

The Mystery *OF* CARLITOS



By

HELEN RANDOLPH

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Helen Randolph and Virginia Fairfax and Helen A. Ripley

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The Mystery of Carlitos

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THE MYSTERY OF CARLITOS

HELEN RANDOLPH

Horse and Rider

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Mexican Mystery Series

by Helen Randolph

[The Secret of Casa Grande](#)

[The Mystery of Carlitos](#)

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CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERIOUS BLUE-EYED BOY

Jo Ann jerked the crude, hand-made chair off the oxcart and set it down in the shade of the thatched roof of the house.

“Your throne’s ready, Your Majesty,” she called over gaily to the pale, worn-looking Mrs. Blackwell whose daughter Florence was helping her off the burro.

“Whoever heard of a throne looking like that?” laughed the slender, hazel-eyed girl beside Jo Ann. “Wait a minute.” She spread a bright rainbow-hued Mexican blanket over the chair. “Now that looks more like a throne.”

Jo Ann nodded her dark curly bob. “You’re right, Peg—as usual.” She turned to Mrs. Blackwell. “I know you’re dead tired. That long automobile trip over the rough roads was bad enough, but the ride up the mountain on that poky donkey was worse yet.”

“Poky’s the word,” put in Florence, her blue eyes twinkling. “That burro, or donkey as you call it, is all Mexican—slow but sure.”

Just as she had finished speaking, the burro flapped his ears, threw back his head, and brayed such a knowing “heehaw” that the girls laughed merrily and even Mrs. Blackwell smiled broadly.

As Mrs. Blackwell dropped down in the chair, Jo Ann remarked to her, “No queen ever had a more beautiful kingdom to look upon from her throne than you have.”

“It’s marvelous!” exclaimed Peggy as all four gazed over the far-flung view stretching out before them: rugged, cloud-tipped mountain peaks, the deep valley covered with tropical growth, and a gleaming, silver waterfall to their right.

“Gracious!” broke in Florence finally. “We’ll never get the house straightened at this rate. And will you look at that driver! I believe he’s sound asleep. He hasn’t taken a single thing off the cart yet.”

As Jo Ann reluctantly turned away, she called over to Peggy, “We’ll have three or four weeks to enjoy all this beauty—let’s get busy now and help Florence straighten up the house. You just sit here, Mrs. Blackwell, and draw in deep breaths of this invigorating air,” she added. “Dr. Blackwell said you weren’t to turn your hand to do a thing.”

“You girls wait on me as if I were a complete invalid. Although I am tired now, I know I’m going to regain my strength rapidly up here.”

While Florence gave orders in Spanish to the driver and the boy in charge of the burros, Jo Ann and Peggy went inside the small, one-room house which was built from stone cut from the mountain side.

While they were waiting for the equipment to be brought in, the girls looked about the room curiously.

“Isn’t this the queerest little house!” Peggy exclaimed. “Not a single window in it. It’s built exactly like the little adobe huts the peons live in.”

“Florence said they bought the place from a Mexican—anyone’d know that at a glance.” Jo Ann walked over across the room to the back door and looked outside. “This must be that funny little kitchen Florence told us about,” she said, gesturing to a small stone building about fifteen feet beyond.

Just then the driver sauntered in and piled some cots and bedding in the center of the cement floor.

Jo Ann wheeled about. “Come on, Peg, let’s sweep out the house and make up the cots. We can do that much, at least.”

By the time they had the cots made up, the Mexicans had finished unloading and were starting off leisurely down the trail behind the oxcart and burros.

“Let’s stop working now and eat our lunch,” called Florence from the kitchen door. “It’s siesta time right now, and it’ll do all of us good to take a nap.”

Peggy grinned over at Florence. “Maybe Jo Ann’ll take a siesta up here. Remember the trouble she got into up on the roof in town during a siesta hour?”

“Don’t worry about me this time. There’s no mysterious window in this house for me to investigate, as there was there.”

“I bet we won’t be here three days before you’ll find some mystery to solve, Sherlock,” teased Peggy.

“Well, Sherlock’s too hungry to look for mysteries now. Let’s eat.”

“That’s what I say,” agreed Florence. “You girls unpack the eats while I go to the spring for some cool water.”

After they had eaten their lunch and had their siestas, the girls worked another hour putting down rugs, arranging gay pillows and blankets on the cots, and making a dressing table out of a packing box.

“Before we start straightening out things in the kitchen, I believe I’d better go down to the goat ranch,” Florence remarked. “I want to see if I can make arrangements to get milk there every day.”

“You mean—goat’s milk?” Peggy asked in dismay, stopping in the middle of slipping a gay cretonne cover on a pillow.

Florence’s eyes twinkled roguishly. “Well, what’s the matter with goat’s milk? That’s what the Mexicans use. When in Mexico do as the Mexicans do.” Seeing the sick-looking expression on both Peggy’s and Jo Ann’s faces, she hastened to explain: “I was just teasing. They raise the goats for market. The natives are as fond of goat’s meat as they are of the milk. They had a cow at this ranch when we were here last year, and——”

“Let’s hope they still have that cow,” put in Peggy quickly.

“So say I,” added Jo Ann emphatically.

Florence picked up the bucket from the rough board table. “Do either of you girls want to go with me?”

“Jo, I know you’re just dying to get out of doors and tramp a bit,” Peggy

remarked. "You go with Florence, and I'll stay here with Mrs. Blackwell."

"Fine! I'd love it."

"We won't be gone long," Florence told her mother as she and Jo Ann started out the door.

A few minutes later they disappeared down a winding trail back of the house. About halfway down the trail Jo Ann halted a moment to enjoy the beautiful scenery. "This is the life for me!" she exclaimed. "I had a good time in the city, but give me the outdoors. I can hardly wait to begin exploring these mountains."

About ten minutes later they came in sight of a little pink adobe hut perched on a narrow ledge jutting out from the steep rocky cliff. It looked to Jo Ann as if the hut might topple off any minute and fall into the valley below.

"That's the goat ranch," explained Florence.

"The goat ranch! All I see is a hut and a stone wall. Why'd they build a house way up there instead of in that fertile valley?"

"I suppose it's because that steep cliff back of the hut saved them from so much work in making an enclosure for their goats."

"I don't see any goats. Where are they?"

"The little goat herder takes them out every morning to graze on the scrubby mesquite that grows on the mountain side. Goats love to climb, you know. I've even seen one on top of an adobe hut."

The girls followed the trail across a narrow ravine and up to the house.

Just then several dogs began barking, and a black-eyed, olive-skinned Mexican woman and two scantily dressed, barefooted children appeared in the doorway.

The next moment the woman's face lit at sight of Florence. "Florencita!" she cried, then went on in a rapid flow of Spanish to ask her numerous questions about her family.

As soon as Florence had answered these questions she inquired if they still

owned the cow.

The woman nodded assent and urged her and Jo Ann to sit down and rest till Pablito brought the cow and she could milk.

Florence shook her head and handing her the bucket asked if it would be possible for her to send the milk up later by one of the children.

“*Sí, Florencita. Muy bien,*” she agreed, smiling.

As the girls turned to go, the woman reached down and picked a fragrant, waxy-white flower from the jasmine growing in a pot by the door. “For your mama,” she explained, handing it to Florence.

With a word of thanks and an “*Adios*” to her and the children, the girls started back down the trail.

“Let’s go home the long way through the valley,” suggested Florence when they reached the ravine. “There’s a cave down this way that I want to show you.”

“Fine! The longer the way, the better. That cave sounds interesting, too.”

Slipping and sliding down the rocky mountain side, they soon reached the broad valley; then they followed the path around the base of the cliff, stopping now and then to gather ferns and flowers.

When they came to a sparkling, crystal-clear spring bubbling out from under the rocks, Jo Ann dropped to her knees and drank thirstily of the icy cold water.

While Florence was drinking, Jo Ann heard a snapping of twigs near by. She wheeled about and, peering through the bushes, saw two small boys gathering wood. One of them was bent over by the weight of a large bundle of the wood, held in place on his back by a rope passed across his forehead; the other was chopping sticks with a machete, a long heavy knife. At first glance Jo Ann thought they must be twins, as they were dressed alike in the loose white trousers and blouse worn by the peon.

A few minutes later the boys stepped back into the narrow trail, but on seeing the girls they quickly moved to one side to let them pass.

With a smile, Florence greeted the boys with the customary salutation, “*buenos tardes*.” Their little brown faces under their frayed straw sombreros grinned back at the girls as they returned the greeting; then they turned and went on down the trail.

As soon as they were out of sight Jo Ann exclaimed, “That’s the first blue-eyed Mexican I’ve seen! I didn’t know they ever had blue eyes.”

“They don’t! What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you notice that one of those boys had dark-blue eyes?”

“No.”

“Well, he did.”

“They were both dressed alike, and dirty and ragged. All I noticed was how frail-looking the one was who had the bundle of wood on his back. I couldn’t help wondering why the other boy, who looked stronger, didn’t take part of the load.”

“That’s the one with the blue eyes. Do they belong to the family at the goat ranch?”

“No, I’ve never seen them before. You must be mistaken about the boy’s having blue eyes.”

Jo Ann shook her head vigorously. “I’m positive his eyes were blue—his features were finer too, but his face was so dirty I couldn’t tell much about them.”

Florence smiled. “You’ve a fine imagination, Jo—trying to find another mystery already.”

“I didn’t try to find this mystery. It bumped right into me. If that boy lives around here, I’m going to find out more about him.”

At Jo Ann’s emphatic words, Florence laughed merrily. “All right, but don’t start now. If we’re going to stop at the cave, we’ll have to hurry.”

CHAPTER II

NEIGHBORS IN THE CAVE

The two girls hurried along the trail, and a few minutes later Florence pointed to a dark, shadowy place about fifty feet up the side of the cliff. "There's the cave I was telling you about."

"All I can see through the bushes is a black hole under some rocks. Can we climb up there? I'd like to explore it."

"Yes, there's a path leading up to it. It isn't very large and won't take you long to look it over."

After rounding a curve in the trail, Florence led the way up the winding path toward the cave.

"That's strange!" she exclaimed a moment later. "There's a burro tied right outside the entrance. Someone must be in there."

"And I smell smoke from a campfire, don't you?" asked Jo Ann in a low voice as she moved over closer to Florence. "Do you suppose we'd better go on?"

"Yes, I think it'll be all right. If we have neighbors, I want to see what sort of people they are."

Just then they saw, silhouetted against the dark cave entrance, the bent form of an old woman leaning on a stick. On coming closer the girls were able to make out the features of a brown, wrinkled face, which was almost hidden by the folds of the black shawl-like *rebosa* about her head and shoulders.

"*Buenos tardes,*" greeted Florence, then went on to explain in Spanish that they had come up to see the cave, not knowing that it was occupied.

While Florence was talking to the old woman, Jo Ann was peering into the dark opening beyond. By the light of the fire in the middle of the floor she could see a woman kneeling by a stone *metate* grinding corn for *tortillas*, and near by, lying on a straw mat on the floor, was a tiny naked baby.

Just then several little stair-step children ran to peer up at the visitors from behind their grandmother. Jo Ann took some of the flowers from her bouquet and offered one to each of them. With smiles spreading over their thin, grimy faces, they reached out timidly for the flowers, then drew back behind their grandmother again.

“What is your name?” Jo Ann asked the largest of the children in her best Spanish, but either the child could not understand or else she was too timid to reply.

Hearing a slight noise behind her, Jo Ann turned in time to see the two boys she had noticed gathering wood. The one with the heavy burden on his back passed on into the cave without looking around, but the other hesitated and stared up at her curiously before disappearing into the dim interior. In that short interval Jo Ann had an opportunity to see that his eyes were unmistakably a deep blue; moreover, she noticed that, although his skin was brown, it was not as dark as the other boy’s and the little girls’.

While she was pondering over this difference, Florence reached over and touched her on the arm. “Come on, Jo, we’d better go now. We’ll come down again sometime.”

Both girls waved good-bye to the children, then started off down the trail. “Did you notice those boys as they came in?” Jo Ann asked. “One of them has blue eyes, just as I said.”

“I was so busy talking to the grandmother that I didn’t see them till they had passed on into the shadows. Evidently they belong to this family.”

“Well, that blue-eyed one certainly doesn’t look as if he belongs to them. There’s something strange about him. Do you suppose they live in that cave? They didn’t have a stick of furniture—not even a bed or table or chair or anything.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter to the peons. They never sleep on a bed, and they eat off the floor. But those people did look awfully poor. I don’t believe they had a thing

for supper but those *tortillas* the woman was making.”

“Let’s come down here tomorrow and bring them something. Those children looked half starved to me.”

“We’ll do that very thing, but if we’re going to eat tonight, we’d better be getting back to camp. Mother and Peg’ll wonder what’s happened to us.”

“And we haven’t finished straightening up the kitchen, either,” Jo Ann sighed. “How about cooking supper in that outdoor fireplace? It’s too gorgeous up here to stay in the house any more than absolutely necessary.”

“All right. That’s what I’d planned to do anyway.”

“Isn’t this the road we came up this morning?” Jo Ann asked a moment later, as they came to a cart road winding back and forth up the steep mountain side.

“Yes, we’re almost home. If it weren’t for the trees, we could see the house from here. There’s a short cut straight up the mountain.” She pointed to a narrow path between the trees and rocks. “Since you’re so fond of climbing, we’ll take that and be back at the house before you know it.”

In a short time they arrived at the house, puffing and panting from the exertion of their steep climb.

“Did you—think we—were never—coming?” asked Florence, dropping down beside her mother, who was lying on a cot out in front of the house; then, without waiting for an answer, she asked, “Have they brought the milk yet?”

Her mother nodded. “Just a few minutes ago. Did you and Jo Ann have a nice walk?”

“Yes, indeed! It seemed so good to be tramping over the mountains again.” Florence smiled. “I had to recount the family history from A to Z to the woman at the goat ranch, and she said it gave her much sorrow to learn of your illness. She and all the children’ll probably be up to see you tomorrow. Here’s a jasmine she sent you—we picked the fern down by a spring.” She sniffed the fragrant perfume a moment, then handed the dainty spray to her mother.

“And while we were at the spring,” put in Jo Ann, “we saw two little Mexican

boys gathering wood; and I'm sure one of them had blue eyes."

"Yes, Jo thinks she's on the trail of another mystery," laughed Florence.

"Oh dear," sighed Peggy with a roguish twinkle in her eyes. "I told you we wouldn't be here three days before she'd find a mystery, and here it's hardly been that many hours."

"Then, when we were at the cave," Jo Ann went on, unruffled by Peggy's teasing, "the boys came in, and I got a good look at that one's eyes, and they were blue—a deep, deep blue—bluer than yours, Florence."

"Well, what's your solution?" grinned Peggy. "Has your blue-eyed boy been kidnaped, or is he a prince in disguise?"

"I'll tell you later. Give me a little time, and I'll find out. Florence and I are going down to the cave tomorrow to carry some food to those children—there were several thin, dirty, half-starved little ones there. Come along, Peg, and if that boy is there, you can see for yourself that his eyes are blue. I hope he is—I want to prove to you and Florence that I'm not color blind."

"I'm 'most as hungry as those children looked," put in Florence. "Let's get supper."

Jo Ann sprang up. "I'm a swell fire-builder. I'll build the fire this minute—in the outdoor fireplace."

"No, you won't. I've beat you to it," laughed Peggy.

As they went through the house, Jo Ann noticed that a gay red-and-white checked cloth had been spread on the table and places set for four. "You have been busy, haven't you?" she said motioning toward the table.

"Sure. Mrs. Blackwell told me what to do with things, and I've straightened up the kitchen and put some rice on to cook for supper."

Just as they reached the kitchen door, Florence came up and slipped her arm around Peggy affectionately, "Peg, you're a grand person to have around; Jo's been dreading straightening this kitchen all the way home." She smiled over at Jo Ann, then went on to the kitchen and took several articles out of a box near

the door. “Here, Jo, if you’ll fry the bacon and scramble some eggs, I’ll make some real Mexican *chocolate*; then if you’ll open this jar of preserves, Peg, we’ll have supper ready in a jiffy.”

“Even that won’t be soon enough to suit me,” laughed Jo Ann. “That climb up the mountain and this invigorating air have made me hungry as a bear.”

In a very short time supper was ready, and as Jo Ann placed the platter of bacon and eggs on the table, she called over to Peggy, “Catch hold of the other end of this table and let’s carry it outside. That sunset’s just too gorgeous to miss, and then Mrs. Blackwell won’t have to walk so far, either.”

Carefully Peggy and Jo Ann carried the table out in front of the house and set it down near Mrs. Blackwell’s cot; then Florence brought a chair and placed it at the head of the table.

“The banquet is served, Your Majesty.” She turned to help her mother into the chair.

“No banquet hall was ever as beautiful as this.” Jo Ann waved her hand toward the deep purple valley, the gold-tipped mountain peaks, and the rainbow-hued canopy overhead. “And listen—the music of the little mountain folk singing their farewells to the sun!”

“You surely have a good, imagination, Jo,” commented Peggy, laughing. “It is perfectly grand, but all I can hear is the croaking of bullfrogs.”

“Your appreciation of the beauties of nature seems to be sadly lacking.” She smiled condescendingly at Peggy, then turned to Mrs. Blackwell. “I don’t wonder that the doctor at the sanitarium, and your husband, too, ordered you up here to recuperate after your long illness. You couldn’t help but get well here.”

Mrs. Blackwell nodded assent. “Yes, this is a wonderful place to rest. I really begin to feel stronger already—and with three such thoughtful girls to look after me I’m sure I shall be as well as ever in a few weeks.”

“I’m so glad you’re here with us and not ’way off there at that sanitarium,” said Florence, reaching over to squeeze her mother’s hand. “We’re going to take such good care of you that you’ll just have to get well.”

Tired out from the busy, strenuous day, they lingered long over their supper, watching the ever changing colors of the slow tropical sunset. Carmine melted into rose, amber, violet, finally fading away into a soft tender green. Deep purple shadows settled over the mountains as the colors faded, and a slender crescent of a moon peeped down at them from a star-flecked sky.

Suddenly the spell was broken as Florence jumped to her feet. “Gracious! I forgot all about fixing that box down at the spring to keep our milk and butter in. Does anyone know where my flashlight is?”

“Yes, I put it on the dressing table right beside your cot. I’ll get it.” Peggy jumped up and ran inside the house. A moment later she returned with the flashlight and handed it to Florence.

“I’ll go with you and fix the box if you’ll tell me what to do,” offered Jo Ann.

“First we’d better light some candles so we can see what we’re doing,” Florence said as the three of them went into the kitchen. She dived down into the box and brought out two tallow candles and handed them to Jo Ann. “When you get those lit, Peg and I’ll put the milk and butter in jars.”

“What’ll I do with them now I’ve got them lit, Florence—hold them?” grinned Jo Ann a moment later, holding a lighted candle in each hand.

“Stick them on these lids and put them on the table. Here’s the box I’d planned to use. We’ll put the things in it and then carry it down to the spring.”

“The spring! Do you mean that spring where we saw the two boys—my blue-eyed boy?” Jo Ann asked.

“Of course not, silly. I mean the spring back of the house where we get our drinking water. There’re springs all over these mountains.”

They placed the things in the box, then, with Florence leading the way with the flashlight, they carried it to the near-by spring.

After they had moved several stones aside, they placed the jars of milk and butter in the icy water, placed the package of bacon on top of the jars and then turned the box over all.

“Pile some stones around the box and put this big one on top, and then our refrigerator’ll be fixed,” Florence said.

As soon as they returned to the house and had washed the dishes, they began getting ready for bed.

“I didn’t realize how tired I was till now. I won’t need any rocking tonight, I’m sure,” Jo Ann said as she crawled under the blankets.

Her thoughts drifted back to the blue-eyed boy. Who was he, and why was he with those peons? There must be some mystery back of it all. Could it be possible that he had been kidnaped as Peggy had jokingly suggested? “I’m going down there early tomorrow morning and find out more about it,” she told herself before dropping off to sleep.

CHAPTER III

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

When Jo Ann opened her eyes the next morning, the sun was already shining through the open doorway. She lay still a moment and tried to think why she had wanted to get up early. What had she planned to do? Then it all came back to her. She was going down to the cave to find out more about the blue-eyed boy.

She threw back the covers and sprang up quickly, but the next moment she dropped back with a stifled groan.

“What’s the matter, Jo?” whispered Peggy. “You’re not stiff or sore, are you?”

“Oh no—of course not! I just groaned for the fun of it.”

“That’s the reason I didn’t want to go with you girls down to the goat ranch yesterday. I knew I wouldn’t be able to move today if I did. I’m going to take my climbing in smaller doses, so it won’t be so painful.”

Just then they heard a groan from the other end of the room, and both girls raised up on their elbows to look over at Florence.

“Are you sore too?” Jo Ann called out loud when she saw that Mrs. Blackwell was also awake now.

“I’ll say I am! It’s agony to move. We’ll have to climb some more today to get limbered up.”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do just as soon as breakfast’s over. You remember we planned to take some food to those children down at the cave. I want to show you and Peggy my blue-eyed boy, too.”

Peggy laughed. “I surely hope you get to satisfy your curiosity about him—we

won't have a minute's peace till you do."

"Well, if we're going down there this morning, we'd better roll out." Florence screwed up her face and began slowly crawling out of bed.

Peggy smiled at the ridiculous contortions Jo Ann and Florence went through as they got up and began dressing.

Finally Jo Ann picked up a shoe and pitched it across at her. "You will laugh at me, will you?" she said good-naturedly. "Roll out yourself, or I'll pour some cold water in your face."

Jo Ann finished dressing first, and as she went out the door she called back, "I'll make the fire while you girls finish dressing; then it won't take us long to get breakfast."

A few minutes later she was joined by Peggy and Florence, and all three girls set to work getting the breakfast started.

"I'll set the table," offered Peggy.

"And I'll get the things from our refrigerator at the spring," added Jo Ann, and started off stiff-legged down the path. "The walk'll help to limber me up."

"Jo ought to have a prize for her graceful walk," smiled Peggy as she started into the house to set the table, while Florence went for some wood to replenish the fire.

A few minutes later Jo Ann came running back empty-handed, her sore muscles forgotten. "Our food's gone—everything's gone!" she called excitedly to Florence.

The wood dropped from Florence's hands and sent up a shower of sparks as it fell into the fire. "Gone!" she gasped. "Are you sure you looked in the right place?"

"Sure. The box's turned over, and there's nothing under it."

By this time Peggy, hearing the excitement, rushed out of the house, and all three girls raced back to the spring, then stood staring at the overturned box.

“What do you think happened?” asked Jo Ann. “Do you suppose someone stole the things and left the box there so it’d look as if a dog had done it?”

“I hardly think so,” replied Florence thoughtfully. “There’s no one up here who’d——” She stopped abruptly.

“Could it have been those people down at the cave who——” began Jo Ann; then the next moment she answered her own question: “No, I know they didn’t do it. They’re poor, but I don’t believe they’d steal.”

Peggy looked over at Jo Ann. “How do you know? You can’t prove it.”

Dropping to her knees beside the spring Jo Ann began examining the moss-covered stones. “The moss is scraped off this rock where something heavy stepped on it, but then we could’ve done that last night when we put the things in here.”

Florence turned and started back toward the house. “It won’t do any good to stand here talking about it. Come on, we’ll find something else to cook in place of the bacon for breakfast. It’s a good thing we brought some canned milk along for an emergency, but we’ll have to do without butter for several days, till I can get some sent out from the city.”

Jo Ann ran to catch up with Peggy and Florence. “Why can’t you get some butter from the people down at the goat ranch?” she asked.

Florence laughed. “Why, they probably wouldn’t even know what I was talking about.”

“Don’t they use butter?”

“No, the peons never use it.”

“Well, then, let’s get extra milk and make it ourselves.”

“How? We haven’t a churn.”

“I’ve seen my mother make butter by stirring the cream in a bowl or jar,” Jo Ann explained.

Just then they reached the house, and all three ran on inside and began telling Mrs. Blackwell of their loss.

“Mrs. Blackwell, what is your opinion about the mysterious visitor—was he man or beast?” asked Jo Ann finally.

“I couldn’t say, of course, but it seems to me an animal would hardly carry off the glass jars of milk and butter.”

Jo Ann stared at Mrs. Blackwell a moment. “I hadn’t thought of that,” she said, then turned and went on outside.

Peggy glanced over at Florence. “Everything seems to point to those people as the guilty parties, doesn’t it? Jo hates to admit it, though.”

“Oh well, it wasn’t much, and anyway, we can’t prove that they are the guilty ones. Let’s forget about it and see what we can find for breakfast.” She got up and went out in the kitchen with Jo Ann.

A few minutes later Peggy joined them, and before long they had the emergency breakfast ready: coffee, dry cereal with canned milk, batter cakes with brown sugar syrup, and oranges.

“This isn’t half bad, if you ask me,” bragged Peggy as they sat down to the table.

Jo Ann grinned. “Just see who fixed it! Why, we’re the best cooks for miles around.”

“That isn’t saying much, is it?” smiled Florence, then all four laughed merrily as they caught Florence’s hidden meaning.

As soon as the breakfast things were cleared away and the house straightened up, Jo Ann asked, “Florence, do you and Peg still want to go down to the cave with me?”

“Why, of course. Come on, let’s see what we can find to carry to those children.”

The three girls hastened to the kitchen, and Florence began searching through the provision box for something to take to the children at the cave.

“Here’re some *frijoles*—that’s their principal food, and I know they’ll like them. We’ll put in some rice, and with these onions and garlic and this can of tomatoes they can make *sopa de aroz*—a kind of stew.” As Florence handed the things to Jo Ann and Peggy, they packed them in a split-cane basket.

She looked about the kitchen a moment, then reached over on the table and picked up a bag of oranges and handed it to Jo Ann. “Here’re some oranges. They ought to have some fruit, too. There’re only half a dozen in there, but that’ll be enough for each of the children to have one apiece. Let’s take these batter cakes we had left from breakfast. They’ll love them. They’ll think they’re some kind of a cake. We’ll put in this cone of brown sugar and tell the woman how to make syrup—but they’ll very likely eat the sugar as it is, thinking it’s candy.”

“I wonder if I couldn’t get milk from the goat ranch for them,” put in Jo Ann. “I’m going to see about it the next time we go down there.”

When they had finished, Jo Ann picked up the basket and followed Florence and Peggy out on the front porch, where Mrs. Blackwell was lying in a hammock stretched between two of the crude peeled posts supporting the thatched roof.

Florence leaned over to drop a kiss on her mother’s pale cheek. “Do you mind if we leave you alone for a little while? We’re going down to the cave to carry some food to those poor little children—we won’t be gone over half an hour.”

“I want to prove to Florence and Peg that I’m right about that blue-eyed boy,” added Jo Ann. “Maybe we’ll be able to find out something that’ll throw some light on the mystery of his blue eyes.”

Mrs. Blackwell smiled. “You girls run along—I’ll take a nap while you’re gone. I’m very glad you’re adopting those children. From what you’ve told me they must be badly in need of a helping hand. You see evidences of real poverty down here among the peons, and yet, as a general thing, they’re very happy.” As they started off down the trail she called, “Jo, I wish you luck in solving the mystery of your blue-eyed boy.”

Florence and Jo Ann found it very painful going down the steep path. Their leg muscles were still stiff and sore from their long tramp over the mountain side the day before. They were glad when they reached the foot of the cliff and started on a smooth wooded trail around its base.

At the first curve they stopped to gaze across the broad valley stretching out before them.

“Isn’t this glorious!” Jo Ann exclaimed. “We almost beat the sun up—down here, didn’t we?”

“Yes, it wasn’t much ahead of us,” agreed Peggy, “and doesn’t the air smell good?”

All three girls drew in deep breaths of the fragrant, woodsy odor of leaf mold and dew-kissed ferns.

A few minutes later they turned and hurried along the trail till they reached the narrow, unused path leading up to the cave. As they came in sight of it, Jo Ann stopped abruptly and stood staring before her.

“What’s the idea of stopping so suddenly?” Peggy demanded, as she bumped into Jo Ann.

“What’s the matter?” chimed in Florence, crowding up behind Peggy and trying unsuccessfully to look over their shoulders.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAVE FAMILY DISAPPEARS

Jo Ann pointed to the rugged arched opening before her. “Look! The donkey’s gone and there’s no sign of anyone. I don’t believe that family’s here now.”

Quickly all three girls walked on to the cave and stood staring inside. With the rays of the morning sun shining directly on the entrance, they could easily see into the farthest corners.

“There’s not a soul here!” finally ejaculated Jo Ann. “They’re gone—bag and baggage.”

“But it’s strange they’d leave so suddenly,” put in Florence. “They must’ve left before daylight.”

Peggy stepped inside the cave and kicked the pile of ashes with her foot. “There hasn’t been a fire here for hours—these ashes are as cold as charity.”

Jo Ann sighed as she set the basket down on the floor. “Those poor little children won’t get any of this food, after all. Isn’t that a shame?” She turned to Florence. “Do you suppose our coming here yesterday had anything to do with their leaving so suddenly?”

Florence shook her head. “No, I hardly think so. Now and then an Indian family spends the night here when they’re on their way farther up the mountain.”

“If they intended to leave so early, then why were those two boys gathering wood yesterday? They couldn’t have burned all of it in such a short time.”

Florence shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe I was right, after all, about the blue-eyed boy having been kidnaped,”

put in Peggy.

Silently the three girls stared around the cave, each busy with her own thoughts.

A few minutes later Jo Ann reached down and picked up the basket. “Come on, let’s see if we can find which way they went. They couldn’t’ve got very far with the old grandmother and all those little children. Maybe we can overtake them and give them these things—then they’ll know we want to be friends.”

In the damp earth of the narrow path they could see distinctly the prints of bare feet and the small half-moons made by the donkey. They easily followed the trail till they came to the rocky cart road up which they had ridden the day before.

Here Jo Ann and Peggy dropped to their knees and began examining the tracks in the dust.

“Now which way do you suppose they went?” queried Jo Ann. “These tracks could have been made here yesterday by our donkeys and the peon driver.”

“The tracks seem to go in both directions, and they’re so indistinct it’d be impossible to follow a trail. You might as well give up, Jo.”

Florence smiled over at Jo Ann. “I believe the blue-eyed Mexican boy is one mystery you won’t be able to solve. You’ll have to use your detective ability in finding out what became of our milk and butter.” She hesitated a moment, then continued thoughtfully, “If those people followed this road up the mountain they’d pass within about fifty feet of our box at the spring.”

Peggy’s eyes widened. “Oh, do you suppose they really did get our things, then?”

Jo Ann jumped quickly to her feet. “Well, since they’re gone, I hope they did get them. Those little children need the milk and butter much more than we do—only I hate to think of their having stolen them.” She glanced down at the basket. “I wish we could have given them this food—they need it so badly. I wanted to see that boy again, too.”

“It won’t do any good to stand here in the sun talking about it,” Florence called over to Peggy and Jo Ann. “Come on. Let’s drop the whole business and go home—it’s almost time to start getting dinner, anyway.”

“Maybe Mrs. Blackwell can help us explain the mystery of their sudden departure,” Jo Ann remarked as she picked up the basket and started off behind Florence, while Peggy brought up the rear.

The three disappointed girls began slowly climbing in single file up the steep, narrow, winding path to the camp. Bending forward like saplings blown by the wind, they trudged silently up the trail, Jo Ann carrying the basket on first one arm, then the other.

When they were within a short distance of the top of the cliff Florence suddenly leaped backward, gasping, “Ugh! A snake!”

She bumped against Jo Ann with such force that the basket was knocked from her hands and rolled clattering down the mountain side. Unmindful of the basket, Florence kept pushing Jo Ann down the narrow trail.

The next moment Jo Ann stumbled and half fell against Peggy. Simultaneously a terrified shriek rent the air. Jo Ann wheeled about in time to see Peggy swaying dangerously over the outer edge of the cliff.

With eyes dilated with horror she saw her clutch wildly at a stunted tree growing out of the rocky ledge. The next instant Jo Ann reached out to grab Peggy. Her fingers touched her skirt, but before she could grasp it, the tree suddenly swayed outward over the cliff under Peggy’s weight.

Involuntarily Jo Ann shut her eyes tightly. “Oh, Peg’ll be killed!” she thought frantically.

The snapping of branches and the crashing of rocks down the mountain side came to her ears. Was Peg falling—falling——

She forced her eyelids open. Thank goodness! Peg was alive! Hanging to the tree. But oh, that awful abyss she was hanging over! She must help her out of that terrible plight if humanly possible. The tree might pull out by the roots at any moment.

“Hold on, Peg!” she cried. “We’ll help you!”

To Jo Ann’s great joy, Peggy began cautiously inching her way along the bent tree trunk.

“Just a little nearer and I can reach you,” encouraged Jo Ann. She called over to Florence. “Grab hold of me and steady me while I pull Peg.”

Years—ages passed, it seemed to Jo Ann, as she leaned forward with outstretched hands. The instant Peggy’s feet barely touched the rocky ledge she reached down and pulled her safely over the edge.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, Florence threw her arms about Peggy. “Oh, Peg, you might’ve been killed! And it was all my fault!”

“Well—I—wasn’t—killed.” Peggy took a step backward and leaned against the bank for support. “I—feel—shaky, though.”

“No wonder,” agreed Jo Ann. “I’m wobbly-kneed, too.”

“What—in the world—got into you girls—to push that way?”

“I saw a snake—a huge snake, right across our path, and I almost stepped on it,” answered Florence. She cupped her hands to make a circle. “He was that big around. He was so long I couldn’t see either his head or his tail.”

Peggy uttered a little gasp of surprise.

“You’re imagining things, Florence,” put in the practical Jo Ann. “You know perfectly well there’re no snakes that big—except boa constrictors in the jungles.”

“But he was huge. I wouldn’t have been so frightened by a smaller one. I’ve never seen one this large here before. He must be at least eight or ten feet long.”

A little twinkle entered Peggy’s eyes. “You girls ought to be even now. Jo insists a Mexican boy has blue eyes, and you insist you saw a huge boa constrictor right in sight of the house.”

“If that snake’s still there—and I imagine it is—I’ll prove to you that I’m right.”

Both Peggy and Jo Ann drew back slightly, and Peggy spoke up. “I, for one, am not going back up this trail with any kind of snake—big or little—waiting for me.”

“How’re we ever going to get to the house, then?” asked Jo Ann. “Will we have to go back down to the cart road and walk all the way around the mountain? Why, that’s miles, and in this hot sun!”

“I think I know a place where we can manage to climb up the cliff,” Florence told them. “How about it? Want to try it?”

“Sure,” replied Jo Ann. “Most anything’d be better than walking miles out of the way when the house is only a few hundred yards from here.”

Florence led the way back down the trail a short distance, then began climbing the sheer surface of the cliff. By sticking their toes in the crevices of the rock and catching hold of the scraggly shrubs growing in the cracks, all three finally reached the top of the cliff.

After they had walked along the ledge for a short distance, Florence remarked, “I think we ought to be able to see the snake from here—if it’s still there.”

Cautiously she pulled the bushes aside and peered down on the path.

“Ugh! There he is—right in the same place!”

Peggy and Jo Ann leaned over to look.

“See that big black thing that looks like a log?”

Jo Ann gasped, “Gosh! What a snake!”

“That’s the biggest one I ever saw, except in a zoo,” declared Peggy, wide-eyed.

Florence pointed to the snake. “See those bumps in him. He’s probably had some squirrels or rabbits for his dinner and is lying there in the sun digesting them.”

“I didn’t dream there were such snakes around here,” Jo Ann added.

Before they started for the house, all three girls picked up stones and pitched them down at the snake. When one of the stones struck him, the huge reptile slowly disappeared over the edge of the path.

“It’s a good thing you saw it in time,” said Jo Ann. “I’d hate to have that terrible

thing get after me in a place like that, where I couldn't run.”

As they hastened across the mesa to the house, Florence remarked, “Maybe we'd better not tell Mother how big that snake was—she'll worry every time we're out of sight, if we do.”

“All right,” Jo Ann and Peggy agreed.

CHAPTER V

FOOTPRINTS

When the girls neared the house they were surprised to hear several people talking in Spanish. Perhaps the family from the cave have come up the mountain by the cart road, Jo Ann thought, and have stopped to talk to Mrs. Blackwell. But a moment later a shadow of disappointment crossed her face as she recognized the woman and children from the goat ranch.

“For a moment I thought it was those people from the cave with the blue-eyed boy,” Jo Ann said in a low voice to Peggy.

Peggy shook her auburn head. “Forget it, Jo. There’s no such luck.”

The girls exchanged greetings in Spanish with the visitors, then dropped down on the floor beside the two little girls. Jo Ann, in her poor Spanish, attempted to carry on a conversation with the children, while Peggy looked on, amused.

She was interrupted a few minutes later by Mrs. Blackwell. “Girls, María says a bear carried off one of their pigs last night. Isn’t that too bad? They had them in an enclosure against the cliff just back of the house here.”

Jo Ann jumped quickly to her feet. “I bet that’s what got our things at the spring. A bear! Why didn’t we think of that before?”

“We’ve never been bothered with one before,” put in Florence.

“María’s husband, Juan, said the continued drouth up in the mountains has caused the wild animals to come down into the valley in search of food,” Mrs. Blackwell continued. “The bear had evidently followed the river, because they found tracks up the ravine.”

María, who had been watching the expression on their faces intently, now began

to shake her head and to talk rapidly in Spanish.

“She says that bears like much the pork,” translated Florence for the girls’ benefit. “She’s afraid he’ll come back for the rest of the pigs, and she doesn’t know what to do to keep him away.”

“What to do!” exclaimed Jo Ann. “Why, shoot him, of course.”

Mrs. Blackwell smiled. “I doubt if Juan has ever owned a gun. About the only weapon the peon ever uses is a stiletto, and it would not be an easy matter to kill a bear with a stiletto—or even with a machete.”

Peggy shivered as if she were cold. “I should say it wouldn’t. I’d hate to get that close to one, especially a real wild bear! It gives me the creeps to think about it.”

“I’ve got a grand idea,” burst out Jo Ann. “Why can’t we go on a bear hunt? We have a gun, and I can shoot.”

“I can shoot pretty good, too,” added Peggy. “Daddy taught me when we lived in the country. I killed a possum once when he got in our henhouse.”

Jo Ann smiled. “He probably just played possum when he heard the report of your gun, and you thought he was dead. They’ll do that sometimes.”

“No, I killed him—sure enough.”

“Well, that’s not like killing a bear—a real, live, wild, grizzly bear.”

“They don’t have grizzly bears down here, silly.”

“How do you know they don’t?” retorted Jo Ann. “Grizzlies are found in the mountains of North America, and this is North America, isn’t it? Besides, you haven’t seen his tracks.”

As the argument continued, Florence explained to María and the children what it was about. The two little girls stared wide eyed at Jo Ann and Peggy. They had never in all their lives heard of a girl’s going out to hunt a bear. They decided a gun must be one of those terrible things which their grandmother had told them about. A stick which shot forth a deadly fire that killed everything before it. She had warned them never to touch a fire stick and to hide if they saw anyone with

one.

Peggy burst out just then with, “Well, young lady, you’re not going on a bear hunt without me, that’s sure.”

Mrs. Blackwell stared at Jo Ann and Peggy in horrified amazement. “Girls! What are you talking about? A bear hunt! The idea!”

“But, Mrs. Blackwell, we wouldn’t be in any danger,” protested Jo Ann. “We’d hide in a safe place and watch for the bear; then, when he came for another pig, we’d shoot him—that’s all.”

“I’m afraid, my dear, that it wouldn’t be as simple as that.”

Florence, seeing the worried expression on her mother’s face, changed the subject. “The bear must’ve smelled the bacon, and that’s the reason he found our box at the spring. By the way, I wonder what time it is.” She got up and walked to the door. As she looked in at the clock sitting on their improvised dressing table, she gasped, “Good gracious! I had no idea it was so late. If we’re going to have any dinner around here today, I’ll have to start the fire this very minute.”

She went on through the house toward the kitchen, Peggy and Jo Ann following a moment later.

“I’ll build the fire, Florence,” offered Jo Ann, taking the wood out of her hands. “I’ll have it burning before you and Peg get something ready to cook on it—and I’ll start it Mexican fashion, too.”

“Don’t be too sure, Jo,” teased Peggy. “Suppose there aren’t any live coals left?”

“We’ll see.”

Peggy and Florence disappeared into the kitchen, and Jo Ann placed her armful of wood down beside the outdoor fireplace. She stirred the coals left from their breakfast fire then carefully laid several small pieces of wood over them. Leaning down, she began blowing on the coals as she had seen the peon women do. Soon, to her delight, tiny flames began licking at the wood. She kept on blowing a few minutes longer, then sat back on her heels to look with satisfaction at the fire which was now burning brightly in the fireplace.

“When in Mexico do as the Mexicans do,” she called gaily to Florence and Peggy. “I’m getting good. I beat you, and I didn’t have to use a match, either. Now bring on your dinner.”

“You didn’t beat us much. Here, put these potatoes on to boil,” Peggy replied as she handed a pot of potatoes to Jo Ann. “I used the last of the water over them. Hadn’t I better get some more?”

Jo Ann stopped in the act of setting the pot of potatoes over the fire as a thought suddenly flashed into her mind. “I’ll get the water,” she offered quickly. She put the pot down and hurried to the kitchen for the bucket. A moment later she disappeared down the path to the spring.

Jo must be up to something, thought Peggy.

When Jo Ann reached the spring, she set the bucket down on a rock and stood gazing at the overturned box which they had so proudly called their refrigerator the night before. If a real live bear had been the thief, then what had he done with the jars of milk and butter? she asked herself. “I’m going to see if I can find a clue. There ought to be tracks somewhere around here.”

She began looking among the ferns and rocks along the bank of the river beyond the spring in search of some sign of the marauder. Carefully she examined every track. Here were their own tracks made the night before, and the tiny footprints of a squirrel, but not a sign of big padded footprints made by a large, heavy animal.

Still unwilling to give up, she jumped from stone to stone across the swiftly flowing stream, and began searching the opposite bank. A moment later, with a cry of satisfaction, she dropped to her knees and began examining some huge tracks in the soft earth.

“It was a bear, all right!” she exclaimed out loud. “Here’s where he crossed the river—but, gee, what a big one!” Instinctively she glanced all around as though expecting to see the bear. “I bet he smelled our bacon and crossed right here.” She began slowly jumping back over the stones, watching for any sign left by the recent thief.

When in midstream she caught a glimpse of a familiar-looking object a short distance ahead. So suddenly did she stop that she lost her balance and toppled off

into the swiftly rushing stream.

Gasping from her sudden plunge into the icy water, she scrambled back up on the rock. “Gosh, that water’s cold!” she shivered. “But since I’m already wet I might as well go on and see if my eyes are deceiving me.”

With the water foaming about her knees, she carefully picked her way down the stream to a large boulder hidden under an overhanging tree. Then, reaching down, she picked up the object that had been wedged between the boulder and the bank.

“Just as I thought,” she said to herself. “Here’s our jar of butter. It won’t do anyone any good because the jar’s broken and there might be glass in the butter, but at least I have proof now that those people at the cave didn’t steal our things—I can show Florence and Peg the bear tracks, too.”

She hastened back up the stream to the spring, and forgetting the bucket of water she had come after, ran on to the house. So eager was she to tell the girls of her discovery that she did not notice that her wet skirt was flapping about her legs and the water sloshing in her shoes.

“Why, Jo, what in the world’s happened?” began Peggy as she saw the bedraggled figure running toward her. “Did you see the bear?”

“No, but I found his tracks! And look what else I found!” she held up the broken jar, partly filled with butter. “I told you those people at the cave didn’t get our things.”

On hearing the noise, Florence ran from the kitchen. “What on earth——” she began, then saw what Jo Ann was holding in her hand. “Where did you find that?”

While Jo Ann was explaining the details of her discovery, they heard a slight noise behind them and, turning, saw Mrs. Blackwell standing in the doorway. “I heard all this chatter and had to find out what it was about. You’re a real Sherlock, I see, Jo—you’ve solved the mystery.”

“Yes,” beamed Jo Ann, “and I’ve proved that I was right about the people at the cave not stealing our things.”

After they had talked a few minutes longer, Florence asked, “What’d you do with the bucket of water, Jo? I want to make Mother’s tea, so we can have dinner.”

Jo Ann stared in blank amazement a moment, then said sheepishly, “I forgot it. I was so excited about my discovery that I forgot all about it. I’ll bring it in a minute.”

She was off like a shot and a few minutes later returned with the bucket of water. “I’m sorry I kept dinner waiting so long,” she told them, as she set the bucket on the table, “but I’m glad I’ve solved that mystery. I’m going to solve the other one, too, before I stop.”

Peggy grinned mischievously. “Which mystery do you mean, Jo? The disappearance of those people at the cave or the mystery of the blue-eyed boy?”

“Both. Just give me time.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Florence called shortly afterwards as she came from the kitchen with a pot of tea, which she placed on the table beside her mother’s plate.

“Be there in a minute,” called back Jo Ann. “I’m simply starving.”

She took a plain little print dress out of her bag, then jerked off her wet clothes. “Can I—may I—eat barefooted?” she asked in a muffled voice as she pulled the dress over her head. “It’ll take too long to put on shoes and stockings.”

“When in Mexico do as the peons do,” quoted Peggy, laughing. “That’s your motto, is it? You’ll probably want to use the floor for your table and your fingers for knives and forks, too.”

“No; I haven’t any *tortillas* to use for knife and fork as they do. Only my feet are peon, anyway, and you can’t see them under the table.” Jo Ann slipped quickly into her place at the table where the others were already seated.

Mrs. Blackwell laughed gaily. “You girls are as good as a tonic,” she declared a little later. “I haven’t laughed so much for months. I feel much stronger today, too. I think I’ll take a short walk later on when it gets cooler.”

Florence beamed as she leaned over and squeezed her mother's hand. "I knew you'd get well up here. I'm going to write Daddy this very afternoon and tell him what a good patient you are and how much better you look already."

"You can do that right after dinner," put in Jo Ann. "I'm going to wash the dishes to make up for running away and leaving you and Peg to get dinner alone. I promise to be good after this."

"You mean till next time," laughed Florence.

"Well, of course, when there's something important——" began Jo Ann.

"We understand, Jo," smiled Mrs. Blackwell.

CHAPTER VI

A MYSTERIOUS LIGHT

As soon as they had finished eating and the girls had stacked the dishes and carried them to the kitchen, Jo Ann turned to Florence. "Now get out of here, young lady. I told you I was going to wash the dishes. You go and write that letter to your father."

She caught Florence by the shoulders and playfully pushed her out of the kitchen and across the yard.

"Peg, I might let you wipe the dishes if you'll promise to be good," she told her as she returned to the kitchen.

"That's really quite considerate of you, my dear," smilingly retorted Peggy. "I appreciate the honor very much."

Gay chatter accompanied the rattle and clatter of dishes as the two girls made quick work of their dishwashing. As they worked, their conversation drifted back to the subject of the bear and the pigs.

"I can't imagine living out in a wild, lonesome place like this and not owning a gun, can you, Peg?" asked Jo Ann. Without waiting for an answer she went on: "It'd be a shame to let that old bear come back and get the rest of those pigs when we have a gun and know how to shoot it. I'm going down there this afternoon and look the place over. If I can find a ledge or some place where I can be practically out of danger, I'm going to give Mr. Bear a warmer reception than he's looking for."

"I'm not very keen about a bear hunt myself, but if you go, I'm going with you. I have my doubts about Mrs. Blackwell's letting us go, though."

Jo Ann let her hands lie idly in the soapy dishwater while she pondered over

how to meet Mrs. Blackwell's objections. "I wonder," she said finally, "if she would be willing to let us go if we get María's husband—Juan—to go with us. I believe she would. I heard her say that she thought Juan was one of the most dependable, trustworthy peons she ever knew. We'd be safe enough if he'd go with us, because he'd have his dagger—stiletto, I believe it's called. The Mexicans're mighty keen and quick about using them, I've heard. Of course, no one's planning to get at such close quarters with a bear, but if worst came to worst——"

"Don't mention such a thing," protested Peggy. "It scares me just to think about it. I'd run for the nearest tree."

"You would! Don't you know that's the worst thing you could do? Never turn your back on a bear. He's not likely to attack you, if you hold your ground."

"Well, if you think I'm going to stand perfectly still and let Mr. Bear look me over and decide whether he likes nice juicy white meat as his diet, you're mistaken. Nothing doing, Jo."

"Don't be silly. I'd shoot him before he got near you, anyway."

"But suppose you missed him?"

"Quit talking such foolishness and wipe the rest of those dishes. Let's hurry and finish in a jiffy and go on down to the enclosure where they have the pigs and look about for the safest spot in which to wait for Mr. Bear."

"Well, I s'pose it won't do any harm to go down and look, but I believe Mrs. Blackwell won't let——"

"Don't be a wet blanket, Peg. I'm going to ask her right now, and you'll soon see that she will." Jo Ann hastily took her hands out of the dishwater, dried them, and then went over to the door of the bedroom. In another moment she came back. "Mrs. Blackwell's asleep, so I'll have to wait to ask her. Florence is sound asleep too. I'm sure Mrs. Blackwell wouldn't object to our going down now just to look at the enclosure."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Not exactly, but I think I can find it. We'll follow the path down toward the

goat ranch.”

They finished the dishes and put the kitchen in order, then slipped quietly around to the back of the house.

“Here’s the path, Peg. Follow me.” Jo Ann led the way down the path she and Florence had taken the afternoon before.

As they neared the goat ranch Jo Ann began looking for some sign which might lead them to the enclosure.

“It’s bound to be up this way somewhere,” Jo Ann said finally. “Let’s follow this ravine a little ways.”

“But suppose we get lost.”

“We can turn around and go back, can’t we?”

They followed a narrow path leading into the cool, shady depths of a deep ravine, a rugged, precipitous wall towering on their right.

“What a beau-ti-ful place,” breathed Peggy, a few minutes later, as they stopped to rest and cool off.

“Listen! Doesn’t that sound to you like the roar of water?” asked Jo Ann. “The river must not be far away.”

Both girls listened a moment. “It surely does,” agreed Peggy, “but how could that be?”

“We must’ve gone around in a circle and’ll come out not far from our spring. Come on, let’s see.”

They started eagerly up the steep narrow path. A moment later they were startled by the sound of a shrill squeal above the roar of the river.

“Oh, do you suppose the bear’s after another pig?” whispered Peggy, grabbing Jo Ann by the arm. “What’ll we do?”

“I don’t know. I wish I’d brought the gun.”

“Let’s go back,” begged Peggy, but Jo Ann shook her head. “Wait a minute.”

They listened intently a moment, then, to their relief, the squeals changed to contented grunts.

Jo Ann laughed. “Juan must be feeding the pigs, but it did frighten me for a minute.”

A moment later they came in sight of a crude enclosure built against the overhanging wall of the cliff. Tall poles were lashed together around a recess in the wall, making a small circular pen. The next moment they spied Juan working at strengthening a weak place in the wall. It appeared impenetrable, as it was, to them, and they wondered that any animal, even one as large as a bear, could break through such a barricade.

Juan turned from his work as he saw the girls approaching. After the customary salutation he went on in Spanish. “The bear very bad—very ferocious. He like much the pig.”

Jo Ann nodded her head. “Sí, sí—but why can’t we shoot him? I’ll kill him for you.”

Juan shook his head and looked puzzled, and Jo Ann realized he had not understood a word she had said.

She racked her brain for a way to make her meaning clear to him. Finally she picked up a stick and, after pointing to herself, put it to her shoulder and pretended to pull a trigger. “Pling! See! *El oso muerto* [The bear dead].”

Juan smiled approval; then, jabbering rapidly, he pointed to himself and shook his head.

“No—not you,” Jo Ann tried again, motioning to herself. “Me! See—I’ll shoot him!”

Finally, after several attempts, she succeeded in making him understand.

But Juan shook his head. “The Señora no like,” he said.

“I know,” agreed Jo Ann, “but if you come with Peg and me”—she pointed to

each of them—"I think it'll be all right."

For a while Peggy enjoyed watching the pantomime, interrupted now and then with a few English and Spanish words. Never before had she seen anyone go to so much trouble to make herself understood. Jo Ann certainly was a determined person.

After a little, however, Peggy became restless and began gathering some of the dainty little ferns growing at the base of the cliff. She wandered over to the bank of the mountain stream and stood for a few moments watching the water as it rushed and tumbled down the rocky gorge. Then her thoughts drifted back to the bear. She wondered if he could be hiding somewhere near, waiting for a chance to steal another pig.

She glanced nervously about, then called over to Jo Ann, "Aren't you ready to go? They'll be wondering what's become of us."

"Yes, I'm ready," Jo Ann called back. "Everything's all set for the surprise party tonight. See that ledge up there?" She pointed to a narrow ledge about fifteen feet straight up the side of the cliff. "That's where you and I are going to wait for Mr. Bear. We couldn't be in any danger there—unless you got scared and tumbled off."

"But how're we going to get up there?" Peggy asked quickly. "I'm not a bird or a lizard."

"That's easy. Juan's going to cut notches in a pole for us to climb up on," explained Jo Ann. "But come on, I've got lots to do to get ready for tonight."

She turned and called to Juan, "Don't you forget."

He nodded his head vigorously to reassure her, and then she and Peggy started down the path for home.

"Where on earth have you girls been?" Florence called to them.

"Exploring," Jo Ann called back.

As soon as they reached the porch Jo Ann began talking as rapidly as her tongue could fly, explaining about Juan's consent to help them on their bear hunt, the

ledge above the enclosure where they could wait in safety, and the other details of her plans. She ended with a vigorous appeal to Mrs. Blackwell: "You'll let us go, won't you, now that Juan's consented to go with us and that we'll be in no danger? We've got to help Juan kill that bear before he gets the rest of the pigs."

Mrs. Blackwell was silent for several moments before answering. After what seemed to Jo Ann to be an age, she said slowly, "If Juan'll be with you—and if you'll promise not to take any unnecessary risks, I'll let you two go."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Blackwell. That's grand!" cried Jo Ann.

"I'll see that Jo Ann doesn't do anything rash," put in Peggy.

Florence smiled over at Jo Ann. "Maybe you won't be so enthusiastic by the time that bear hugs you. I'm glad I'm going to stay here with Mother."

Jo Ann merely smiled back at Florence and caught Peggy by the arm. "Come on, let's go in and get our things ready for the hunt."

The two girls went on into the house, and Jo Ann quickly opened her bag and took out several garments and handed them to Peggy. "We'll need these knickers. We can't be bothered with skirts flapping about our legs tonight," she said.

"No, we surely can't. They'd be a terrible nuisance."

"Get the flashlight, and I'll get the gun. This is a peach of a gun," Jo Ann added a moment later, running her hand lovingly over the polished surface of the stock. "I wish it were mine."

"Why? Is it different from any other gun?" Peggy asked.

"Different! I should say it is. It's two guns in one, a double-barrel shotgun and a 30-30 rifle. This little barrel underneath is the rifle barrel." She opened a box and held it out to Peggy. "See what vicious-looking cartridges you shoot in it. They'll blow a hole clear through that bear."

Peggy's eyes opened wide in surprise. "I've never seen a gun like that before."

"I never have, either. They're very expensive. Florence said her father ordered

this one so he wouldn't have to carry two guns when he went hunting. You see, in the mountains you never know whether you'll run into wild turkeys or mountain lions, and with this gun you're ready for anything. I want to get started as early as possible tonight."

They hurried outdoors, built the fire and began preparations for supper.

Later that evening, after the supper things were cleared away, they sat out under the stars, watching a full round moon rise from behind the mountain range across the valley. As it rose higher and higher the shadows began to disappear, and soon it was almost as light as day.

Jo Ann was very thankful for the bright moonlight. It made their daring adventure seem a little less dangerous. Now that it was so light she decided it was time to leave. She sprang up, saying, "I believe it's light enough for us to see now, Peg. Come on; let's change our clothes and get started."

In a few more minutes two knicker-clad figures disappeared down the path.

When they neared the deep gorge which had looked so beautiful to them that afternoon, the girls began to feel a little nervous. They peered at every shadow, almost expecting it to rush at them. Jo Ann held the gun ready to throw it into position in a second. She had the safety on, but the gun was loaded, ready to use. Peggy stayed as close behind her as she possibly could without getting in her way.

When they saw Juan coming to meet them they breathed a sigh of relief. He wore the usual white trousers and loose white shirt of the peon, and they made him look like a ghost walking in the moonlight. But Jo Ann and Peggy were not afraid of ghosts just now. They were looking for something big and black and terrifying.

Jo Ann started to speak, but Juan motioned to her to be quiet. He led them to the base of the cliff, then pointed to the crude notched pole which he had placed against the ledge.

A few minutes later both girls had climbed up the narrow rocky ledge and were wriggling about trying to find a comfortable position. Statue-like Juan took his place just below. Jo Ann held the gun across her lap, ready to throw it into position in an instant.

The moonlight, filtering through the trees, cast grotesque shadows on the ground below them. Several times Jo Ann was sure she saw a dark hulk shambling toward the enclosure, only to discover it was the shadow of a tree swaying in the night breeze. She strained her eyes till they hurt, trying to peer into the dark depths of the ravine from which they expected the bear to appear.

In the excitement of making plans for the bear hunt, Jo Ann had forgotten about the blue-eyed boy, but now her mind drifted back to him and the mysterious way in which he and the rest of the family had disappeared. It was almost as though the earth had opened and swallowed them, she thought. She went over the events of the last two days in her mind and tried to plan some course of action. She did not intend to leave one stone unturned that might help in solving the mystery.

While she sat there dreaming, she was startled by a tiny stone hitting her on the arm. She glanced around quickly and saw Peggy pointing questioningly to the high range of mountains on their right. With difficulty Jo Ann turned partly around on the ledge. A tiny light flickering against the blackness of the mountains caught and held her attention. For a moment she thought it was a star falling; then she noticed that it did not move. What could it be? She looked at Peggy and shook her head to indicate that she did not know what it was.

For a while they watched the light. There was something mysterious about the way it flared up brightly then almost flickered out, only to brighten up again. That could not be a campfire, she decided. Florence had said no one lived up on the side of that mountain. It was too wild for habitation. At that distance a tiny campfire could scarcely be seen.

Suddenly a thought flashed through her mind. It was a signal light. Someone was trying to send a message across the valley. Perhaps the blue-eyed boy *had* been kidnaped, after all, and that was why the family had disappeared so suddenly.

She turned to tell this to Peggy, then realized she must not talk. The next instant she was half ashamed for being so suspicious. If that boy had been kidnaped, she felt sure those people had not done it—they were merely tools in the employ of someone else, she decided.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHARCOAL MAKER

Peggy and Jo Ann continued to wait silently for the stealthy appearance of the bear. Myriads of tiny stars winked down at them as they watched the full round moon sail slowly across the deep sapphire sky. Now and then the chirp of a nearby cricket or the croak of a frog could be heard above the constant splashing of the river.

In their hasty preparations for the bear hunt they had forgotten their sweaters, and now they shivered a little, both from excitement and the chill mountain air. The jagged edges of the rock felt anything but comfortable, and their muscles ached from sitting in one position so long. Jo Ann felt dizzy from trying to watch the light high on the mountain side and the dark shadows below her at one and the same time. Was there some connection between this new mystery and the mystery of the blue-eyed boy? she wondered.

When the girls felt they could keep still no longer, Juan stepped out from the shadows and called up to them in Spanish, “The bear no come tonight.”

Jo Ann shook her head. “No, I don’t think he’s coming either. Come on, Peg,” she said, turning around on the ledge. “Let’s get down and stretch our legs.”

Stiffly the two girls scrambled down the pole and began kicking and stretching in an effort to relax their cramped muscles.

Juan began jabbering rapidly in Spanish, and Jo Ann stopped a moment to listen. “The bear no have *hambre* tonight,” he told her.

She gazed at him questioningly. “*Hombre?* Man?” she repeated. “*No sabe* [I do not understand].”

Juan shook his head and began rubbing his hand over his stomach. “No—no

hombre, h-ambre.”

Jo Ann’s face broke into a smile, “Ah, *sí*,” she replied, then turning to Peggy she explained: “He’s trying to tell us that the bear isn’t hungry tonight.”

“I guess he’s right,” agreed Peggy. “Anyway, I’ve had enough. I’m going to the house.”

She started off but had only gone a few steps when she realized Jo Ann was not following. “Aren’t you coming, Jo?” she called to her.

“Yes, in a minute. I want to ask Juan about that light.” Pointing to the light, she asked, “What is it, Juan?”

“Ah, that. It is the light of a *carbonero*.”

“But what is a *carbonero*?” she asked again.

Juan rattled off more Spanish, but Jo Ann shook her head.

“Oh, well, I’ll ask Florence,” she said to herself, then turned to follow Peggy. “*Buenas noches*, Juan,” she called back to him. “Tomorrow night we watch again, *sabe*?”

Juan nodded his head, “*Sí*, señorita.”

The two girls hurried back to the house, and on entering they found Florence and her mother fast asleep. They quickly slipped into their pajamas and snuggled up under the warm blankets. Peggy, worn out from their long vigil, soon fell asleep, but Jo Ann kept wondering about the light. Why was it there? And why did it flare up and die down as it had? The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that it had something to do with the blue-eyed boy. She would climb the mountain the next day and find the answer to these questions, she decided. If that really was a signal light, she was going to find out what it was all about. Finally, when the faint rose of dawn was beginning to show in the east, Jo Ann drifted off to sleep.

It seemed to her that she had scarcely closed her eyes when she was conscious of someone calling, “Jo, Jo, wake up. If you want any breakfast you’ll have to hurry.”

There was a strong aroma of coffee and the clatter of dishes being placed on the table. Jo Ann opened her eyes and stared around in surprise as she saw Peggy putting the finishing touches to the breakfast table and Florence helping her mother to her chair.

She sprang quickly out of bed. “Why didn’t you wake me sooner? I didn’t mean to sleep so late. I don’t know what made me——”

She stopped suddenly. The events of the night before flashed through her mind: the bear hunt, the mysterious light, the trip of investigation she had planned up the mountain. If she were to accomplish all she wanted to do today, she had no time to waste.

After a brief sketchy toilet, she slipped into her place at the table and began eating rapidly, scarcely conscious of the food she was putting into her mouth. In spite of Peggy’s and Florence’s pointed remarks, she ate in unruffled silence, her mind apparently a million miles away. “Jo’s on the trail of another mystery,” Peggy laughingly remarked to Florence and Mrs. Blackwell.

Just then Jo Ann looked up and asked, “What does *carbonero* mean, Florence?”

“A maker of charcoal.” Florence smiled. “I know why you’re asking that question. Peggy told me all about your mysterious light and how you killed the big bad bear.” She laughed teasingly, then added, “That light was just from a charcoal maker’s fire.” Jo Ann felt a wave of disappointment sweep over her. She had been so sure there was some mystery about the light and that it would lead her to the blue-eyed boy, and now Florence said it was only the light of a charcoal maker’s fire. “Every now and then an Indian family will go up in the mountains and stay there several days to make charcoal; then they carry it to the villages to sell.”

At these words a sudden new idea leaped into Jo Ann’s mind. It was so simple that she wondered why she hadn’t thought of it before.

“Girls, I believe I’ve solved the mystery!” she exclaimed. “That Mexican family of the cave have gone up there on the mountain to make charcoal. I’m on their trail again.”

“I shouldn’t wonder but that you’re right,” agreed Florence. “That would explain why those two boys were gathering wood the other afternoon. They were going

to use it to make charcoal.”

Jo Ann burst out impulsively, “I’m going up there on the mountain and see if that really is our family of the cave. Who wants to go with me?”

“I think you’re probably going on a wild-goose chase, but I’ll go with you,” Florence replied. “It’ll not be any easy matter to locate the family, even if we can see the smoke from their fire.” She turned to her mother, “You don’t object, do you, if we go up there?”

Mrs. Blackwell hesitated a moment, then answered, “Oh, I think it’ll be all right for you to go if you’ll be very careful and be back before dark.” She smiled over at Jo Ann. “I know you’ll never be satisfied till you find out if your blue-eyed boy’s up there.”

“It won’t take us long,” Jo Ann said confidently. “That light didn’t look as if it were very far away.”

Florence and her mother exchanged amused glances, and then Florence remarked, “We’d better take some lunch with us. It’s lots farther than you think, Jo.”

“I’m not going,” spoke up Peggy. “I’m going to stay here with Mrs. Blackwell.”

Jo Ann sprang up from the table. “Well, let’s get busy this minute and get our work done and get started.” She began stacking the dishes hurriedly.

A few minutes later she was washing the dishes so vigorously that Florence prophesied there wouldn’t be enough left unbroken to set the table for supper. In a surprisingly short time they had finished the dishes, packed the lunch, and were ready to start.

“I believe I’ll carry the gun along,” Jo Ann remarked. “We might see a rabbit or squirrel—or something.”

Soon the two girls were winding their way up a donkey trail that led up the mountain side. From the very first they kept stopping now and then to scan the mountain for the smoke from the charcoal maker’s fire.

Finally Jo Ann cried triumphantly, “I see it! Look, right up there!”

“Yes, that’s it!”

Both girls began searching for a path leading toward the spiral of smoke.

“I know they couldn’t have climbed up this steep place,” Jo Ann remarked. “They’d have had to be human flies to do that. That old grandmother and the little children couldn’t possibly have made it up here.”

“Well, the only thing to do is to follow this trail a little farther and see if we can’t find some trace of the way they did go.” Florence started along the path, Jo Ann close at her heels.

“What on earth made them go to such an outlandish place to make their charcoal, Florence? It looks as if they could’ve found a much better place.”

“Well, you see, the Indian has no way to cut his wood except with a machete—that’s just a big, long butcher knife. He hunts for the fallen limbs and trees that don’t require much chopping.”

“Believe me, if I were a charcoal maker, I’d hunt an easier place to reach than that.”

After they had walked for some distance without noticing any sign of another path leading up the mountain, Jo Ann called, “Say, I believe we’ve gone too far. We must’ve missed their path. That smoke’s back of us now.”

“You’re right. So it is. We’ll have to turn around and go back. If we don’t find that path soon, I think we’d better go back home. The sun is terrifically hot now.”

They began retracing their steps, searching more carefully than before.

“That family would’ve been bound to leave some sort of a trail,” Jo Ann kept saying.

When at last they reached the spot where they had first seen the smoke, Florence said in a discouraged tone, “How about giving it up and going back home now? I’m tired and hot.”

“Not yet,” Jo Ann urged as she wiped the perspiration from her forehead. “Let’s

sit down in the shade of this cliff and rest for a while, and then we'll feel more like going on." She dropped down on the ground and leaned back against the cool rock.

Wearily Florence followed her example and began fanning herself with her hat.

After she had rested a few minutes, Jo Ann rose, saying, "I'm going to take another look around here while you rest awhile longer."

She wandered down the trail a short distance beyond the cliff, searching for a place where it would be possible to climb up the mountain side. "If we can't find their path, then I'm going to find another way to get up there," she told herself determinedly.

A few minutes later she started up the steep bank, steadying herself now and then by catching hold of the scrubby bushes growing out of the crevices of the rocks. After climbing about twenty-five or thirty feet she found herself on a rocky ledge above the cliff.

Her eyes suddenly began to twinkle. "I believe I'll slip around this ledge till I'm right above Florence and drop a pebble or two on her, just for fun."

As she was slipping quietly along the ledge she heard a faint moaning sound. She stopped instantly and listened. "What on earth is that? Sounds like someone in distress. Just suppose it's a wild animal!" She strained her ears again to listen. Once more the moaning sound floated down to her a little more distinctly.

"That's a human being!" she told herself excitedly. "I believe it's more than one person. Sounds as if there must be several in distress. I wonder if it could be that family from the cave in some kind of trouble."

She leaned over the edge of the cliff and called down excitedly, "Florence! Oh, Florence!"

"Where are you?" Florence called back in a surprised voice.

"Right over you."

Florence stepped out hastily and stared up at Jo Ann. "How did you ever manage to get——"

“Did you hear that queer moaning sound a minute ago?” Jo Ann broke in.

“Why, no—what——”

“I believe someone’s in terrible trouble. Come on up here and let’s see if we can find them. Be sure to bring the gun.”

“How can I get up there?” Florence asked hesitatingly.

“Go down the trail a little way, and I’ll show you.”

In a few minutes Jo Ann was helping to pull Florence up the bank. No sooner had she reached the ledge than Jo Ann ejaculated, “Listen! There’s that sound again.”

Florence’s eyes stretched to their widest as the cry of distress reached her ears.

“Mercy! That’s awful,” she murmured, low voiced.

“That sound’s coming from right up there!” Jo Ann pointed almost straight above. “Come on, I believe we can get up around this way.”

CHAPTER VIII

FRIENDS AT LAST

Jo Ann started climbing the steep bank, Florence following as closely as possible. After they had struggled upward a short distance, Jo Ann caught sight of a faintly marked trail which showed signs of having been used recently.

“Here’s the way they went!” she exclaimed. “We’re on the right track at last.”

“I believe you’re right, because it seems to be winding up toward that smoke,” Florence agreed.

Just as she had finished speaking the moaning sounded again, more clearly than ever.

“Let’s hurry!” cried Jo Ann.

After starting up the faintly marked path, the girls were able to make much better time. Without wasting a moment in conversation they hurried on as fast as they could go. A few minutes later at a turn in the path they came in sight of a crude shelter of boughs thrown up in a hurried fashion against the steep face of rock.

Simultaneously the piteous wailing of several voices burst upon their ears with such heart-rending sadness that involuntarily both girls were filled with sympathy.

The next moment, through an open space in the shelter, Jo Ann saw the white-clad figure of a boy stretched out on the floor. Huddled around him were two women and several little girls, their heads bowed and their faces almost concealed by their black *rebosas*.

Catching Florence by the hand, Jo Ann quickly led her to the entrance of the shack. As they stepped inside, the mourners raised startled eyes.

Immediately the two girls recognized the two women as the mother and grandmother they had seen in the cave. Swiftly then Jo Ann's eyes flew to the still, white-clad figure lying on a mat on the ground.

"He's dead!" flashed through her mind as she dropped on her knees and placed a comforting hand on the mother's shoulder.

Before she could think of a single Spanish word of sympathy, the poor mother began wailing, "*A Dios!* My son—my Pepito! He is dead!"

Over and over she intoned this lament, along with the groaning of the grandmother and the little girls.

"How could that boy have died so suddenly?" Jo Ann thought. "He looked frail and undernourished, but——"

Her train of thought was broken by hearing Florence begin questioning the mother. She listened intently to see if she could discover what they were saying. She could catch only a few words now and then, but she understood the mother to say that the boy had died that morning. He and the other boy had gone higher up on the mountain the night before to help the father to gather the wood and start the fire for making the charcoal. The boy had taken sick suddenly—the father had brought him down and he had died soon afterwards.

Before the mother had finished speaking, Jo Ann saw Florence kneel down beside the still figure of the boy and feel first his pulse then touch his forehead and cheek.

"How strange!" Jo Ann thought. "He's dead—why is she doing that?"

The next moment Florence exclaimed, "Jo, find me a piece of glass this instant! Hurry!"

"Why on earth does she want a piece of glass?" Jo Ann thought, but without stopping to question she began looking about the scantily furnished hut.

"There's no sign of any kind of glass here. Won't this do instead?" she asked a moment later as she handed her a small glazed pottery mug.

"It'll have to do. Break it—I want only a small piece."

“Why do——” Jo Ann checked the question at the end of her tongue and quickly broke the mug against the stone *metate*, then handed her one of the pieces.

Wide eyed, she watched Florence place the piece of pottery, glazed side down, over the boy’s mouth. After a short interval she saw her take it up and examine it.

“Look here, Jo! There’s a tiny speck of moisture on this! Don’t you see it?” Florence exclaimed excitedly.

“Yes, but——”

“That means he’s not dead! There’s a fighting chance for him yet.” She turned and repeated this to the mother.

“Let’s try artificial respiration,” Jo Ann put in excitedly. “I know how! I can help you.”

Florence nodded assent as she began lifting the thin little arms up and down, being careful to press them against his sides each time. While she was doing this, the mother and grandmother were mumbling their prayers, the tears rolling down their cheeks.

After Florence had worked for several minutes, she heard sudden footsteps back of her, then a deep voice demanding, “What are you doing? My son is dead. Why are you disturbing him?”

She turned about quickly and saw a dark, grimy, bearded man and behind him the blue-eyed boy. With a gesture to Jo Ann to continue the artificial respiration, Florence rose and began explaining why she thought the boy was alive. She picked up the piece of pottery, saying, “Look! I’ll show you.”

Just as she was placing it over the boy’s mouth, she noticed a tiny flickering of his eyelids. “See!” she cried triumphantly, pointing to his eyelids. “He *is* alive!”

A look of mingled joy and awe came over the man’s face. “*Madre de Dios!* My son lives!” he cried. “You are an angel of mercy. You have brought him back to life!”

“*Sí, Papá!* They have performed a miracle!” the mother agreed, smiling through

her tears.

Florence placed her hand over his heart, then she looked up at the parents, saying, “His heart very bad. It is necessary that you take him down from here immediately. It is too high up here.”

“*Si—sí*, señorita. Whatever you say I will do,” the father said.

Florence and Jo Ann lifted the boy gently and placed him, head lowered slightly, over his father’s shoulder.

As he began to shift the child into a more upright position, Florence spoke up quickly, “No, no—you carry him like this, and the blood will run to his head—then he will get better more quickly.”

“*Bien*,” the father assented, and started down the path at the easy rhythmical pace of the peon, Florence and Jo Ann following closely.

When they had gone a short distance, the mother caught up with them. “I come with my Pepito,” she said.

“Florence, what made you think that boy might not be dead?” Jo Ann asked a moment later.

“Daddy has told me of several cases like that one. Some people, he said, could not stand the high altitude. That boy was frail and undernourished to begin with, and I figured that the hard work and the high altitude combined were too much for him.”

“How did you happen to think of putting that piece of pottery over his mouth?”

“Well, there’s a law in this country that requires a corpse to be buried within a few hours after death. Daddy told me that several times he has used a piece of glass in this way to prove to the officials that a patient was not really dead.”

“It’s a blessing you knew about that. I’ve never seen people more helpless in my life than those poor peons.”

“Daddy says most peons know nothing of modern medicine and are ignorant of some of the simplest remedies.”

By this time they had reached a cool, shady spot beside a spring, and Florence called to the father to stop. "Put him down here."

No sooner had he laid the boy on the ground than she and Jo Ann began bathing his face with their dampened handkerchiefs.

"One minute, señorita. I bring you water," spoke up the father. He lined the deep crown of his hat with large green leaves and filled it with water, then brought it over to the girls.

Florence dipped her hands into the water and let it drip gently on the boy's face and neck.

As soon as the cold water touched his face the boy's eyelids fluttered open.

Florence turned to the father. "Bring me more water—I want to give him a drink."

With a nod of assent, the man stooped down, broke off a large leaf from an elephant's-ear plant near by and folded it into a cup which he quickly filled with water.

Florence then lifted the boy's head slightly and held it while Jo Ann held the improvised cup to his lips. After she had laid him down again, his eyes opened wider, and he stared blankly at the girls for a moment.

Then his gaze fell upon his mother, and he murmured faintly, "*Mi—Ma-má!*"

With a cry of joy, she exclaimed. "Ah, my Pepito. You have come back to me!"

"It is necessary that we be very careful," Florence cautioned the parents. "The boy must not talk yet. After he rests longer, then he can talk."

"*Bien!* Just as you say." The tears began to flow down the father's cheeks again as he added in a choked voice, "If it had not been for you, señoritas, my Pepito would have been buried. Carlitos and I were digging his grave when you came."

A shudder of horror swept over both girls as they realized how narrow had been the escape from such a tragedy.

“You must not take your little boy back up on the mountain,” Florence went on. “He will be sick again, if you do.”

“Ask him to move his family down to the cave,” spoke up Jo Ann eagerly. The thought darted through her mind, “I could find out about the blue-eyed boy, then.”

“Good idea!” Florence replied, then translated her suggestion to the father.

He hesitated a moment then began haltingly, “But my charcoal——”

The mother broke in rapidly, “You can come Up here and make your charcoal. We will stay at the cave.”

“But—who——” A strange expression of fear passed over his face as he glanced at the girls, then at his wife.

She stepped over hastily to his side and began talking to him in a low tone.

Surprised at these strange actions, the girls looked questioningly at each other.

As Florence turned to see how the boy was faring, she overheard the mother say, “It will be all right, *Papá*. These are our friends.”

CHAPTER IX

“I’M GOING TO SOLVE THE MYSTERY”

Jo Ann, who had been watching the play of expressions on their faces intently, now experienced a feeling of relief as she saw the father nod and smile.

He then addressed Florence, “*Bien*. I go bring my family. You wait here.”

“All right,” Florence agreed.

After the father had left, Jo Ann remarked, “Now that the boy is so much better we can take time to eat our lunch while we’re waiting for the father to bring the rest of the family down. I’m beginning to get hungry.”

Florence glanced up at the sun and noted its position. “Why, it must be after two o’clock! No wonder you’re hungry. The suspense has been too great for us to think of ourselves.”

“Yes, this has been the most exciting experience I’ve ever been through. It does seem almost like a miracle, doesn’t it?” Her gaze fell on the boy, whose great black eyes were glancing from one face to the other.

Florence picked up the package containing their lunch and offered some to the mother.

After a moment’s hesitation she took out a small chocolate cake, looked at it curiously, then bit off a tiny piece. Her face beamed. “Ah, caké! For my Pepito.” She leaned over and touched the cake to the boy’s mouth.

Florence spoke up quickly, “No, no. You eat that one. That kind very bad for Pepito. I’ll give him one of these.” She picked up a graham cracker and handed it to the mother to give to him.

No sooner had the boy tasted the cracker than he began to eat rapidly, as if he were very hungry.

“I believe that child was about starved,” said Jo Ann. “He must have been weak from lack of food to begin with.”

“He’s probably not had anything to eat except some cold *tortillas* since we saw them the other day.”

“Let’s not eat another bite,” said Jo Ann quickly. “Let’s save the rest of our lunch for those children. I’m hungry, but I’m not half as hungry as they must be. I can wait to eat till we get back home.” She handed the rest of the lunch over to the mother saying, “For your children.”

“Ah, *gracias*, señoritas. You are too good,” the mother said, smiling. In a rapid flow of Spanish she began telling Florence that they had been traveling for days and had had very little food. “When *Papá* make the charcoal, then we will have food.”

In the pause that followed, Florence told Jo Ann what the woman had said.

“It’s strange they came away up here to make the charcoal. It looks as if they’d have stopped sooner,” Jo Ann remarked. “Hurry up and ask her about the blue-eyed boy, Carlitos. Ask her if he and Pepito are twins.”

The mother shook her head when Florence asked, “Which is the older one—Carlitos?”

“No. Pepito.”

“They don’t look a bit alike.”

A strange expression passed over the woman’s face; then she said slowly, “Carlitos is not my child.”

Jo Ann caught this last remark and spoke up eagerly: “Ask her if he is related to her family.”

When Florence obediently asked this question, the mother merely shook her head without saying a word.

“Ask her if his eyes aren’t a deep blue, just as I said,” put in Jo Ann.

“No, I can see she doesn’t want to talk about him. You can find that out for yourself in a few minutes. He’ll be coming down with the family soon.”

“Well, believe me, I’m more convinced than ever that there is something strange about that boy, and I’m going to solve the mystery.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to do your investigating while they’re back in the cave.”

Shortly afterward they heard the clatter of the donkey’s feet on the trail, and soon the family arrived at the spring. The mother ran to meet them and quickly divided the girls’ lunch among them; then she took the baby from the father’s arms and sat down with it beside Pepito again.

While the hungry children were eating, Jo Ann got a good look at Carlitos’s eyes. “See, Florence,” she murmured. “I was right. The boy’s eyes are a beautiful deep blue.”

“Yes, you’re right. His eyes are blue and his features are finely cut. He’s entirely different from the others.”

Noticing that the father was watching them closely, Florence changed the subject by saying, “It’s time we were starting home this minute if we’re going to get there before dark, as we promised.” She turned to the father. “Are you ready to start?”

“Sí, señorita,” he replied, then stooped down quickly and picked up Pepito, who was struggling to rise to his feet.

In a few more minutes the long procession started down the narrow trail, the father with Pepito at the head, and Jo Ann in the rear with Carlitos and one of the little girls.

Florence smiled as she noticed that Jo Ann was beside the blue-eyed boy and trying to talk to him.

It did not take Jo Ann long to discover that Carlitos knew no English. “He can’t be an American, then,” she thought. “He’s probably a German or some other

kind of a foreigner.” She asked him a few questions in her broken Spanish but, as it was very difficult for him to understand her, she gave up trying to talk finally and turned her attention to the little girl, who kept looking up at her adoringly.

When at last they drew near their house, Florence pointed it out to the father, saying, “This is where we live. We will have to leave you now. You must be very careful with Pepito, remember. Don’t let him go back up the mountain with you.”

The man nodded a vigorous assent. “All right, señorita. We will take much care of Pepito.”

Jo Ann spoke up eagerly just then: “Florence, tell them that we’ll come down to the cave tomorrow to see how Pepito is getting along.”

After Florence had translated this message, the two girls called, “*Adios!*” to the family and a special one to Pepito, then hurried on to the house.

No sooner had they greeted Mrs. Blackwell and Peggy than they began recounting their adventures excitedly.

When Florence told of discovering that Pepito was still alive, both her listeners gasped in amazement.

“I’m so thankful you girls knew what to do and could save that boy from being buried alive,” Mrs. Blackwell said, after Jo Ann and Florence had finished their entire story.

“And I am, too,” agreed Peggy.

“It was a good thing we carried a lunch along with us,” Jo Ann added. “Those poor children were almost starved. They’d had hardly anything to eat for days. You should have seen the way they gobbled up the cakes we gave them—even Pepito.”

“If you gave your lunch to the children, you must be very hungry by this time,” Mrs. Blackwell said.

“Oh, we are,” both replied together.

Peggy smiled. "I thought you'd be about starved, so I have supper all ready. Maybe you'll be too excited to eat, though, Jo, since you've discovered that there really is a mystery about the blue-eyed boy."

"Not so you'd notice it. We'll be ready to eat as soon as we wash our hands and faces," Jo Ann said, rising. As she started toward the door she suddenly stopped and wheeled about. "I just thought of something! Those poor little children won't have a thing to eat tonight or in the morning. All their possessions were in those little bundles on the burro."

"That's so." Florence drew a long sigh. "Well, I certainly can't enjoy my supper knowing that they're not going to have any." She turned to Peggy. "What have you got for supper that we can take to them?"

"Well—I made a lot of potato salad, for one thing."

Florence shook her head. "They wouldn't like that, I'm sure. They've probably never tasted any."

"Well, we know they like beans and rice and tomatoes," put in Jo Ann. "We can take those."

"Why not take a box of crackers, Florence?" Mrs. Blackwell suggested. "They can eat them while they're waiting for the other things to cook."

"All right." Florence at once began helping Jo Ann to gather up the food, and soon the two girls were starting down the short cut to the cave.

"Hurry up, or it'll be dark," Mrs. Blackwell called after them.

"She needn't worry," smiled Jo Ann. "We'll step on it. We've got to go right past where we saw that snake yesterday."

Florence's brows drew together in a frown, but she replied determinedly, "I'm not going to let that stop me. We can watch more closely this time. I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have yesterday."

"Snake or no snake, I'm not going to drop this food down the mountain as I did my basket yesterday."

Cautiously they made their way down the steep path. When they reached the base of the cliff and started around toward the cave, they heard the sound of voices.

“There’s the family,” exclaimed Jo Ann. “If we run we can catch up with them and won’t have to go all the way to the cave.”

They started off at a swift pace and soon reached the little procession.

Florence called to the mother, “Wait a minute. We’ve brought you some things to eat.” She and Jo Ann handed the packages to the mother and Carlitos.

The mother’s face broke into a wide smile. “*Muchas gracias, señoritas,*” she said as she took the packages.

The grandmother and the father also joined in thanking the girls.

As they turned to leave, Florence remarked to the father, “We’ll help to look after the family while you go up and make your charcoal. We’ll come again tomorrow. We hope Pepito will be much better by then.”

The man’s face broke into a smile. “Our friends, you are most kind. We have much gratitude.”

CHAPTER X

A SOILED YELLOWED ENVELOPE

The next morning, when they were at the breakfast table, Jo Ann suggested that they go down to the goat ranch to see if they could get some milk to take to Pepito. “Do you want to go this time, Peg?”

“We-ell, if I thought I’d get to see your mysterious boy, I’d go.”

“I don’t think you’d see him, because he and the father are going back up the mountain to finish making their charcoal.”

“Well, I’ll stay here, then. You two go on.”

After they had washed the dishes and finished their other tasks, Florence and Jo Ann set out toward the goat ranch, Jo Ann swinging a bucket on her arm.

When they came in sight of the little pink adobe house, Florence remarked, “While we’re here getting the milk, I believe I’ll see if I can buy some corn to take to the cave family for their *tortillas*.”

“Good idea,” approved Jo Ann.

After they had exchanged greetings with the woman at the house, Florence asked about the milk and corn, explaining their reason for wanting them.

“Poor little boy,” the woman exclaimed. “I give you some milk to take to him. It is not the kind of milk you get—it’s goat’s milk.”

Florence explained her answers to Jo Ann, adding, “That’ll suit Pepito better, anyway. He’s probably never tasted cow’s milk.”

After the woman had filled the bucket and had given them several ears of corn,

they started off toward the cave.

As they neared the cave opening, Florence remarked, “The family’s here this time. I smell food cooking. I’m glad we brought that down last night, aren’t you?”

Jo Ann nodded an emphatic assent.

In a few more moments they stepped into the entrance of the cave.

The mother looked up quickly, then smiled broadly as she recognized the girls. “Ah, good morning, friends.”

“How’s Pepito this morning?” Florence asked a moment later.

“Much better.” Her face was beaming. “He ate much of the food that you brought.”

“That’s fine. We brought you some corn for your *tortillas* and some milk for Pepito. He must eat lots and drink much milk, then he will get strong.”

The mother caught hold of Florence’s hand, saying, “A thousand thanks, *señorita*.”

With a smile of greeting to the family, Jo Ann crossed over to Pepito, who was lying on the *petate* beside the baby watching his grandmother knot a long slender fiber rope.

“What are you doing?” Jo Ann asked the grandmother curiously, after she had talked a moment.

“Making bags for the charcoal,” she replied.

“But how can you——” she began, then, not knowing the word for carry, she called over to Florence, “Does she mean they’re going to carry charcoal in that thing? I should think it’d fall through such big holes.”

Florence came over beside Jo Ann and smilingly translated her question into Spanish.

“No, it won’t fall through,” Pepito replied earnestly. He raised up and took the partly finished bag from his grandmother and held it up for Jo Ann to see. “The charcoal is big. We pack it with much care, and it no fall through these holes,” he added, shaking his head.

“They fasten a large bag of charcoal on each side of the burro so that all you can see is his long ears sticking out between the bags,” Florence explained. “It looks as if the bags of charcoal were walking down the road.”

After watching how deftly the grandmother’s gnarled old hands tied the knots in the wiry rope, Jo Ann said, “I’d like to have a hammock made like that. Ask her, Florence, if she could make me a long strip that I could use for a hammock. Tell her I’ll buy it from her.”

“All right. You catch hold of one end of the strip and I the other, and we’ll show her exactly what you mean.”

After Florence had translated Jo Ann’s request and the two girls had demonstrated their meaning by gestures, the grandmother’s brown wrinkled face began to beam. She took the strip from them, saying, “*Sí, sí*. I understand. I finish this one for you. You have been so good—you give us back our Pepito.”

“Oh, but you need these bags for the charcoal right away,” put in Jo Ann, who had caught the meaning of the grandmother’s words. “Tell her I’m not in a hurry for the hammock. I can wait till after they sell the charcoal.”

After Florence had passed this remark on, the grandmother replied, “I make you one. When my son sell the charcoal, he will bring me more rope.”

After talking for a few minutes more Jo Ann remarked to Florence, “Ask the mother something more about Carlitos, now. If he isn’t their child, ask her where they got him and what nationality he is—he doesn’t understand English.”

Florence began to laugh. “Hold on! I can’t ask all of those questions at once. I’m a little dubious about asking any at all. They don’t seem to like to talk about him.”

“Yes, I know, but I’ve got to find out about him.”

“We-ell, I’ll see what I can find out, but I can’t promise you much.”

Florence walked back to the mother, who was cooking beans over the fire in the middle of the cave. After chatting with her awhile she tactfully brought up the subject of Carlitos. "How long has Carlitos lived with you?"

"Oh, for a long time. He is as one of our family."

"How old was he when you took him?"

"Like Rosita over there." The mother gestured toward the smaller one of the two little girls.

Florence glanced over at the child, who, she judged, must be about a year and a half old. So Carlitos had been with this family about seven years, she thought. "Where is his mother?" she asked.

"Ah, she died and left her baby with me. I was his nurse."

"That was too bad. Wasn't there any relative to take him?"

The woman shook her head. "No one."

The thought darted through Florence's mind that perhaps after all Carlitos was American or English. Since he had been so young when he was taken into this family, he could not have remembered any of his native language.

"Was his mother an American?" she asked.

"Yes, and she was so good to me and so beautiful. She had eyes of blue just like Carlitos'."

Just then Jo Ann crossed over to Florence's side. "Did I hear right? Did she say Carlitos was an American?"

"Yes."

"So I was right at first about his not being a Mexican. What else did she say?"

Florence quickly recounted all that the mother had told her.

When she had finished, Jo Ann said, "Well, there's something queer about a beautiful American woman leaving her baby with an ignorant Indian nurse. Ask

her where his father is. That child's bound to have some relatives somewhere. Looks strange to me that, as poor as this family is, they'd keep Carlitos when they can hardly feed their own children."

"Well, all right, I'll ask her. She doesn't seem to mind talking about him today as much as she did yesterday."

Florence turned to the mother. "Why did you have to keep Carlitos when you have so many children? Where was his father?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't know. He no come back."

"Where did he go?"

"To the mine. The beautiful American woman go every day to watch for her husband, but he no come. It was cold, and she got sick. She had much cough, and one day she died."

To the girls' surprise the woman walked over to the grandmother and began talking in a low, rapid voice. The grandmother nodded and smiled over at the girls.

"She said something about us, or the grandmother wouldn't have looked over at us that way," said Jo Ann. "At least she's smiling—that's encouraging."

They noticed the woman go over into a dark recess, then come back shortly. In the light of the fire they could see that she held a soiled yellowed envelope in her hand.

On coming closer the woman said earnestly, "You are American like his *mamá* and *papá*. You have been good to us like they were." She touched Florence on the cheek first, then Jo Ann. "And you are beautiful like his *mamá*."

She held up a sealed envelope. "His *mamá* give this to me. I keep it for Carlitos. When he get big, I give it to him."

Florence took the envelope into her hand. She uttered a little gasp. "Why, this is a letter! It is addressed to a man in New York." She read the name out loud. "Mr. E. P. Eldridge."

“Well, for Pete’s sake!” exclaimed Jo Ann. “Why didn’t she mail that?”

Not stopping to listen to Jo Ann, Florence asked the woman quickly, “Is Carlitos’ name Eldridge—Carlitos Eldridge?”

The woman hesitated a moment; then, after Florence had repeated the name Eldridge several times, she nodded her head. “Yes, I think that was the name. It has been many years—I forget.”

“This is a letter. Why didn’t you put it in the mail?”

The woman looked blank at this question.

“Didn’t Carlitos’ mother tell you to put this in the mail?” Florence asked.

“No. His *mamá* speak very little Spanish. She only been in Mexico a little time. When she was dying she give this to me and tell me, ‘No let big mean man get this.’”

“Who was the big mean man?” Florence asked, puzzled at this new turn in her story.

The woman broke into a confused account which Florence later translated to Jo Ann. “I can’t make out exactly what she’s talking about, but she says some big man who had something to do with the mine was mean to Carlitos’ mother after her husband had disappeared. She said they were all afraid of him.”

“But that’s no excuse for her not mailing the letter,” Jo Ann said.

“All she understood was to keep this from that man,” Florence explained. “She’d never seen a letter before in her life. She couldn’t read or write. And the American woman couldn’t explain it to her, you know. The only other people at this mine were Indian peons like themselves, so there was no one she could go to.”

“It’s hard to realize that she didn’t know what a letter was when she saw one,” Jo Ann remarked, then looked down at the envelope with renewed interest. “I wish we dared to open this and read it, but of course we can’t do that.”

“No; the only thing for us to do is to mail it now.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Jo Ann replied quickly. “It might get lost. It has to be carried so far before it even gets to a postoffice. Besides, it’s about seven years since this letter was written. Why not write a letter to this address explaining the situation?”

Florence pondered over this plan a moment, then spoke up briskly: “I have a better idea than that. I’ll write to Daddy and explain it all to him and have him telegraph to this Mr. Eldridge in New York. That’ll save lots of time.”

“You’re right, it certainly will.”

Florence turned and explained to the woman that she and Jo Ann were going to send word to this man whose name was written on the envelope. “It may help Carlitos,” she ended.

“Ah, you are so good to want to help Carlitos,” the woman exclaimed.

“I wish we could find something to write this address on, but we can’t,” said Florence. “We must look at it very carefully so as to be sure we get it right.”

Both girls read and reread the address, then repeated it aloud to each other.

“Now let’s hurry and get home before we forget it,” said Jo Ann.

After a hasty “*Adios*” to the family, the two hurried out of the cave.

CHAPTER XI

THE BEAR RETURNS

When the girls reached the house, almost breathless from their rapid climb, Jo Ann immediately burst out, "I was right! There is a mystery—about the blue-eyed boy!"

"Wait a minute, Jo," put in Florence. "Let's get that address down first of all." She grabbed up a piece of paper and scribbled down the address, then showed it to Jo Ann. "Is this right?"

Jo Ann studied it carefully. "Yes, I'm sure it is." She turned back to Peggy and Mrs. Blackwell. "That boy's an American! He's an orphan."

"Why, I thought you said he couldn't speak English!" exclaimed Peggy.

"I did—and he can't. He was left with this family when he was a baby, and so naturally doesn't know anything but Spanish. This Indian woman, María, was his mother's servant while she was up at the mine."

"That sounds as if the boy must have come from a well-to-do family."

"I'm sure he did," Jo Ann replied, and Florence added, "I gathered from what María said that his father was either the owner of the mine or had an interest in it."

"Suppose you tell us the whole story from beginning to end, Florence," suggested Peggy. "It sounds so unlikely that an American boy of good family would be left with poor ignorant Indians like this."

"I haven't got it straight in my mind either. It's a mystery all right—a mystery that's far from being solved. I'll tell you all we found out." Florence recounted all that María had told her and showed both her mother and Peggy the piece of

paper with the address which they had seen on the envelope at the cave.

“Jo and I think we ought to write to Daddy at once and ask him to telegraph to this Mr. Eldridge,” she ended. “What do you think of that plan, Mother?”

“I believe it’d be a wise thing,” Mrs. Blackwell answered thoughtfully. “It’d save a great deal of time, I’m sure.”

“I know it would. Fortunately today’s the day we get our mail. I’ll write my letter right away and when the man comes, I’ll give it to him to take back. We won’t get our mail again till next Tuesday—four whole days to wait before we can hear from Daddy!”

“He ought to have some interesting information for us by that time,” put in Jo Ann.

While Florence busied herself with writing the letter to her father, Jo Ann kept up a steady chatter about the mystery of the blue-eyed boy. “I’d certainly like to find out more about that man that María kept calling the ‘mean man.’ What reason could he have had for having been so hateful to Carlitos’ mother? From what María said everybody else liked her. Another thing I want to know is why his father disappeared so suddenly and where he went. A mystery within a mystery.”

Peggy smiled. “You ought to be satisfied this time, Jo. It’ll keep you busy for a long time if you untangle all this mix-up.”

About a half hour later, Jo Ann caught sight of a man with a big sombrero riding a burro leisurely up the cart road toward the house.

“Somebody’s coming,” she called to Florence. “Is it the man that brings the mail?”

Florence came running out on the porch. “Yes—that’s the one. He’s bringing us some groceries, too.”

“Let’s run down and meet him. I can’t wait to see if I have any letters.”

The three girls tore off down the road.

“Got any mail for us?” Florence asked on nearing the rider.

The man nodded his head. “Ah, many letters!”

“Give them to me,” Florence cried in Spanish, then added to Peggy and Jo Ann, “I know Mother and I’ll have one from Dad.”

“And I ought to have two or three!” exclaimed Peggy.

“Here too,” added Jo Ann.

The Indian slipped off the back of his burro and slowly began untying one of the bundles.

“I wish he’d hurry,” grumbled Jo Ann. “He’s the slowest thing I ever saw.”

“Just have patience. You can’t hurry him.”

“One thing’s certain, none of the mail could’ve been lost out of that bundle—it’s tied so tightly,” smiled Peggy.

Finally the man handed a bunch of letters and papers to Florence, and she sorted them out quickly and gave Peggy and Jo Ann their share; then all three hurried back to the house. Several minutes later the man brought in the groceries and other articles that they had ordered sent out from the city.

Florence gave him the letter she had just written to her father, saying, “Be very careful—don’t lose this letter. It’s *very* important.”

“*Sí*, señorita, I *sabe!* I’ll be careful.” The man nodded, then went back to his burro.

As soon as the girls had finished reading their mail, they picked up their groceries and carried them out to the kitchen.

When Jo Ann unwrapped the butter and the bacon, she remarked, “What’ll we do with these things? We won’t dare put them in our refrigerator box down at the spring. That old bear would be sure to find them again. We’ve just got to get him. I was too excited over saving Pepito yesterday to think about anything else. But we must watch again tonight for that bear. He’ll be getting hungry by this

time and'll come back for another pig. Your mother'll let us go, won't she, Florence?"

"I imagine so."

"Well, if we go, I'm going to take a sweater and a cushion," spoke up Peggy. "I got cold the other night, and it was so uncomfortable sitting on that rough hard ledge."

The other two began to laugh, and Jo Ann added, "Whoever heard of taking a cushion on a bear hunt?"

"If you get too comfortable, you'll go to sleep and tumble off the ledge," put in Florence. "Then the bear won't have to break into the pen for his supper."

"Not with Jo around," Peggy laughed teasingly. "Why, she's such a good shot she'd have the bear killed before he could take a step toward me!"

Jo Ann grinned. "You just wait till I get a chance to demonstrate my marksmanship, Peg. I'll show you that I am a good shot."

"Changing the subject—what're we going to do with this butter and bacon?" Florence queried, looking at the two packages on the table.

"Let's don't leave the bacon in the kitchen," Peggy cut in. "The bear might smell it and come snooping around here."

"How about putting both the bacon and butter in jars and hiding them down in the water under a rock?" suggested Jo Ann. "That way he could neither smell nor see the food."

"Good plan," approved Florence.

"She does get a brilliant idea once in a blue moon," laughed Peggy.

They set to work at once to carry out Jo Ann's plan and soon had the bacon and butter safely hidden down in the stream just below the spring.

After the girls had eaten their midday meal and washed the dishes, they stretched out on their cots for a siesta.

Jo Ann called over to Peggy teasingly, “Be sure to take a long nap today. I don’t want you to go to sleep and tumble off the ledge tonight. You’d make so much noise that you’d scare the bear away, and I want to get him tonight sure.”

“You’ll need plenty of sleep yourself to keep your eyes open to watch for him.”

Florence called over, “You both’d better stop talking and go on to sleep, or you’ll both tumble off the ledge.”

Shortly after dark that evening Peggy and Jo Ann started off toward the enclosure where the pigs were kept.

“We certainly need the flashlight tonight,” Peggy remarked. “It’s dark, isn’t it? The moon isn’t up nearly so high as it was the other night.”

They had not gone far till they spied the white-clad figure of Juan coming toward them.

“I certainly am glad to see him,” exclaimed Peggy. “I’ve been dreading crossing that ravine. It’s so dark and spooky down there.”

“I’m not sorry to see him myself,” admitted Jo Ann.

When Juan drew near, he motioned to them to be quiet. In a low voice he said to Jo Ann, “I think the bear come tonight.”

“What’d he say?” asked Peggy curiously.

“I don’t know for sure, but it was something about the bear.”

Juan turned and led the way to the enclosure. As he drew near he pointed over to it, saying something about the pigs and the bear.

“I believe he’s saying something about the pigs being restless,” Jo Ann told Peggy in a low voice. “Don’t you hear them? They didn’t do that way the other night. Sometimes animals know instinctively when danger’s near, and I believe those pigs do.”

“Well, let’s hurry and get up on that ledge before the bear comes,” Peggy whispered.

They climbed up the notched pole as rapidly as they could and settled themselves on the ledge, Jo Ann with her gun cocked, lying across her lap. Juan remained below at the foot of the pole, as he had before.

For what seemed an interminable time to them they sat perfectly still waiting for the coming of the bear. Every now and then Jo Ann would fancy that she saw a dark shadow moving below and would raise her gun, only to discover that it was merely the shadow of a tree swaying in the breeze. She noticed, too, that the pigs were growing more restless. "That old bear must be prowling around near here," she thought. She leaned over and strained her eyes to peer into the darkness of the ravine beyond the moonlit space directly below her.

Not long afterwards she heard a slight cracking sound. She peered instantly in the direction from which it had come. Her eyes widened as she saw a black shaggy head rear up above the enclosure, one paw tearing at the poles.

Simultaneously she heard Peggy gasp in fright.

Jo Ann raised her gun, waiting to get a good aim before pulling the trigger. "I mustn't miss him. I've got to kill him the first shot," she told herself. "If I miss, he'll get back in those dark shadows, and I can't see him then."

Just then there was a loud crashing noise. The bear's head dropped out of sight as he pulled out one of the poles.

A few seconds later the bear reared up again and Jo Ann saw a long black arm reach through the narrow opening. Just as he was jerking out another pole she pulled the trigger.

Almost simultaneously with the report of the gun Jo Ann heard a deep growl, then the thud of a heavy body falling. A few moments later she was amazed to see a dark hulk shamble off toward the darkness.

Instantly she pulled the trigger again. "Oh, shucks! I've missed him!" she thought.

After the reverberations had died away she turned to Peggy. "I'm sure I hit him. He must be wounded or he wouldn't have fallen so hard."

"I heard him make a queer choking noise, above the squealing of the pigs!"

Peggy declared excitedly.

Just then Juan called up, “You hit him! You hit him!”

“*Sí, sí.* I think so too,” Jo Ann replied.

The three listened intently to the snapping of branches and the clatter of loosened stones as the bear made his way up the ravine. When the sounds finally died away, Peggy started climbing down the pole. When she was about halfway down there sounded a loud crashing, and she hurriedly scrambled back up the pole to the ledge.

“I believe the bear’s coming back again,” she cried.

After listening intently for a few moments, Jo Ann said, “No, I don’t think he’s coming back. I believe he’s wounded—badly wounded.” She called down to Juan. “Is it all right for us to come down now?”

“*Sí, señoritas,*” he called back. “The bear gone.” He waved his hand in the direction of the ravine.

The girls cautiously climbed down the pole.

Jo Ann reloaded her gun and, holding it in readiness, she made her way with Juan and Peggy to the hole the bear had torn in the enclosure.

“Shine your flashlight down here, Peg,” she ordered. The next moment she exclaimed, “Oh, look, here’s some blood! I knew I hit him!”

“You certainly did!” Peggy cried.

“*Sí, señorita,* you much good!” Juan ejaculated, then began jabbering so fast that Jo Ann could not understand a single word. He kept gesturing toward the trickle of blood leading toward the ravine.

Jo Ann shook her head. “Not tonight, Juan. *Mañana* we go.”

“*Sí, mañana,*” he agreed and then set to work repairing the hole the bear had torn in the enclosure, while Peggy held the flashlight for him.

“I believe it’ll be a long time before Mr. Bear comes back here,” Jo Ann declared in a satisfied tone.

As soon as Juan had finished, the girls, with a “*Buenas noches*,” to him, started off toward the house.

CHAPTER XII

JO ANN'S TROPHY

When Jo Ann and Peggy reached the house, Florence met them at the door. "My, I'm glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "Ever since we heard those shots, Mother and I've been worried. Did you kill the bear?"

"I'm not sure. I know I wounded him, because I saw the blood on the ground," Jo Ann replied, "and I kind of believe I killed him. We heard him shamble off up the ravine, but I don't believe he went very far."

"Judging by that stream of blood, I feel sure he couldn't have lasted long," Peggy added.

"That's fine!" praised Florence. "Now Juan won't lose any more of his pigs."

"As soon as it's daylight, I want to follow his trail and see if I can find him," Jo Ann said. "Peggy wants to go, too."

"You're not going to leave me behind this time," Florence put in, smiling. "I'm going with you."

"O. K.," Peggy and Jo Ann agreed together, and Jo Ann added, "Whoever wakes up first in the morning calls the other two."

Shortly after the first faint rays of dawn had appeared the three girls set off down to the enclosure, Jo Ann carrying the gun as before. On reaching it they picked up the bloodstained trail and followed it up the ravine.

After they had gone a short distance, the trail led to the bank of the stream.

"Look here!" Jo Ann exclaimed. "Here's a great big spot of blood. This must be the place where we heard him stop last night."

Florence pointed down to the prints made by the bear's paw. "Poor thing! He was trying to stop his wound with mud."

Jo Ann's and Peggy's eyes widened in surprise. "I never heard of such a thing!" declared Peggy.

"I never did either," said Jo Ann. "I didn't know bears had that much sense."

"Daddy told me they did it, and he's had a good deal of experience hunting. You can see for yourself how the bear scraped up the mud here."

"He succeeded pretty well in stopping the flow of blood," observed Jo Ann. "The trail isn't nearly as plain now."

They followed the faint marks upward a short distance. Suddenly they heard something moving just ahead of them. They stopped instantly. Jo Ann threw the gun to her shoulder, then cautiously crept around a boulder so she could get a better view.

Just at that moment she saw Juan rise up to his feet.

"Oh, Juan!" she cried. "I thought you were the bear! I nearly shot you."

Juan did not understand a word of what Jo Ann had said, but he pointed excitedly, "Look! Here is the bear! You killed him!"

The three girls hurriedly climbed up beside Juan. Their eyes widened in amazement as they saw the size of the shaggy black animal lying on the ground before them.

"My, isn't he immense!" gasped Florence.

"No wonder he could tear down those poles so easily," Jo Ann remarked.

"If I'd known he was that big I'd have been scared to death!" exclaimed Peggy.

Hunter-like, Jo Ann stooped down and pointed to the bullet wound in the animal's left side. "See! Here's where my bullet came out. I hit him in the right shoulder when he was reaching for that other pole."

“I can breathe much more freely now that he’s actually dead,” put in Peggy.

“Isn’t he a beauty,” Jo Ann admired. “It’s too bad I had to kill him, but we just couldn’t have him prowling around here. I’m going to have a bearskin rug to take home with me now, to show what a good hunter I am. Florence, I wish you’d tell Juan to skin him for me. Tell him to be careful about skinning the feet and to be sure to leave on the claws.”

Florence quickly relayed Jo Ann’s request to Juan, and he nodded assent, “*Bien, señoritas,*” and went on in a rapid flow of Spanish.

“He wants to know if we want some of the meat,” Florence translated to the girls.

Peggy tilted her nose disdainfully. “Bear meat! That doesn’t sound good to me.”

“I never have tasted bear steak,” Jo Ann put in. “I’d like to try it, wouldn’t you, Florence?”

“We might try a little. I’ll tell him to cut us off a small piece.”

“Oh, tell him to take a great big piece to the cave family.”

“That’s a fine idea!” Florence praised. “They’ll have a feast. That’ll probably be the first meat they’ve had in many a day.”

After Florence had delivered this message to Juan and they had exclaimed over the size of the bear again, they turned around and set off for the house.

When they came near they saw Mrs. Blackwell waiting for them on the porch.

“Oh, Mother!” Florence called. “Jo got the bear all right! You just ought to see him. He’s huge!”

“He must’ve been the old granddaddy of all the bears in this part of the country,” Peggy added impressively.

Mrs. Blackwell smiled. “Well, I’m relieved to hear that. I’ve been worried every time you girls’ve been out of sight.”

Every now and then the rest of the day the girls' conversation would drift back to the subject of the bear.

The next morning, when they were eating breakfast, Jo Ann suggested that they go down to the cave and see how the family was getting along.

"That's a good idea," agreed Florence. "I hope they haven't let Pepito eat too much of that bear meat."

"We'll get to see Carlitos again, and the father, José," Jo Ann added. "I have lots of questions that I want to ask José. I believe he can tell us more about Carlitos than María could. I want to find out more about that big mean man that she kept referring to."

"Well, I'm going without fail this time," put in Peggy. "I want to see that wonderful blue-eyed boy."

"We'll hardly have time to go this morning—we got up so late. Let's have lunch a little earlier so we'll have a long time this afternoon to stay with the cave family," suggested Florence.

Mrs. Blackwell spoke up, smiling: "I'm as curious as Peggy is to see the blue-eyed boy. I wonder if you couldn't bring him up here and let me take a look at him. I'd like to see Pepito too."

"All right, we'll do that very thing," Jo Ann replied.

"Pepito'll probably not be strong enough to come yet," Florence said quickly. "We'll see how he is today, and maybe he'll be able to make the trip up here in a few more days."

Jo Ann's eyes began to shine. "I know what let's do! As soon as Pepito's well enough to come, let's have a little party for the cave children and the ones at the goat ranch." She asked hastily, "Would that disturb you too much, Mrs. Blackwell?"

Mrs. Blackwell shook her head. "No; I'd love to have a party for them. I doubt if they've ever had one in all their lives."

"I feel sure they haven't," agreed Florence, "and it'll be almost as much fun for

us as it will be for them. Don't you think so, Peggy?"

"Indeed I do. I'm strong for the party."

Just after they had sat down to eat their lunch, a few hours later, they heard the clattering sound of hoofbeats coming down the road. "Listen! That isn't a burro—sounds like a horse!" exclaimed Florence. "Who in the world would be riding a horse around here? I'm going to see who's coming."

She sprang up and started to the door, the other two quickly following her example. They had not watched long before they saw a horse and rider appear over the edge of the mesa.

A few minutes later Florence suddenly cried excitedly, "Why, it's Daddy!" Off she flew down the trail, fleet as a deer, to meet him. Peggy turned to Mrs. Blackwell and passed on the good news of Dr. Blackwell's coming.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" ejaculated Mrs. Blackwell, her eyes sparkling. She hurried out on the porch and waited eagerly for him and Florence.

As soon as the first greetings had been exchanged, Dr. Blackwell gazed down at his wife appraisingly and remarked, "How well you look! You're recuperating much more rapidly than I'd thought possible."

"With this invigorating mountain air and such good nurses I couldn't help but get well in a hurry," Mrs. Blackwell replied, with a smile that included all three girls.

In a little break in the conversation Florence spoke up, "You're just in time for lunch, Daddy. We had just sat down to the table. Come on before everything gets cold."

"I won't need a second invitation. I'm terribly hungry after that long hot ride," Dr. Blackwell replied as he escorted his wife to the table.

No sooner were they all seated than Jo Ann asked Dr. Blackwell, "Did you send that telegram to that Mr. Eldridge?"

He nodded. "Yes, I sent it, but I got word there was no one by that name at that address."

“Oh, that’s terrible!” exclaimed Jo Ann. “I was so in hopes we could find some of Carlitos’ relatives. What’ll we do now?”

“I’ve already written to the chief of police to see if he can trace this Mr. Eldridge,” Dr. Blackwell replied. He smiled over at Florence. “I couldn’t make much out of part of your letter—I couldn’t get the connection between a blue-eyed boy in the poor Indian family and the man in New York. Suppose you girls start at the beginning and tell me all you know about them.”

Florence nodded over at Jo Ann. “It’s your story. You tell it. You’re the one who discovered the blue-eyed boy and became interested in him.”

“All right.” Jo Ann plunged into an account of seeing Carlitos and Pepito the first time, then on till she came to the trip up the mountain. She stopped and smiled over at Florence. “It’s your turn now. You were the star actor and doctor in this part of the story.”

Florence obediently took up the account where Jo Ann had broken off.

Dr. Blackwell listened attentively to their every word, and when they had finished he praised both girls highly, Jo Ann for her detective ability, and Florence for her first-aid skill in saving the boy’s life. “I’d like to see this sick boy while I’m up here and give him a thorough examination. And I certainly want to see the blue-eyed boy. I’m as interested in his story as you are. All the time you’ve been talking about this mysterious boy I’ve been racking my brain to recall a rumor I heard some time ago about an American who was down here searching for a brother whom he had not heard from for several years. I was wondering if there could possibly be any connection between him and your story. When I go back to the city, I’ll see if I can find out anything more about this man.”

“We’d already planned to go down to see the cave family this afternoon, and so we’ll take you with us,” spoke up Florence. “It’s not very far to the cave.”

Dr. Blackwell looked over questioningly at his wife, saying, “I don’t like to go off and leave you.”

“That’ll be all right,” Mrs. Blackwell replied. “I always take a nap right after lunch.” She smiled and added, “Your orders, you know.”

Dr. Blackwell turned to Florence again. “I’ll go with you girls while your mother’s taking her nap, but I won’t stay long.”

CHAPTER XIII

JOSÉ'S STRANGE STORY

A short time later the three girls and Dr. Blackwell went down to the cave, reaching there just as the family were finishing their feast of bear meat and the other food the girls had given them.

“Let me go in and talk to them first and tell them who you are, Dad,” Florence murmured.

She walked on inside and quickly explained to José that her father, who was a doctor, had come down to see how Pepito was getting along.

José stepped forward and politely shook hands with Dr. Blackwell; then each member of his family timidly followed his example.

“I’m much interested in your son Pepito,” Dr. Blackwell told José in his fluent Spanish. “I’d like to see if there’s anything I can do to help him.”

José hesitated a moment, then began apologetically, “I no have money and——”

With a little gesture of his hand Dr. Blackwell dismissed this objection. “That’s all right. I don’t want money.”

On hearing this José turned and called Pepito to his side.

Knowing the nature of the Indian so well, Dr. Blackwell realized that he must win Pepito’s confidence first before he could make a complete examination.

While he was busy with Pepito, María called the three girls to the back of the cave. She gestured proudly to the baby lying in a rope hammock. “See, my Pepito fix this like you say.”

Jo Ann smiled approvingly. “That was clever of Pepito to use my idea of a charcoal bag for a hammock, wasn’t it, girls?”

“It was clever of him to fasten it to these stalactites, too,” added Peggy. “Aren’t they beautiful? They’re so white and sparkling back here where the smoke hasn’t reached them. Stalactites always remind me of big icicles hanging from the roof.”

Noticing Carlitos at her side just then, Jo Ann remarked to Florence, “Before you forget it, you’d better tell Carlitos and the other children about the party.”

“All right.” As Florence knew that the word party had no meaning for the children she began explaining about the cakes and *dulces* that she and the girls would have up at the house for them. Immediately their faces began to beam.

“Oh, señorita, we’ll be most happy to come!” Carlitos explained, acting as spokesman for the younger children.

As soon as Dr. Blackwell had completed the examination of Pepito, he came over beside the girls. With the keenest interest he eyed Carlitos and talked to him for a few minutes; then he turned to Florence and said, “I’m going back to your mother now, but you girls may stay as long as you like.”

“We’ll be along in a little while,” Florence replied. “We’re not quite ready to leave.”

After he had given the parents a few directions about caring for Pepito, he bade them all “*Adios*” and left.

No sooner had he gone than Jo Ann suggested to Florence that she ask José about the part the big mean boss had played in Carlitos’ life. “Ask him what made that man so mean to Carlitos’ mother and if he has any idea what became of his father.”

“Well, I’ll do my best, but first I want to tell María about Daddy’s not being able to find that Mr. Eldridge.”

After Florence had talked to María a few minutes, she began questioning José. Jo Ann listened intently to their conversation, but José talked so rapidly that she could catch only a word now and then. Finally, discouraged, she remarked to

Peggy, “Why is it that foreigners always talk so much faster than Americans?”

Peggy laughed. “It does sound that way, but I suppose they really don’t.”

In spite of her failure to understand much, Jo Ann persisted in listening and watching the expression on their faces. All at once she saw Florence’s eyes widen as if in surprise. “What is it, Florence?” she broke out impulsively. “What did he tell you then?”

Florence turned quickly. “Oh, he said this mean boss was plotting to get rid of Carlitos! That’s why he took his family away from that mine and has been hiding up here in the mountains.”

“But why did that man want to get rid of Carlitos?” Jo Ann asked quickly.

“I can’t figure that out yet. He said that this mean boss had given orders for all the boys who were large enough to help at the mine. José and María sent Pepito up to work but kept Carlitos away—they were afraid the man would mistreat him.”

“But why should this man want to mistreat Carlitos?” Jo Ann queried curiously.

“One reason, José said, was that this man had been so mean to Carlitos’ mother. They had also suspected that he’d had something to do with the disappearance of his father and so were afraid to let him know that they even had Carlitos. José said they moved ’way back up in the mountains to keep him from finding out about Carlitos. José himself kept on working at the mine, though. All went well till one day when Pepito was sick and couldn’t go to work and Carlitos slipped off to the mine and took his place, because he was afraid the boss would beat Pepito when he returned.”

“That man must’ve been a terrible creature,” put in Jo Ann indignantly. “But go on. What happened?”

“Well, while Carlitos was working at the mine, the boss saw him and became suspicious about him. He asked José all kinds of questions about Carlitos, but José wouldn’t answer. He just shrugged his shoulders, threw up his hands and kept saying, ‘No *sabe*.’ That made the boss furious, as well as more suspicious, and he ordered José to make Carlitos work all the time thereafter. That evening, when José was leaving the mine, he chanced to overhear one of the miners

bragging to another about the easy money he was going to get from the boss for kidnaping the blue-eyed boy for him. José was immediately terrified, because he knew that the boy was Carlitos.”

“Horrible!” Jo Ann ejaculated.

Florence turned back to José, and after talking to him again she translated to Jo Ann and Peggy, “José said on hearing this that he rushed home and told María and the grandmother that they must all leave immediately. They packed up their few possessions on the burro and left that very night. They wandered over the mountains then till they came here.”

“Isn’t that terrible!” exclaimed Jo Ann. “That man’s a demon. I feel sure he had something to do with the disappearance of Carlitos’ father. Ask José, Florence, what Carlitos’ father did at the mine—if he was the owner and if this mean boss had been in his employ.”

“Well.” Once more Florence translated Jo Ann’s questions to José. All eagerness, the two girls waited for his reply.

This time Jo Ann was able to catch the answer. Her eyes shone with excitement as she broke out, “That’s why that mean boss wanted to get rid of Carlitos. Carlitos is by rights the owner of the mine!”

“You’re right—he is!” Florence exclaimed.

“Gee, Jo, you’ve run into a thrilling mystery this time, sure enough!” Peggy burst out in an excited voice.

“I feel sure this mean boss was responsible for the disappearance of Carlitos’ father, too,” Jo Ann went on. “He wanted to keep the control of the mine in his own hands. He wanted to get rid of Carlitos so there’d be no possible chance of anyone’s ever claiming the mine. Ask José, Florence, how long Carlitos’ father had lived at the mine—where the mine is and what the name of it is.”

Florence nodded. “All right.”

After talking with José a few minutes, she explained to Jo Ann, “Don Carlos—that’s what José calls Carlitos’ father, had come down from the United States to inspect his mine and had been there only a short time. I gathered from what he

said that Don Carlos had not liked the way the Mexican boss was handling things and had dismissed him. It was only a short time after that, he said, that Don Carlos disappeared and the boss took charge of the mine again.”

“That proves to me that the boss did steal the mine,” Jo Ann said in an emphatic tone. “Doesn’t it sound that way to you, Peg?”

“Yes, it does.” Peggy shook her head dubiously and added, “You’ll never be able to unravel this mystery—it’s too complicated for you.”

“José said it was a silver mine and that they called it La Esperanza,” Florence went on. “He couldn’t tell me where it was. All he did was to wave his hand toward the range of mountains across the valley and said it was beyond that. He could find it himself, of course. I asked him how they carried out the silver ore from the mine—if there weren’t a railroad near—and he looked blank and then shook his head and said they carried it out on burros.”

“That’s certainly a poky way to carry the ore,” observed Jo Ann. “It looks as if they ought to be able to build a railroad.”

“But it might be too steep for a railroad. And this is Mexico, remember. Labor’s cheaper than modern machinery. Come on, let’s hurry up to the house and talk it all over with Daddy before he leaves.”

“All right,” Peggy agreed.

As the girls started off, Florence called over her shoulder to the children, “Don’t forget to come to my house *mañana*.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE PIÑATA

Early the next morning the three girls began making preparations for the party for the little Mexican children.

“I’ll make some fudge,” suggested Peggy.

“That’ll be something new to them,” Florence told her. “I can make some molasses candy out of this brown sugar. Maybe they’ll know what that is.”

“I think we ought to have some kind of cakes, too,” put in Jo Ann. “I can make pretty good doughnuts. Do you think the children would like them, Florence?”

“I’m sure they would. They won’t know what they are, but they’ll like them. I doubt if these children even know what candy is. Living out in the mountains as they have, they’ve probably never tasted many sweets. I know this party will be a real treat to them and their mothers, too.”

When they had finished their cooking, Florence remarked, “Now we must decorate the *olla* for the *piñata*.”

Peggy smiled. “I know what an *olla* is—it’s just a big earthen water jar, but what is a *pin*—*pin*—or whatever you called it?”

“That’s what I’m wondering, too,” added Jo Ann.

“Well, when we fill this *olla*”—she pointed to the big pottery jar on the table—“with the candy and doughnuts and decorate the outside with gay colors, then it’ll be called a *piñata*.”

“What do you do with it then?” queried Jo Ann.

“Hang it up by a rope and blindfold the children and let them see which one can break it; then they all scramble for the contents.”

The girls laughed, and Peggy added, “Sounds like a lot of fun. What’re we going to decorate the *olla* with?”

“The only thing I can think of is to cut some colored pictures out of magazines and paste them on it. Can you think of anything better?”

Both girls shook their heads.

Soon the three had selected the brightest advertisements from some magazines and had decorated the jar till it looked quite festive.

That afternoon, before they had finished their siestas, the guests began to arrive. First were the children from the goat ranch with their mother; then shortly afterwards María and the grandmother with their line of little stairsteps.

Jo Ann noticed at once that Carlitos was missing and asked Florence to inquire about him.

A moment later Florence explained to Jo Ann that Carlitos had gone up on the mountain with José to get the charcoal. “María says they’ll be down later—they’ll stop on their way down with the charcoal.”

“Let’s wait to have the *piñata* game till Carlitos gets here,” Jo Ann suggested to Florence. “I don’t want him to miss that. Let’s show them how to play some simple game like drop the handkerchief while we’re waiting.”

Florence smiled dubiously. “We can try it, but I’m sure they’ve never played it before.”

In spite of their strenuous efforts to start the game, they failed, as the children merely stared timidly with their big black eyes, not seeming to know how to enter into the fun.

“These are the quietest children I’ve ever seen in all my life,” Jo Ann declared. “Don’t they ever play, Florence?”

“Very seldom. They work most of the time. The older ones take care of the

babies and help their mothers. I believe we'd better go ahead with the *piñata*. It'll take them a long time to break the *olla*, and maybe Carlitos'll be here before anyone succeeds."

Florence blindfolded the largest one of the little girls and handed her a stick, then turned her around several times. "Now see if you can break the *piñata*."

The girl took a few steps, then timidly struck out with her stick, only to miss the *piñata* by several feet.

"Don't be afraid," called Pepito. "Go closer."

Florence smiled. "No, she gets only one turn this time. You come on, Pepito, and try."

With his black eyes shining Pepito stepped forward to be blindfolded. Jo Ann was delighted to see how much stronger he seemed to be and was as pleased as he when he hit the *piñata*, even though he did not succeed in breaking it.

Jo Ann and Peggy clapped their hands in applause, and the little Mexican children, thinking that was part of the game, timidly followed their example.

Before all of the children had had a turn in trying to hit the *piñata*, Carlitos came running up to the porch, his hands and face streaked with the black charcoal dust.

Pepito pointed up to the *piñata*. "Look, Carlitos, a *piñata*! And I hit it!" He went on rapidly to explain about the game.

With the keenest interest the three girls watched Carlitos' face brighten and his blue eyes sparkle bluer than ever against the black of his face.

"I'll break it for you, Pepito," he replied confidently.

Peggy turned to Jo Ann and Florence, smiling. "Say, Jo, your little blue-eyed Mexican seems to have turned into a little nigger. Don't you think you'd better introduce him to some soap and water before the refreshments?"

"Not a bad idea," Florence replied. "Jo, take him back and show him how to use the soap."

Jo Ann's eyes stretched to their widest. "Show him how to use soap! What do you mean?"

"He's probably never seen toilet soap before."

"Gracious! To think of an American boy living like that—not even having seen toilet soap!"

After she had demonstrated to Carlitos how to wash his hands with soap, she watched almost unbelievably his evident delight in the white foamy suds and its magic effect.

"I've got to get that boy back to civilization. Something must be done right away," she told herself.

As soon as he had finished, they hurried back to the porch, and Florence placed the blindfold on Carlitos. As he started toward the *piñata* Pepito called eagerly, "Hit it hard, Carlitos—very hard!"

With almost uncanny accuracy, Carlitos neared the *piñata*, then struck out vigorously.

There was a crashing sound as the pottery vessel cracked open and the contents scattered over the floor.

Carlitos jerked the blindfold off, while the children uttered little squeals of mingled excitement and delight.

Smiling, Florence pointed to the scattered sweets. "Go get them!" she exclaimed.

The children needed no more urging. Straightway they began scurrying about, their black eyes shining with delight as they picked up the candy and cakes and tasted them. With their usual unselfishness they took some of them over to their mothers and the grandmother.

Just then Jo Ann noticed José leaning against a near-by tree, a pleased expression on his face as he watched the children's fun. "Come on and get some *dulces*," she called to him.

Smiling, he came over to the porch and took the sweets Jo Ann offered.

While both the older people and the children were enjoying the treat, Jo Ann went out to examine the huge bags of charcoal that almost completely covered the small burro. She laughed aloud as she noticed that only his ears and his feet were visible.

“It’s a good thing that charcoal’s light, or that burro’d never be able to get to town with that load,” she thought.

When she went back to the porch she told José, chiefly by gestures, that she was glad he had made so much charcoal. “When are you going to take it to the village to sell?” she asked him.

“*Mañana* in the *mañana*,” he replied.

“That means early in the morning, doesn’t it?” she asked Florence.

Florence nodded.

Jo Ann put her hand on Carlitos’ shoulder. “Are the boys going with you, José?”

José shook his head. “No, I think it better that they do not go.”

Shortly after the children had finished eating their refreshments, each one politely thanked the girls and offered a grimy, sticky little hand in a farewell shake.

As María was leaving with her family she remarked to Florence again, “You have much kindness, señoritas—like Carlitos’ *mamá*. I have much joy that he has friends *Americanos* now.”

After they had all left Jo Ann said determinedly, “We’ve simply got to find Carlitos’ relatives right away. María and José are as kind to him as they can be—they treat him as if he were their own child—but they’re so pitifully poor and ignorant.”

Florence shook her head dubiously. “I wish we could find some of his relatives, but it looks as if we’re up against a stone wall now. We’ve done everything we could.”

“Oh, Jo’ll solve the mystery—she’ll climb right over the stone wall,” laughed

Peggy. “She’s great on climbing.”

The next day, when the girls were busily preparing dinner on the outdoor fireplace, Jo Ann happened to glance down the road. “Good gracious!” she exclaimed. “Is that Pepito, running like that? It is! Why, he oughtn’t to run like that.”

She rushed out to meet him. “No, no, Pepito! You mustn’t run like that,” she called to him.

Gasping for breath, Pepito ejaculated, “Carlitos! Oh, Carlitos!”

CHAPTER XV

“CARLITOS—GONE!”

Before Jo Ann could ask any more questions Florence and Peggy came flying out.

“What is the matter, Pepito?” Florence asked quickly. “Why were you running so hard?”

“Car—li—tos—gone!” he panted, his eyes filled with tears.

“Gone!” Florence repeated. She wheeled about. “Girls, he says Carlitos is gone—lost!”

She turned back. “How could he be lost? What’s happened?”

Realizing how exhausted Pepito was from running, Florence led him up to the porch and made him sit down. “Rest a few minutes, then tell me what’s happened,” she ordered.

After he had partially regained his breath, he began telling between sobs that Carlitos and the burro had been stolen. Carlitos, he said, had begged José to let him go to town to help sell the charcoal and that while there both he and the burro had disappeared.

Florence rapidly translated his broken story to the impatient girls.

“Carlitos stolen!” Jo Ann repeated, puzzled. “Does he mean kidnaped?”

“Sounds like it.” Florence began questioning Pepito again. “Where is your *papá* now?”

“At the cave. When *mi papá* tell us that Carlitos is lost, I come to you. You can

help us find Carlitos.”

Florence repeated his words to the girls, saying, “Poor child, he thinks we can help them because we did before.”

“We’ve got to help,” Jo Ann spoke up emphatically. “We’ve got to find Carlitos. Let’s go down to the cave right now and talk to José and find out exactly what’s happened. Tell Pepito to stay here and rest while we go to the cave.”

When Florence suggested to him that he stay and rest, Pepito shook his head. “No, no, señorita. I go with you.”

Before starting to the cave Florence ran inside to tell her mother what had happened. “Peggy says she’ll stay and finish getting dinner while Jo and I go down and find out the details from José.”

“All right,” her mother replied. “I hope they’ll be able to find Carlitos before night.”

By the time Florence came back, Jo Ann was hurrying down the trail, Pepito following. Suddenly realizing that Pepito must not walk so rapidly, Jo Ann checked her pace, although she could hardly wait to find out from José what had really happened.

“I wonder if it’s possible that Carlitos has been kidnaped,” she thought anxiously. “That mean mine boss tried to get him once—maybe he’s had something to do with his disappearance.”

Just then Florence caught up with her and began talking over this new trouble. “We’ll have to do something to help find Carlitos, Jo. Had it occurred to you that that mean boss might’ve had a hand in his disappearance?”

Jo Ann nodded. “I was just thinking that very same thing. The fact that Carlitos is the rightful owner of the mine would give him a reason for wanting to get him out of the way.”

“That sounds terrible,” Florence shuddered, “but it’s possible, all right.”

As they neared the cave, the girls could hear the mother and grandmother talking rapidly in shrill excited voices. On entering they saw José crouched

disconsolately in a corner, his face buried in his hands.

They stepped across to his side, and Florence began quickly, “José, Pepito has told us about Carlitos. Tell us all about what happened to him—how he disappeared—and where you saw him last. Maybe we can help you find him.”

José raised his head, his dark troubled eyes lighting a little at sight of the two girls who had helped to save his son’s life only a few days before.

“Ah, *Papá*,” put in María just then. “The señoritas—our friends—they will help us find Carlitos.”

“We hope we’ll be able to help,” Florence told them earnestly.

Brokenly then José began by telling how after several efforts he had succeeded in selling only a few *centavos*’ worth of the charcoal, and so he decided to exchange some of it for food. Leaving Carlitos outside to watch the burro, he had gone into the little general store of the village. After he had bargained with the storekeeper to exchange corn, *frijoles* and coffee for a bag of charcoal, he had hurried out to get it.

To his amazement Carlitos and the burro were not in sight. Thinking they might have wandered down the street, he started off to look for them. They were nowhere to be seen, and after he had searched in vain all over the few streets of the village, he was in despair. Finally, after inquiring of several people, he found a man who said he’d seen a boy and a man go by driving a burro—only there were no bags of charcoal on the burro.

“I search much then, but I cannot find Carlitos or the burro,” he ended sorrowfully. “I have much fear that harm has come to Carlitos.”

As soon as José had stopped talking, Florence translated his story to Jo Ann.

When she reached the part about the man’s having seen a boy and a man driving a burro without any charcoal, Jo Ann spoke up quickly, “Maybe that boy was Carlitos.”

Florence turned back to José. “Do you suppose that boy was Carlitos who was helping to drive the burro?”

José shook his head. “No, no. The man say this boy hit much the burro. Carlitos no hit our burro.”

Jo Ann, who had caught the meaning of José’s words, put in, “Florence, maybe the man was making the boy hit the burro so he could hurry him out of the village. He probably wanted the burro too.”

When Florence translated this idea to José, he replied, “I thought of that too. I try to find them, but it was impossible. I hunt for many hours, but I find nothing.” He shook his head mournfully. “Carlitos gone—the burro gone—the charcoal gone—no have money to buy food for my children. Ah *Dios*, it is terrible!”

“I believe it’s that man from the mine who’s back of it all,” Jo Ann declared again. “He could easily have taken the charcoal off the burro and hidden it, and have frightened Carlitos into going with him.”

“That’s true,” agreed Florence. “He might’ve forced him to go at the point of a gun. That mean boss wouldn’t stop at anything.”

“Well, we must do something about it right now. Let’s go to the village and see if we can’t find out more about that man and boy. Will your mother let us go to the village with José?”

“Yes, I’m sure she will. It’s not so far there.” She turned to José and said, “We want you to go back to the village with us and see if we can find out something more about Carlitos. Go to the goat ranch and tell Juan to let us have two burros. We’ll go up to the house to tell my mother and then meet you at the cart road.”

José nodded assent. “*Bien*, señorita, I go immediately.”

The girls hurried up to the house, and Florence quickly explained their plans to her mother.

“I think it’ll be all right for you to go,” Mrs. Blackwell replied. “I hope you can find Carlitos, but be very careful. That man is probably capable of doing anything.”

“Oh, Mrs. Blackwell, he can’t be more dangerous than that bear,” put in Jo Ann. “We’ll be careful. I believe I’ll take the gun along. I’ll feel safer.”

“No, let’s take the pistol instead,” Florence put in. “The gun’s too heavy.” She took a pistol out of her bag and handed it to Jo Ann, then they set off down the trail and a little later found José at the road waiting for them with the burros.

Jo Ann hesitated a moment before getting on her burro. “This is my first experience riding without a saddle or a bridle.”

“Oh, it’s easy after you get used to it,” Florence encouraged. “You guide a burro, you know, by hitting him on the neck with a stick.” She sprang up nimbly onto the pack on the donkey’s back.

After Jo Ann had mounted on her burro she remarked, smiling, “This burro’s so small and my legs’re so long that they almost drag on the ground.”

“Sit farther back, the way the Mexicans do,” Florence called back. “It’s much easier riding that way.”

José followed, walking closely behind Jo Ann, having no difficulty in keeping up with the donkey’s pace.

“Isn’t there any way to make these animals go faster?” Jo Ann called to Florence impatiently a few minutes later.

“They’ll trot a little ways, but they really make as good time by keeping their steady pace. Remember you’re in Mexico, Jo.”

As soon as the three had reached the village, José took the girls to the store in front of which he had left Carlitos and the charcoal-laden burro a few hours before. “I know this storekeeper,” Florence told Jo Ann. “He’ll probably know if any strangers have been in the village lately. His store’s a meeting place for everybody in the village, and he hears all the gossip.”

She went inside and began questioning the storekeeper. “Have you heard of any strangers being in the village in the last day or two besides this man?” She pointed to José.

The storekeeper nodded his head, “Sí, señorita. I saw a man this morning that I have never seen before. He bought some cigarettes from me.”

“Did he come in before this man—José—did?”

“Sí. He said he was looking for a family that had lived at a mining camp across the mountains.”

Florence gave a little start. “Did he say why he wanted to find this family?”

“He say they were his friends.” The storekeeper shrugged his shoulders Mexican fashion and added, “I tell him I know nothing, and then he leave.”

Florence hurriedly recounted this information to Jo Ann, ending indignantly, “I believe that man was either the mean boss or someone he’d sent to get Carlitos. José knows what the boss looks like, so we can find out if the stranger was he.” She wheeled around to José and asked, “What’d that mean boss look like?”

“Very fat.” José gestured with his hands to indicate a Santa Claus figure, then twisted an imaginary mustache, adding, “and a big black mustache.” He turned to the storekeeper. “Did that man look like that?”

The storekeeper shook his head. “No. He very small—no mustache.”

“I’m glad it’s not the boss,” exclaimed Jo Ann.

“I am, too,” Florence agreed. She turned to José and said, “Take us down the street now where that man you talked to said he saw the strange man and the boy driving the burro.”

While José was guiding them to this street which led to the outskirts of the village, Florence caught sight of a familiar figure standing in an open doorway. “Wait a minute,” she explained. “There’s a woman I know. I’ll ask if she saw them pass.”

Florence hurried across the street and began explaining to the woman about their search for Carlitos and the burro. “Have you seen anybody of his description or heard anything about him?”

The woman shook her head, “No.”

Florence’s face fell. “Well, have you heard about anyone’s finding any bags of charcoal? This boy’s burro was carrying two bags of charcoal when he came to the village.”

The woman's black eyes lit with interest. "Sí, señorita. Adela, the woman who lives at the corner, told me she had found two bags of charcoal in her yard this morning. She did not know how they got there."

"Will you take us to her house and ask her to let us see the bags of charcoal? This man"—she nodded over at José—"will know if they're his bags. His mother made them herself."

The woman readily agreed to go with them, and in a few minutes they were shown the bags of charcoal.

A gleam of recognition immediately shone in José's eyes. "Sí, señorita. These are the bags made by my mother." His voice changed to a mournful note. "That boy was Carlitos. That man was making him beat the burro—he throw this charcoal over the wall. He very bad *hombre*."

Jo Ann, who had caught the meaning of José's words, put in quickly, "We've got to find that man and get Carlitos away from him. There's no telling what he'll do to him."

"But José said he followed him for some distance out this way." Florence wheeled about. "José," she asked, "which direction do you go to get to that mine you came from?"

"You follow this road." He gestured toward the winding road leading across the valley to the range of mountains.

Jo Ann spoke up impatiently, "Let's start after Carlitos this minute. If we could find some horses to ride, we could overtake that man and Carlitos even if they did have several hours' start. That man wouldn't have taken the burro if he hadn't intended using it. I know he can't be traveling fast with a burro along. Come on, let's see if we can find some horses."

"We can get some horses here, I'm sure. Dad always gets his horse here when he comes to see us—a burro's too slow for him." Florence stopped a moment, then added hastily, "I believe I'll call Dad—I can phone to him from here—and tell him what's happened and——"

"Oh, Florence," Jo Ann broke in, "ask him if we can't go straight on to the mine. Tell him we'll take José with us, and tell him if we don't follow that man and

Carlitos at once we'll never see Carlitos again!"

"Well, all right. Come on. We'll go back to the store—that's where the only telephone in the village is. Come on, José."

CHAPTER XVI

ON A DANGEROUS TRAIL

As Florence led the way back to the store, she told José of their plans to get the horses and follow the man and Carlitos. “Can you guide us across the mountains to the mine?”

“Sí, señorita, I *sabe*. I take you there.”

A few minutes later the three were back at the store, and Florence had succeeded in getting her father on the telephone. It was anything but easy for her to make him understand at first about Carlitos’ disappearance and their desire to hunt for him. When she finally made the situation clear, a note of excitement came into his voice.

“I’m glad you’ve phoned,” he told her, “because I’ve just got in touch with a man by the name of Eldridge who, I believe, is Carlitos’ uncle. Ask José again the name of that mine Carlitos’ father owned, and get him to tell you as nearly as possible where it is. I want to be sure that that is the mine and Carlitos the boy that this man Eldridge has been hunting.”

Florence quickly turned to José. “Didn’t you say the name of the mine was La Esperanza?”

“Sí,” José nodded.

“Tell me again how you get there.”

With many gestures José told her as nearly as he could where the mine was located. “Over that mountain to the east,” he kept saying, pointing to the range beyond.

As soon as Florence repeated José’s answer to her father, he replied that he

would telegraph at once to Mr. Eldridge. The name and location of the mine, he said, corresponded with what he had told him.

“But, Daddy,” Florence put in, in a pleading tone, “if we don’t find Carlitos right away I’m afraid it’ll be too late. We’re afraid that mean boss’ll do something terrible to him—maybe kill him. We’re sure the boss is back of this kidnaping. The reason José left the mine was to keep that man from getting Carlitos. We must go right now and hunt for him. We know the kidnaper has started toward the mine with him.”

“Tell your father if we get horses we’re sure we can overtake the man and Carlitos, because they had only a burro,” burst out Jo Ann eagerly.

Florence nodded and repeated her words over the telephone.

After a momentary silence Dr. Blackwell answered slowly, “Well, as soon as I send the telegram to Mr. Eldridge, I’ll start for the mine too. I’m sure I can get there before you do, as I’ve found an Indian guide who knows where it is. I want to be there before you arrive, in case any trouble should come up. I can’t have you girls risking your necks, even to save Carlitos.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you’ll be there!” Florence replied.

Jo Ann’s eyes shone as she heard Florence’s answer. She knew that meant that they could start following the kidnaper and Carlitos right away. As soon as Florence put up the receiver, she caught her by the hand, saying, “Let’s hurry as fast’s we can and get the horses.”

“Not yet. I’ve got to write a note to Mother first and give it to the man who brings our mail. He can take the burros back to Juan, too.”

While Florence was still speaking, Jo Ann began looking about impatiently for some paper. “I can’t get used to stores not having wrapping paper as they do back home,” she said. A few moments later the storekeeper unearthed a scrap of soiled brown paper and proudly handed it to Florence.

She hastily scratched a few lines to her mother, explaining the situation and the new plan.

To Jo Ann’s annoyance a half hour passed before they could find the man who

carried the mail and arrange to get the horses and everything else they needed.

When, at last, they were actually mounted on the horses and had started off down the road, Jo Ann gave a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness we’re on the way at last. Let’s ride fast now, because we’ll have to slow down when we reach the mountain.”

She tapped her horse sharply on his neck with her switch, and off she galloped, Florence and José following closely.

When they reached the foot of the mountain, Florence called to Jo Ann, “We’ll have to let José lead the way from now on. He says we leave the road here.”

Somewhat reluctantly Jo Ann checked her horse’s pace to allow José to lead. Slowly and in single file they began winding their way up a rocky trail. After about an hour’s climb it became so steep and narrow that even Jo Ann, experienced rider that she was, began to grow nervous.

With the towering wall of rock on her right and the deep canyon below, she realized that if her horse should make a single misstep it might be fatal. She shuddered at the thought of how easy it would be for the kidnaper to make away with Carlitos in such a place as this. One little push would mean death.

“Florence,” she called back, “I’ve been thinking how easy it’d be to make away with anyone in such a wild, lonesome spot. You don’t think that man’d push Carlitos off this precipice, do you?”

“No, no,” Florence called back quickly. “I’m sure he’ll take him on to the mine. That mean boss wouldn’t pay him a large sum of money till he was sure he had the right boy.”

“I believe you’re right.” Encouraged by Florence’s words, Jo Ann rode on in better spirits. “If that kidnaper takes Carlitos clear to the mine, then we’ll be sure to overtake them,” she thought.

About half an hour later, as the horses were struggling up an unusually steep place, Jo Ann suddenly cried out a sharp, “José, stop!”

Startled, José checked his horse and looked back.

Jo Ann pointed down at a boy's hat caught on a sharp point of rock jutting out from the edge of the cliff. "See! Carlitos' hat!"

"*Ay Dios!* I have fear that it is the hat of Carlitos." He leaped off his horse and began hunting about for a stick with which to reach the hat. Finally, having found a long stick, he leaned over as far as he dared and carefully worked the stick up under the frayed edge of the hat. Both girls sprang off their horses to watch his efforts.

When at last he had the hat in his hands, he exclaimed, "*Dios mio!* It is his hat!" He pointed to the cord around the crown. "The grandmother made this cord for him."

Jo Ann suddenly gasped and pointed down into the abyss-like gorge. "Oh, José, do you think Carlitos——" She broke off in the middle of her sentence, shuddering at the thought of Carlitos hurled down over the jagged rocks to the bottom of the gorge hundreds of feet below.

Florence broke in quickly, "Maybe his hat just blew off. If he had fallen over, we ought to be able to see some sign of loosened rocks or broken bushes where he slipped."

She and Jo Ann, as well as José, began searching for some sign along the edge of the precipice. After a few moments Jo Ann walked up the trail a short distance and, leaning over, examined the path.

All at once her face lit. "Florence! José! Come here—look!" she called.

At the joyous note in Jo Ann's voice both Florence and José came up to her side and stared down at the footprints in the limestone dust.

"See," she said. "These small prints were made by Carlitos' bare feet. They're just his size."

"*Sí, sí,*" José agreed. He pointed to some larger footprints beside them. "And these are made by the sandals of the man who is taking him off. And here're the burro's marks."

Both Jo Ann and Florence drew deep sighs of relief. "I feel more certain than ever now that the man'll take him clear to the mine."

The next moment Jo Ann frowned and pointed to the ground a few feet ahead. “That rascal made Carlitos get off the burro so he could ride. See! There’re no signs of his footprints from there on—just Carlitos’ and the burro’s.”

“I believe you’re right,” Florence agreed. “I wonder if it’s very far to the mine now.” She turned to José, “How much farther is it to the mine?”

“Three or four more hours and we’ll be there.”

“I didn’t think it was that far. Why, it’ll be dark before we get there.” There was a note of anxiety in Florence’s voice.

Jo Ann shivered. “How in the world will we ever get over this trail in the dark? It’s scary enough in the daylight. Let’s hurry and get going.”

Soon all three were on their horses again and climbing steadily upward. After they had ridden about an hour, the trail began to drop downward.

“Wh—ew!” Jo Ann ejaculated. “I’ve ridden horses in lots of places, but nothing like this toboggan slide.”

Just as she was finishing this sentence, José’s horse dropped back on his haunches, his four feet braced together, and began sliding in the loose gravel of the almost perpendicular incline.

Both girls caught their breath.

The next moment Jo Ann felt her horse begin to slide. A feeling of horror overwhelmed her. She realized that she had no control over him whatsoever. Would her horse and Florence’s be able to keep from slipping over the edge of that horrible precipice?

CHAPTER XVII

A STARTLING CRY

It seemed to Jo Ann that years passed before her horse came to a stop. She drew a quick breath of relief, then turned about quickly to see if Florence were safe.

“Thank goodness!” she ejaculated as she saw that Florence’s horse, though still slipping, was over the worst of the incline, and that Florence was hanging on pluckily.

“O—oh, José!” Jo Ann ejaculated. “This is terrible!”

“*Sí, sí,*” José agreed, watching Florence anxiously.

Shortly after Florence’s horse had come to a safe halt, she called out between gasps, “José—are there—any more—places—this bad?”

“No, señorita. This is the worst.”

In spite of the fact that their horses were getting tired they urged them on, as darkness was beginning to settle down over the mountains.

“I thought surely we’d have caught up with Carlitos and that man by this time,” thought Jo Ann. “The poor child must be nearly dead, walking so fast. I’m tired, and we’ve been riding all the way.”

When she saw how swiftly the shadows were deepening, she wondered how they would ever be able to follow the trail from now on. But they must.

“If that mean boss ever gets his hands on Carlitos, that’ll be the last we’ll ever see of him,” she thought. “That boss wants to keep the mine, and he won’t stop at anything to have his way.”

After they had ridden for about an hour, the darkness grew so thick that it was almost impenetrable.

Jo Ann called back in a low anxious voice to Florence, “I can’t see a thing—it’s so black. I’m glad, though, the trail’s not so dangerous along here. It must be almost time for the moon to be up.”

“I’m sure it is,” Florence answered, then called to José, “Isn’t it time for the moon to come up?”

“Sí, señorita, but I have much fear there will be no moon tonight. I think there will be a storm.”

Even as he was speaking the girls saw a flash of lightning and heard the distant rumbling of thunder. A few moments later great drops of rain began to pelt into their faces as a gust of wind blew against them. With almost incredible swiftness the storm broke in all its fury. Blinding flashes of lightning darted in every direction, deafening rolls of thunder echoed and re-echoed over the mountains.

Never had Jo Ann heard such thunder—it growled and raged like some horrible monster. The rain began sweeping down in torrents, lashing them furiously.

In a brilliant flash of lightning Jo Ann was horrified to see streams of water rushing down the mountain side carrying stones and debris. She realized at once that they were in grave danger.

The next moment José was beside her. Without a word he caught her horse’s bridle and began leading him over the treacherous, slippery trail.

“Is Florence coming——” she began, but her words were drowned by the storm.

In a few more moments José turned off the trail and started leading the horse almost straight up the rocky mountain side.

“What—where are you going?” Jo Ann gasped, unheard.

When her horse had climbed a little farther, lightning illuminated the darkness enough to show her an overhanging ledge of rock jutting out just ahead of them.

Instantly she grasped José’s plan. Here was a shelter—a refuge from the storm!

As soon as he had led her up under the cliff she sprang off her horse, crying, “Get Florence! Hurry!”

“*Sí, sí,*” he nodded.

With that José was off again down the trail. After what seemed to Jo Ann an endless time, he reappeared leading Florence’s horse and his own.

The moment Florence leaped off her horse Jo Ann caught her in a warm embrace.

“Oh, Florence, I’m so thankful you’re safe!”

“And I’m thankful we’re all safe.”

“If only we had Carlitos here with us, too! Oh, Florence, where do you suppose he is now? He might get washed off the trail if that man forces him on in this storm.”

“I believe that kidnaper’ll do exactly what José is doing—seek refuge till the storm checks,” Florence comforted.

“I hope so. He and Carlitos might be under just such a rocky ledge as this right now. What puzzles me is how they could’ve got this far without our overtaking them.”

As soon as José had tied the horses to some scrubby bushes he hurried over to Florence’s side and shouted, “I go now to look for Carlitos. We are getting near the mine, and I must find him.”

“But, José, the storm is terrible. Wait a little while.”

After the rain had checked a little, José turned to Florence and said, “Wait for me here, *sabe?* I go now.” With that he started off and disappeared in the darkness once more.

“Oh, if he can just find Carlitos!” Jo Ann said wistfully.

She drew back hastily against the rocky wall in an effort to escape a sudden gust of rain, as did Florence.

“This isn’t as good a shelter as I thought,” Florence gasped. “The wind—must be changing—to another direction. It’s cold, too.”

“Yes, it is. Let’s move over farther this way.”

“All right.”

Keeping close to the wall they made their way farther on around a sharp projecting rock, which protected them a little better.

After they had stood there several minutes, an unusually brilliant lightning flash lighted the surrounding blackness long enough for them to see that back to their right was what appeared to be the opening of a cave.

“If that’s a cave back there and we can get in it, we’ll be entirely out of the rain,” Jo Ann told herself as she wiped her rain-drenched face on her sleeve.

When at last the thunder’s reverberations were beginning to die away, she leaned over closer to Florence and said, “Did you see that cave-like opening back there on your right?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go on back and see if it is a cave.”

“No—no. There might be a bear—or some other animal in it.”

“That’s right! I didn’t think of that.”

In a sudden lull in the rain and thunder just then a wailing sound floated to them.

Both girls uttered little gasps of fright.

That was the cry of a human being! The same thought struck them—could that be Carlitos?

Jo Ann leaned over and whispered excitedly in Florence’s ear, “That sounds like Carlitos’ voice. Do you think——?” She halted to listen to the wailing notes again. “I believe that is Carlitos! It’s a boy’s voice!”

“You’re right—it is. There probably wouldn’t be any other child up here in this

wild place on a night like this.”

“Let’s slip up closer and see if we can tell whether it’s Carlitos. If it is, we’ve got to get him.”

“But that man! We couldn’t get Carlitos away from him without José to help us.”

Jo Ann caught Florence’s hand in hers. “Come on. Let’s slip on up closer and see if we can find out for sure if it’s Carlitos.”

Together they stealthily crept along the wall till they could see two figures crouched about a small fire on the floor of the cave.

Jo Ann squeezed Florence’s hand tightly to indicate to her that she had recognized Carlitos. Quickly Florence returned the pressure, then began pulling her backwards.

Jo Ann obediently turned, and silently the two girls retraced their steps out of hearing distance.

“We’ve got to get Carlitos away from that man right away,” Jo Ann whispered excitedly.

“But José isn’t here to——”

“I’m afraid to wait for him. That man might leave with Carlitos before he gets back. I’m going to get the rope and pistol out of the saddle-bag, and we can capture that man ourselves.”

“Oh, but, Jo!” Florence’s voice was filled with horror.

“All you’ll have to do’ll be to hold the gun on him while I tie him.”

“Oh, Jo! Let’s wait for José.”

“No. You wait here while I get the things.”

Without waiting to hear Florence’s whispered protest, she hurried back to the horses and returned with the pistol and rope.

As she handed Florence the pistol she whispered, “Don’t get so excited you

forget to throw off the safety. As soon as I fix my rope, we'll be ready."

She hastily tied a slipknot in the rope, then ordered, "Come on. Stay right behind me and hold that gun on the man. We'll wait till it thunders again, so he won't hear us."

Slowly and cautiously they slipped on toward the cave. [Jo Ann could see that the man and Carlitos were still crouched around the fire.](#)

When they had gone as close as they dared, they waited till there was a loud crash of thunder. Immediately Jo Ann crept forward till she was directly behind the man.

With amazing swiftness she dropped the noose over the man's head and down over his shoulders, then jerked back on the rope. Automatically his hand flew toward his stiletto as he leaped forward. But the rope tightened—his arms were pinioned to his sides. He wheeled partly around only to find he was looking into the barrel of a 32-caliber automatic.

"Stand still or I'll shoot," Florence ordered in Spanish. "Carlitos—get back. You might get hurt."

Jo Ann quickly slipped a loop of the rope over the man's right hand and drew it behind his back, then his left, and tied the two together securely.

"Tell him to lie down on the ground now," Jo Ann said.

Florence quickly repeated the order.

The man's eyes blazed angrily. "No—no. I no——" His protest was lost in a clap of thunder.

"Do as you're told or I'll shoot," Florence commanded a moment later.

As the man made no move, Jo Ann quickly gave him a hard shove and sent him sprawling headlong on the ground.

"You do what we tell you," she scolded in English as she jerked the rope about his feet and began tying them together. "What do you mean by running off with this little boy?"

As soon as she had finished tying him, she remarked to Florence, “Ask him where he’s taking Carlitos and what he was going to do with him.”

Just as Florence had begun asking him these questions, Carlitos suddenly cried out in terror and pointed to the entrance.

The same instant Florence felt a strong hand clutch her shoulder as the gun was snatched out of her hand.

At Carlitos’ cry of terror Jo Ann’s gaze turned toward the cave entrance. Then cold fear clutched her heart as she saw towering over Florence a great hulk of a man with a long mustache who she instinctively felt must be the mean boss.

CHAPTER XVIII

PRISONERS

Before Jo Ann could spring to her feet, Carlitos was crouching behind her crying piteously, “*El jefe! El jefe!*”

Jo Ann immediately recognized the name “*el jefe*” as meaning the boss. She was right. That man was the mean boss!

Just then the boss broke into a burst of coarse derisive laughter that sent shivers down her spine. “Ah, the señoritas *muy bravo!* They bind the peon who thinks he’s a man but has not the strength of a woman.”

It seemed to Jo Ann that the boss’s huge body almost filled the narrow opening as he stood there with Florence’s gun aimed directly toward them. What could she do now? How could they save themselves and Carlitos? Oh, why hadn’t she taken Florence’s advice and waited for José before coming in here! If only José would come now!

A sudden idea flashed into her mind. When the boss stooped over to untie the peon, maybe she’d have a chance to slip his gun out of his holster; then she’d watch her chance to take him by surprise.

Her thoughts were broken into by the boss seizing Florence roughly by the arm and starting toward her.

“Here’s my chance to get his gun,” Jo Ann thought, feeling sure that he was going to untie the peon now.

To her consternation, instead of untying the peon, he kicked him viciously and snarled, “You no good—you let the señoritas bind you up—now I leave you here for the wild beasts to gnaw on your bones.”

Although Jo Ann could not understand all that he said, she realized immediately that he was going to leave the peon here to die. “What a beast that man is,” she thought.

“Get on out—all of you,” the boss growled, pushing Carlitos roughly in front of the girls and pointing his gun menacingly.

When the peon saw them all starting out of the cave, leaving him there alone, bound and helpless, he began struggling and rolling about, trying to free himself.

“Don’t leave me here! You can’t leave me! I did what you told me. I brought the boy back. Where is the money you promised me?”

“The wild animals cannot eat money,” the boss flung back, then laughed callously.

Jo Ann gasped in horror as she caught the meaning of his cruel words. “That man isn’t human. No wonder José with his family had fled from the mine.”

With the peon’s piteous cries ringing in their ears the two girls silently walked on in front of the boss.

“Go and get on your horses—*pronto*,” the boss ordered.

As Carlitos whimpered softly, Jo Ann caught hold of his hand to silence and comfort him.

Too terrified even to speak to each other, the three stumbled along in the darkness around the ledge. Instead of three horses, they found four.

“One must belong to the boss,” Jo Ann thought. “I wonder if he has guessed that José came with us.” She caught her breath as a new fear overwhelmed her. Had he already found José and made away with him—pushed him over the precipice, perhaps?

“Go on, *pronto!*” the boss growled.

In a brilliant flash of lightning Jo Ann saw Carlitos struggling to reach the horn of his saddle. She leaned over quickly and half lifted, half pushed him up on the horse.

“*Infante!* Can you not ride without Pancho?” the boss growled tauntingly.

“He must think that the peon and Carlitos came here on a horse,” Jo Ann thought with a feeling of relief, as she mounted one of the other horses. “That means he must not have seen José or know that he’s with us. But where can José be now? Could he have slipped on the trail and fallen over a precipice?”

“*Andale—mas pronto!*” ordered the gruff voice again.

“He’s in a big hurry to get away from here,” thought Jo Ann. “He evidently has some strong reason for rushing us this way. I’m going to delay him in every way I can so Dr. Blackwell’ll be sure to be at the mine before we get there. If he isn’t there——” She shuddered at the thought of what might happen to Florence, Carlitos, and herself.

Just then the boss broke into such a rapid flow of Spanish that Jo Ann could catch only a word or two.

At his threats Florence shook so she could hardly get on her horse. He would kill all of them, he had said, if any one of them tried to escape.

“We no *sabe*,” Jo Ann spoke up. “We *Americanos*—no *sabe*.”

The emphasis Jo Ann had placed on the word “we” made Florence understand at once that she did not want her to let the man know that she could speak or understand Spanish. Though she could not guess Jo’s reason, she decided to pretend not to understand him.

Just as they were about to start off down to the trail Jo Ann heard the faint but heartrending cry of the deserted peon.

“Suppose the boss should tie us and leave us to die of thirst and starvation like that,” she said to herself. “Perhaps that’s what he did to Carlitos’ father, José said no one knew what had become of him.”

“I’m glad I’m first,” she thought a moment later. “That’ll give me a better chance to delay him.”

On reaching the trail, she deliberately turned her horse back in the direction from which they had just come. That would delay them a little bit.

The horses of both Carlitos and Florence followed her lead.

No sooner did the boss realize that they were going in the wrong direction than he roared out angrily, “Wait! That’s not the direction to go!”

Jo Ann paid no attention to this gruff command but kept on.

A few moments later her horse was stopped by being crowded against the rocky wall. Then she felt her arm seized in a vise-like grip and heard the boss’s shouts in her ear. A flash of lightning showed her his anger-contorted face only a few inches from her own.

Though she was terrified, she controlled herself enough to cry out, “No *sabe*. No *sabe*.”

“I make you *sabe*!” He blocked the trail in front of her with his horse, then leaped off and grabbed her horse’s bridle and turned him around. As he struck him sharply with his quirt, the animal leaped forward.

Instantly she realized the danger of pushing one of the other horses off the narrow trail and drew back on the reins in time to avert a disaster.

With Florence in the lead they set off toward the mine.

“At least I made him waste a little time,” Jo Ann thought, “but if he finds out I’m deliberately trying to delay him there’s no telling what he’ll do. He’s the meanest man I ever saw.”

Having come to an unusually slippery stretch she could think only of the danger of riding on the treacherous winding mountain trail in the darkness. One thing lifted her flagging spirits. The storm was abating—abating almost as rapidly as it had begun. “Now if only the moon’ll come up,” she thought.

Shortly afterwards she noted a light shining from behind the fast-sailing storm clouds. Even as she looked, the moon came into full view, lighting up the mountain side.

“Thank goodness!” she exclaimed to herself. At least they could see where they were going now. It would be safer traveling for José, too. But where was he? Would they meet him soon? But if they did, what would the boss do to him? He

might treat him as badly as he had the peon.

Even as she was wondering, José was struggling up a steep bank not far below the cave. In his haste to get back to the girls he had, Indian fashion, left the trail and had struck straight up the mountain side, scaling almost perpendicular rocks and pulling himself up by anything that offered a finger hold.

Just before reaching the rocky ledge under which he had left the girls and the horses, he heard a wailing sound that made him stop as rigid as if frozen. Who was that? What was the matter? The señoritas! He must get to them at once.

Cautiously but rapidly he crawled up to the ledge. As soon as he saw there was no sign of the girls or the horses there, his eyes widened in horror. What had happened to them? That cry—but that was a man's voice.

All at once it flashed through his mind that it might be the very man he had been hunting. Was Carlitos there with him? The señoritas——

Just then the cry, half wailing, half groaning, sounded again.

Silently José started in the direction of the cry. That might be only a trap, and he must not be caught.

When he neared the cave he saw through the opening the dying embers of a fire. By its faint glow he could make out the figure of a man struggling and rolling about on the ground.

As soon as José saw that the man was tied and that there was no one else in the cave, he called out, "What is your trouble? Who are you?"

At the sound of José's voice the man instantly stopped struggling. "Come and release me! Release me!"

José made no move to enter, "Who are you?" he demanded again. "Who tied you?"

"Two señoritas tie me up. Then that man take them away—and leave me here to die. Release me! I kill him!"

Immediately José knew that this must be the man who had stolen Carlitos.

“Where is the boy—Carlitos? What have you done with him?” he demanded sharply.

“*El jefe* take him. Release me and I go kill *el jefe*. He no give me the money he promised. And he leave me here for the animals to eat.”

“Did he take the señoritas to the mine?”

“Sí—I think so.”

After José had asked him a few more questions the man promised to show him a short cut to the mine so they could overtake the boss and his prisoners. “I help you get the señoritas and the boy.” Convinced, finally, that the man was in earnest, José quickly untied the rope that bound him and coiled it over his arm.

A few minutes later the two men set off together down the steep, rocky mountain side.

CHAPTER XIX

A DARING PLAN

In spite of all Jo Ann's efforts to slow their progress down the trail, she met with little success. Every time she slowed her horse the boss would ride up close behind and strike her horse with his quirt.

When the first faint rays of dawn were tingeing the eastern sky, the boss suddenly ordered them to stop. Pointing down into a dark ravine, he indicated by signs that they were to leave the trail and ride into it. Involuntarily Jo Ann gasped. The steepness of the sharp descent terrified her. Even more alarming was the thought that this was the place where he had planned to leave them as he had the peon back in the cave.

If Dr. Blackwell or José should come along this trail they never would think of hunting down there for them. "Unless I leave some clue up here on the trail," she told herself.

When both Jo Ann and Florence kept repeating, "No *sabe*—no *sabe*," to all of his commands, the boss, with an angry, "Follow me, *pronto*," started his horse down into the ravine. He glanced over his shoulder to see if they were following.

In the short interval in which he was not looking at them, Jo Ann jerked off her belt and tossed it back on the trail. "If José or Dr. Blackwell sees that, they'll search all around here," she thought.

Slipping and sliding over sharp rocks and scrubby mesquite bushes they finally succeeded in reaching the bottom of the ravine.

After they had ridden some distance out of sight of the trail, the boss leaped off his horse and ordered them to follow his example.

For an instant it seemed to Jo Ann that her heart had stopped beating; then it

began pounding away so rapidly that she had difficulty in breathing.

Was this to be the end? Was this silent dark ravine the spot where Florence and Carlitos and she were to be left to die?

As soon as they had all dismounted, the boss gestured to them to take the saddles off their horses.

“No *sabe*—no *sabe*,” Jo Ann began repeating.

The next instant the boss growled and raised his quirt threateningly.

Without another protest she pulled the saddle off and then helped Carlitos remove his.

“*Mas pronto*,” the boss kept commanding.

As soon as they had removed the saddles, he indicated some bushes near by under which they were to hide them; that done, he had all three tie their horses a little farther down the ravine.

“He’s trying to cover up all trace of us,” Jo Ann thought, shaking. “He must be going to make away with us now. Poor Florence! Poor Carlitos! What can I do? Isn’t there something I can do?”

To her amazement just then the boss gestured to them to climb back up on the trail. What was he going to do with them now? Where was he taking them?

On reaching the trail he urged them on forward as fast as they could walk. Not long afterward they came to a little rise in the trail from which they could see in the valley below a huge white stone house outlined against the dark gray background of the mountains. Involuntarily the girls stopped to stare down at it in surprise.

“Who’d ever think of seeing such a palace as that way out here!” Jo Ann exclaimed.

For once the boss forgot to urge them on. He pointed down proudly to the house. “My *casa*. It cost me *mucho dinero*,” he bragged, then gestured to some tiny shacks on the mountain side. “I no live like the peons.”

“No wonder he can have such a fine house,” Jo Ann thought. “He stole the mine from Carlitos’ father in the first place and makes the peons live in little old shacks.”

By this time the boss had leaped off his horse and had tied it to a near-by bush. He turned back to the girls and Carlitos. “Move along. *Pronto!*” he ordered, gesturing up to a narrow path cut into the steep mountain side.

Jo Ann intuitively realized that this path led to the mine. A feeling of terror swept over her again. This must be the end! He was taking them up to the mine to make away with them there so no one would know what had become of them. That was why he was hurrying them so fast—so he’d get rid of them before it was daylight and the men came to work. What would he do with them? If he left them bound as he had the peon in the cave, some of the workmen would be sure to find them.

A sudden thought flashed into her mind that left her panic-stricken. In nearly all mines, she’d heard, there were old, deep unused shafts. Was it possible that he was going to leave them in one of those old shafts? If he did, no one in the world would ever find a trace of them. She must fight to the very last. There must be something she could do. Dr. Blackwell—where was he? He had said he would get here ahead of them. He might be down there in the valley waiting for them this very minute, she told herself.

By this time they had reached a spot in the path directly above the house. “One could almost throw a stone down into the patio of that house from here,” she thought. “If I could only attract the attention of someone down there. He seems to be trying so hard to get us up here without anyone’s seeing us.”

A daring plan darted into her mind. She’d risk the boss’s anger. No matter what he did, it could not be as bad as what awaited them at the mine. The next instant she began to put this plan into action.

She stumbled and with a piercing shriek fell prostrate, pushing several large stones over the edge of the trail. As they rolled down the mountain side, loosening other stones on their way, they made a terrific crashing noise.

“Oh, my foot! My foot!” she groaned, grabbing her ankle.

Florence was at her side the next moment. “Oh, Jo Ann! Are you hurt badly?”

Before Jo Ann could answer, the boss was standing over her, shaking his quirt threateningly. “What you mean? You make too much noise. Move on—*pronto*.”

Jo Ann shook her head, crying again, “My foot!”

As he started to strike her with his quirt she turned over and began crawling on hands and knees.

“Oh, if only Dr. Blackwell or someone heard those rocks and would come to our rescue,” she thought. “My crawling this way will delay us some. I wish, though, that I dared tell Florence that I’m not hurt. She’s so worried because she thinks I’ve really sprained my ankle.”

Every few moments she kept looking back toward the boss as an excuse to get a view of the valley.

“Surely, if Dr. Blackwell’s down there and heard all that noise, he’d look up here and see us,” she thought. “If I don’t see somebody soon, I’ll risk knocking some more stones over.” She slowed her crawling pace.

“*Mas pronto!*” came the growling command, then she felt a sharp lick across her back. Only her thick sweater kept her from being cut by the boss’s quirt.

In spite of this, she ventured to look around again a few moments later. To her unbounded relief she caught a glimpse of three men on horses riding rapidly toward the foot of the trail. They were not dressed like Indians, she noticed. The rider ahead looked as if he might be Dr. Blackwell. Oh, if only he were! If he could only get to them right away. “That black hole up ahead on the path—that must be the opening to the mine,” she thought.

Just then Carlitos exclaimed in a frightened voice, “*La mina* [The mine]!”

Terrified at the sight of this black yawning hole so close above them, Jo Ann cried out frantically, “Florence, stop! Don’t go any farther.”

At her sharp command Florence halted, white-faced and trembling. The next instant she reached out to catch hold of Carlitos.

The boss burst forth in such a rapid flow of Spanish that neither one of the girls could understand a word. His face was so distorted with rage that Florence and

Carlitos huddled together against the rocky wall, frozen with fear.

As the boss raised his quirt to strike her, Jo Ann caught a glimpse of a white-clothed man stealthily slipping along the trail close behind him. Instantly she recognized the man as José. “I must keep the boss from knowing José is behind him,” she thought quickly.

“No, I won’t go on!” she cried, and jumped to her feet just in time to dodge a blow from his quirt.

As he lurched forward to strike again, she saw a coil of rope sail through the air and fall over his head and shoulders. The next instant his arms were pinioned to his sides.

Before the boss could realize what had happened, José and the peon sprang forward and threw him down on the ground. With deft fingers they bound him securely.

CHAPTER XX

THE NEW HOPE MINE

Everything had happened so quickly that Florence and Carlitos were still standing motionless by the wall.

While José and the peon held the boss, Jo Ann cautiously led Florence and Carlitos past him. So fiercely was he roaring that shivers ran down their spines.

Jo Ann scarcely drew a long breath till all three of them were out of his reach. Even then she was terrified for José and the peon. Would they be able to get him down that narrow trail without danger to themselves?

A few moments later, as the three rounded a curve, they saw Dr. Blackwell running up the trail toward them.

“Oh, Daddy! Daddy!” Florence cried.

The next moment she was in her father’s arms.

“How thankful I am that I’ve found you girls and Carlitos alive!” he exclaimed, hugging her tightly. “I was frantic when I got here and didn’t find you.”

Now that she realized that Dr. Blackwell was here and they were all safe, Jo Ann felt such a surge of weakness creep over her that she leaned against the wall for support. Now she could relax—all the responsibility was the doctor’s from now on.

Just then two other men came running up the trail, one of them wearing the uniform of a *rurale*.

“Tell the officer to go up and help José and the peon,” Florence told her father. “They have the mean boss tied, but——”

“He’s so terrible—so savage, he’s liable to escape yet,” Jo Ann put in. “Tell him to hurry.”

The *rurale* hurriedly slipped past them and rushed on up the narrow trail.

Dr. Blackwell now turned to the tall thin man who had been standing quietly behind him. “Girls, this is Mr. Eldridge, Carlitos’ uncle. He reached the village about the same time I did.”

Florence turned and in rapid Spanish explained to Carlitos that this was his uncle.

Carlitos’ blue eyes widened in amazement. “My uncle!” he repeated, gazing past them to the tall man. Slowly then the boy edged around the girls toward his uncle.

Mr. Eldridge reached out and took Carlitos’ hand in his. “I’m so happy—happy that I’ve found you at last,” he said in English. “I’ve searched for years for you.”

Carlitos stared blankly, not understanding a single word. Florence turned to Carlitos and translated what his uncle had said.

Immediately Carlitos’ face began to brighten.

“It seems terrible that my own nephew can’t understand his native language,” Mr. Eldridge remarked.

“We’d better hurry on down off this narrow trail,” put in Dr. Blackwell. He turned around and led the way down, the others following in single file.

As soon as they neared the great white house, Dr. Blackwell explained that they had better go on inside and wait till the men brought the boss down. “Mr. Eldridge wants to question him about Carlitos’ father and mother. There are also several things about the mine he’d like to find out.”

When the girls saw the three men bringing the boss in, they slipped out into the patio.

“I’ve seen all I want to of that terrible creature,” declared Jo Ann. “I never want to lay eyes on him again.”

“Neither do I,” agreed Florence.

“Aren’t you thrilled over Carlitos’ finding his uncle and his prospect of getting the mine back? Just think how his life’ll be changed now! From poverty to comfort. And now he’ll have his uncle to look after him and see that he has all the advantages he should.”

“I’m just as happy as can be over his good fortune. And José’s and his family’s, too, because I’m sure Mr. Eldridge’ll help them for taking care of Carlitos and saving his life.”

While they were waiting, Jo Ann began to gaze about, noticing the number of rooms, each opening onto the patio. “Isn’t this a strange place? And this is Carlitos’ house now. Some contrast with the cave he’s been living in, isn’t it? Let’s take a look around.”

The two girls walked down the corridor to the first open door and peered in.

“My stars!” gasped Jo Ann. “A grand piano! What do you know about that! And look what’s tied to one of the legs—a fighting rooster!”

“Oh yes, that man’d be sure to have some fighting roosters. Cock fighting’s one of the principal amusements down here. That’s a strange place to keep the rooster, though.”

They wandered on down to the next open door, and to Jo Ann’s utter amazement there was another piano with a rooster tied to one of the legs.

“Am I seeing double?” she exclaimed.

“That’s typical of the peon. They’re very fond of music and of cock fighting.”

After going to three more rooms and finding three more pianos and each with a rooster tied to it, Jo Ann exclaimed, amazed, “Is that man crazy? That’s the funniest thing I ever heard of in all my life.”

Florence was not nearly as surprised. “It’s just his idea of wealth,” she explained. “Those are his most valued possessions.”

Just then Dr. Blackwell stepped out in the corridor and called to them to come to

the office. "Mr. Eldridge wants to talk to you girls," he said.

"I hope we won't see that mean boss again," Jo Ann remarked as she and Florence started to the office.

On entering they glanced hurriedly about to see if he were there.

Dr. Blackwell spoke up quickly. "The men have gone with their prisoner. They're taking him on to the city to turn him over to the authorities there."

"Did you find out anything about what happened to Carlitos' father before he left?" Jo Ann asked the doctor.

"Yes, the peon told us that he knew that the boss had made away with him by pushing him down into a deep unused shaft."

"That's awful!" Jo Ann exclaimed, a look of horror in her eyes. "And that's what he was going to do with us, too."

"That's where we might be right now if you hadn't come to our rescue, Dad," Florence added. "But let's don't talk about it any more. I can't bear to think of it."

Jo Ann caught her by the hand and led her over to Carlitos' side. "Tell him how happy we are that his uncle has found him at last."

As soon as Florence had translated these words to Carlitos, Mr. Eldridge moved over closer to the three. "If it had not been for you girls, I never would have found my boy," he said patting Carlitos' shoulder affectionately. "You risked your lives for him, and I'll never cease to be grateful to you. Since, with your help, we've got the mine back for Carlitos, we want you to have a share in it. As soon as I get back to the city I'm going to send each of you several shares of the stock."

"Oh, thank you!" Jo Ann cried. "But we really don't deserve it."

"That's so good of you and Carlitos," Florence added. She turned to Carlitos then and told him how glad she and Jo Ann were to be partners with him in his mine. "We want always to be your friends," she ended.

“Don’t forget the other señorita,” Carlitos said, shining eyed. “I want her to be a partner in my mine, too. Tell my uncle that.”

Florence turned and repeated this to Mr. Eldridge.

He smiled back at her, then at Dr. Blackwell. “We have already arranged for her to have some shares also. I’m going to see that José and his family are well taken care of the rest of their lives, too. They have been so good to my boy.”

“That’ll be fine!” exclaimed both girls together.

Jo Ann pressed Florence’s hand. “I’m so glad! They deserve to, after all they’ve been through.”

Jo Ann squeezed Florence’s hand tightly, her eyes like twin stars. “Didn’t you say that Esperanza means hope? It’ll mean new hope now for Carlitos and José and his family—and for us too. Let’s call it the New Hope Mine from now on.”

“A grand idea!”

Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Added a list of the Mexican Mystery Series.
- Added a Table of Contents.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.

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