “I’ll probably be back sometime about noon,” he said and was off.

As long as they could hear them, the girls listened to the rumbling beat of his horse’s hoofs. When silence settled down on the valley again they looked expectantly at Jim and Virginia. The latter two were westerners, versed in the ways of the West. Surely they could tell the girls what they could do. It was inconceivable that they should sit idle for hours and hours, just waiting for Tom and his companions to come.

“Can’t we do something?” Madge asked, voicing the desire of all of them.

“We can make sure that nobody enters or leaves this camp without all of us knowing it,” Jim said sternly.

“What could Val have been thinking of to wander off like that?” Virginia added worriedly.

“She probably didn’t think there was anything to fear,” Phyllis defended. “What are we to do?” she asked of Jim.

“Get your revolver,” he said crisply.

Phyllis bent down and pulled it from her boot. She had taken the suggestion from Gale, and now she was never without it.

“We’ll have to watch the camp,” Virginia said practically. “Is that your idea, Jim?”

“Yes. I’ll take a spot here in the shadows.” Jim indicated the direction from which Val’s scream had come. He stationed Virginia and Phyllis on both sides of the camp. The others, unarmed, could go back to bed or do as they pleased as long as there was no noise and they didn’t leave the camp.

“As though we could sleep,” Janet sniffed disdainfully when bed was suggested.

“I’m going to sit with Virginia,” Madge said and departed to take up her post in the shadows at Virginia’s side.

Carol and Janet went off to join Phyllis and so once more silence descended on the Adventure Girls' camp.

Virginia and Madge sat with their backs against a tree, facing the camp. Protected by the heavy shadows all around them, the girls could see the camp site clearly, but anyone coming stealthily onto the camp could not see them.

"Why do you suppose Jim thinks it necessary to guard the camp?" Madge whispered.

"It looks as though those bandits were interested in us for some reason," Virginia murmured. "Why should they kidnap two of the girls, as Jim thinks they did, unless for some special reason?"

Madge thought this over for a moment. "But what reason could they have?" she asked at length.

"I don't know," Virginia answered.

It was strange. The girls had done nothing to warrant this attack on them by the outlaws. Or had they? They couldn't tell what Gale or Val might have found after they left the camp. Perhaps they had stumbled on the hiding place of the bandits and now were being held prisoner by those very outlaws. Virginia half smiled to herself. The girls had come out for a restful, interesting summer and they had stumbled into a feud of bandits and rustlers.

She hoped fervently that Tom, riding hard toward the K Bar O, was safe. Since he had given her his gun, it left him unarmed and if he should come face to face with any of the rustlers---- She turned her thoughts sternly away from that subject. She had faith in Tom's ability to take care of himself. He was no child, he was older than she, and he knew the range land and its secrets. The only time he had left the ranch was when he had been away to school. After graduation he had returned eagerly to his interrupted western life. Virginia settled herself more comfortably. No, Tom would be all right. It was not him she should worry about, but the two girls who had disappeared so mysteriously.

Since she was ten and Gale nine, Virginia had not seen her cousin until that day weeks before when the ramshackle car had puffed into the ranch yard and its occupants had piled gratefully from it. They had exchanged letters faithfully, but they never really knew each other until they started on this camping trip. Riding, eating, sleeping, laughing together in the vast silence and beauty of Virginia's native state, the two cousins had grown close. Now Virginia knew and admired her cousin tremendously. She recognized in Gale the same high ideals and love

of truth and sincerity that she herself cherished. There was in Gale, too, a spirit of mischievous recklessness and courage that delighted Virginia. In Gale's gray eyes there burned a continual spark and her red lips were always laughing. She liked Gale, honestly and whole-heartedly. She wanted to be one of her firmest friends, because she was sure Gale would be loyal and unselfish to those who won her deepest friendship.

Smothering a yawn, Virginia glanced at Madge beside her and received a sunny smile. She smiled in answer and folded her arms. She liked all the girls that had come West with Gale. What a fine name they had chosen for themselves. The Adventure Girls! The very words spoke of fun, mystery, and excitement. They must have countless good times. All of them were capable of stirring up mischief and excitement. She wondered how so many different natures had ever come together. She must ask Gale sometime how they had first formed their group.

The darkness was like a heavy blanket and the faint wind was soothing. The trees stirred faintly overhead. The few remaining embers of the campfire in front of them glowed like a small red eye through the blackness. Each faint sound was like a roar in their ears. Their nerves were on edge and magnified each whisper of a leaf or cracking of a twig. The stars overhead were fading and the moonlight was waning. Far, far in the east the first faint streaks of daylight were creeping into the sky.

Virginia straightened up, startled. She had been asleep! That was her first chagrining thought. Jim had put her on guard and she had fallen asleep. Madge grinned at her when they glanced at one another.

"Have a good nap?" she asked laughingly.

Virginia laughed too. "Why didn't you wake me?" she demanded.

"What for?" Madge asked blandly. "Nothing happened. In fact," she giggled, "I've a sneaking suspicion that I was asleep too."

"Wouldn't we make fine night watchmen?" Virginia laughed.

Jim had stepped into the circle of the camp and now he called them. "Might as well have breakfast," he suggested practically.

"When should Tom get back?" Phyllis asked.

"It's a long ride to the ranch house," Jim said, poking at the fire. "Best he could do would be sometime this afternoon."

The girls said nothing but each felt a sinking of the heart at the big delay it

meant. It would be hours yet before they could start looking for their comrades.

They had breakfast, consisting mainly of steaming hot coffee and warmed biscuits; but at that, they felt better, more cheerful, after a little food. They could look upon Gale's and Val's absence with more fortitude and confidence in the good fortune of their friends. Both absent girls were resourceful and quick-witted. Perhaps nothing serious had happened to them after all.

The girls were wondering what to do with themselves during the hours they must spend when the galloping of hoof beats was heard. Their hearts beat faster. Was it Tom and men from the ranch or--could it possibly be the bandits?

Chapter XIII

RESCUE

Darkness found Gale in much the same position she had occupied through the rainstorm, standing beside her horse and gently stroking his nozzle. The rain had stopped but she was uncomfortably wet. She wondered whether this was a climate where one caught colds easily. If so, she would probably have a dandy tomorrow. The horse shifted his feet impatiently and nudged her shoulder.

She smiled at him. "Impatient to be off, old boy? So am I. Something tells me that this is going to be a night of excitement. I wonder if I'm being foolhardy in spying on these fellows. I might be, you know," she said seriously to the horse. He nodded his head as though in agreement. "Oh, so you think I'm foolhardy, do you? But on the other hand, I might be able to help Uncle. What do you think, old fellow?"

The horse shook his head and whinnied softly. "Please don't do that," she said hastily, a hand on his nose. "If you make such a noise you might bring those men out to investigate and that wouldn't be lucky for either you or me."

The stars came out and with them the moon. The bright moonlight made Gale frown in annoyance. Any other time she would have marveled at the white radiance of Mr. Moon, but now it was indiscreet. The cabin where she was to do her spying stood squarely in the center of a large patch of moonlight. There would be no skulking in darkness close to it. If she hoped to get close enough to peer in a window or to hear what was being said, she would not only have to cross that moonlit space but to stand in the white light, clearly visible to anyone coming to the cabin. Well, she had made up her mind what she wanted to do and now she was going through with it.

She wondered what her friends were thinking at her absence. She wished there was some way she could let them know she was safe and sound. But in an hour or two she would be on her way back to them with information that might be valuable. She wished she had a good supper, though. That was what ailed her horse too, he was hungry.

Through the trees she could see that there was a light in the cabin and smoke curled from the chimney. Loud voices too, could be heard. Perhaps they were

planning something this very minute. Making sure her horse was securely tied to a tree, Gale started slowly toward the cabin. It would be a ticklish business and goodness knew what might happen if she was caught. She approached the rear of the cabin but it was no good to take up a post here. The window was too high for her to see in and the voices were merely an indistinguishable blur through the thick wall.

Before the cabin stood six horses, reins hanging and their heads drooped forward. Six horses! That meant there were six riders in the cabin. Coming around the corner of the cabin, Gale trod heavily on a twig and it snapped loudly. She stood still on the verge of flight, her heart racing. But when no one came she realized that they were making too much noise to hear such a slight sound. Evidently it was an occasion for celebration for they all seemed in high spirits.

The window where she had meant to make her observations was closed but the door stood ajar. It was perilous looking in at the window, for any moment one of them might glance toward the glass and see her. Gale discovered that, pressed flat against the wall beside the open door, she could hear everything being said, though she could not see the occupants. It was the latter position that she took. Making herself as flat as possible against the rough logs, so there was scarcely risk of detection as long as the men remained indoors, Gale strained her ears to make sense of the conversation.

Suddenly their voices lowered, tones became confiding and mysterious. Now Gale could distinguish only snatches of what was being said. She slid a little closer to the open door.

“Pedro will stay here,” one man said sternly. “Three of you will tend to the cows and the two of us will scout around to that dude camp and see what’s goin’ on.”

Gale wondered if there was another party of easterners camping in the hills, or did those words “dude camp” apply to her and her friends? Quite possibly they did. But why were these men interested in what they did?

“They’re too near the cattle to suit me,” one of the other outlaws said in a deep rumbling voice. “Suppose they see us? Then they’ll be able to give a nice little description to the Sheriff.”

He didn’t sound like an original westerner, Gale thought. More like a gangster of the movie type. Another voice joined in, soft and slurring. A Mexican, probably a half-breed, she decided mentally. For a while she could catch no more of what they said and then only a word here and there. But finally she knew enough that they planned to steal more of the K Bar O cattle. Should she go now and tell Jim

and Tom so they could forestall the thieves? No, she would wait longer. Perhaps there was something more she could learn. Where they were taking the cattle for instance. As though in reply to her thoughts, the Mexican spoke again.

“You should have the cows across the border by morning.”

But there seemed to be some little dispute about this. Three of the men started arguing. There was a step near her and a man’s shadow fell on the ground where the light from the doorway streamed out. He was standing in the doorway looking across to the trees. If he turned an inch more in her direction he would see her. Gale held her breath and leaned stiffly against the wall. He must hear her heart beating so loudly. It sounded like thunder in her own ears. Tossing his cigarette out to the ground the man turned and stepped back into the cabin again. Gale almost sank to the ground in sheer relief. Pure luck, that was all it had been, that kept the man from sensing her presence. If he had stepped just a bit farther out, or turned just a bit more in her direction, she would have been discovered. And then what would have happened? She refused to think about that. Cautiously she moved a few paces away from the door. There was no need for her to invite exposure.

Heavy steps sounded in the cabin and with lightning rapidity Gale disappeared around the corner of the building and none too soon. Two of the riders strode to their horses and mounted.

“Follow in an hour, Shorty,” one of them called and the two departed.

Were they the two who were going to investigate the camp, she wondered. She hoped her friends would have some warning of the men’s approach and were able to prepare themselves. She would like to have followed them but she meant to stick here and see what happened. The rustlers were leaving one man at the cabin. Why? What further than robbery did they plot? Were they planning to return here and use the cabin as their hiding place after the K Bar O cattle were safely across the border? If that was it, she wanted to know so she could send the Sheriff and his men here and be sure it was no wild goose chase.

The moon was high overhead and moving slowly toward the west. Gale had no means of knowing what time it was for she wore no wrist watch, but she judged it to be about midnight. She would say it was an hour since the two riders had left, but still the other three had not followed them. The four of them were having a high old time, she reflected as a loud laugh floated out to her. She seated herself on the ground and leaned against the wall. Might as well be comfortable while she waited for something to happen. She was at the side, safe

from immediate discovery should they come out without warning. But it would be better not to remain seated here, should she hear them, for it might just happen that they would come around this side.

Suddenly the loud talking came to an end and there was a scraping as of chairs on the floor. Three men came to the door and walked leisurely to their horses. Gale was peeping around from the back of the cabin now and she watched them as they rode away. There remained now only one man in the cabin. Cautiously she went around to the window at the front. Slowly she brought her eyes up to the level of the windowsill and gazed in. The Mexican--she had been right as to his nationality she realized now--sat before the fireplace, his chair tilted back, his feet propped on the table. In his hands he held a stick of wood and a knife and he whistled as he sent the chips flying. His profile was toward Gale and she shivered at the ugliness of his countenance.

“Wouldn’t like to meet him in a dark alley,” she reflected to herself as she studied him. A long scar ran down his cheek, making his profile even more repulsive than it would ordinarily have been. “Something definite with which to identify him, that scar,” she told herself as she left the window.

The moon as it moved westward caused a dark, heavy shadow on the far side of the cabin and Gale stepped into its protecting blackness. A sudden thought of her horse occurred to her and she went back to where he was tied to see if he was secure and safe. There was no telling when she might want him in a hurry. She might have to leave suddenly, she thought humorously. She returned to the cabin and sat down in the protecting shadow. She wondered if there was a harder thing in the world than the job of waiting. Her eyes were growing uncomfortably heavy and the danger of falling asleep was very near. She smothered a yawn and stood up. If she fell asleep now!

What was that? The gallop of hoofs? It was. And they were coming to the cabin here. Who was it? The outlaws coming back from their nightly marauding? Or could it, by some inconceivable magic, be Tom or Jim looking for her? Somehow she had not expected them to. At any rate not at night. Of course if she didn’t return to camp by the morning, no doubt they would go out to look for her. But she planned to be safely among them by morning. Meanwhile, those horses were drawing nearer. At last they came into the moonlight from the direction she herself had come early that afternoon.

There were two horses but it looked as though one horse was carrying a double load. Gale’s interest was aroused. Who was it? The horses were pulled up short

in front of the cabin and Gale flattened herself against the wall. She did not have as good a view of the new arrivals as she might have wished for, but she could catch glimpses of them and she could hear their voices. Right now they seemed anything but pleased. They were having trouble with something--or someone.

“Let me go!”

Out of the thin air, it seemed to Gale, she heard Valerie’s voice. Valerie here! How did she get here? Was she on the horse with one of the outlaws? That must be the explanation of the double burden one of the horses was carrying. In some way, the men had kidnapped Valerie and brought her here. Gale rejoiced inwardly now that she had stayed, but her heart leapt and her hands clenched the next second when she heard what sounded like a slap and a half smothered scream from Valerie.

“Maybe that’ll keep you quiet for a while,” one of the men said.

Gale longed to rush out and interfere on Valerie’s behalf but she knew how foolish that would be. She could only wait for an opportunity and pray that they did not seriously harm Val. That it should be Valerie made it all the more tragic in Gale’s estimation. If it had been Phyllis or Madge or Virginia, one more able to stand rough handling and hardship, Gale would have been more optimistic about her chances. But with Val she was worried. She, Gale, had to help her friend, but how?

Carefully she approached her post by the window and looked in. Valerie was seated in a chair by the fireplace and the Mexican was approaching with two straps from the saddle lying in the corner. He proceeded to strap Val’s hands to the chair posts. The other two riders watched him for a moment and then came toward the door. Gale hastily retreated and did not appear again until their horses were lost in the black trees. Back at the window she watched, while the Mexican walked slowly around his captive, deliberately appraising her. The door was closed and she could not hear what was being said, but it was evident that Valerie was saying uncomplimentary things for the breed’s face was growing blacker and blacker with rage.

It was Gale’s intention to call the Mexican from the cabin on some ruse and while he was out slip in and cut Val free. But for that purpose she would need a knife. She ran back to her horse. In her saddle bag she carried a knife and, while she was here, it would be just as well to move her horse up closer to the cabin. If she and Val had to make a dash for it, it would be well not to have to run too far. Leaving her horse standing at the rim of the open space where the cabin was, she

approached the window again. Now she had to think of a ruse to get the Mexican out of the cabin.

The light in the cabin was from the fire in the fireplace and from two lanterns which cast a sickly yellow glow over the occupants of the building and the meager furnishings. Gale could see the Mexican bending over Val, leering at her. She could see Val's bright eyes and flushed cheeks. Whatever the Mexican was saying to taunt her, it had thoroughly aroused Val's temper. She saw Val's lips move and wished desperately that she might hear what the girl said. But the walls of the cabin were thick and the windows and doors closed, effectively smothering all sound. The Mexican's hand shot out and struck Val a heavy blow across the cheek, bringing a dark red stain to the white skin.

Gale saw Val's head droop until her chin rested on her chest. What was wrong? Was she going to cry now, of all times? It was just what the Mexican wanted, to make her grovel. Evidently the Mexican thought he had subdued all signs of rebellion in his fair prisoner for he bent closer with a sneering smile. But it was a trick! When the Mexican bent over, Val's foot shot up and kicked him hard in the pit of the stomach. He stumbled backward, doubled over in pain.

Gale could have danced in delight. Three cheers for Val! Her fighting blood was up. Gale found herself a little surprised at Val's daring. Val had more courage than the girls had given her credit for. But now would come a reckoning. The Mexican was straightening up, his face still contorted with pain, and drawing a knife from his belt. He took two steps toward Val, caressing the knife with loving fingers. If Val was afraid, she gave no sign of it and for that Gale admired her all the more. She was quite well aware that had she been in Val's place she would have been scared green. The Mexican looked awfully intent on doing a bit of carving.

As for Val, she was frightened. The light in the half-breed's eyes and the way he held the knife sent little shivers up her back. She twisted vainly at the bonds about her hands. Must she sit here while he stuck his knife into her? But for all her terror, she gave no sign of it. Her head was high and her gaze steady.

"Ah! You are brave my leetle one!" the Mexican said with his slurring accent. "But you weel not be so brave w'en I have--what eez that?"

To Val's ears it sounded like hoofbeats. She prayed earnestly that it was. Even if it was but the other two bandits coming back, it would delay the Mexican's knife a little longer.

Gale, recognizing that the Mexican sought revenge for that kick and was intent

upon securing that revenge with his knife, cast about quickly for some means of getting him from the cabin. Her eyes came round from the window to the Mexican's horse standing meekly a few paces away. She crossed to him, pulled the reins up over his head and gave him a sharp slap on the flank. The horse started forward with a jerk and Gale disappeared around the side of the cabin. With the sound of the hoofbeats the door of the cabin was pulled open and the Mexican stepped to the ground. Gale could see him staring after his horse, but he made no effort to chase the animal as she had hoped he would. He stood there for several minutes until the horse had disappeared and then with a smothered exclamation of disgust or wrath stalked back into the cabin. Her ruse had failed. He didn't apparently care what happened to his horse. Now what was she going to do? Val needed help and she, Gale, must do something. She didn't have time to go for Jim or Tom. She would have to handle the Mexican herself, and hope that she and Val would have a fighting chance. If he should foil her attempt at rescue, then they would both be his helpless prisoners and anything might happen! She laughed nervously at her own lack of confidence. She wasn't very optimistic at any rate. However, they would see--what they would see.

She peeped in the window again. The Mexican was wiping the blade of his knife carefully on his shirt sleeve. She knew he was so deliberately cool and slow just to keep Valerie in suspense and to undermine her courage. She looked at her friend. Valerie's color had faded a bit and her eyes were a little more luminous, but not with fear. She saw Val's lips move again but she didn't know that Val had said:

"Well, why don't you get it over with?"

"In time, my leetle one, in time," Pedro laughed.

"If you don't hurry my friends might arrive and spoil your little party," Valerie continued imperturbably.

He laughed again. "They weel not come here, my friend."

"Yes they will," Valerie said coolly, "and when they do, you will look very handsome--at the end of a rope."

"Rope?" he pretended not to understand her.

"Yes, a rope," Valerie said bluntly, "for they will hang you to the highest limb of the nearest tree and your friends with you!"

He laughed, albeit a tiny gleam of fear had flickered for a moment in his eyes.

“But I weel not be here,” he said smoothly. “And you, my preety flower, will not be able to tell them w’ere I have gone.”

Valerie swallowed with difficulty. The fellow was getting on her nerves. He knew her story about her friends coming had been a bluff and he was gloating over the fact. If something didn’t happen soon, her nerve would go to pieces.

Chapter XIV

TRAPPED

Gale, her revolver clasped firmly in her right hand, and the knife with which she was to free Valerie secure in her left, crept forward to the door. What if the door was bolted on the inside? That would spoil everything! With her foot she pushed on the heavy panels and, creaking protestingly, the door swung inward.

The Mexican had wheeled sharply when the door first moved, and now he stared in amazement at the slender girl on the threshold and then at the business-like revolver in her hand.

“Oh, Gale!” was all that Valerie could manage to utter, so great was her joy and relief.

“Hands up, Señor,” Gale commanded.

The knife clattered to the floor as the Mexican obediently raised his arms above his head. Gale walked forward to Valerie.

“O. K., Val?”

“Yes--now,” Val said, with answering smile.

The Mexican, thinking to catch Gale off guard, slowly lowered his arms, but she was watching him.

“Reach for the sky, you!” she said savagely. “I’m not afraid to shoot, so be careful.”

But the Mexican, his pride outraged that such a slip of a girl should dare oppose him, lunged forward and caught Gale’s wrist in his hand. Gale’s finger pressed the trigger, but the bullet sped harmlessly past him. His fingers were like steel talons about her wrist, hurting so she had to drop the revolver. It fell to the floor by her foot and a kick sent it spinning into the corner. At the same time she pulled herself free of the man and darted to the other side of the rickety table. He retrieved his knife from the floor and took a few catlike steps toward her.

Gale retreated until she stumbled against a stool. She gripped it firmly and watched her enemy.

“Don’t come near me!” she warned.

Forgotten was the knife she still had. Now she had another plan of defense and, desperate as it was, she meant to use it. The Mexican came nearer and she swung the stool up with a crashing blow against his head. It was an effective means of subduing him, for he crumpled to the floor without a sound.

“That was the one I owed him,” Val muttered.

Gale shivered, and turning away, secured her gun and went across to Val, her back deliberately upon her fallen enemy. It took but a moment to slash Valerie’s bonds.

“Oh, Gale!” Valerie said, almost sobbing, her head on Gale’s shoulder. Now that there was no longer any reason for her to be brave, reaction had set in. “It was--horrible!”

“You were marvelous!” Gale said soothingly.

“I was scared!” Val contradicted with a nervous laugh. “And now I’m acting like a silly goose. Oh, Gale, how did you get here? Where did you come from?”

“I was here all the time,” Gale said, “ever since this afternoon. But we’ll have explanations later. Come along, we have to get out of here.”

“Slowly my young friends!” an oily voice spoke behind Gale.

The latter could see Val’s face whiten with sudden terror. She heard her catch her breath and felt her tremble.

“Gale--he was shamming--it was a trick. He’s got a gun!” Val whispered brokenly.

Gale put Valerie from her and turned about. The Mexican was peering along the barrel of a rifle leveled at them. Her gaze went beyond him to the corner where lay the saddle and where, this afternoon, she had found the same rifle he now held. Her hand went into her breeches pocket and she smiled broadly.

The more the Mexican glowered over the gun at them, the more Gale smiled. Valerie watched her friend with amazement. Had the evening’s events mentally unbalanced Gale? It was no situation at which to laugh. At least she didn’t see the funny side.

“Gale! What’s the matter?” Val asked, shaking Gale’s arm vigorously. “Are you crazy? He’ll shoot!”

“No, he won’t,” Gale said, shaking her head. “He can’t. The gun isn’t loaded.”

For an instant the rifle wavered. "Look for yourself," she invited, hoping desperately that it *hadn't* been reloaded.

Pedro did so and with a muttered exclamation of disgust flung the gun aside.

"And now we'll let you take Val's place," Gale said, leveling her revolver at him. "Come on, sit down there!"

It took but a moment to fasten him as securely as Valerie had been. He glared at them all the while.

"W'en I am free I will keel you!" he promised balefully.

"Ah, but you won't be free," Gale assured him happily. "The Sheriff will take care of that."

"You t'ink so, eh?" he laughed. "The gringo jail cannot hol' me!"

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?" was Gale's opinion.

He nodded. "I know. An' I weel fin' you and wit' my knife I weel slash so----"

"Never mind the details," Valerie interrupted. "Come on, Gale, let's leave him."

"Right you are," Gale said cheerily. "Well, Pedro, the next time we see you I hope you are behind bars."

"I weel not be," he said confidently.

Outside was the sound of voices. Valerie turned startled eyes to Gale. The Mexican laughed and then Gale understood why he had talked so loud and confidently. He had talked to cover the sound of approaching horses and he had succeeded. His friends had returned and they were trapped.

Gale's mind worked with lightning rapidity. If their plans had worked only two outlaws were to return here. The other three would be busy taking cattle across the border into Mexico. But even two----

"What will we do, Gale?" Valerie's voice was steady. The emergency had brought back her courage.

Gale thrust her revolver into Val's hand and snatched up the rifle. She brought the shells from her pocket and loaded it.

"Get on the other side of the door," she directed her friend. "We have to take 'em by surprise or else----"

Valerie shivered. "Yes," she agreed, "or else!"

“Steady,” Gale warned, “here they come.”

There was a ring of a bootheel as the two men approached the cabin unsuspectingly. Gale was on one side of the doorway and Val on the other. As the men stepped into the room and stopped aghast at the sight of the Mexican, the girls stepped forward. The two, taken utterly unaware by the pressure of the gun muzzles in their backs, raised their hands obediently.

“Face the wall,” Gale ordered, and the two turned meekly. She knew if she gave them time to overcome their surprise they would not be so docile. Cautiously she reached forward and secured first one man’s gun and then the other. While Valerie watched the two, Gale emptied the guns, put the shells into her pocket and tossed the revolvers onto the table.

“What shall we do with them?” Valerie asked nervously, indicating the two men standing, faces to the wall, at the rear of the cabin.

“That’s what I’m wondering,” Gale murmured with a frown. “I suppose one should watch them while one goes back to camp for Tom and Jim.”

“Well,” Val said firmly, “I’m sure I couldn’t find the way back to the camp, and I refuse to stay here alone! So what?”

“Indeed, so what?” Gale returned. “We have to do one or the other. Stand still there!” she warned, as one of the outlaws made as though to turn around. “Don’t forget I’ve got a gun and I know how to use it.”

“It’s almost morning,” Val said.

Through the window they could see the sky growing lighter as night faded into dawn. One of the bandits turned about.

“See here you----”

“Keep quiet,” Gale commanded, “and turn around.”

“No kid is gonna tell me what to do,” the man returned. “I’ll----”

Deliberately Gale raised her gun and fired a bullet into the wall over his head. “I might hit you next time,” she said sweetly.

The man turned then with a muttered exclamation that only his companion heard. The two of them stood with their faces to the wall while the girls held a conference.

“We have to do something,” Valerie said. “And in a hurry too,” she added.

“What’s that?” Gale asked.

Val went to the window and looked out. Coming into view between the trees were riders, about six of them and all of them carried rifles across their saddles.

“Horses,” Val answered in a low, worried tone. “I wonder if their pals are to come back this morning?”

“Maybe some of them,” Gale replied uneasily. “Now what will we do? I wish we had never got mixed up in this.”

“No more than I do,” Val agreed. “Well?” she asked.

“Can you recognize any of the riders?” Gale wanted to know.

“No,” Val answered, gazing out the window. “They are not coming toward the cabin now. They seem to be having a conference about what to do.”

“If they come on here we are lost,” Gale declared. “We’ll have to stop them.”

Val turned to watch the outlaws while Gale took a look out the window. There were men in the distance, but they were indistinguishable in the gray light of dawn and because of the thickness of the trees. While she watched, they started forward toward the cabin. She raised her rifle and fired a bullet that raised a spurt of dust in front of the advancing horses. That had the desired effect. The men retreated to the trees again. There they seemed to spread out fanlike.

“Going to surround the place,” she said to Val. “We’re trapped all right. We might as well invite them in now.”

“We won’t give up without a fight,” Val said staunchly.

At the moment she spoke a well-planted bullet shook the center panel of the door. The girls exchanged looks.

“I don’t think it will be much of a fight,” Gale said. “We have only one rifle bullet left. That won’t be much help.”

“I’d like to know who it is,” Valerie said with a frown. “If it is these fellows’ friends why did they stop before they got to the cabin in the first place?”

Another bullet thudded into the door. The outlaws looked about uneasily.

“Why don’t you go out and meet your friends,” one of them demanded of Gale.

She regarded him with a shrewd glance. “Our friends?” she murmured. “Are you sure you weren’t expecting anybody?”

“Shore, the King of England,” the other man drawled loftily.

“Do you suppose it could be our friends?” Valerie asked.

“Too many,” Gale said immediately, but she was uncertain.

Were the outlaws as uneasy over these new arrivals as they seemed? Or was it pretense to trick the girls? Gale wished she knew. To her the terror of the outlaws seemed real enough. There was no mistaking the fear on the face of Pedro when a bullet entered through the window and pinged against the fireplace alarmingly close to him. They feared these men, but why? Were the new arrivals officers of the law or a band of rival outlaws? Were there such things as rival groups of bandits?

Gale pulled Val against the wall beside her. It was safest out of range of any gun that might shoot in the window. Suddenly from the rear of the cabin came a shout. Another voice took it up. A hasty glance out the window showed men running from cover and toward the door.

“Use your gun,” screamed one of the outlaws.

“No,” Gale said firmly. “We’ll see who they are--first!”

Chapter XV

CAPTURE

Walking to the door Gale threw it open and stepped into the arms of the two men who rushed forward. She recognized them with a great overwhelming joy.

“Tom! Jim! How on earth did you get here? Who----”

“We’ve brought the Sheriff and his men,” Tom said breathlessly. “Looks as though you had the situation well in hand,” he added after he had greeted Valerie and taken in the sight of Pedro and the other two.

The Sheriff with two of his deputies crowded into the room and took charge of the three bandits.

“Reckon you’ll do no more rustlin’ cattle or robbin’ banks,” the Sheriff said, as he snapped handcuffs on the bigger of the two, while one of his men did the same with Pedro.

“Ya can’t keep me in jail,” the man returned. “An’ when I get out--I’m goin’ after these two kids!”

“Threats won’t get you anywhere,” Tom said practically. “Well, girls, want to go back to camp? Your chums are pretty worried about you.”

Valerie and Gale mounted the latter’s horse and Tom took them back to camp. Jim remained with the Sheriff to see the prisoners started on their way to the K Bar O and from there to Coxtton. Later he would join the Adventure Girls again.

“Who shot at us from the window?” Tom demanded as they jogged along.

Gale grinned. “I did. How did I know it was help? I thought it was some more bandits.”

“And you were taking no chances, eh?” Tom laughed.

“But how did you know we were in the cabin?” Valerie asked him next.

“Recognized Gale’s horse standing in back,” Tom replied. “How did you get there in the first place?”

“When the rain came on yesterday I was looking for shelter,” Gale explained. “I

got in there and just had time to crawl out the back window when I saw the men ride up. I decided to hang around and see if I could learn anything about the cattle that are being stolen from your Dad. I did. I heard them plotting to steal some more last night and drive them over the border into Mexico. Then all but the Mexican went away. Along about midnight two men came back and had Val with them. From then on things moved fast.”

“I saw the rustlers last night, Tom,” Valerie chimed in. “At least I think it was them. They were rounding up a herd of cattle and I turned to come back to camp and tell you when two men grabbed me and took me to that cabin. There the Mexican managed to scare me out of a year’s growth--until Gale came along.”

“I left the camp last night for the ranch and to get Dad and some men,” Tom added his bit. “I met the Sheriff and three of his deputies riding out to meet us and this morning we picked up the trail of the two men who had kidnapped you, Valerie. You know what happened after that. Oh, yes, Dad and some of the boys got the three who were after the cows last night.” He smiled. “I want to hear what happened all night and how you managed to trick those fellows, but I’ll be patient until we get back to camp and you’ve had some breakfast. I suppose you are hungry?”

“Are we!” Gale and Valerie echoed together.

“And I’m so sleepy I could sleep standing up,” Gale declared.

“You and me both,” Valerie murmured.

The three of them soon after rode up to the camp. The girls pounced on the two adventurers and welcomed them with open arms. While they were waited on and served with breakfast they told their story and the other girls declared it thrilling. After the last bite of breakfast Gale and Val went to their tent so sleepy they could scarcely keep their eyes open. They slept the sleep of utter exhaustion for ten hours. When they awoke the sky was aglow with sunset colors and the other girls were waiting with their supper.

“We are going to ride tonight,” Virginia informed them as the two appeared. “While you were snoozing we had a nap, too, so we could ride by moonlight.”

“Grand,” Gale declared.

“We thought you would never wake up,” Janet complained. “How could you sleep so long?”

“A clear conscience is the secret, my dear,” Valerie declared with a laugh. “I’ll

bet you never slept as soundly as we did.”

“And why shouldn’t I?” Janet demanded in a loud voice. “I’ve nothing on my conscience----”

“How about the time you spilt ink on the professor’s desk? And the time you rang the fire gong when there was no cause, and the time----” Carol was enumerating when Janet interrupted.

“They should keep you awake,” Madge added mischievously.

“You’ve committed just as many crimes,” Janet defended quickly.

“I’ll wager they have,” Virginia said with a sympathetic arm about Janet’s shoulders. “Well, Tom?” she said to her brother who was approaching from the horses. “All set to go?”

“As soon as we take down the other tent,” he agreed. “How’re you, girls?” the last was to Gale and Valerie.

“Fine as a fiddle!” Valerie declared.

Indeed she appeared to be. Gale had at first watched her friend with some trepidation, remembering the strenuous events of last night. Before, Valerie had always been worn out, utterly exhausted after any excitement or nerve strain. Now she was as calm and steady as any of them. It was borne home to them all that Valerie had surely won her long fight for health.

Val herself was the happiest as it was natural that she should be. She, too, had been anxious as to the results of last night’s adventure. This morning when she and Gale had gone to bed, tired as she had been, she had feared an undoing of all the good work these weeks in the sun and air had done. But now, to her own amazement as well as to the surprise of her friends, she felt more fit, more cheerful than she had done for many months. It was a continual joy to her to be able to ride and compete equally with her friends, to know that she was as capable of meeting an emergency as any of them.

“Oh, Val!” Phyllis said, hugging her exultantly. “You look marvelous this morning.”

“Indeed she does,” Gale agreed, as the three of them walked to their horses.

“I feel it too,” Val declared.

“All the credit goes to beautiful Arizona,” Phyllis said cheerily.

“No it doesn’t,” Val said sturdily. “You girls deserve a vote of thanks on my

behalf. I hereby express it,” she said gayly.

“Who is getting thanked and for what?” Janet interrupted, overtaking the three while Madge, Carol, and Virginia lagged behind.

“I’m offering all the Adventure Girls a vote of thanks for helping me back to health,” Valerie said.

“And we claim we didn’t have anything to do with it,” Gale said immediately. “It was sheer grit on Val’s part that she won out.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” Janet said to Gale. “She has been wonderful, hasn’t she?”

“My word!” Valerie laughed. “I’m getting a lot of bouquets. You will bring on a rainstorm with such compliments.”

“It’s the truth,” Phyllis asserted. “And our trip has served its purpose.”

“What do you mean?” Valerie demanded suspiciously. “Was this Arizona trip planned for my especial benefit?”

“Well, you see--we--ah----” Phyllis floundered.

“Phyllis Elton!” Janet sighed. “You never open your mouth but you put your foot in it!”

“Well, I couldn’t help it,” Phyllis grumbled. “Val shouldn’t be so suspicious.”

“Gale,” Valerie commanded, “tell me what this is all about. What does she mean by the trip has served its purpose? Tell me!” she insisted as Gale hesitated.

“Why--um--you see, Val, we--got together and sort of talked it over and we decided----”

“You all decided to spend your summer out here so I could get well,” Val said, a suspicion of tears in her voice. “Was there ever a girl had such friends?”

“Bosh!” Janet said crisply, immediately dispersing all sentiment. “We did it for ourselves. Aren’t we the Adventure Girls and didn’t we come, out for some more adventures? But so far,” she added humorously, “you and Gale have been doing all the adventuring. Getting kidnapped and----”

“And almost run through by a Mexican and his knife,” finished Valerie. “Well, from now on, Janet, I cheerfully resign all my adventures in your favor.”

“Can I count on that?” Janet asked when the other girls joined them.

“We are on our way home, girls,” sighed Carol, “and all our adventuring is over for another summer. Dear me, winter and school are dull times, don’t you think?”

“Yes!”

“No!” came simultaneously from Janet and Phyllis.

Carol had not spoken the whole truth. They were on their last long ride of the summer, but their adventures were not over, and this they were shortly to discover for themselves.

Chapter XVI

ALARM

The moonlight turned the ground to silver dust and gave the girls the appearance of ghostly white riders as, single file, they started on their journey back to the K Bar O ranch house. They were feeling a trifle sad and regretful that it was almost time to leave these wide open spaces they had grown to love, when all thought of the approaching parting was jogged out of them.

Janet, who had been riding behind Gale, turned her horse from the line to come up beside Phyllis. At the same moment something, presumably a squirrel or jack rabbit, darted across from the side of the trail in front of her horse. She had been riding with loose reins, her horse's head drooping forward, and now, when her horse reared in sudden fright, she was almost unseated. The horse stood for a moment balanced on his hind legs, pawing the air wildly with his forehoofs, then came down to earth and raced away, Janet trying frantically to retrieve her reins.

Jim had joined them again for the return to the ranch house, and now the minute he saw Janet's horse was a runaway, urged his own mount after the girl's. Tom was a close second, with Gale right behind him. The others strung out behind the first three, all bent on catching the runaway or saving Janet from an accident.

The wild dash of her horse, taking her utterly by surprise, had knocked all thought from Janet's head and now she could do nothing but cling grimly to her seat. Darn the horse! she thought exasperatedly. He was supposed to be tame and used to the wild life of the plains and hills, yet a little jack rabbit could scare him out of his wits! She flung a hasty glance over her shoulder and saw her friends bearing down on her. But as if her own horse decided he didn't want to be caught, he put on a sudden spurt and widened the distance.

Janet could see the reins dangling over the horse's head, just out of her reach. Murmuring soothingly in his ear, Janet endeavored to catch the elusive reins but failed. One hand clinging desperately to the pommel on her saddle, Janet rose in her stirrups. For an instant she felt the reins in her fingers and then she had lost them again. She was quite well aware what the consequences would be if her horse threw her. She might suddenly find herself with a broken shoulder or arm or a fractured skull. The thought wasn't at all pleasant and she set her teeth

grimly, determined to stop the fool horse before something did happen to both of them.

They were coming out onto a wide plain where her horse had the best chance of all to run himself out. But she didn't propose to stick to him until he was tired. She wanted him stopped now before he jolted all her bones loose. Clinging to the saddle and rising in her stirrups she leaned as far forward as possible. The horse lurched suddenly and it was by the merest piece of luck that she wasn't thrown off on her face. But she clung to her saddle and persisted in her attempt to reach the reins. Finally her fingers closed on the left rein and she hung onto it desperately. She pulled with all her strength but the horse didn't slacken in speed, not a fraction. He seemed bent on reaching some invisible object ahead and nothing could swerve him from his purpose. Janet braced her feet squarely in the stirrups, put both hands on the rein and continued to pull.

Phyllis, who was behind Gale in the race to reach Janet, saw the runaway swerve suddenly, an act all of them had been unprepared for. Janet's horse raced parallel to its pursuers and it was a moment of lost precious time before either Jim or Tom could change the course of their own mounts. Phyllis, by the time Jim was after Janet again, had sent her horse at an abrupt angle from the group. If Janet's horse did not swerve again, and she herself kept on at the present line, the two were bound to come together. Perhaps if they collided it would bring Janet's horse to a halt, she reflected with a bit of humor.

For all of Janet's tugging at the rein her horse was adamant. He did not slacken his speed until he began to feel tired. He had swerved from his course, but he would not stop. Janet, her whole attention claimed by the horse under her, did not see Phyllis until horse and rider loomed up before her. She felt herself suddenly hurled over her horse's head as he made a mad attempt to stop himself, and the next second she found herself on top of Phyllis on the ground.

Janet rolled off her friend and sat up. She felt herself all over to be sure she was still in one piece. It had been quite a jolt, that landing on the ground. Then she turned to Phyllis. Her chum had not stirred and Janet feared the girl might be seriously hurt.

"I say, Phyll, are you all right?" Janet asked anxiously.

Phyllis opened her eyes and grinned through the dust and grime she had acquired when she pitched headlong to the ground.

"Yes," she said thickly through a mouth full of dust. "I s'pose I'm all right, but you knocked all the wind out of me. I also saw several stars I never knew

existed. But we stopped him, didn't we?" she demanded, gazing at Janet's horse which was standing meekly beside Phyllis' own, all trace of rebellion gone.

"He ought to stop now, the crazy thing," Janet said, getting stiffly to her feet. "You know, Phyll," she said with a laugh, "you aren't at all soft to land on. I'm all bumps and bruises."

"You can be glad I was here to land on," Phyllis said, "you might have picked a cactus, you know."

"It isn't everybody has a runaway," Janet said with satisfaction. "I've certainly something to write home about now," she declared, as the two turned to greet their friends.

"All right?" Gale asked anxiously as the others flung themselves from their horses and gathered solicitously around.

"Yes, but I'm going to sue Janet for damages," Phyllis declared, rubbing a bruised place tenderly. "She had no right to knock me off my horse."

"You had no business running into me," Janet laughed in turn.

"Our hearts were in our mouths when we saw Janet fly through the air over her horse's head," Val declared.

"She floats through the air with the greatest of ease----" Carol started to sing when Janet glared at her.

"Riding, especially runaways, gives me an appetite," Virginia said. "Suppose we have a bite of lunch."

"You are indeed my friend," Janet declared to Virginia. "You always know just what I need."

A half hour later the ride was resumed. Janet and Phyllis, to the amusement of their friends, both lowered themselves gingerly into their saddles. Their experience had left them jolted and bruised and before much riding they began to coax the others to camp for the rest of the night.

"We might as well," Tom said. "It's already nearing morning and this afternoon will see us at the K Bar O even if we take our time."

They camped on the plains and decided not to put the tents up for the few hours that they meant to remain there. The girls rolled in blankets, feet toward the campfire, and in a few moments all but Gale and Virginia were dozing.

Lying flat on her back, the earth warm beneath her, staring up at the stars

overhead, Gale felt suddenly tiny, so infinitesimal. The plain was so wide, the sky so near, the stars so bright----

“What are you thinking about?” Virginia asked from beside her.

“The stars,” Gale answered. “Didn’t somebody call them the windows of heaven?”

“Are you looking for the angels with their golden harps?” Virginia laughed.

“Yes,” Gale agreed with a smile. “Do you think I’ll see any?”

“Never can tell,” Virginia said, smothering a yawn. “Which one is your wagon hitched to?”

“Which angel?” queried Gale.

“No, silly, which star?”

“That one up there, see it? The little one, all sparkly. Oh!” Gale laughed, “It winked at me.”

“Not very big,” Virginia commented, squinting at the sky. “Whyn’t you pick a big one?”

“Wait until it grows up,” Gale murmured. “Just like me, wait until I grow up!”

“Won’t that be sompin’,” Virginia giggled. “What are you going to be? A female Lindbergh?”

“Never can tell,” Gale said. “Maybe I’ll be another Columbus.”

“I don’t know whether there are any lands left to discover, so you might have a little difficulty along that line,” was Virginia’s opinion. “Meanwhile--I’m getting sleepy.”

She fell silent and Gale, too, pulled her blanket closer for a cool wind had sprung up. The last thing she remembered before Tom brought them all wide awake with a loud banging on the frying pan was the wild, untamed howl of a coyote.

With the first dancing rays of the sun, the riders were up and about their business. Packs securely fastened on the pack horses and the girls mounted, they started on their way. As always when riding their spirits rose with the sun. Tom was playing his harmonica and Janet and Carol both insisted on giving voice to the tune Tom was playing until the other girls threatened dire punishment unless they stopped.

Noon found them riding into the valley with the K Bar O ranch house just ahead

of them. To the girls it seemed as though there were a great many men gathered about the bunkhouse and the corral. The very air seemed tinged with suspense and mystery. Unconscious that they did so, all the riders spurred their horses on at an increased pace. Why should there be such activity where usually there were peace and orderliness unless something had happened? It was as if a cloud of trouble had descended on the K Bar O.

“I wonder what’s the matter?” Virginia murmured to Gale. “I hope nothing has happened----”

“We’ll soon find out,” Gale answered as the horses trotted up to the corral and the girls dismounted. “Look, isn’t that the Sheriff?”

“Hello, there, youngsters!” Gale’s uncle came forward and at his heels came Sheriff Colman.

“What’s up, Dad?” Tom asked anxiously.

The Sheriff looked a bit sheepish and Mr. Wilson frowned in annoyance.

“It’s the--rustlers,” the Sheriff said finally. “They’ve escaped--vamoosed!”

“Gone?” Valerie asked incredibly. “But how----”

“We locked ’em in the bunkhouse last night; when we came to the bunkhouse--they were gone.”

“The three of them?” Virginia asked.

Mr. Wilson nodded. “We think they are hiding somewhere around the ranch. They couldn’t have gone far.”

Carol cocked a speculative eye in the direction of Gale and Valerie. “I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes with the three of them loose.”

“You’re cheerful,” Gale told her.

“It does make me rather uncomfortable,” Valerie said, uneasily glancing over her shoulder as if she expected the Mexican to rise up behind her.

“Don’t let their threats frighten you,” the Sheriff said heartily. “There are enough of my deputies here on the ranch to subdue an army. You’ll be safe.”

“I hope so,” Valerie said, but her tone wasn’t very confident.

“How about some lunch?” Tom put in. “You can tell us about what’s happened then.”

“Where’s Mother?” Virginia asked.

“She’s gone into town to stay with the Johnsons a few days--until we find these bandits,” her father replied. “I wish you girls hadn’t come back right now.”

“We thought we were coming to peace and quiet,” Phyllis laughed. “Instead we walk into a----”

“Riot,” supplied Janet.

Luncheon was a spasmodic affair, interrupted by deputies wanting a consultation with the Sheriff, and with discussions as to where the men might be hiding. The hours between luncheon and dinner passed and still the outlaws were not found. They eluded capture with the elusiveness of ghosts. The Sheriff was angry and chagrined. It didn’t speak well for his prowess as an officer of the law to have criminals escape him so constantly.

The girls were worried. Each believed that the bandits would try to seek revenge on the two who had been responsible for their capture. Valerie especially had unpleasant memories of Pedro and his knife.

Gale and Virginia alone held the opinion that the outlaws wouldn’t linger near the ranch when there were so many officers about. Why should they risk their freedom for revenge? It seemed silly to fear the angry threats made when the Sheriff and his men captured the bandits. Those kind of men were notoriously brave talkers, but when it came to putting their deeds into words they were slow in action. Gale believed their bluster had been a mere attempt to cover up their fear of the law. She refused to be worried over their escape.

“I’ll wager they are in Mexico by now,” she said confidently to Valerie as the two stood at the window of their room preparatory to jumping into bed.

“The Sheriff doesn’t think so,” Valerie said bluntly. “Or if he does, why didn’t he follow them?”

“Because they didn’t leave a trail,” a jolly voice said behind them and Janet and Carol trailed into the room through the communicating door. Both were clad in flowing pajamas and robes and seated themselves cross-legged on the bed.

“I happen to know,” Carol said in a mysterious whisper, “that the Sheriff and his men trailed the outlaws to the creek and there the trail was lost.”

“Isn’t that always the way?” Janet said wearily. “I thought we were going to have some excitement but all the fun is over before we get here.”

In answer to her words a volley of shots rang out from the ranch yard.

Valerie frowned on her friend. "All the fun is over, eh? I wonder what that was?"

"I'm going to find out," Gale said and ran from the room with Valerie at her heels.

Carol and Janet remained calmly on the bed. When Gale and Valerie returned Janet looked up in inquiry.

"Merely one of the patrolling sentries shooting at a shadow," Gale said dryly.

"Hm," Janet yawned. "Those fellows are so nervous if they suddenly looked in a mirror they would shoot themselves!"

"How come you didn't run when you heard the shooting?" Valerie wanted to know. "For all you know it might have been a lot of excitement."

Janet shook her head. "I've got a sixth sense that tells me when there is excitement in the air."

"It doesn't tell you when your horse is going to run away though, does it?" Carol asked teasingly.

"Please," Janet begged, "that is a painful subject. Let's not talk of it--I've still got a couple of bruises. I'm going to bed," she announced suddenly.

"It's about time," Carol declared, jumping up.

"Why do you say that?" Janet demanded. "If you're so sleepy why didn't you go hours ago?"

"Because I can't go without you, darling," Carol said sweetly. "I can't sleep even if I do, because when you come in you are sure to fall over something and scare all sleep out of me."

"I do not," Janet protested.

When the two, still arguing, had closed the door to their room Gale and Valerie prepared for bed.

"I shall probably dream of Pedro," Valerie said as she jumped between the covers. "That fellow haunts me!"

"Nonsense," Gale laughed. "Don't let your mind dwell on it. Anyway," she sighed, "we'll be going home in three days and then you can get all the sleep you like."

“Just the same,” Val murmured, “I won’t ever forget that knife.”

When the lights were out and sleep had come to the girls, Gale slept dreamlessly, peacefully. But Valerie tossed and fretted, pursued in her dreams by Pedro and his knife, which, with the fantasy of dreams, had grown to new and large proportions.

Chapter XVII

REVENGE

Their horses were fresh and eager and the girls had a hard time holding them into a leisurely walk on the way back from town. Gale and Valerie--the other girls had remained at the ranch house to pack some of their things, for they were to leave for the East day after tomorrow--were the only ones who had felt eager for an early morning ride. Tom had saddled their horses for them and the girls had ridden into Coxtown to get a last look at the little western town. They made some trifling purchases in the general store and now were on their way back to the ranch.

The sun shone down, its brilliance sending little dust eddies up from the road. At the roadside a bird twittered.

"Funny," Valerie said, "I never thought of them as having birds in Arizona."

Gale laughed. "Why shouldn't they?"

"I don't know. It just never occurred to me. Did it you?"

"I read about them in an encyclopedia," Gale confessed laughingly. "I'm afraid that is the way most of us become acquainted with places we've never seen. It's a very unsatisfying way."

"I suppose you have an idea in your head to go to see all the places in the world some day?"

"How did you guess?" Gale demanded gayly. "That is just what I've been keeping up my sleeve. Do you possess the same secret yen?"

"I do," Val said smilingly. "But the places I want to see are a little far to walk and there's not much hope of my going any other way."

They turned off the trail into the ranch yard and Janet hailed them frantically.

"Hi there! Come and hear the news!" she called.

"What is it?" Gale asked as they dismounted and left their horses' reins dangling.

"Hear ye, hear ye," Carol chanted, "the Sheriff is about to capture the famous outlaws."

“Just like he did several times,” Val said dryly.

“This time he is not going to let them out of his sight one minute until they are sentenced and on their way to a federal prison,” Janet said.

“How does he propose to catch them?” Gale asked, sitting astride the banister.

“A little while ago,” Janet said, her voice a confidential whisper, “a rider came from across the valley somewhere. He says one of the bandits was seen about five miles on the other side of Coxtan.”

“Only seen!” Valerie echoed.

“Is that all?” Gale added. “I thought they at least had the three of them tied to a tree or something.”

“Let me finish!” Janet said. “He also said that they have Pedro--he fell off his horse and hurt himself--or something,” she added vaguely. “Anyway they’ve got him.”

“Let’s hope they keep him,” Val said heartily. “Why doesn’t the Sheriff go get him?”

“He is,” Carol interrupted. “He and his men are getting their horses ready now. We’re going, too,” she continued. “We coaxed and coaxed until Mr. Wilson said we might ride along if we didn’t get in the way. Everybody’s going,” she added.

“Well, I’m not!” Val said positively. “Everybody can go that wants to. I’m staying right here!”

“Oh, Val,” Janet began coaxingly.

“I’m staying with Val,” Gale agreed. “Nine chances out of ten it will be a wild goose chase anyway.”

“You’re going to miss all the fun,” Carol threatened.

“I don’t mind,” Val said. “Besides, I don’t want even one more glimpse of Pedro or I’ll dream about him again.”

“Oh, but everybody is going,” Janet said, “Virginia--Madge--Tom--us,” she enumerated.

“You’ll be quite alone,” added Carol.

“We don’t mind,” Gale assured them.

From the house came Virginia and Phyllis and Madge. Their voices were added

to Janet's and Carol's, but Gale and Valerie remained firm in their decision to remain at the ranch. The girls trailed off to the corral to get their mounts. Valerie and Gale walked with them and joined Mr. Wilson, Tom, and the Sheriff where they were talking.

"Going along?" Tom asked.

"No," Gale shook her head. "We're of the opinion it is all a wild goose chase so we're staying here."

"I rather agree with you," he said in a low tone, "but it is up to the Sheriff to follow every lead you know or the people will say he is shirking his duty. I don't believe those fellows are even in the United States any more," he continued. "Anyway, it won't take long to make sure."

"I hope it is true," Valerie said. "I've had the jitters ever since those fellows got away again."

"Well, Val, I'll give Pedro your regards when I see him," Carol said as the girls rode up.

"You don't have to bother," Val said hastily.

"You better come along," Janet laughed. "My sixth sense tells me we are due for some excitement."

"No," Val said. "I'm going to stay here and make fudge."

"Now why didn't you tell me that sooner?" Tom said aggrievedly. "Fudge is my weakness."

"We'll save you some," Gale promised. "Adios!"

The girls and the Sheriff, with his men and Mr. Wilson and Tom, rode away in a cloud of dust. Valerie and Gale leaned on the corral fence, watching them out of sight. Then they turned and proceeded leisurely up to the house.

"I wish them luck," Valerie declared. "And now for the fudge!"

The K Bar O possessed a very fine Chinese cook who did the cooking for the ranch house, as well as the bunkhouse, and he presided in solitary estate over the kitchen and its equipment. Loo Wong had very definite ideas about who was privileged to set foot in his domestic kingdom, and Mrs. Wilson was the only one whom he greeted with his wide smile. The "boss-lady" was welcome at any time, but woe to the others who tried to muss up his kitchen.

Now as the girls entered the ranch house and approached the kitchen they went

on tiptoe. Together they peeped around the door. Everything was spick and span, but Loo Wong was nowhere in sight.

“It seems the coast is clear,” smiled Gale.

“Ah, but if Loo Wong returns there will be fireworks,” Val declared. “However, here goes.”

From the closet Valerie brought the pan and the necessary ingredients while Gale sat on the edge of the table and watched. The brown mixture was on the stove and a delicious odor filled the room. When Valerie took the pan from the fire to beat the fudge Gale stuck an experimental finger in it for a taste.

“Ouch!” she cried.

Valerie giggled. “You might have known it was hot,” she said unsympathetically.

“Just the same, it tastes good,” Gale declared. “When can I have a piece?”

“When it gets cold!” Valerie said. “Come along, young lady,” she said, leading Gale into the other room. “Let it alone for a while.”

The girls took magazines and settled themselves for the rest of the afternoon. The silence was undisturbed but for the occasional rustling of paper when a page was turned. Val got up and turned on the radio. Soft music filtered into the room.

“Imagine,” Gale smiled lazily from her comfortable position, “way out here we can dance to music from California or New York.”

“Hm,” Val answered, executing a few intricate steps from sheer joy and happiness.

“Val,” Gale continued teasingly, coaxingly, “how about that fudge? It is a shame to leave it all by itself in the kitchen.”

“It ought to be cold enough now,” was Val’s opinion and there was a concerted rush for the kitchen.

With appropriate ceremony Val cut the candy and each of them chose a piece.

“Ah,” Gale murmured. “It is delicious, delightful, de----” Her voice died slowly away.

Standing in the doorway was Loo Wong looking mightily displeased and angry. He took in the two girls and then the dirty dishes piled on the sink. With difficulty Gale swallowed the last remaining bit of her fudge as Loo Wong took a further step toward them.

“We’ll wash the dishes,” Val said hastily, seeking to placate him.

Gale held out the fudge. “H-Have a piece,” she invited.

Loo Wong looked from one girl to the other. Slowly he reached out and took a piece of candy. Wonderingly he bit into it and a slow grin spread over his yellow face.

“Missy alle same fline cook,” he declared. “You teach Loo Wong?”

If the girls had looked at each other they would have laughed so neither glanced at the other. Both of them had expected dire results for musing Wong’s kitchen, but instead he wanted them to teach him to make fudge.

Gale, inwardly shaking with mirth, sat on the table and watched while Val instructed the Chinaman. Loo Wong might be adept at making flapjacks and other western specialties, but when it came to candy he wasn’t so artful. He insisted on doing things wrong and Val was becoming exasperated. But finally it was done, and set out to cool. Loo Wong, the grin of a delighted child on his face, hands hidden in voluptuous sleeves, bowed low and went out to the bunkhouse to start supper.

“I wouldn’t have missed that for anything,” Gale declared with a hearty laugh. “When he first came in I expected no less than murder. Instead----”

“We better wash the dishes,” Val declared. “He might take it into his head to come back. It was funny, wasn’t it?” she murmured laughingly. “He looked so serious all the time, too. And you,” she said, “you wouldn’t help me explain it to him.”

Gale laughed. “He asked you. Besides, I was enjoying myself,” she added.

“There!” Val sighed when the dishes were clean and tucked away in their proper places. “Now everything is just as we found it.”

“I’m going back to my magazine,” Gale declared. “I wonder when the girls will get back?”

Above the music on the radio a knock sounded.

“Maybe Loo Wong has returned,” Val said with a laugh, jumping up and going to the kitchen.

At the same time another knock came on the front door.

“What is this?” she heard Gale murmur as she got up to see who was there.

Val pulled open the kitchen door and stumbled back in amazement. Terror gripped her heart and her hands were suddenly cold. She caught at the table for support.

“What do you want--here?” she asked through dry lips.

The man who stood on the threshold advanced slowly into the room and closed the door behind him. All too well she had recognized him. It was Pedro, the Mexican who had sworn revenge. He was here, the Sheriff hadn't caught him. Slowly she began to back away toward the other room. Perhaps together she and Gale could do something. Possessed solely with an unreasoning terror she turned and fled into the living room where she flung herself on Gale.

“Gale--what'll we do?” she demanded wildly.

“Keep your chin up,” Gale said into Val's ear. “It seems we have two visitors.”

“Two?” Val said in surprise. “Who--oh!”

While Pedro entered from the kitchen, Val faced the other man whom Gale had been forced to let in at the front door. It was the bank bandit, the same man who with his partner they had held up in the cabin when the Sheriff arrested the three. The man who had boasted that no jail could hold him. It seemed he had spoken the truth for here he was again, free.

Pedro looked across at his companion who was fingering a horsehair rope and smiled. That smile made the girls' blood run cold. It was like an evil shadow of what was to come.

Gale felt Val's hand tighten convulsively on hers. She looked at her friend. Poor Val, she looked scared to death. Gale hoped she didn't show her own fright as plainly. Somehow, the knowledge that Valerie was frightened and was counting on her, Gale, for help, served to banish some of Gale's own terror. When one was terror-stricken, one couldn't think clearly and goodness knew, they were in need of some straight, clear thinking at this moment. How had these men eluded the police so long? How *had* they managed to keep in the vicinity and remain hidden from their pursuers?

“How--how did you get here?” Gale said nervously. “We thought----”

“We were miles away, eh?” the outlaw said with a loud laugh. “We couldn't leave without payin' a final visit to you. It was easy to get your friends off the ranch.”

“But what if we had gone with them?” Gale demanded, wishing desperately that

they *had* gone with the others.

“We’d have tried another way,” he said calmly. “You ride alone sometimes.”

“But it is nicer so,” Pedro put in. “No one will hear you--scream!”

Valerie, who had been listening in frightened and worried silence, now permitted herself a gleam of triumph. They supposed no one would hear, did they? Loo Wong was in the bunkhouse. In fact, he might at any moment come here to the big ranch house. And surely he would hear? Val smiled to herself. Both girls had pretty good lungs and once they let out a yell, Loo Wong would have to have bad ears indeed not to hear them!

“Loo Wong,” Val said in the barest of whispers to Gale.

Gale nudged her friend in understanding. It was well that they did have a faint hope of help, but it would not do to let these men know of Loo Wong. They had come here bloodthirsty and revengeful. What would happen before they left? Of that she scarcely dared to think. The outlaw was fingering his rope again, in a most unpleasant manner. What was he contemplating? She shivered at the malicious look on his face. They might try anything, they were utterly ruthless. She wished frantically that there was some way in which they might summon Loo Wong.

“No, as I said, we couldn’t leave without paying a visit to you,” the outlaw continued. “Did you ever see anybody horsewhipped?” he asked next.

Gale paled at the suggestion. “You can’t mean to--you must be mad!” she said.

“Oh, an’ I might as well tell you, there’s no use yellin’ for that crazy cook o’ the Wilsons. My pal is takin’ care of him.”

That took all the wind out of the girls’ sails. It was the final blow. Now they were certainly cornered. All their friends away and Loo Wong--incapacitated.

“Are you mad to come here like this?” Gale said stormily. She had decided it was better to put up a staunch front. “You know what will happen when you are caught, and you will be caught! The Sheriff will shoot you on sight!”

“We won’t be here,” the man said confidently. “Tonight we’re leavin’ the country for good, eh, Pedro?”

“Sí,” replied his companion with a wide grin. “We go ver’ fast.”

“Not fast enough to get away,” Gale said confidently. “And when they catch you----”

“That’s enough! They’re not goin’ to catch us,” he repeated, jerking his rope between his hands and taking a firm grip on the handle.

Gale wished suddenly that they had not come to Arizona at all this summer. But then when they had started out who had thought things might come to this? The West nowadays was supposed to be calm and orderly, with no traces of the old-time Billy the Kid and his confederates. They had wanted adventures and now they were certainly getting them.

“I wonder if Janet’s sixth sense told her of this,” Val murmured, with a dry attempt at humor.

“Ever since you landed here things have been poppin’,” the outlaw resumed, fixing a stern eye on Gale. “First you grab the bank money and land us in jail. Then you hand us over to the Sheriff again.”

“And we’ll do it a third time,” Gale said.

“Not when we get through,” the man assured her. “I reckon we’ve got a little score to settle and we’re goin’ to do it--now!”

Chapter XVIII

PREMONITION

The Adventure Girls, with their companions, rode along briskly through the bright sunshine. They were all anxious to reach the spot where the outlaws had been as soon as possible so they did not dawdle along the way.

“Gale and Val don’t know what they’re missing,” Janet declared as they jogged along. “It’s not every day you can join in a chase for bandits.”

“But just think of them lounging around eating big chunks of fudge,” Carol said mischievously.

Janet frowned on her. “Must you give voice to such disturbing thoughts? If they don’t save me a piece, I’ll never forgive them,” she added darkly.

“What’s the matter with you?” Virginia asked Phyllis as the latter rode along between Virginia and Tom.

“I?” Phyllis laughed, “I’ve got a funny feeling that I’d like to run back to the ranch. Call it a premonition or----”

“A hunch,” supplied Tom. “Well, it’s about time we called a halt. I’m thirsty,” he declared, sliding from his saddle and approaching the little stream beside which the party had halted.

The afternoon was wearing fast away and long shadows were appearing under the trees.

“Say, Sheriff, when do you reckon we’ll find these fellows?” Tom wanted to know.

“’Bout two, three hours yet,” the Sheriff replied.

“That means we’ll be riding back to the ranch in the moonlight,” put in Madge.

“For which three cheers,” added Janet. “I like night riding.”

When they remounted, Phyllis declared her intention of returning to the ranch house. It took a bit of determination to persuade the others to leave her, but she was firm about it and finally watched them ride off without her. Then she turned her horse and headed back to the K Bar O. She was in no hurry now, so she let

her pony proceed at a leisurely walk.

It was strange, this feeling she had, that she should go back to her friends. She could not tell why she should feel so. There was certainly nothing that could happen to them at the ranch. Yet she had that queer feeling that there was something doing, something in which she should have a part.

She looked up at the setting sun. It would be dark before she reached the ranch house and, she plotted mischievously, she would surprise Gale and Valerie. Pounce on them all unaware. Behind her sounded the beat of hoofs and Tom rode into sight.

“Hi, there!” he called. “Wait up for a pal.”

“Going home, too?” she demanded.

“Yep,” he nodded, reining his horse in beside hers. “I thought you might get lost, so I’ll be your guide.”

“Was it me or was it Val’s fudge,” Phyllis asked suspiciously, “that made you decide to come along?”

“Well now,” Tom drawled, a twinkle in his eye, “I reckon the fudge was an added inducement.”

“I thought so,” laughed Phyllis.

“That hunch of yours must have been strong to take you back to the ranch,” Tom declared after a while.

“It’s strange,” Phyllis frowned. “I can’t account for it.”

“Hunches are funny things,” Tom agreed. “Sometimes they’re right and sometimes--well, sometimes they’re not so good.”

“Do you get them?” Phyllis asked.

“Lots of times,” he agreed. “I remember once a couple years ago, I was out night riding with the herd. I made up my mind to return to the ranch in the middle of the night. I came to a fork in the trail and a hunch told me to take the trail to the right, so I did. Well, all of a sudden my horse balked and refused to budge another step. He was right stubborn about it too. I reckon I called him everything I could think of and used my whip a lot, too. But he just set back on his haunches and refused to go on.

“It was so dark I couldn’t see a thing of what was ahead an’ thought maybe Dusty was afraid of something. Usually he was the best-behaved horse on the K

Bar O.”

“What did you do?” Phyllis asked interestedly.

“I got down and took out my flashlight. I got a habit of carryin’ a light with me, and turned it ahead of us. Did my hair stand on end! Here I had been trying to drive him off a sixty-foot cliff. All he would have had to take was one step to land us both in kingdom come.”

“He had good reason to be stubborn,” Phyllis murmured in awe. “I didn’t know horses had such sense!”

“Yep, you can trust a horse’s judgment in preference to a man’s sometimes,” Tom said. “Especially in the country out here.”

They rode along, chatting amiably, while the sun sank farther and farther out of sight.

“Boy, am I hungry!” Tom declared. “I hope Loo Wong has supper ready.”

“But he doesn’t know we’re coming,” Phyllis reminded him.

“Surely Gale and Val intend to eat,” Tom said. “There will be enough for us, too.”

When they rode into the ranch yard it was dark and the windows of the bunkhouse and the ranch house were gleaming yellow. Three horses stood saddled by the corral. When Phyllis and Tom rode up and dismounted, Tom went across and examined the horses curiously. He was back at Phyllis’ side in a moment.

“Something funny going on here,” he said in a low undertone. “The place is too quiet to be natural.”

“My hunch was right,” Phyllis murmured in return. “But what is it? Don’t you know those three horses?”

“No, never saw ’em before,” he answered. “Let’s go to the bunkhouse and see if we can find Loo Wong.”

Cautiously they crossed the ranch yard and peered in the bunkhouse window. Phyllis involuntarily caught her breath at what they saw.

Loo Wong was seated against the wall and directly in front of him, across the table, his back to the window and door, sat another man, a dirty, unkempt individual. The latter had his feet propped on the table and a rifle aimed squarely at Loo Wong’s head. Loo Wong was glaring fruitlessly at his enemy. The

situation was highly injurious to his oriental pride and this disgusting individual was keeping him from his duties in the kitchen. Wong was properly angry, but he had no desire to resort to violence and perhaps end up with a bullet in him from the other's gun, so he submitted impassively.

"What can we do?" Phyllis demanded of Tom.

Neither of the two was armed, but it was imperative that they rescue Loo Wong and determine what, if anything, had happened to Gale and Valerie. Tom pulled his hat, the usual ten gallon size, farther down on his forehead and grinned maliciously.

"You stay here," he directed in a tone that brooked no argument.

Around by the door was piled firewood. Loo Wong was negligent in carrying his wood into the kitchen and usually commissioned one of the cowboys to do it, but today no one had bothered. Tom chose a piece that would be admirable as a club and approached the door.

Not by a glance or a sound did Loo Wong betray himself when he saw the door slowly open and the face of the young boss appear. He kept his almond eyes fixed on the man opposite him, hands hidden in his enveloping sleeves, face perfectly impassive. What was going on in his mind it was impossible to tell.

Phyllis, watching at the window, wondered how in the world he managed to sit so perfectly still. She, herself, was almost dancing in impatience. She expected to see the outlaw whirl about and shoot at Tom any minute. It was impossible that he could be wholly ignorant of Tom's presence. She held her breath as Tom shut the door behind him and approached catlike to his prey. She saw the man suddenly straighten in his chair and stand up. He turned and at the same time Tom hurled himself forward. The man fired his rifle and Phyllis instinctively ducked. It was fortunate that she did, for the bullet crashed through the glass over her head. When she cautiously raised her eyes to the window again, the outlaw was on the floor and Loo Wong was grinning at Tom.

Phyllis left the window and ran to the door. She wanted to get up to the ranch house and see if Gale and Val were safe and sound, but she wanted company, for something told her she might run into trouble. Ever since she had seen that man guarding Loo Wong, she had a secret conviction that the girls were in trouble. If they were, it was up to her, Tom, and Loo Wong, to get them out of it. The Sheriff and the others wouldn't be back for hours yet.

"That'll hold him for a while," Tom declared as she appeared. He dusted his

hands and turned to the Chinese cook. "What happened, Wong?"

Laboriously and in his funny English, Loo Wong proceeded to acquaint the others with the details of how the man had surprised him at work and held him prisoner at the point of a gun. Of the two girls in the ranch house, he knew nothing. He had not known the man who accosted him had had companions.

"When did he come, Loo Wong?" Tom asked.

"Mebbe one, almost one hour," the Chinaman said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Time flies."

"Don't you think we better go up to the house?" Phyllis asked Tom worriedly.

"Yes, come along, Wong!" Tom said turning to the door.

"One moment, please," the Chinaman said and disappeared into the kitchen.

"What do you suppose he is after?" Phyllis asked impatiently.

"I don't know," Tom said with a half smile. "He has a funny idea in his head, I suppose."

He was as anxious as Phyllis to get to the ranch house. He believed, now, that the hunt the Sheriff and the others had gone on was a hoax. For some reason the outlaws had come here to the ranch, of that he was certain, and he thanked his stars he had decided to return to the K Bar O with Phyllis. He knew the men, on the day the Sheriff had arrested them, had sworn to get even with the two girls who were responsible for their capture, but he had not dreamed that they would attempt anything--above all, here at the ranch. He tried not to seem worried in front of Phyllis, but he was.

Loo Wong appeared from the kitchen brandishing his meat cleaver. The wide, sharp blade gleamed dully in the lamplight.

"Don't aim that thing at me," Tom laughed. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Show blandits tlwo, thlee thing," Loo Wong said gravely.

"You'll show them two or three stars if you hit them with that," Phyllis declared. "Let's go, Tom."

The three stepped from the bunkhouse and started across the yard. From the house ahead of them came a crash and the light in the front room went out. A shout arose, then another.

"Stay here, Phyllis," Tom said, starting forward at a run. "Come along, Wong."

“Velly fast!” responded the Chinaman, his cleaver clasped tightly in his hand, ready to smash the first thing that accosted him.

Chapter XIX

HELP

The horsehair whip was heavy and long. It cracked ominously as the outlaw swung it once around his head and brought it down on the floor.

Val jumped as it snapped scarcely six inches from her ankle. Two high spots of color burned in her cheeks and her eyes were blazing. She was beginning to conquer her terror and to feel exasperated with the situation, it was so like a melodramatic “thriller” of the movies. She was sure these men wouldn’t dare use the whip on them, but--she glanced apprehensively at Pedro, and saw his knife once more between his caressing fingers. Darn the man! Did he always have to look so much like a--pirate? Mentally she decided that was just the appearance he gave, ragged, dirty, daring--a pirate who was ready to make his victims walk the plank. Val wished frantically that their friends would return and upset the outlaws’ plans. Of course they wouldn’t dare to harm Gale and her, but just the same she wanted to be rid of them.

Gale was not as confident of escape from injury as Val. She believed the men were determined to seek the revenge which they claimed. Their threatening appearance certainly did not belie their words. The sight of the whip curled in the leader’s hand was enough to convince Gale of their purpose. They intended to use the whip on the girls, and unless something happened to interfere----

Gale was glad Val was conquering her terror. It seemed after the first surprise and terror were over, Val rallied surprisingly. Now she was standing beside Gale, calm and haughty. If the two of them kept their wits about them, they might be able to find a means of escape from the situation. But how? They could not look for help from their friends because they were still miles away. It was up to them to either take the horsewhipping, or to rebel and overthrow the tyranny of these two bandits. With lightning glances, Gale looked about the room for something, anything that might help, for she was determined to fight.

The girls were standing before an open window. The night breeze faintly rustled the curtain. Before them was the lamp that lighted the room, standing on a table among books and magazines. At one end of the room, effectively blocked by Pedro, was the door to the dining room and the kitchen beyond. At the other side

of the room was the front door by which the chief outlaw had entered. A dash to either of the doors would be useless.

Pedro watched with a pleased grin while his companion stepped closer to the girls. Instinctively the girls gave ground until they were flat against the wall--by the window.

“Val,” Gale whispered.

“Yes?”

“Can you jump out the window in a minute?”

“Half a minute,” Val said at once. “But what----”

“Get ready,” Gale murmured urgently.

Gale had an idea. True it was a long chance, but it might work. If the room was suddenly plunged in darkness, the outlaws would momentarily be nonplussed. That moment was all they needed. Once outside they might have a chance of outrunning or tricking their pursuers. If they stayed here in the room, the whip was bound to fall on them. As it was, the bandit was swinging it viciously and it took agility to avoid the stinging lash.

Obedient to Gale’s command to get ready to drop out of the window, Val half turned to face the wall.

“Don’t think you can get out that way,” the outlaw said. “We’ve got you now and we’re going to settle a few things!” He swung the whip and it descended with a crack on Val’s shoulders.

At the same time Gale launched herself forward and with one sweep of her arm knocked the lamp to the floor. With a ringing crash, the room was plunged into darkness. She heard Pedro shout to his partner as she saw Val’s figure outlined against the window when her friend climbed over the sill. It all happened in a split second and Gale sprang to the front door which the outlaw had deserted when he sprang after Valerie. But ere she reached the door Pedro was behind her and a heavy hand on her shoulder pulled her stumbling back into the room. She eluded him and sprang away. She had the advantage of the bandits, for she knew the Wilson living room and she knew what to avoid but the men didn’t. They thrashed about, stumbling over the furniture and muttering angrily. Sliding along the wall she reached the dining room door and slipped through while the men still sought her in the darkness.

She stepped into the silence of the other room and bumped into someone. She

drew back with a stifled exclamation. Had the men stationed another of their friends in here?

“Gale?” a voice demanded.

“Tom! Quick, they’ll get away!” she said.

“How many are there?” he asked.

“Two. Oh, do be careful!”

“Phyllis and Val are outside, go out to them,” he said and pushed her to one side. He and Phyllis and Wong had met Valerie when she dropped from the window.

In quick strides he entered the living room and in another minute had flung himself on one of the men. Together they struggled in the darkness. Loo Wong had come up silently behind Gale and now he followed Tom into the confusion.

“They’ll kill each other,” Phyllis declared nervously as she and Val joined Gale.

“Tom has a hefty punch and I hope he uses it,” Valerie said determinedly. “I--oh!”

A revolver shot had crashed through the sound of struggle and there was an accompanying groan.

“Tom?” Gale called uncertainly.

When there was no answer she crept forward and into the living room. Suddenly all had become quiet and she scarcely dared to press the switch to light the overhead lights for fear of what she might see. The light disclosed Tom swaying over the prostrate form of the chief bandit, while Loo Wong sat calmly on Pedro’s chest, brandishing his meat cleaver.

“You’re hurt, Tom!” Gale said running forward.

“Just a scratch in the arm,” he answered. “I reckon we got these fellows this time.”

“Alle same velly blad business,” was Loo Wong’s opinion.

“Let me fix your arm, Tom,” Gale said.

“It’ll be all right,” he assured her.

But Gale insisted and after cutting away the bloody sleeve cleansed and wrapped the wound in clean bandages. As he had said it was not severe, but it was better that they should take no chances.

After Gale's first-aid treatment was over, Tom and Loo Wong locked the two desperadoes with their partner in the bunkhouse and there they stayed until the Sheriff returned.

The others returned to the ranch house to set the living room to rights. It was a wreck, table overturned, lamp broken, magazines torn, and chairs upside down.

"It looks as though a cyclone had hit the place," Phyllis declared.

"I'll send your Mother a lamp when I get home," Gale promised Tom. "It was my idea to put the place in darkness."

"You don't have to bother," he said laughingly. "You'll probably get a reward for capturing those fellows. We'll let the Sheriff buy the lamp."

"You and Loo Wong deserve the reward," Val put in. "We didn't do a thing."

"You captured them that time in the cabin," Tom said. "That's what the reward is for. I don't want any money. You can have every bit--to find some new adventures with," he added laughingly.

By the time the others arrived home some semblance of order had been restored but much of the furniture still showed signs of rough usage.

"It was all a wild goose chase," Janet greeted them, sinking into the first convenient chair. "I wish I had stayed home with you. Is there any fudge left?"

"Plenty," Valerie said. "Didn't you have any excitement?" she asked sweetly.

"Nary a crumb," Carol declared. "For once Janet's sixth sense was totally wrong."

"You mean it led in the wrong direction," Phyllis said. "You didn't need to chase off after the excitement. It came to the ranch."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Madge.

"What happened to Tom?" Virginia continued as her brother and the Sheriff and Mr. Wilson left the ranch house and walked toward the bunkhouse.

"Did he fall off his horse?" added Janet.

"He was shot," Phyllis said innocently, gleefully noting the sensation her words created.

"What's this?" Carol asked, rousing herself from a comfortable position. "Did I hear aright? Shot? How? By whom? And why?"

“Haven’t you noticed the living room is slightly awry?” Gale demanded.

“We thought maybe you were having football practice or something with the lamp,” Carol commented. “What happened?”

“Well, you see it was this way,” Valerie began mischievously, to keep them in suspense. “I was making fudge in the kitchen and you know how fussy Loo Wong is about his kitchen.”

“Don’t we!” Virginia agreed. “Did he catch you?”

“Yes, he did,” Gale laughed.

“And asked me to teach him to make fudge,” Valerie added.

“But what has that to do with mussing the living room?” Janet demanded. “I don’t see the point.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you, it was after that that the bank robbers called on us,” Valerie said nonchalantly.

“The bank robbers called on you,” Carol said slowly. “Are you joking?”

“No,” Gale assured her. “You’ll find three of them carefully subdued and locked in the bunkhouse.”

“One of them shot Tom,” Virginia said rather than asked.

“Exactly,” Phyllis agreed. “That was during the fight.”

“Fight? Don’t be so aggravating!” stormed Janet. “Give us the details!”

“All right,” Valerie said laughingly, “we’ll tell you, and maybe next time you will stay with us for your excitement.”

Phyllis told of her and Tom’s arrival at the ranch house and Gale and Valerie took turns describing what had happened at the ranch house. The other girls were half glad and half sorry that they had been absent. They were glad they had not had to face the two bandits, but at the same time sorry because they had missed the excitement.

“Gosh,” mourned Janet, “nothing happens when we are around.”

“Never mind,” consoled Valerie, “Tom says we will get a reward and you can help us spend it.”

“Hurrah! How much do you get?” demanded Carol brightly.

“I don’t know,” Gale answered. “Anyway, we shall probably have to wait until the prisoners are safely in jail. That means we won’t be able to go home day after tomorrow.”

“Oh well, if we stay another day or two it doesn’t make any difference,” Madge said, dismissing that subject abruptly. “What do you propose to do with your reward?”

“We hadn’t thought about it,” Valerie said. “We shall all have to put our heads together and think of something--not anything crazy!” she said with a glance at Janet and Carol.

“Do you insinuate that anything crazy might come from our heads?” the latter two demanded crisply.

“I have known such times,” Val laughed.

“My friend, you wound me deeply,” Janet said with mock tears. “My thoughts are always for the betterment of humanity.”

Carol coughed loudly over a smothered giggle. “Quite so,” she agreed. “But that doesn’t settle the question of what to do with the reward.”

“Perhaps we better wait and see if there really is a reward,” Gale suggested dryly.

“Meanwhile, let’s eat,” Carol proposed and the rest were unanimous in

agreement.

They all trooped to the kitchen, but there found Loo Wong already in the throes of making a late lunch and there was nothing they could do to help him so they went back to the living room to wait and to talk.

Chapter XX

REWARD

The sun was warm and dazzling. Gale felt uncomfortably hot as she rode along. The creak of saddle leather and the clop clop of her horse's hoofs were all the sounds that disturbed the stillness. Somehow she had lost the others when she stopped some distance back and now she rode alone.

It was the day the Adventure Girls had planned to leave for home, but they hadn't carried out their plans. Yesterday the notorious bandits had, under heavy guard, left for a federal prison. The Sheriff had bestowed the reward, one thousand dollars, upon the Adventure Girls. Now the question was, what were they to do with it? They had all agreed upon using it for some worthy cause rather than keeping it for themselves, but they couldn't find a worthy cause.

Dismounting from her horse, Gale let him drink from a tiny brooklet. A low, cheerily whistled tune caught her attention and she looked about for the whistler. Several yards from her, industriously whittling a wooden twig, sat a small boy, with ragged clothes and tangled curly hair. His eyes, when he looked up at Gale, were as blue as the skies overhead.

"Lo," he said with an engaging grin.

"Hello," she replied smilingly, dropping down beside him.

"Fine horse, that," he declared. "You're from the K Bar O, aintcha?"

"That's right," she answered. "Who are you?"

"I'm Bobby," he answered brightly.

She accepted this wondering who in the world Bobby might be. "You live around here?" she asked.

"On t'other side of the hill," he replied. "You're just visitin', huh?"

"Yes, I live in the East."

"Where?"

"In Marchton, that's a little town near the Atlantic Ocean," she replied.

“What’s an ocean?” he wanted to know.

“Why an ocean is a--um--a big body of water,” she said.

“Somethin’ like a lake, huh?”

“Something like it, only much bigger,” she assured him. “Don’t you learn about oceans in school?”

“I don’t go to school,” he replied.

“Why not?” Gale asked.

“Cause my Mother hasn’t any money for my clothes or books,” he answered brightly. “Anyway, I’m goin’ to be a cowboy when I get big and I don’t haveta know much for that.”

“Wouldn’t you like to go to school?” she persisted.

He bent over his knife and the wood he was whittling. “Aw, shucks,” he said. “Course I would. But I can’t. I talk to the riders a lot an’ Tom and Virginia too. They tell me stories and Virginia teaches me ’rithmetic sometimes.”

Gale wondered why Virginia had never mentioned the little boy to the Adventure Girls. Then she remembered when they had first arrived Virginia had casually talked about him, but the girls had gone off on their camping trip and he had not been mentioned again. Gale liked him, he seemed a bright little fellow, quick to learn and to imitate.

“I can ride an’ fish an’ shoot,” he bragged. “Course I don’t know much outa books, but I’ll get along.”

Gale marveled that a youngster, scarcely eight, could be so optimistic and have such a cheerful acceptance of his destiny. She felt a trifle guilty that she didn’t have such philosophy about the things she wanted but couldn’t have.

“Do you have a horse of your own?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted, “but Tom loans me one lots of times.”

“Want to take a ride on mine?” she asked.

His eyes sparkled joyfully at the suggestion and he murmured a bashful “Gee!”

“Go ahead,” she invited. “I’ll wait here for you.”

His legs didn’t reach to the stirrups, but horse and rider seemed welded together as Bobby urged the roan across the valley. At first Gale was afraid he might be

unseated, but she soon discovered she need have no fear. Bobby was a born rider, and knew as much about sticking in the saddle as Gale herself.

“He sure can run,” Bobby panted as he jumped off beside Gale and handed her the reins.

“He sure can,” she replied with a smile. She held out her hand and Bobby placed his in it. “Goodbye, Bobby,” she said cheerfully. “Maybe I’ll see you again before I go home.”

“I live in the cabin over by the creek,” he said. “Ma an’ me’ll be glad to see ya,” he declared.

“Oh, and Bobby,” she said, pausing, one foot in the stirrup. “If a fairy gave you a wish what would you wish?”

“I’d wish to go to school,” he answered promptly. “Are you a fairy?” he added.

“Hardly,” Gale said, “but I might meet one and I’ll tell her about you.”

As she rode away she looked back at the sturdy little figure standing gazing after her. He was such an oldish little chap for his years. What a pity he had to waste his active little brain because his mother had no money to send him to the country school. What Gale admired was his fortitude and readiness to accept the little good things that did come his way.

She had an idea in her head and all the way back to the ranch house it persisted in teasing her. But what would the other girls think of her idea? That she meant to find out as soon as possible. She dismounted at the corral and Jim came forward to take her horse. On the porch of the ranch house were gathered the Adventure Girls with Virginia.

“Aha, run away from us, will you?” accused Janet.

“You lost me,” Gale replied.

“We have been discussing ways of spending your reward,” Carol informed her. “We have about decided to save it for another trip out here next summer.”

“To meet some more bandits,” interposed Valerie dryly.

“That might not happen in another hundred years,” Virginia declared. “You would have to pick the summer that we were having trouble. Other years all is peaceful and serene.”

“Look,” Phyllis said laughingly, “if we hadn’t come out you might still be having trouble. We cleared everything up.”

“Of course,” Virginia laughed teasingly. “You’re good!”

“What do you think, Gale?” Madge asked.

“Hm?” Gale brought her gaze back from the tops of the far pine trees on the horizon. “About what?”

“You weren’t listening,” Janet accused.

Gale laughed. “No, I wasn’t,” she confessed. “What were you saying?”

“Don’t listen to them,” Val interrupted. “Each one has a worse idea how to spend the thousand dollars.”

“Haven’t you an idea that will put our minds at rest?” Phyllis demanded of Gale. “We really have to do something, you know. We start for home tomorrow and we haven’t much time.”

“Don’t you have a plan, Gale?” Janet demanded. “You must have, everybody else does. Come now, confess!”

“Yes,” Gale said, “I have a plan, and I’m wondering what you would think of it.”

“Well, we can’t think a thing unless you tell us what it is,” Carol said practically.

“Yes, Gale, tell us,” Phyllis agreed. “Yours will probably be the best. The rest of these weak minded people will soon suggest buying an airplane.”

“I resent that!” Janet said loudly. “What is the matter with an airplane?”

“Not a thing,” Phyllis consoled her. “I just----”

“Suppose we let Gale talk?” Madge cut in.

“This afternoon when I lost you girls I met a little boy. A cute little chap. About eight, I should say. He has the most trusting blue eyes and curliest hair----”

“Are you going to adopt him?” interposed Carol.

“Silly,” Gale said. “Let me finish. I talked to him quite a while. He is awf’ly cunning and smart--as smart as any of you,” she added wickedly.

“He must be smart to compare with us,” Janet declared modestly.

“Hush!” Valerie commanded. “Go on, Gale.”

“He asked me where I lived and I told him a little town on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. He wanted to know what an ocean was.”

“I hope you could tell him,” Carol murmured mischievously.

“I wish you could have seen him, girls. He is positively thirsting for knowledge. But he can’t go to school because his mother has no money with which to send him. It is a shame because an education would certainly not be lost on him. It made my heart ache just to see him and to hear him tell about how fortunate he was that Tom and Virginia and the other cowboys told him stories and taught him a little of arithmetic and spelling. He is so cheerful with what he has, his riding and fishing and hunting. He could be such a fine man because he has an insatiable ambition.

“I thought we might give him the thousand dollars. It would see him through the little country school here and by the time he is older he might be able to earn more. It would be such a good use to which to put our money. We could always remember how happy we made one little boy. It is something he wants more than anything else in the world. Just to look at him made me want it, too.

“Of course all you girls have a share in the reward and it is up to you to do as you please, but I can tell you if you should agree with me Bobby would love it--and you,” she finished.

“Hurrah for Bobby!” Carol said loudly. “I want to meet him.”

“Didn’t I say Gale’s plan would be the best?” Phyllis demanded, hugging Gale affectionately. “You always seem to know just what we’d like,” she told her chum.

Virginia hugged Gale too. “You’re a darling, Gale, to think of Bobby. I know he’ll be tickled pink. Let’s go tell him now.”

With one accord the girls ran to the corral and saddled their horses. Virginia, who had been to see Bobby often before, led the way to the broken down little cabin.

Gale had the check for the thousand dollars and the girls all agreed that she should be the one to present their gift to the little boy.

Before the cabin, its door hanging ajar on one rusty hinge, the girls dismounted. Virginia sent a ringing halloo into the interior and Bobby soon appeared. He gravely informed his visitors that his mother wasn’t home. He greeted Gale with a wide grin and smiled shyly at the other girls, who were all delighted with the appearance of their little protégé.

“Bobby, honey,” Virginia said, “Gale has something to tell you.”

“Yes, Bobby,” Gale said smiling broadly, “remember me telling you I might

meet a fairy when I was riding back to the ranch?”

“Did you?” he demanded eagerly.

“I did,” Gale said gravely. “I told her all about you and how fine a man you are. I told her you wanted more than anything in the world to go to school and what do you think?”

“What?” Bobby asked, his wide, earnest gaze fixed on Gale’s face.

“She gave me this.” Gale handed Bobby the check and at his puzzled expression continued: “It is worth a whole lot of money, enough to send you to school for a couple of years.”

He looked dazedly from one smiling face to the other and back at Gale. “I’m goin’ to school?” he said in a dazed voice.

“Yes, darling, as soon as it opens for the term,” Gale said.

To their surprise his lip puckered and he flung himself on Gale, hiding his face on her shoulder with a smothered sob. Across his blond head, Gale and Virginia exchanged a smiling glance, tears not far from the surface of either pair of clear eyes.

“Bobby,” Gale murmured, “aren’t you glad? Don’t you want to go to school?”

“Course I do,” he said, choking, “t-that’s why I’m cryin’.”

“Gosh,” Carol said when the girls rode away, leaving an ecstatic, beaming Bobby behind them. “I never knew it was so nice to play Santa Claus. We’ll have to do it often,” she said slyly tucking her handkerchief back into her pocket.

“I’m so glad you suggested giving the money to Bobby, Gale,” Val said, a suspicious thickness in her voice.

“So am I,” Janet declared, “but hang it all, I almost cried with him.”

“I guess we never realized before how fortunate we were,” Phyllis said, contemplating the blue sky overhead. “Didn’t it do something to you just now? I feel all sort of big inside. Like--like I wanted to be nice to everybody in the world.”

“It does make you happy just to make somebody else happy,” Madge agreed. “He is such a cunning little chap.”

“And worthy of anything we might do for him,” Virginia declared. “His mother has raised him with the best manners of any youngster in Arizona.”

“What happened to his father?” Valerie asked.

“He used to work in a silver mine,” Virginia said. “He and several other men owned it in partnership. Bobby’s father was killed trying to rescue one of the other men from a cave-in or something. I don’t know the exact facts. Bobby’s mother is wonderful with sewing and my mother and some other ladies from Coxtton keep her supplied. That is the only way they get along.”

“I wish we had had two thousand dollars,” Janet said.

“But if Bobby’s father owned a silver mine why don’t they have money?” Madge asked.

“The mine never amounted to much,” Virginia answered. “It was only a small vein of silver and it didn’t last very long.”

The girls returned to the ranch house, each with a little warm glow in her heart. Making Bobby happy as they had done, had shown each one how much happiness there is in giving joy to some one else.

The Wilsons had prepared a festive program for their guests’ last night at the ranch. There were music and dancing and chatter and laughter. The hilarity kept up for hours.

“You know,” Janet said, “I feel like celebrating tonight--for Bobby.”

“Strange as it may seem, I was thinking the same thing,” Phyllis declared.

“I used to get the jitters every time I thought of Pedro and his knife,” Val confided to Gale in a secluded dark corner of the porch where they had gone for a breath of air between spurts of gaiety. “Now I’m glad we did meet them as we did.”

“Why?” Gale wanted to know.

“Well, look what we did with the money,” Val said. “It was worth all our adventures to see that little boy’s face this afternoon.”

“He was just about overwhelmed,” Gale smiled softly. “It is amazing that he could be so starved for knowledge and contact with other youngsters his age.”

“Tomorrow we shall leave all this,” Val said, motioning to the trees and sky, lit by the giant yellow moon and sparkling stars, and the ranch house and the corral.

“Wasn’t it a worth while summer, though?” Gale asked. “We’re all so much better able to cope with the studies and struggles we’ll have this, our last term, in high school.”

“Where are you going to college?” Val asked suddenly.

“Why--I don’t know----” Gale said vaguely. “I want to go to Briarhurst. I don’t know if I shall, though.”

“That’s my aim, too. I shall probably----”

“Say, aren’t you having a good time?” Carol demanded through the window.

“Sure we are,” Val declared.

“Then come in and join the party,” Carol commanded.

“The queen commands,” laughed Gale. “We have to obey.”

The two went back to the living room and danced some more. The noise kept up until the wee hours of the morning when, out of sheer necessity, the girls went off to bed. Each had a vague suspicion that they would not be able to get up the next morning and get the early start on which they had planned.

Chapter XXI

ADIOS

Their fears were confirmed. About ten o'clock the next morning Gale and Valerie managed to leave their beds for breakfast. But when they appeared in the dining room they discovered that they were the first and only ones to make their appearance. Mrs. Wilson despatched Valerie to bestir Phyllis and Madge and Gale departed to rouse Carol and Janet.

She knocked loudly on their door but all remained blissfully quiet. She peeped around the corner of the door and beheld her two friends curled like kittens, enjoying their nap.

"Hey!" she yelled. "Last call for breakfast."

"Huh?" Carol cocked one sleepy eye in her direction while Janet remained in dreamland.

"I said," Gale repeated painstakingly, "it is the last call for breakfast."

"I don't want any," Carol said, turning over and burying her head in the covers.

"Come on, get up," Gale urged, shaking her friend, "we want to get an early start."

"Let's go home tomorrow," Carol begged. "I wanta sleep."

"We have to leave today," Gale insisted. "There can be no more putting it off. Come on, turn out, or I'll pour cold water on you!" she threatened.

At that declaration Carol managed to sit up, but she was half asleep as she tried to struggle out of her pajamas.

"Lazy bones, get out of there," Gale demanded of Janet.

The latter squinted frowningly at Gale. "Must you bother me?" she demanded. "Go away!"

"Not until you get up and dress," Gale said calmly. "We've got to get started."

"I want my breakfast," Janet said.

"Well, you won't get a bite unless you get up this minute!" Gale declared

vigorously.

“In that case,” Janet yawned, “I reckon I’ll do without it. Good night.”

Gale went to the door. “Virginia,” she called, “bring me a bucket of cold water. The colder the better!”

“What’s that for?” Janet demanded.

“To pour on you,” Gale said calmly.

“I’m up!” Janet declared, tossing back the covers and jumping out of bed.

She was up, but it took her and Carol at least another half an hour to complete their dressing. When finally they appeared for breakfast, it was lunch time. After lunch there was frantic last minute scrambling to collect baggage.

The old car in which they had arrived at the K Bar O was brought to the front of the ranch house and there the girls viewed it with frowns.

“That tire is certainly flat,” Carol declared. “It looks like a deflated pancake.”

“Jim and I’ll have it fixed in no time,” Tom offered.

“Brothers are good for something,” Janet murmured satisfactorily to Virginia.

“Where’s Phyllis?” Gale asked.

“I don’t know,” Janet said. “Isn’t she in the house with Val?”

Gale went into the living room and called but neither Phyllis nor Valerie answered.

“Perhaps she is down at the corral kissing her horse goodbye,” suggested Carol brightly.

“Go see,” Janet said.

“Go yourself,” Carol murmured lazily.

“I have it,” Janet said. “We’ll both go. Maybe Loo Wong has an extra piece of cake,” she whispered in Carol’s ear.

“The way those two departed I’ll bet they were thinking of food,” Madge commented.

“Phyllis isn’t down at the corral and neither is Val,” Janet informed them when, after a lengthy absence, she and Carol returned.

“Were you eating anything?” Madge demanded suspiciously.

“Of course not,” Carol said with dignity. “Didn’t we just have lunch?”

“Then wipe that chocolate icing off your tie,” Madge said laughingly.

“Look. Here they come. What in the world is Phyllis carrying?” Carol demanded wonderingly.

“A cactus,” Janet giggled. “What are you going to do with that?” she asked.

“Take it home with me,” Phyllis grinned, “for a souvenir. You can sit on it in the car,” she invited.

“Thoughtful of you,” Janet grimaced.

“There’s your tire all fixed,” Tom said, dusting himself off as he straightened up from his work.

“Gee, I’m glad it went flat here and not ten miles away,” Phyllis sighed. “Just think, we might have had to fix it.”

“I hope the old thing holds together until we reach Phoenix,” Janet said, looking the car over. “I wouldn’t want to walk.”

“Why that car is good for years yet,” Carol declared, a twinkle in her eye.

“Sure, if it just sits in the garage,” agreed Phyllis.

“It’s getting rusty already,” Janet said.

“Well, there is one consolation,” Carol murmured, “the horn can never rust away.”

“Why not?” Janet wanted to know.

“Because it’ll break up in honks!” Carol answered.

Carol had been sitting on the porch step with Janet, but suddenly she found herself catapulted into the dust.

“That’s for that terrible joke,” Janet said firmly. “Another one like that and we will make you ride on the rear bumper.”

“We better get going,” Madge put in. “It is getting late.”

The girls had had such a good time and they had grown fond of Virginia. It was hard to say goodbye.

“I wish you were coming East with us,” Gale said sadly.

“Couldn’t you?” Phyllis asked eagerly.

Virginia shook her head. "No can do. But maybe I can visit you some time. I hope you can come out here again, too."

"You will let us know how Bobby gets along in school?" Val asked. "We'll want to know."

"Of course," Virginia assured them. "I want you all to write to me, too. Don't forget."

After their goodbyes were over the girls piled into the car, Gale at the wheel. Ineffectively she pressed her foot on the starter. There was a whirr but the engine refused to break into the longed-for roar. The girls exchanged exasperated glances.

"I suppose we'll have to get out and push," Carol groaned.

"Nothing doing!" Janet balked at the suggestion. "What's the matter with the old thing anyway, Gale?"

Gale replied with a shrug of her shoulders and climbed out. She opened the engine hood and looked at the complicated array of gadgets. She knew a little, not much, about an automobile engine.

"Everything looks all right," Tom declared. "I'll get under and see what's what."

"How's it?" Phyllis asked, leaning over the door.

"A couple bolts loose," Tom yelled back.

Several minutes later Tom reappeared, streaked with grease but triumphant.

"Try it now," he suggested.

But the car refused to obey the summons to action.

"Lizzie certainly isn't a lady!" Janet declared impatiently. "Maybe she wants to be coaxed."

"I've got it!" Gale said suddenly with a snap of her fingers.

"Goodness, hold onto it whatever it is," Phyllis begged.

Gale grinned sheepishly. "We should have thought of it, sooner. I'll wager we haven't any gas."

Tom looked at the tank and laughed. "Dry as the desert," he declared. "But there is a five-gallon can in the bunkhouse. I'll get it."

The gas tank was filled and the engine responded readily now to Gale's pressure

on the starter. They said their goodbyes again.

“Goodbye, goodbye, parting is such sweet sorrow,” Janet said sorrowfully, clinging to Virginia’s hand.

“Now I know it is time to go,” Carol said. “When Janet quotes Shakespeare things will begin to happen.”

The car rattled and wheezed as it began to move.

“Hey, hold everything,” Phyllis called to Gale. “Here comes Loo Wong.”

Once more their departure was halted. Loo Wong had packed a lunch and he proceeded to present it to Janet with a low bow and a wide grin.

“Loo Wong wish many happiness. Bid all toubles goodbye fo’lever.”

“Same to you, Loo Wong, and many of ’em,” Janet declared. “Girls, what would we have done without Loo Wong?”

“We couldn’t do without him,” Carol declared. “He makes the best pancakes I’ve ever eaten.”

“Don’t forget how to make fudge, Loo Wong,” Valerie called.

The Chinaman bobbed up and down, hands hidden in wide sleeves and his face wreathed in smiles.

“This time it is really goodbye,” Gale called. “Don’t forget to write, Virginia!”

The car wheezed and rattled out of the ranch yard onto the dusty road. Handkerchiefs fluttered until the car was swallowed up in a cloud of dust and the ranch house was hidden from view. They had a long trip ahead of them and they settled down comfortably for their last glimpse of Arizona scenery.

“Ah, now let’s eat,” proposed Janet. “Ouch!” Unwittingly she had leaned against the cactus plant Phyllis had stored in with the baggage.

“Get along, Liza,” Gale said, patting the steering wheel encouragingly as the engine coughed. “Don’t let us down now,” she pleaded.

So, with the girls hoping that the old car would hold together until they reached Phoenix where they would take the train to the East, let us leave the Adventure Girls. Those who have enjoyed the six girls’ adventures may join them again in “The Adventure Girls in the Air,” when they have some exciting times with airplanes and find themselves in new and surprising situations.

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