

**THE
PHANTOM
TOWN
MYSTERY**

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On all sides there were deserted adobe houses in varying degrees of ruin.

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THE PHANTOM TOWN MYSTERY

By CAROL NORTON

AUTHOR *of*

“The Phantom Yacht,” “Bobs, A Girl Detective,”
“The Seven Sleuths’ Club,” “The Phantom
Town,” Etc.

Girls on Horses

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CONTENTS

<u>I LUCKY LOON</u>	7
<u>II THE GHOST TOWN</u>	15
<u>III THE MISSING FRIENDS</u>	24
<u>IV "DESPERATE DICK"</u>	32
<u>V POOR LITTLE BODIL</u>	40
<u>VI THE EVIL-EYE TURQUOISE</u>	48
<u>VII MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT</u>	56
<u>VIII SINGING COWBOYS</u>	64
<u>IX A VAGABOND FAMILY</u>	72
<u>X A LONELY MOUNTAIN ROAD</u>	80
<u>XI THE SKELETON STAGE COACH</u>	88
<u>XII A NARROW ESCAPE</u>	95
<u>XIII A SAND STORM</u>	103
<u>XIV "A.'S AND N. E.'S."</u>	111
<u>XV IN THE BARN LOFT</u>	119
<u>XVI SEARCHING FOR CLUES</u>	127
<u>XVII A WOODEN DOLL</u>	135
<u>XVIII A STRANGE HOSTESS</u>	143
<u>XIX A GUN SHOT</u>	151
<u>XX INTRODUCING AN AIR SCOUT</u>	160
<u>XXI A POSSIBLE CLUE</u>	168
<u>XXII AN INTERESTING ARRIVAL</u>	176
<u>XXIII A SILVER PLANE</u>	184
<u>XXIV A LONG NIGHT WATCH</u>	192
<u>XXV A CRY FOR HELP</u>	200
<u>XXVI IS IT A CLUE?</u>	208
<u>XXVII IT WAS A CLUE</u>	215
<u>XXVIII A NEW COMPLICATION</u>	222
<u>XXIX AN OLD LETTER</u>	230
<u>XXX SECRET ENTRANCE TO THE ROCK HOUSE</u>	238

**THE PHANTOM TOWN
MYSTERY**

CHAPTER I

LUCKY LOON

A whirl of gleaming sand and dust on a cross desert road in Arizona. The four galloping objects turned off the road, horses rearing, riders laughing; the two Eastern girls flushed, excited; the pale college student exultant; the cowboy guide enjoying their pleasure. A warm, sage-scented wind carried the cloud of dust away from them down into the valley.

“That was glorious sport, wasn’t it, Mary?” Dora Bellman’s olive-tinted face was glowing joyfully. “Wouldn’t our equestrian teacher back in Sunnybank Seminary be properly proud of us?”

Lovely Mary Moore, delicately fashioned, fair as her friend was dark, nodded beamingly, too out of breath for the moment to speak.

Jerry Newcomb in his picturesque cowboy garb, blue handkerchief knotted about his neck, looked admiringly at the smaller girl.

“I reckon you two’ll want to ride in the rodeo. I never saw Easterners get saddle-broke on cow ponies as quick as you have.” Then his gray eyes smiled at the other boy, tall, thin, pale, who was wiping dust from his shell-rimmed glasses. “Dick Farley, I reckon you’ve ridden before.”

Dick flashed a radiant smile which made his rather plain face momentarily good-looking. “Some,” he said, “when I was a kid on Granddad’s farm just out of Boston.”

Jerry, a little ahead, was leading them slowly across soft shimmering sand toward a narrow entrance in cliff-like rocks.

Dora protested, “Mary *ought* to know how to ride a cow pony since she was born right here on the desert while I have always lived on the Hudson River until two weeks ago.”

“Even so,” Mary retaliated brightly, “but, as you know, I left here when I was eight to go East to school and since I have *never* been back, I haven’t much advantage over you.”

The cowboy turned in his saddle and there was a tender light in his eyes as he looked at the younger girl. “I’m sure glad something fetched you back, Mary, though I’m mighty sorry it was your dad’s illness that did it.”

Dora, glancing at the pretty face of her best friend, saw the frank, friendly smile she gave the cowboy. To herself she thought,—“Jerry certainly thinks Mary is the sweetest thing he ever saw, but *she* only thinks of him as a nice boy who once, long ago, was her childhood playmate.”

They had reached the narrow entrance in the wall of rocks. It was a mysterious looking spot; a giant gateway leading, the girls knew not where. On the gleaming sand near the entrance lay a half-buried skeleton. It looked as though it might have been that of a man rather than a beast. The girls exchanged startled glances, but, as Jerry was riding unconcernedly through the gateway, they silently followed.

“What a dramatic sort of place!” Dora exclaimed in an awed voice as she gazed about her.

They were on a floor of sand that was circled about by low mountains, grim, gray, uninviting. Here and there in crevices a twisted dwarf tree clung, its roots exposed. There was a death-like silence in the place. Even the soft rush of wind over the desert outside could not be heard.

Mary shuddered and rode closer to the cowboy. “Jerry,” she said, “*why* have you brought us here? Is there something that you want to show us?”

The cowboy nodded. “You recollect that Dora was saying how she wished there was a mystery she could solve—” he began, when he was interrupted.

“Oh, Jerry,” Dora’s dark eyes glowed with anticipation, “is there *really* a mystery here—in this awfully bleak place? What? Where? I don’t see anything

at all but those almost straight up and down cliffs and—”

There was an exultant exclamation from Dick Farley. Perhaps his strong spectacles gave him clearer sight.

“I see a house, honest Injun, I do, or something that looks powerfully like one.” He turned questioning eyes toward the cowboy.

“Righto! You’re clever, old man!” Jerry Newcomb told him. “Don’t tell where it is. See if the girls can find it.”

For a long silent moment Mary and Dora sat in their saddles turning their gaze slowly about the low circling mountains.

Dora’s excited cry told the others that she saw it, and Mary, noting the direction of her friend’s gaze, saw, high on a narrow ledge, what looked like a wall made of small rocks with openings that might have been meant for two windows and a door. The flat roof could not be seen from the floor of the desert.

“How perfectly thrilling!” Dora cried. “What was it, Jerry, an Indian cliff dwelling?”

The cowboy shook his head. “Let’s ride up closer,” he said. He led the way to the very base of the low mountain. The ledge, which had one time been the front yard of the house, had been cracked by the elements and leaned outward, leaving a crevice of about twenty feet. There were no steps leading up to the house. It was, as far as the three Easterners could see, without a way of approach.

Dick Farley rode about examining the spot from all angles. “Jerry,” he said at last, “if it isn’t an Indian dwelling, who did live there? Surely *not* a white family!”

The cowboy shook his head. “Not a family. Only a man, Danish, but he was white all right. Sven Pedersen was his name but everyone called him ‘Lucky Loon.’ The name fitted him on two counts. Lucky because he struck it rich so often, and he certainly was ‘loony’ if that means crazy.”

“What did he do?” Mary asked, her blue eyes wide and a little terrified.

“Sven Pedersen had a secret—Dad said—and that was why he took to hoarding

all the wealth he got out of his gold and turquoise mines. My father was a boy then. He says he hasn't any doubt but that old rock house up yonder is plastered with gold and turquoise."

Dora asked in amazement, "Doesn't anybody know? Hasn't anyone *ever* climbed up there to see?"

"No one that I've heard tell about," Jerry said. "No one cared to risk his life doing it, I reckon." Then, seeming to feel that he had sufficiently aroused his listeners' curiosity, the cowboy went on to explain. "As Sven Pedersen grew old, he got queerer and queerer. He took a notion that he was going to be killed for his money, so after he'd built that rock house, he shut himself up in it, and if any intruder so much as rode through that gateway in the rocks over there, bang would go his gun and the horse would drop dead. He was sure-shot all right, Sven Pedersen was."

Dick Farley's large eyes glanced from the high house out to the gate in the wall of rock. "I bet the rider of the dead horse scuttled away mighty quick," he said.

"I reckon he did," Jerry agreed when Dora exclaimed in a tone of horror: "He must have shot a man once anyway. Mary and I saw the half-buried skeleton of one out by the gate. We were sure we did."

"Maybe so," Jerry went on explaining. "You see no one could tell whether the Lucky Loon was in his house or out of it; no one ever saw him in the door or on the ledge, but they found out soon enough when they heard his gun bang."

"How did he get his food and water?" Dick asked.

"Maybe there's a spring on the mountain," Dora suggested.

"Nary a spring," the cowboy told them. "These mountains and the desert around here are bone dry. That's why there's so many skeletons of cows hereabout. Some reckoned that he rode away nights to a town where he wasn't known. He might have stayed away for days and got back in the night without anyone knowing."

"But, Jerry, what happened to him in the end? Does anybody know? Did he go away?" Dora and Dick were questioning when Mary cried in sudden alarm, "Oh, Jerry, he *isn't* here *now*, is he?"

It was Dora who replied, "Of course not, Mary. You *know* Jerry wouldn't bring us in here if there was any danger of our being shot."

"I reckon Sven Pedersen's been dead this long time back," the cowboy told them. "Father was a kid when Lucky Loon was old. Dad says he and some other kids watched around the gate rocks, taking turns for almost a week. They reckoned if the old hermit *had* gone away, they'd like to climb up there and find the Evil Eye Turquoise Sven had boasted so much about before he shut himself up."

"*Did* they climb up there?"

"*What* was the eye?"

"One question at a time, please," Jerry told the eager girls. "No, they didn't go. Dad said it was his turn to watch one night. There was a cutting wind and since it was very dark, he thought he'd just slip inside of the rock gate where the blowing sand wouldn't hit him. Dad got sort of sleepy, after a time, crouched down on the sand, when suddenly he heard a gun bang. He leaped out of the gate, up on his horse and galloped for home. He laughs when he tells that story. He reckons now that he'd dreamed the shot since Sven Pedersen never was seen again and that was thirty years ago." The cowboy had looked at his watch. "Jumping Steers!" he exclaimed. "Most milking time and here I'm fifteen miles from the ranch. Dick, will you ride home with the girls?"

Jerry had whirled his horse's head and had started for the gateway, the others quickly following. Dick, at the end, was just passing through the gate when they distinctly heard the report of a gun.

CHAPTER II

THE GHOST TOWN

Safely outside of the wall of rocks, the four young people drew their restless horses to a standstill. Mary's nettlesome brown pony was hard to quiet until Jerry reached out a strong brown hand and patted its head.

Mary lifted startled blue eyes. "Jerry, *what* do you make of that?" she asked. "We *couldn't* have imagined that gun shot and surely the horses heard it also."

Jerry's smile was reassuring. "'Twas the story that frightened you girls, I reckon," he said, glancing about and up and down the road as he spoke. "It's hunters out after quail or rabbits, more'n like."

Then, seeing that Mary still glanced anxiously back at the gate in the rock wall, Dick said sensibly, "Of course you girls *know* that Sven Pedersen *couldn't* be in that high house. He *must* have been dead for years if he was old when Jerry's father was a boy."

"Of course," Dora, less inclined to be imaginative, replied. Then to the cowboy she said in her practical matter-of-fact way, "Hurry along home to your milking, Jerry, and Dick, don't you bother to come with us. Now that you're working on the Newcomb ranch you ought to be there. It's only a few miles up over this sunshiny road to Gleeson. We aren't the least bit afraid to ride home alone, are we?" She smiled at her friend.

Mary, not wishing to appear foolishly timid, said, in as courageous a voice as she could muster, "Of course we're not afraid. Goodbye, boys, we'll see you tomorrow."

Turning the heads of their horses up a gently ascending mountain road, the girls

cantered away. At a bend, Mary glanced back. The boys were sitting just where they had left them. Jerry's sombrero and Dick's cap waved, then, feeling assured that the girls were all right, the boys went at a gallop down the road and across the desert valley to the Newcomb ranch which nestled at the base of the Chiricahua range.

"They're nice boys, aren't they?" Mary said. "I've always wished I had a brother and I do believe Jerry is going to be just like one."

Aloud Dora replied, "I have noticed that sometimes he calls you 'Little Sister.'" To herself she thought: "Oh, Mary, how *blind* you are!"

Dreamily the younger girl was saying—"That's because we were playmates when we were little so very long ago."

"Oh my, how ancient we are!" Dora said teasingly. "Please remember that you are only one year younger than I am and I refuse to be called elderly."

Mary smiled faintly but it was evident that she was still thinking of the past, when she had been a little girl with golden curls that hung to her waist; a wonderfully pretty, wistful little girl. When she spoke, she said, "It's only natural that Jerry should call me 'Little Sister.' Our mothers were like sisters when they were girl brides. I've told you how they both came from the East just as we have. My mother met Dad in Bisbee where he was a mining engineer, and Jerry's mother taught a little desert school over near the Newcomb ranch. She didn't teach long though, for that very first vacation she married Jerry's cowboy father. After that Mother and Mrs. Newcomb were good friends, naturally, being brides and neighbors."

Dora laughed. "Twenty-five miles apart wouldn't be called *close* neighbors in Sunnybank-on-the-Hudson where I come from," she said.

Mary, not heeding the interruption, kept on. "When Jerry and I were little, we were playmates. I spent days at the ranch sometimes," her sweet face was very sad as she ended with, "until Mother died when I was eight."

"Then you came East to boarding-school and became like a sister to me," Dora said tenderly. "Oh, Mary, when you came West to be with your dear sick dad, I wonder if you know what it meant to me to be allowed to come with you."

“I know what it means to *me* to have you, Dodo, so I ’spect it means the same to you,” was the affectionate reply.

For a time the girls cantered along in thoughtful silence. The rutty road was leading up toward the tableland on which stood the now nearly deserted old mining-town of Gleeson.

Far below them the desert valley stretched many miles southward to the Mexican border. The girls could see a distant blue haze that was the smoke from the Douglas copper smelters.

The late afternoon sun lay in floods of silver light on the sandy road ahead of them. It was very still. Not a sound was to be heard. Now and then a rabbit darted past silently.

“How peaceful this hour is on the desert,” Mary began, glancing at her friend who was riding so close at her side. Noticing that Dora was deep in thought, she asked lightly, “Won’t you say it out loud?”

“Why, of course. I was just wondering why Jerry hurried us away so fast from Lucky Loon’s rock house.”

“Because he had to do the milking,” Mary replied simply.

Dora nodded. “So he *said*.” Then she hastened to add, “Oh, don’t think I’m inferring that Jerry told an untruth, but you know that some evenings he has stayed with us for supper and—”

Mary glanced up startled. “Dora Bellman,” she said, “do you think maybe there *was* someone up in that rock house watching us all the time we were there; someone who fired the gun just as we were leaving to warn us to keep away?”

Dora, seeing her friend’s pale face, was sorry that she had wondered aloud. “Of course not!” she said brightly. “That’s impossible!” Then to change the subject, she started another. “Jerry didn’t have time to tell us about the Evil Eye Turquoise, did he?”

“Dora, do you know what *I* think?” Mary exclaimed as one who had made an important discovery. “I don’t believe he will tell us about that. I acted so like a scare-cat all the time we were there, he won’t ever take us there again and he

probably won't tell us the story either."

"Then I'll find it out some other way," Dora declared. "I'm crazy about mysteries as you know, and, if there *really is one* about that rock house, I want to try to solve it."

She said no more about it just then, as they had reached the old ghost town of Gleeson. They turned up a side street toward mountain peaks that were about a mile away. On their right was the corner general store and post office. A crumbling old adobe building it was, with a rotting wooden porch, on which stood a row of armchairs. In the long ago days when the town had been teeming with life, picturesque looking miners and ranchers had sat there tilted back, smoking pipes and swapping yarns. Today the chairs were empty.

An old man, shriveled, gray-bearded, unkempt, but with kind gray eyes, deep-sunken under shaggy brows, stood in the open door. He smiled out at them in a friendly way, then beckoned with a bony finger.

"I do believe Mr. Harvey has a letter for us," Dora said.

The old man had shuffled into the dark well of his store. A moment later he reappeared with several letters and a newspaper.

"Good!" Dora exclaimed as she rode close to the porch. "Thanks a lot," she called brightly up to the old man who was handing the packet down over the sagging wooden rail.

His friendly, toothless smile was directed at the smaller girl. "Heerd tell as how yer pa's sittin' up agin, Miss Mary," he said. "Mis' Farley, yer nurse woman, came down ter mail some letters a spell back." Then, before Mary could reply, he continued in his shrill, wavering voice, "That thar pale fellar wi' specs on is her son, ain't he?"

"Yes, Mr. Harvey. Dick is Mrs. Farley's son." Mary took time, in a friendly way, to satisfy the old man's curiosity. "Dick has been going to the Arizona State University this winter to be near his mother. She's a widow and he's her only son. Her husband was a doctor and they lived back in Boston before he died."

"Dew tell!" the old man wagged his head sympathetically. "I seen the young fellar ridin' around wi' Jerry Newcomb."

“Dick’s working on the Newcomb ranch this summer,” Mary said, as she started to ride on.

“Ho! Ho!” the old man cackled. “Tenderfoot if ever thar was un. What’s Jerry reckonin’ that young fellar kin do? Bustin’ broncs?”

Mary smiled in appreciation of the old man’s joke. “No, Jerry won’t expect Dick to do *that* right at first. He’s official fence-mender just at present.”

Dora defended the absent boy. “Mr. Harvey, you wait until Dick has been on the desert long enough to get a coat of tan; he *may* surprise you.”

“Wall, mabbe! mabbe!” the old storekeeper chuckled to himself as the girls, waving back at him, galloped away up the road in the little dead town.

[On either side there were deserted adobe houses](#) in varying degrees of ruin, some with broken windows and doors, others with sagging roofs and crumbling walls.

The only sign of life was in three small adobes where poor Mexican families lived. Broken windows in two of the houses were stuffed with rags; the door yards were littered with rubbish. Unkempt children played in front of the middle house. The third adobe was neat and well kept. In it lived the Lopez family. Carmelita, the wife and mother, had long been cook for Mary Moore’s father.

A bright, black-eyed Mexican boy of about ten ran out to the road as the girls approached. “Come on, Emanuel,” Mary sang down to him. “You may put up our horses and earn a dime.”

The small boy’s white teeth flashed in a delighted grin. His brown feet raced so fast, that, by the time the girls were dismounting before the big square two-storied adobe near the mountains, Emanuel was there to lead their horses around back.

Mary glanced affectionately at the old place with its flower-edged walk, its broad porch and adobe pillars. Here her mother had come as a bride; here Mary had been born. Eight happy years they had spent together before her mother died. After Mary had been taken East to school, her father had returned, and here he had spent the winters, going back to Sunnybank each summer to be with his little girl.

Hurrying up the steps, Mary skipped into a pleasant living-room, where, near a wide window that was letting in a flood of light from the setting sun, sat her fine-looking father, pale after his long illness, but growing stronger every day.

“Oh, Daddy dear!” Mary’s voice was vibrant with love. “You’ve waited up for me, haven’t you?” She dropped to her knees beside the invalid chair and pressed her flushed face to his gray, drawn cheek.

Then, glancing up at the nurse who had appeared from her father’s bedroom, she asked eagerly, “May I tell Dad an adventure we’ve had?”

Mrs. Farley, middle-aged, kind-faced, shook her head, smiling down at the girl. “Not tonight, please. Won’t tomorrow do?”

Mary sprang up, saying brightly, “I reckon it will have to.” Then, stooping, she kissed her father as she whispered tenderly, “Rest well, darling. We’re hoping you know all about—” then, little girl fashion, she clapped her hand on her mouth, mumbling, “Oh, I most disobeyed and *told* our adventure. See you tomorrow, Daddy.”

CHAPTER III

THE MISSING FRIENDS

Upstairs, in Mary's room which was furnished as it had been when she had been there as a child, curly maple set with blue hangings, the two girls changed from riding habits to house dresses. Mary wore a softly clinging blue while Dora donned her favorite and most becoming cherry color.

"One might think that we are expecting company tonight." Mary was peering into the oval glass as she spoke, arranging her fascinating golden curls above small shell-like ears.

"Which, of course, we are *not*." Dora had brushed her black bob, boy-fashion, slick to her head. "There being no near neighbors to drop in." Then suddenly she exclaimed, "Oh, for goodness sakes alive, I completely forgot that letter. It's for both of us from Polly and Patsy. I've been wondering why they didn't write and tell us where they had decided to spend their summer vacation."

Dora sprang up to search for the letter in a pocket of her riding habit. Mary sat near a window in a curly maple rocker as she said dreamily: "If we hadn't come West, we would have been with them—that is, if they went to Camp Winnichook up in the Adirondacks the way we had planned all winter."

Dora, holding the letter unopened, sat near her friend and smiled at her reminiscently as she said, "We plan and plan and plan for the future, don't we, and then we do something exactly different, and *most* unexpected, but *I* wouldn't give up being out here on the desert and living in a ghost town for all the fun Patsy and Polly may be having—"

Mary laughingly interrupted. "Do read the letter and let's see if they really *did* go there. Perhaps—"

“Yes, they did.” Dora had unfolded a large, boyish-looking sheet of paper. “Camp Winnichook,” she announced, then she read the rather indolent scrawl. “Dear Cowgirls,”—it began—

“Patsy has just come in from a swim. She’s drying her bathing suit by lying on the sand in front of the cabin in the sun. Her red hair, which *she* calls ‘a wind blown mop,’ looks, at present, like a mop that has just finished doing the kitchen floor. Last winter, you recall, she had a *few* red freckles on her saucy pug nose, but now she wears them all over her face and arms and even on her back. She’s a sight to behold!”

There were spatters on the paper that might have been water. The type of penmanship changed. A jerky, uneven handwriting seemed to ejaculate indignantly, “Don’t you kids believe a word of it. I’m a dazzling beauty—as ever! It’s Polly whose looks are ruined—if she ever had any. She won’t play tennis and she *won’t* swim and she *will* eat chocolate drops—you know the finish, and she wasn’t any too slim last year when she *had* to do gym.”

The first penmanship took up the tale. “I had to forcibly push Patsy away. She’s gone in to dress now, so I’ll hurry and get this letter into an envelope and sealed before she gets back because I want to tell on her.

“You know Pat has always said she was a boy hater, and the more the boys from Wales Military Academy rushed her, the more she would shrug her shoulders and ‘pouff!’ about them, but she’s met her Waterloo. There’s a flying field near our camp and a boy named Harry Hulbert is there studying to be a pilot. Pat and I strolled over to the field one day and ever since she caught sight of that tall, slim chap all done up in his flying togs, she’s been wild to meet him. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s even hoping that his machine will crash some day right in front of our cabin so that she can bind up his wounds and—”

Once again the jerky, uneven writing seemed to exclaim, “Silly gilly! *That’s what* Polly is! It isn’t the flier, it’s the flying that *I’m* crazy about. I *do* wish I knew that Harry Hulbert, but not for any sentimental reasons, believe me. Pouff—for all of ’em! But fly I’m going to!! In truth, if you girls stay West until the end of vacation, you *may* see an airplane landing in your ghost town—me piloting!!!???”

Then came a wide space and when the writing began again, it was dated three

days later and was Polly's lazy scrawl. "It's to laugh!" she began. "But, to explain. If you wish hard enough for anything, it's *bound* to happen. Not that Harry Hulbert's plane crashed in front of our cabin but it was forced down when Patsy and I were out in her little green car far from human habitation. Of course we hadn't gone riding *just* because we *saw* that particular little silver plane practicing up in the air—oh, no—not at all!"

Patsy's jerky scribble interrupted. "She's a mean, horrid, misrepresenting person, Polly Perkins is! She knows perfectly well we *had* to go to the village to get a pound of butter for our camp mother, and wasn't it only *polite* for us to give that poor stranded boy a lift? He *is* a real decent sort, even though the only thing *he's* crazy about is flying, but we *did* learn something about him. His father has some sort of a government position in Arizona, where *you* are, no less. I mean, in the same state, and when Harry gets his pilot's license, he is to be a flying scout, he told us. He said it will be an awfully exciting life. When there has been a holdup out there on a stage or a train and the bandits leap on to their horses and flee across the border, Harry is to pursue them in his little silver plane and see where they go. Then he'll circle back to where a posse is waiting, notify them, and so the bandits will be captured. Won't that be simply too thrilling for words? Oh, *why* wasn't I born a boy? I could have been Patrick, then, instead of Patsy. Believe me, when Harry Hulbert gets his license, and it won't be long now—he's *that* good—don't I wish I could be a stowaway in his plane! We'd have to leave Polly here though. She's so heavy, the plane wouldn't be able to get off of the ground."

The lazy scrawl concluded the epistle. "If Patsy goes West, so do I, but I'll go by train. I have no romantic urge to take to the air with slim, goggle-eyed young men with a purpose in life.

"Our camp mother (nice Mrs. Higgins, Jane's aunt, came with us this year) is calling us to lunch, and right after that Pat and I are going to town to mail this. Pat wants me to say that when *her* friend Mister Harry Hulbert *does* fly West, she'll give him a letter of introduction to you two and I calls that right generous of her considering—"

"Pouff!" came a brief interruption. Then "Goodbye. We're signing off. Patsy Ordelle and Polly Perkins of the famous Sunnybank Seminary Quadralettes."

"What a jolly letter!" Mary said. "Wouldn't it be fun if the missing members of

our little clan could be here with us. Patsy is as wild about mystery stories as you are and this ghost town just teems with them.”

A rich, musical voice drifted up from the back porch, “Señoritas!”

“Oh, good! There’s Carmelita calling us to supper, and *am I hungry?*” Dora tossed the letter on the dresser and slipping an arm about her friend, she gave her a little impulsive hug.

“I don’t envy Pat and Poll, not the least little mite,” she said as they went down the broad front stairway together. “It is lovely at Camp Winnichook as we well know, since we’ve been there with them the past three summers, but the desert has a lure for me that the little blue lake in the mountains never did have.”

“I know,” Mary agreed. “Those mountains are more like pretty hills. There’s nothing grim or grand about them.”

They entered a large, pleasant kitchen, in one corner of which, between two windows, was a table spread with a red cloth. A good-looking middle-aged Mexican woman, dressed in bright colors, stood at the stove preparing to dish up their meal. “*Buenos dias, niñas,*” she said in her deep, musical voice.

“Good evening, Carmelita,” the girls replied, and then, when they had been served generous portions of the Americanized Mexican dish which the girls called “tamale pie,” Dora flashed at the smiling cook a pleased glance as she said, “*Muchas gracias, Señora.*”

Then to Mary, “It doesn’t take long to use up all the Spanish I know. Let’s take a vow that when we go back to Sunnybank Seminary next fall we will add Spanish to—” A wistful expression in her friend’s face caused Dora to pause and exclaim in real alarm, “Mary Moore, do you think, because of your dad, that you *won’t* be able to go back East to school? You have only one year more before you graduate. You know how we four of ‘The Quadralettes’ have counted on graduating together.”

Mary smiled brightly. “Of course, I expect to go and take Dad with me.” Her momentary wistful doubting had passed.

They had finished their supper and were rising when Carmelita, who had been out on the back porch, hurried in and began a rapid chattering in her own

language. The mystified girls could not understand one word. But, as the Mexican woman kept pointing out toward the road, they felt sure that someone was coming toward the house, nor were they wrong.

CHAPTER IV

“DESPERATE DICK”

Skipping to the vine-covered back porch, the two girls peered through the deepening dusk at the approaching car. In it were two boys.

“One of them resembles Jerry,” Mary said, “but the other one is also a cowboy, so it can’t be Dick.”

“It is Dick!” Dora exclaimed gleefully. “Jerry must have loaned him some cowboy togs.”

“Oh, Happy Days!” Mary exulted. “Now we can ask Jerry about that Evil Eye Turquoise and all the rest of the story about poor Mr. Lucky Loon.”

“If there is any rest to it,” Dora remarked. “Look!” she interrupted herself to point laughingly at the little car that was rattling toward them. “Dick is waving his sombrero. He wants us to be sure and take notice of it!”

“Isn’t he proud though?” Mary chuckled. “His face fairly shines.”

Then, as the small car drew up near the porch, the girls clapped their hands gaily, and yet quietly, remembering that Mary’s invalid father might be asleep.

“Oh, Dick,” Dora exclaimed, not trying to hide her admiration, “your mother must see her to-be-physician son. You make a regular screen-star cowboy, doesn’t he, Mary?”

Before the other girl could reply, Dick, who had leaped to the ground, struck a ridiculous pose as he said in a deep, dramatic voice, “Dick, the Desperate Range Rider.”

Dora's infectious laugh rang out. "Your big, dark eyes look so solemn through those shell-rimmed glasses, Mr. Desperate Dick, that somehow you fail to strike terror into our hearts," she bantered.

Then Mary smiled up at Jerry, who was standing near her. Half teasingly she asked, "To what do we owe the honor of this visit? When we parted this afternoon, you called 'we'll see you tomorrow.'"

Jerry glanced at the other boy, mischievous twinkles in his gray eyes. "You might as well 'fess up, old man. Truth is, Dick couldn't wait until tomorrow to let you girls admire him in his cowboy togs."

"Villain!" Dick tried to glower at his betraying friend, but ended by beaming upon him with a most friendly grin. "I suppose I *had* to *rope* you and drag you over here quite against your will."

Jerry's smile at the curly-headed little girl at his side revealed, more than words, the real reason of his coming. What he said was, "Mom had a letter she wanted mailed and—er—as long as Dick wanted to show off, I reckoned—"

"Oh, Jerry," Mary caught his arm, "it really doesn't matter in the least *why* you came. I was wild to see you—" then, when the tall cowboy began to glow with pride, Mary quite spoiled her compliment by hurrying to add, "Oh, it wasn't *you* that I wanted to see." Jerry pretended to be greatly crestfallen, so she laughingly added, "Of course I'm *always* glad to see you, Big Brother, but—"

"Goodness!" Dora rushed to her friend's rescue. "You're getting all tangled up." Then to Jerry, "Mary and I are wild to know more about that awfully desolate stone house you showed us this afternoon and about the Evil Eye Turquoise—"

"Yes, and about poor Mr. Lucky Loon—" Mary put in.

"Rather a contradictory description, isn't it?" Dick asked. "How can a man be poor and lucky all in one sentence?"

"I'll tell you what." Jerry had a plan to suggest. "Let's go down to the store and get old Silas Harvey to tell us all that he knows about Lucky Loon. I reckon he'd loosen up for you girls, but he never would for me. He knows more than any other living person about that rock house and the mystery of Sven Pedersen's life —"

“Oh, good!” Mary’s animated face was lovely to look upon in the starlight. Jerry’s eyes would have told her so, had she read them aright, but her thoughts were not of herself.

“Let’s walk down,” she suggested. “It’s such a lovely night.” Then she added, “Wait here while Dora and I go up to our room and put on our sweater coats.”

“You’ll need them!” Dick commented. “Even in June these desert nights are nippy.”

The girls, hand in hand, fairly danced through the wide lower hall, but so softly that no sound could penetrate the closed door beyond which Mary’s father slept.

They did not need to light the kerosene lamp. The two long door-like windows in Mary’s room were letting in a flood of soft, silvery starlight. Dora found her flash and her jaunty green sweater coat. “It looks better with this cherry-colored dress than my pink one,” she chattered, “and your yellow coat looks too sweet for anything with that blue dress. Happy Days, but doesn’t Jerry think you’re too pretty to be real? His eyes almost eat you up—”

“Silly!” Mary retorted. “It’s utterly impossible for Jerry and me to fall in love with each other. Goodness, didn’t we play together when we were babies?” Her tone seemed to imply that no more could possibly be said upon the subject.

“No one is so blind as he who will not see,” Dora sing-songed her trite quotation, then, fearing that Mary would not like so much teasing, she slipped a loving arm about her and gave her a little contrite hug. “I’ll promise to join the blind hereafter, if you think I’m seeing too much, Mary dear,” she promised.

“I think you’re *imagining* too much,” was the laughing rejoinder. “Now, let’s tiptoe downstairs, and oh, I must tap at the sitting-room door and tell nice Mrs. Farley where we are going.”

Just before Mary tapped, however, the door opened softly and Dick appeared, his mother closely following, her rather tired brown eyes adoring him. “Haven’t I the nicest cowboy son?” she asked the girls, glancing from one to the other impartially.

It was Dora who replied, “We think so, Mrs. Farley.”

“However,” the mother leaned forward to kiss the boy’s pale cheek, “I’ll not be entirely satisfied until you’re as brown as Jerry.”

“Has Dick told you that we girls are going?—” Mary began.

Mrs. Farley nodded pleasantly. “Down to the post office? Yes, I hope you’ll find that ancient storekeeper in a garrulous mood. Good night!”

Jerry was seated on the top step of the back porch waiting for them. They caught a dreamy far-away expression in his gray eyes. He was looking across the shimmering distance to the Chiricahua Mountains, and thinking of the time when he would build, on his own five hundred acres, a home for someone. He glanced up almost guiltily when Mary’s finger tips gave him a light caress on his sun-tanned cheek.

“Brother Jerry,” she teased, “are you star-dreaming?”

He sprang to his feet. “I reckon I was dreaming, sure enough, Little Sister,” he confessed.

Mary slipped her slim, white hand under his khaki-covered arm, and, smiling up at him with frank friendship, she said, “The road down the hill is so rough and hobbly, I’m going to hang on to you, may I?”

Dora did not hear the cowboy’s low spoken reply, for Dick was speaking to her, but to herself she thought, “Some day a miracle will be performed and she who is now blind will see, and great will be the revelation.” Then, self-rebuking and aloud, “Oh, Dick, forgive me, what were you saying? I reckon, as Jerry says, that I was thinking of something else.”

“Not very complimentary to your present companion.” Dick pretended to be quite downcast about it. “I merely asked if I might aid you over the ruts—”

Dora laughed gleefully. “Dick,” she said in a low voice, “I’m going to tell you what I was thinking. I was wondering why Mary doesn’t notice that Jerry likes her extra-special.” Dick’s eyes were wide in the starlight. “Does he? I hadn’t noticed it.”

Dora laughed and changed the subject. “Oh, Dick, isn’t this the shudderin’est, spookiest place there ever was?”

They had passed the three small adobe huts that were occupied by Mexican families and were among the old crumbling houses, which, in the dim light, looked more haunted than they had in the day.

“I suppose that each one holds memories of sudden riches won, and many of them have secrets of tragedies,—*murders* even, maybe.” Dora shuddered and drew closer to Dick.

“You *are* imaginative tonight,” he said, smiling at her startled, olive-tinted face. “It’s quite a leap, though, from romance to gunfights and—”

Mary turned to call back to them, “Jerry and I have it all planned, just what we are to do. I’m to ask some innocent question and, Dora, you’re to help me out, but we mustn’t appear *too* interested or too prying, Jerry says, or for some reason, quite unknown, old Mr. Harvey will put on the clam act. Shh! Here we are! Good, there’s a light. Now Jerry is to speak his piece first and I am to chime in. Then, Dora, you take your cue from me.”

Dick whispered close to his companion’s ear, “I evidently haven’t a speaking part in the tragedy or comedy about to be enacted.”

Dora giggled. “You can be scenery,” she teased, recalling to Dick the forgotten fact that he was wearing a cowboy outfit for the first time and feeling rather awkward in it.

Jerry opened the door, a jangling bell rang; then he stepped aside and let Mary enter first.

CHAPTER V

POOR LITTLE BODIL

Old Mr. Harvey was dozing in a tilted armchair close to his stove. He sat up with a start when his discordant-toned bell rang, and blinked into the half-darkness near the door. The smoked chimney on his hanging kerosene lamp in the middle of the room and near the ceiling did little to illumine the place. When he saw who his visitors were, he gave his queer cackling laugh, "Wall, I'll be dinged ef I wa'n't a dreamin' I was back in holdup days and that some of them thar bandits was bustin' in to clean out my stock." Then, as he rose, almost creakingly, he said, disparagingly, as he glanced about at the dust and cobweb-covered shelves, "Not as how they'd find onythin' *now* worth the totin' away."

Having, by that time, gone around back of his long counter, he peered through misty spectacles at Mary. "Is thar suthin' I could be gettin' fer yo', Little Miss?" he asked.

Jerry stepped forward and placed a half dollar on the counter. "Stamps, please, Mr. Harvey," he said. "I reckon that's all we're wanting tonight, thanks."

The cowboy put the stamps in his pocket, dropped his mother's letter in a slot, and turned, as though he were about to leave, but Mary detained him with:

"Oh, Jerry, you don't have to hurry away, do you? I thought," her sweet appealing smile turned toward the old man, "that perhaps Mr. Harvey might be willing to tell us a story if we stayed awhile."

"Sho' as shootin'!" the unkempt old man seemed pleased indeed to walk into Mary's trap. "Yo' set here, Little Miss." It was his own chair by the stove he was offering.

“No, indeed!” Mary protested. “That one just fits you. Jerry and Dick are bringing some in from the porch.”

The boys sat on the counter. The girls, trying to hide triumphant smiles, drew their chairs close to the stove. Old Mr. Harvey put in another stick. Then, chewing on an end of gray whisker, he peered over his glasses at Mary a moment, before asking, “Was thar anythin’ special yo’ wanted to hear tell about?”

Mary leaned forward, her pretty face animated: “Oh, yes, Mr. Harvey. This afternoon Dora and I saw that small stone house that’s built so it’s almost hidden on a cliff of the mountains. Can you tell us anything about the man who built it; *why* he did it and what became of him?”

The old man’s shaggy brows drew together thoughtfully. He seemed to hesitate. Mary glanced at Dora, who said with eager interest, “Oh, *that would* be a thrilling story, I’m sure. I’d just love to hear it.”

Wisely the boys, who were not in the line of the old man’s vision, said nothing. In fact, he seemed to have forgotten their presence.

The storekeeper was silent for so long, staring straight ahead of him at the stove, that the girls thought they, also, had been forgotten. Then suddenly he looked up and smiled toothlessly at Mary, nodding his grizzly head many times before he spoke.

“Wall,” he said at last, almost as though he were speaking to an unseen presence, “I reckon Sven Pedersen wouldn’t want to hold me to secrecy no longer—thirty year back ’tis, sence he—” suddenly he paused and held up a bony, shaky hand. “You didn’t hear no gun shot, did you?”

The girls had heard nothing. They glanced almost fearfully up at the boys. Jerry shook his head and put a finger to his lips.

The girls understood that he thought it wise that the old man continue to forget their presence.

“Wall, I reckon the wind’s risin’ an’ suthin’ loose banged. Thar’s plenty loose, that’s sartin.” Then, turning rather blankly toward Mary, he asked in a child-like manner, “What was we talkin’ about?”

Mary drew her chair closer and smiled confidingly at him. “You were going to tell us, Mr. Harvey, *why* Mr. Pedersen built that rock house and—”

“Sho’! Sho’! So I was. It was forty year last Christmas he come to Gleeson. A tall, skinny fellar he was, not so very old nor so young neither. It was an awful blizzardy night an’ thar wa’n’t nobody at all out in the streets. I was jest reckonin’ as how I’d turn in, when the door bust open an’ the wind tore things offen the shelves. I had to help get it shet. Then I looked at what had blown in. He looked like a fellar that was most starved an’ more’n half crazy. His palish blue eyes was wild. I sot him down in this here chair by the fire an’ staked him to some hot grub. I’d seen half-starved critters eat. He snapped at the grub jest that-a-way. When he’d et till I reckoned as how he’d bust, he sank down in that chair an’ dod blast it, ef he didn’t start snorin’, an’ he hadn’t sed nothin’, nohow. Wall, I seen as how he wa’n’t goin’ to wake, so I lay down on my bunk wi’ my clothes on, sort o’ sleepin’ wi’ one eye open, not knowin’ what sort of a loon I was givin’ shelter to.

“The blizzard kep’ on all the next day an’ the next. Not a gol-darned soul come to the store, so me’n’ and him had plenty o’ time to get to knowin’ each other.

“Arter he’d drunk some hot coffee, he unloosed his tongue, though what he sed was so half-forrin, I wa’n’t quick to cotch onto his meanin’s.

“The heft o’ his yarn was like this. He an’ his little sister, Bodil, he named her, had come from Denmark to New York. Thar he’d picked up some o’ Ameriky’s way o’ talking, an’ enuf money to git West. Some Danish fellar had tol’ him about these here rich-quick mines, so he’d took a stage an’ fetched Bodil.”

The old man paused, and Mary, leaning forward, put her hand on his arm. “Oh, Mr. Harvey, tell us about that little girl. How old was she and what happened to her?”

The old man’s head shook sadly. “Bad enuf things happened to her, I reckon. She must o’ been a purty little critter. Chiny blue eyes, Sven Pedersen sed she had, an’ hair like yellar cornsilk when it fust comes out. She was the apple o’ his eye. The only livin’ thing he keered for. I sho’ was plumb sorry fer him.”

“But *do* tell us what happened to her?” Mary urged, fearing that the old man’s thought was wandering.

“Wall, ’pears like the stage was held up on a mount’in road nigh here; the wust road in the country hereabouts. Thar wa’n’t no passengers but Sven Pedersen an’ Little Bodil; the long journey bein’ about to an end. That thar blizzard was a threatenin’ an’ the stage driver was hurryin’ his hosses, hopin’ to get over the mountain afore it struck, when up rode three men. One of ’em shot the driver, another of ’em dragged out a bag of gold ore; then they fired over the hosses’ heads. Skeered and rarin’, them hosses plunged over the cliff, an’ down that stage crashed into the wust gulch thar is in these here parts.

“Sven saw his little sister throwed out into the road. Then, as the stage keeled over, he jumped an’ cotched onto some scrub tree growin’ out o’ the cliff. It tuk him a long spell to climb back to the road. He was loony wild wi’ worryin’ about Little Bodil. He ran to whar he’d seen her throwed out. *She wa’n’t thar*. He hunted an’ called, but thar wa’n’t no answer. Then he reckoned as how that thar third bandit had whirled back an’ carried her off.”

“Oh, Mr. Harvey, how terrible!” There were tears in Mary’s eyes. “Wasn’t she ever found?”

The old man shook his head sadly. “Sven Pedersen follered them bandits afoot all night an’ nex’ day but they was a horseback an’ he couldn’t even get sight o’ them. Then the blizzard struck an’ he staggered in here, bein’ as he saw my light. Arter that he went prospectin’ all around these here mount’ins an’ he struck it rich. That cliff, whar he built him a rock house, was one of his claims.”

“I suppose he never stopped hunting for poor Little Bodil.” Mary’s voice was tender with sympathy.

“Yo’ reckon right, little gal. Whenever Sven Pedersen heerd tell of a holdup anywhar in the state, he’d join the posse that was huntin’ ’em but it warn’t no use, nohow. Bodil was plumb gone. Sven Pedersen never made no friend but me. His palish blue eyes allays kept that wild look, an’, as time went on an’ he piled up gold an’ turquoise, he got to be dubbed ‘Lucky Loon.’”

The old man paused and started to nod his shaggy gray head so many times that Dora, fearing he would nod himself to sleep, asked, “Mr. Harvey, *what* was his Evil Eye Turquoise?”

“Hey?” The old man glanced up suspiciously. “So yo’d heerd tell about *that*.” Then he cackled his queer, cracked laugh. “I heerd about it, but I’d allays

reckoned thar wa'n't no sech thing. I cal'lated Sven Pedersen made up that thar yarn to keep folks from climbin' up ter his rock house an' stealin' his gold an' turquoise, if be that's whar he kept it. I reckon as how that's the heft o' *that* yarn an' yet, I dunno, I dunno. Mabbe thar was suthin' to it. Mabbe thar was."

"Oh, Mr. Harvey, we'd like awfully well to hear the story whether it's true or not, unless," Mary said solicitously, "unless you're too sleepy to tell it."

The old man sat up and opened his eyes wide. "Sleepy, *me* sleepy? Never was waked up more! Wall, this here is the heft of that tale."

CHAPTER VI

THE EVIL-EYE TURQUOISE

The old man continued:

“Sven Pedersen hisself never tol’ me nothin’ about that Evil Eye Turquoise o’ his’n. *That’s* why I cal’late it was a yarn he used to skeer off onweloome visitors to his rock house, bein’ as thar was spells when he was away fer days, huntin’ fer Bodil.

“I heerd it was a big eye-shaped rock with a round center that was more green than it was blue. Hangers-on in the store here used to spec’late ’bout it. Some reckoned, ef ’twas true that Sven *had* found a green-blue turquoise big as a coffee cup, it’d be wurth a lot o’ money, but I dunno, I dunno!”

Dora recalled Mr. Harvey’s wandering thoughts by asking, “It must have been very beautiful, but *why* was it called ‘Evil Eye?’”

The old man shook his head. “Thar was folks who’d believe onythin’ in them days,” he said. “I reckon thar still is. Superstitious, yo’d call it, so, when Sven Pedersen tol’ yarns ’bout that green-blue eye o’ his’n, thar was them as swallowed ’em whole.”

“Tell us one of the yarns,” Mary urged.

“Wall, Lucky Loon tol’ ’round at the camps, as how he’d put that thar turquoise eye into the inside wall o’ his house jest whar it could keep watchin’ the door, an’ ef anyone tried to climb in, that thar eye’d *see* ’em!”

“But what if it did,” Dora laughed. “Was there ever anyone superstitious enough to believe that the eye could *hurt* them?”

The old man nodded, looking at her solemnly. "Sven Pedersen tol' 'round that 'twas a demon eye, an' that whatever it looked at, 'ceptin' hisself, 'd keel over paralyzed. Wall, mabbe it's hard to believe, but them miners, bad as some of 'em was, warn't takin' no chances till 'long come a tenderfoot fellar from the East. He heern the yarn, an' he luffed at the whule outfit of 'em. He opined as how he'd come West to get rich quick, an' he reckoned cleanin' out that rock house o' its gold an' turquoise'd be a sight easier than gettin' it out o' the earth wi' pick an' shovel. Yessir, that fellar did a power o' a lot o' boastin', but yo' kin better believe, 'twa'n't when Lucky Loon was in hearin'."

Dora glanced up at the two boys sitting so silently on the counter back of the old man. She saw that they were both listening with interest. The story was evidently as new to Jerry as to the others. Dick motioned to Dora to ask another question as the old man had paused.

"Oh, Mr. Harvey," she leaned forward to ask, "did that bragging boy actually try to rob Mr. Pedersen?"

"He sure sartin did," the storekeeper replied. "He watched over the rocks o' nights till he'd seen Lucky Loon ridin' off, and, jedging by the pack he was totin', that fellar cal'lated he was goin' on one of them long rides he took, off'n' on, hunting for Bodil. Wall, arter a time, he climbed up, draggin' a bag he'd tuk along to put the gold in. He peered into the rock house door an' *thar* was that eye, jest as Sven had said, in the wall opposite, an' it was glarin' green like a cat's eye in the dark."

The old man stopped talking and swayed his shaggy head back and forth for a long minute before he satisfied his listeners' curiosity. Dora found herself clutching Mary's hand but neither of them spoke.

"The nex' day," the old man continued, "cowboys ridin' out on the road heerd screamin'. Then it stopped an' they couldn't place it nohow. Arter a time they heerd it agin. Thinkin' as how Lucky Loon was hurt mabbe, they rode in through his gate an' found that young tenderfoot fellar writhin' around at the foot o' the cliff. He was paralyzed, sure sartin, an' arter he'd tol' about seein' that *thar* turquoise eye, he give up the ghost. *That* much is true. They fetched the tenderfoot fellar in here to my store an' I seen the wild, skeered look in his eyes. Wall, arter that, Sven Pedersen didn't have no more need to worry about his house bein' robbed."

“Oh-o-o! I should think not.” Mary shuddered, then she glanced at her wrist watch, thinking that they ought to go. Nine o’clock, and Mr. Harvey’s store was always dark before that. They were keeping him up, but before she could suggest leaving, she heard Dora asking still another question.

“Mr. Harvey, when did poor Mr. Lucky Loon die?”

There was actually a startled expression in the deeply sunken eyes of the old man. He turned in his chair and looked up at Jerry. After all, he had *not* forgotten the boys. In an awed voice he asked: “Jerry, did yo’ ever hear tell how old Sven Pedersen give up the ghost?”

The tall cowboy shook his head. “No, Mr. Harvey. I’ve asked Dad but he said it was a mystery that he reckoned never would be solved.”

“It wa’n’t never any mystery to *me*,” the old man told them, “but I’d been swore to secrecy. Sven Pedersen said he’d come back an’ hant my store if I ever tol’, but I reckon thar’s no sech thing as hants. Anyhow I ain’t never *seen a* ghost, though thar *is* folks as calls this here town hanted.”

Mary turned startled eyes around to question Jerry. That boy said seriously, “Mr. Harvey, we’d like awfully well to know what happened to Mr. Pedersen, but we wouldn’t want your store to be haunted if you believe—”

“I *don*’ believe nothin’ o’ the sort.” The old man seemed to scorn the inference. Turning, he beckoned to the boys. “Stan’ up close, sort o’. I won’t tell it loud; than mabbe it won’t be heern by nobody but you-uns.”

Jerry stood close back of Mary’s chair. Dick sat on his heels next to Dora. The wind that had rattled loose boards had gone down. Not a sound was to be heard. The fire in the stove had burned to ashes. The room was getting cold but the girls did not notice. With wide, almost startled eyes they were watching the old man who was again chewing on an end of his gray beard.

Suddenly he cupped an ear with one palsied hand and seemed to be listening intently. Mary clutched Dora’s arm. She expected the old man to ask them if they heard a gun shot, but he didn’t. He dropped his arm and commenced in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Fer the las’ year o’ his life, Sven Pedersen give up minin’. He reckoned as how

he'd never find his sister an' he'd jest been pilin' up wealth to give to her, he sed. He used to spec'late about poor Bodil a lot. She'd be a young woman now, he'd say, sad like, *if* them bandits let her live. Then thar was times when he'd hope she'd died ruther than be fetched up by robbers. He didn't talk much about anythin' else. Folks never knew whar he went to do his buyin'; thot as how he'd go off to Bisbee, but 'twa'n't so. He come here arter midnight so's not to be seen. He tol' me if, chance be, Bodil was alive an' showed up arter he was dead, he wanted her to have his gold. He writ a letter in that furrin tongue o' his an' give it to me. I got it yit. In it he tol' Bodil *whar* he'd got his fortin hid." The old man paused and blinked his eyes hard.

Mary asked softly, "But she never came, did she, Mr. Harvey? That poor Little Bodil with the china-blue eyes and the corn-silk hair."

"No, she never come, an' I cal'late she never will. Lucky Loon didn't reckon she would, really, but he hung on till he felt death comin'. Then he tol' me what he was a plannin' to do to hisself." The old man glanced anxiously at Jerry, who stood with his hands on Mary's shoulders. "It's a mighty gruesome story, the rest o' it, Jerry lad. Do you reckon it'd better be tol'?"

It was Dora who replied, "Oh, *please*, Mr. Harvey! We girls aren't a mite scary. It's only a story to us, you know. It all happened so long ago."

"Wall, as I was sayin', Sven Pedersen knew he hadn't long to live, so one night thar was a blizzard threatenin'—an' it turned into as bad a one as when he furst blowed into my store years back. Whar was I?" He looked blankly at Mary who prompted with, "So one night when he felt that he was soon to die—"

"Sven come to me an' swore me to keep it secret what he was goin' to do. He sed that back of his house an' opening into it, he had a vault. He'd jest left room for hisself to creep into it. Then he was goin' to wall it up, an' lay hisself down an' die."

"Oh, how terrible!" Dora exclaimed. "Surely he didn't *do* that?"

The old man sighed. "Fur as I know he did. I seen as how he was white as a ghost an' coughin' suthin' awful. I tol' him to stay at the store till the blizzard blew over. It commonly lasted three days, but out he went an' I never seen him sence."

“Poor Lucky Loon!” Mary said commiseratingly.

“An’ poor Little Bodil,” Dora began, when she glanced at the old man who had suddenly sat erect, staring into a dark corner.

“Oh, Mr. Harvey,” Mary whispered, “*do* you see that ghost?”

They all looked and saw a flickering light. Then Jerry, glancing up at the hanging lamp, saw that the kerosene had burned out. One more flicker and the store was in darkness. Mary screamed and clung to Jerry, but Dora, remembering her flash, turned it on.

Dick, matter-of-factly, glanced about, saw the oil can, pulled down the lamp, refilled it, and relighted it.

“Thank ye! Thank ye!” the old man said. “I reckon that’s about all thar is to hants anyhow. I never had no reason to believe in ghosts an’ ain’t a-goin’ to start in now. Wall, must yo’ be goin’? Drop in tomorrer an’ ef I kin find it, I’ll show yo’ that yellar ol’ letter Lucky Loon left fer his gal.”

CHAPTER VII

MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

It was midnight when Mary Moore awoke with a start and sat up, staring about her wild-eyed. "Where am I? Where am I?" her terrorized cry, low though it was, wakened Dora, who, sitting up, caught her friend in a close embrace.

"Mary," she whispered reassuringly, "Mary, you're here with me. We're in bed in your very own room. Did you have a nightmare?"

In the dim starlight, Dora saw how pale and startled was the face of her friend. Mary's big blue eyes looked about the room wildly as though she expected to see someone lurking in the dark corners.

"There's no one here," Dora assured her. "See, I'll prove it to you." She reached for her flash which she had left on a small table near her head. The round disc of light danced from corner to corner of the dark room. The pale blue muslin curtains, waving in the breeze at open windows, *looked* like ghosts, perhaps but Mary knew what they were. Still she was not satisfied.

"Dora," she whispered, clinging to her friend's arm, "are you sure the window at the top of the outside stairway is locked? Terribly sure?"

"Of course. I locked it the last thing, but I'll get up and see." Dora slipped out of bed and crossed the room. The long door-like window was securely fastened. The other two windows were open at the top only. No one could possibly have entered that way.

"Try the hall door," Mary pleaded, "and would you mind, awfully, if I asked you to look in the clothes closet?"

Dora had no sense of fear as she was convinced that Mary had been dreaming some wild thing, and she didn't much wonder, after the gruesome story they had heard the night before.

"Now, are you satisfied?" Dora climbed back into bed and replaced the flash on the table.

"I suppose I am." Mary permitted herself to be covered again with the downy blue quilt. "But it did seem so terribly real, and yet, now that I come to think, it didn't have anything at all to do with this room. We were in some bleak place I had never seen before. It was the queerest dream, Dora. In the beginning you and I went out all alone for a horseback ride. The road looked familiar enough. It was just like the road from Gleeson down to the Douglas valley highway. We were cantering along, oh, just as we have lots of times, when suddenly the scene changed—you know the way it does in dreams—and we were in the wildest kind of a mountain country. It was terrifyingly lonely. We couldn't see anything but bleak, grim mountain ranges rising about us for miles and miles around. Some of them were so high the peaks were white with snow. I remember one peak especially. It looked like a huge woman ghost with two smaller peaks, like children ghosts, clinging to her hands.

"The sand was unearthly white and covered with human skeletons as though there had been a battle once long ago. We rode around wildly trying to find an opening so that we could escape. Then a terribly uncanny thing happened. One of those skeletons rose up right ahead of us and pointed directly toward that mountain with the three ghost-like snow-covered peaks. But our horses wouldn't go that way, they were terrorized when they saw that hollow-eyed skeleton, waving his bony arms in front of them. They reared—then whirled around and galloped so fast we were both of us thrown off and *that's* when I woke up."

"Gracious goodness," Dora exclaimed with a shudder. "That *was* a nightmare! For cricket's sakes, let's talk about something pleasant so that when you go to sleep again, you won't have another such *awful* dream. Now, let me see, *what* shall we talk about?"

"Do you know, Dora," Mary's voice was tense with emotion, "I keep wondering and wondering about that poor Little Bodil. If she were carried off by a robber, *what* do you suppose he would do with her?"

“Well, it all depends on what kind of a bandit he was,” Dora said matter-of-factly. “If he were a good robber like Robin Hood, he would have sent her away to a boarding-school somewhere to be educated, since she was only ten years old. Then he would have reformed, and when she was sixteen and very beautiful with her china-blue eyes and corn-silk-yellow hair, he would have married her.”

“How I do hope something like that *did* happen.” Mary’s voice sounded more natural, the tenseness and terror were gone, so Dora kept on, “I think they probably bought a ranch in—er—some beautiful valley in Mexico, or some remote place where Robin Hood wouldn’t be known and lived happily ever after.”

“I wonder if they had any children.” Mary spoke as though she really believed that Dora was unraveling the mystery. “If they had a boy and a girl, suppose, they would be our age since poor Bodil would be about fifty years old now.”

Dora laughed. “Well, we probably never will know what became of that poor little Danish girl so we might as well accept my theory as any other. Let’s try to sleep now.”

Mary was silent for several moments, and Dora was just deciding that her services as a pacifier were over and that she might try to go to sleep herself, when Mary whispered, “Dodo, do *you* believe that story about the Evil Eye Turquoise?”

Dora sighed softly. Here was another subject with scary possibilities. “Well, not exactly,” she acknowledged. “I don’t doubt but that the thieving tenderfoot *did* fall over the cliff and *was* paralyzed, because he hit his head against a rock or something, but I think it was his own fear of the Evil Eye Turquoise which made him fall and not any demon power the eye really had.”

“Of course, that *does* seem sensible,” Mary agreed. Again she was quiet and this time Dora was really dozing when she heard in a shuddery voice, “Oh-oo, Dora, I do try awfully hard to keep from thinking of that poor Sven Pedersen after he’d walled himself into his tomb and lay down to die. What if he lived a long time. I’ve read about people being buried alive and—”

“Blue Moons, Mary! What awful things you do think about!” Dora was a bit provoked. She was really sleepy, and thought she had earned a good rest for the remaining hours of the night. “Lots of animals creep away into far corners of

dark caves when they know they're going to die. That's better than lying around helpless somewhere, and have wolves tearing you to pieces or vultures swirling around over you, dropping lower and lower, waiting for you to take your last breath. For my part, I think Sven Pedersen did a very sensible thing. In that way he was sure of a decent burial. Now, Mary dear, much as I love you, if you so much as peep again tonight, I'm going to take my pillow and go into the spare front bedroom and leave you all to your lonely."

"Hark! What was that noise? Didn't it sound to you like rattling bones?" Again Mary clutched her friend's arm.

Dora gave up. "Sort of," she agreed. "The wind is rising again." Then she made one more desperate effort to lead Mary's thoughts into pleasanter channels. "Wouldn't it be great fun if Polly and Patsy could come West while we're here?" she began. "I wonder how Jerry and Dick would like them."

"How could anyone *help* liking them? Our red-headed Pat is so pert and funny, while roly-poly Poll is so altogether lovable." Mary was actually smiling as she thought of their far away pals. Then suddenly she exclaimed, "Dora Bellman, that new friend of Pat's, Harry Hulbert, you know; he really and truly is coming West soon, isn't he?"

"Why, yes!" Dora was recalling what Pat had written. "Oh, Mary," she exclaimed with new interest, "when he is a scout, hunting for bandits and train robbers and—"

Mary sat up and seized her friend's arm. "I know what you're going to say," she put in gleefully. "This Harry Hulbert *may* be able to help solve the mystery of Bodil's disappearance. But that's too much to hope."

Dora laughingly agreed. "How wild one's imagination is in the middle of the night," she said.

"Middle of the night," Mary repeated as she looked out of the nearest window. "There's a dim light in the East and we haven't had half of our sleep out yet."

Long-suffering Dora thought, "That certainly isn't *my* fault." Aloud she said, "Well, let's make up for lost time."

She nestled down and Mary cuddled close. Sleepily she had the last word. "I

hope Harry Hulbert will come, and—and—Pat—”

At seven o'clock Carmelita's deep, musical voice called, but there was no answer. The two sound-asleep girls had not heard. At ten o'clock they were awakened by a low whistling below their open windows.

CHAPTER VIII

SINGING COWBOYS

“What was that?” Mary sat up in bed, blinked her eyes hard to get them open, then leaped out, and, keeping hidden, peeped down into the door yard. Near the back porch stood Jerry Newcomb’s dilapidated old car, gray with sand. Two cowboys stood beside it, evidently more intent upon an examination of the machinery under the hood than they were of the house. Although they were whistling, to attract attention, they pretended to be patiently waiting. Carmelita had informed Jerry that the girls still slept.

Mary pirouetted back into the room, her blue eyes dancing. “The boys are going to take us somewhere, I’m just *ever* so sure,” she told the girl, who, sitting on the side of the bed, was sleepily yawning.

“Goodness, *why* did they come so early?” Dora asked drowsily.

“Early!” Mary laughed at her and pointed at the little blue clock on the curly maple dresser. “Dora Bellman, did you ever sleep so late before in all your life?”

“Yeah.” Dora seemed provokingly indifferent to the fact that the boys waited below, and that, perhaps, oh, ever so much more than likely, they were going adventuring. “Once, you remember that time after a school dance when the boys from the Wales Military Academy—”

Mary skipped over to the bedside and pulled her friend to her feet. “Oh, *please* do hurry!” she begged. “I feel in my bones that the boys are going somewhere to try to solve the mystery and that they want to take us with them.”

Dora’s dark eyes stared stupidly, or tried hard to give that impression. “What mystery?” she asked, indifferently, as she began to dress.

“I refuse to answer.” Mary was peering into the long oval mirror brushing her short golden curls. Her lovely face was aglow with eager interest. “There is only *one* mystery that we are curious about as you know perfectly well and that is what became of poor Little Bodil Pedersen.”

Although Mary was looking at it, she was not even conscious of her own fair reflection. She glanced in the mirror, back at her friend, and saw her grinning in wicked glee.

Whirling, brush in hand, Mary demanded, “What *is* so funny, Dora? You aren’t acting a bit natural this morning. What made you grin that way?”

“I just happened to think of something. Oh, maybe it isn’t so awfully funny, but it’s sort of uncanny at that. I was thinking that, pretty as *you* are on the outside, you’ve got a hollow, staring-eyed skeleton inside of you and that if I had X-ray eyes—”

Mary, with a horrified glance at her teasing friend, stuffed her fingers into her ears. “You’re terrible!” She shuddered.

Dora contritely caught Mary’s hands and drew them down.

“Belovedest,” she exclaimed, “I’m just as thrilled as you are at the prospect of going buggy riding with two nice cowboys whether we find poor Little lost Bodil (who is probably a fat old woman now) or solve any other mystery that may be lying around loose.”

Mary was still pouting. “It doesn’t sound a bit like you to pretend—”

Dora rushed in with, “*That’s* all it is, believe me! There, now I’m dressed, all but topping off. What do you think we’d better wear?”

“Let’s put on our kimonas until we find out where we’re going, then we’ll know better *what* to wear. Jerry may have an errand over in Douglas and, if so, we’d want to dress up.”

Mary’s Japanese kimona was one of her treasures. It was heavy blue silk with flowers of gold trailing all over it. Dora’s laughing, olive-tinted face reflected a glow from her cherry-colored silk kimona with its border of white chrysanthemums.

Carmelita, who was in the act of reheating the breakfast for the girls, who she felt sure would soon be coming, stared at them open-eyed and mouthed when she saw them tripping through the kitchen.

In very uncertain Spanish they called “Good morning” to her, then burst upon the boys’ astonished vision.

Dick, snatching off his sombrero, held it to his heart while he made a deep bow. Jerry, bounding forward, caught Mary’s two small hands in his. Then he held her from him as he looked at her with the same reverent admiration that he would have given a rarely lovely picture.

“I don’t know a word of Japanese,” Dick despaired, “so how can I make my meaning clear?” His big, dark eyes smiled at Dora, who gaily retorted, “We didn’t know that our prize costumes would strike you boys dumb. If we had, we wouldn’t have worn them, would we, Mary?”

“I’ll say not,” that little maid replied. “We’re wild to know *why* you’ve come when you *should* be roping steers or mending fences, if that is what cowboys do in the middle of the morning.”

“Oh, we’re going to explain our presence all right. We made it up while we came along—” Dick began, when Jerry interrupted with, “You girls have heard range-ridin’ songs, I reckon, haven’t you?”

“Oh, no,” they said together.

“That is, not real ones,” Dora explained. “We’ve heard them in the talkies.”

“Well, this is a real one all right. Just fresh from the—er—” Dick glanced sideways at Jerry who began in a low sing-song voice:

“Two cowboys in the middle of the night,”

Dick joined in:

“Did their work and they did it right.
Come, come, coma,
Coma, coma, kee.
Coma, coma, coma,

Kee, kee, kee.”

“That,” said Dick with a flourish of the hand which still held his sombrero, “is why we have time to play today.”

The girls had been appreciative listeners. “Oh, isn’t there any more to it?” Dora cried “I thought cowboy songs went on and on; forty verses or more.”

“So they do!” Jerry agreed. “But I reckon *this* one is too new to be that long, but there is another verse,” he acknowledged.

Then in a rollicking way they sang:

“Two cowboys who were jolly and gay
Wished to go adventuring the next day.
Come, come, coma,
Coma, coma, kee.
Coma, coma, coma,
Kee, kee, kee.”

Then, acting out the words by a little strutting, they sang lustily:

“Two cowboys who were brave and bold
Took two girls in a rattletrap old.
Come, come, coma,
Coma, coma, kee.
And that’s *all* of it
If you’ll come with me.”

Dick bowed to Dora and Jerry beamed upon Mary.

“Oh, Happy Days! We’re keen to go,” Dora told them, “but *where?*”

The answer was another sing-song:

“The two cowboys were on mystery bent.
They went somewhere, but *you’ll* know where they went
If you’ll come, come, coma,
Come in our old ’bus,
Come, come, coma,

Come with us."

Carmelita, who had appeared in the kitchen door, started chattering in Spanish and Jerry laughingly translated, rather freely, and not quite as the truly deferential cook had intended. "Carmelita asks me to tell you girls that she has reheated your breakfast for the last time and that if you don't come in now and eat it, she's going to give it to the cat."

"Oho!" Mary pointed an accusing finger at him. "I *know* you are making it up. Carmelita wouldn't have said that, because there *is* no cat." Then graciously, she added, "Won't you singing cowboys come in and have a cup of coffee, if there is any?"

Jerry asked Carmelita if there was enough of a snack for two starved cowboys who had breakfasted at daybreak and that good-natured Mexican woman declared that there was batter enough to make stacks more cakes if Jerry wanted to fry them. *She* had butter to churn down in the cooling cellar.

Mary insisted that she be the one to fry the cakes, but Jerry and Dick insisted equally, that she should not, dressed up like a Japanese princess.

"Grease spatters wouldn't look well tangled up in that gold vine," Jerry told her.

With skill and despatch, Jerry flipped cakes and Dick served them. Then, while the girls went upstairs to don their hiking suits with the short divided skirts, the boys ate small mountains of the cakes.

"Verse five!" Dick mumbled with his mouth full.

"Two cowboys with a big appetite
They could eat flapjacks all day and all night.
Come, come, coma,
Coma, coma, kee.
Those cowboys, Jerry,
Are You and me."

Back of them a laughing voice chanted, "Verse six."

"Two cowgirls are ready for a lark.
Oho-ho, so let us embark.

Come, come, coma,
Coma, coma, kee.”

Dick and Jerry sprang up and joined the chorus with:

“We’ll coma, coma, coma
With glee, glee, glee.”

CHAPTER IX

A VAGABOND FAMILY

Jerry assisted Mary up onto the front seat without question, then slipped in under the wheel. Dora climbed nimbly to her customary place in the rumble. Dick leaped in beside her. His frank, friendly smile told his pleasure in her companionship.

Dora's happy smile, equally frank and friendly, preceded her eager question, "Where are we going, Dick? I'm bursting with curiosity. Of course I know it's some sort of a picnic." She nodded toward the covered hamper at their feet. "But, surely there's more to it than just a lark. You boys wouldn't have worked all night, if you really did, that you might just play today, would you?"

Dick leaned toward his companion and said in a low voice, "Shh! It's a dire secret! We are on a mysterious mission bent."

Dora laughed at his caution. "This car of Jerry's makes so many rattling noises, we could shout and not be heard. But do stop 'nonsensing,' as my grandfather used to say, and reveal all."

Dick sobered at once. "Well," he began, "it's this way. Last night, after we left you girls, Jerry was telling me about a family of poor squatters, as we'd call them back East. Some months ago they came from no one knows where, in an old rattletrap wagon drawn by a bony white horse. Jerry was riding fences near the highway when they passed. He said he never had seen such a forlorn looking outfit. The wagon was hung all over with pots and pans, a washtub, and, oh, you know, the absolute necessities of life. In the wagon, on the front seat, was a woman so thin and pale Jerry knew she must be almost dead with the white plague. She had a baby girl in her lap. The father, Jerry said, had a look in his

eyes that would haunt the hardest-hearted criminal. It was a gentle-desperate expression, if you get what I mean. Two boys about ten sat in the back of the wagon, hollow-eyed skeletons, covered with sickly yellow skin, while seated on a low chair in the wagon was an older girl staring straight ahead of her in a wild sort of a way.”

“The poor things!” Dora exclaimed when Dick paused. “What became of them?”

“Well, the outfit stopped near where Jerry was riding and the man hailed him. ‘Friend,’ he called, ‘is there anywhere we could get water for our horse? It’s most petered out.’

“Jerry told them that about a mile, straight ahead, they would find a side road leading toward the mountains. If they would turn there, they would come to a rushing stream. They could have all the water they wished. And then, Jerry said, feeling so terribly sorry for them, he added on an impulse, ‘There’s a herder’s shack close by. Stay all night in it if you want. It’s my father’s land and you’re welcome.’”

Dora turned an eager face toward the speaker. “Dick,” she said, “I believe I can tell you what happened next. That poor family stayed all night in that herder’s shack and they *never left*.”

Dick nodded. “Are you a mind reader?” he asked, his big, dark eyes smiling at her through the shell-rimmed glasses.

“No-o. I don’t believe that I am.” Then eagerly, “But *do* tell me what *possible* connection that poor family can have with this expedition of ours.”

“Isn’t that like a girl?” Dick teased. “You want to hear the last chapter, before you know what happened to lead up to it. I’ll return to the morning after. Jerry said he had thought of the family all the afternoon, and that night when he got home, he told his mother, who, as you know, has a heart of gold.”

“Oh, Dick!” Dora interrupted. “Gold may be precious, but it isn’t as tender and kind, always, as the heart of Jerry’s mother.”

“Be that as it may,” the boy continued, “Mrs. Newcomb packed a hamper—this very one now reposing at our feet, I suppose—with all manner of good things and she had Jerry harness up as soon as he’d eaten and take her to call on their

unexpected guests. They found the woman lying on the one mattress, coughing pitifully, and the others gazing at her, the little ones frightened, and huddled, the older girl on her knees rubbing her mother's hands. The father stood looking down with such despair in his eyes, Mrs. Newcomb said, as she had never before seen.

“‘There'd ought to be a doctor here,’ she said at once, but the woman on the mattress smiled up at her feebly and shook her head. ‘I'm going on now,’ she said in a low voice, ‘and I'd go on gladly,—I'm so tired—if I knew my children had a roof over their heads and—and—,’ then a fit of coughing came. When it passed, the woman lay looking up at Jerry's mother, her dim eyes pleading, and Mrs. Newcomb knelt beside her and took her almost lifeless hand and said, ‘Do not worry, dear friend, your children shall have a roof over their heads and food.’ Then the mother smiled at her loved ones, closed her eyes and went on.”

There were tears in Dora's eyes, and she frankly wiped them away with her handkerchief. Unashamed, Dick said, “That's just how I felt when Jerry told me about the Dooleys. That's their name. Of course, Mrs. Newcomb kept her word. That little shack is in a lovely spot near the stream with big cottonwood trees around it. After the funeral, Mr. Newcomb told the father that he and the boys could cut down some of the small cottonwoods upstream, leaving every third one, and build another room, so they put up a lean-to. Then he gave them a cow to milk and the boys started a vegetable garden. Mr. Dooley does odd jobs on the ranch, though he isn't strong enough for hard riding, and the girl Etta mothers the baby and the little boys.”

“Have we reached that last chapter?” Dora asked. “The one I was trying to hear before we got to it? In other words, may I now know how this terribly tragic story links up with our today's adventuring?”

“You sure may,” Dick said. “It's this way. The Newcombs, generous as they have been, can't afford to keep those children clothed and fed. Moreover they ought to go to school next fall and between now and then, some money *must* be found and so—”

“Oh! Oh! I see!” Dora glowed at him. “Jerry thinks that it is a cruel shame to have this poor family in desperate need when Mr. Lucky Loon has a tomb full of gold helping no one.”

Dick smiled. “Now I’m *sure* you’re a mind reader. Although,” he corrected, “Jerry didn’t just put it that way. But what he *did* say was that if we could find out definitely that Bodil Pedersen is dead and that there is no one else to claim that buried treasure, perhaps the old storekeeper, Mr. Silas Harvey, *might* give us the letter he has, telling where it is hidden.”

“Did Jerry think the money might be used for that poor family?” Dora asked.

Dick nodded. “He did, if Mr. Harvey consented. Jerry feels, and so do I, that if Bodil Pedersen hasn’t turned up in thirty years, she probably never will. Of course it would be by the merest chance that she would drift into this isolated mountain town, anyway, even if she *is* alive, which Jerry thinks is very doubtful.”

Dora was thoughtful for a moment. “Did Mr. Pedersen advertise in the papers for his lost sister?”

“We wondered about that and this morning we asked Mr. Newcomb. He said he distinctly remembered the story in the Douglas paper, and that afterwards it was copied all over the state.”

“Goodness!” Dora suddenly ejaculated as she glanced about her. “I’ve been so terribly interested in that poor family, I hardly noticed where we were going. We’ve crossed the desert road and here we are right at the mountains.”

“How bleak and grim this range is,” Dick said, then, turning to look back across the desert valley to a low wooded range in the purple distance, he added, “*Those* mountains across there, where the Newcomb ranch is, are lots more friendly and likeable, aren’t they? They seem to have pleasant things to tell about their past, but these mountains—” the boy paused.

“Oh, I know.” Dora actually shuddered. “These seem cruel as though they *wanted* people who tried to cross over them to die of thirst, or to be hurled over their precipices, or—” suddenly her tone became one of alarm. “Dick, did *you* know we were going up into these *awful* mountains?”

Her companion nodded, his expression serious. “Yes, I knew it,” he confessed, “but I also know that Jerry wouldn’t take us up here if he weren’t sure that we’d be safe.”

“Of course,” Dora agreed, “but wow! isn’t the road narrow and ruddy, and *are* we going straight up?”

Dick laughed, for the girl, unconsciously, had clutched his khaki-covered arm. “If those are questions needing answers,” he replied, “I’ll say, *Believe me*, yes. Ha, here’s a place wide enough for a car to pass. Jerry’s stopping.”

When the rattling of the little old car was stilled, Jerry and Mary turned and smiled back at the other two. “Don’t be scared, Dora,” Mary called. “Jerry says that no one ever crosses this old road now. It’s been abandoned since the valley highway was built.”

“That’s right!” The cowboy’s cheerful voice assured the two in back that he was in no way alarmed. “I reckoned we’d let our ‘tin Cayuse’ rest a bit and get his breath before we do the cliff-climbing stunt that’s waitin’ us just around this curve.”

Dora thought, “Mary’s just as scared as I am. I *know* she is. She’s white as a ghost, but she doesn’t want Jerry to think she doesn’t trust him to take care of her.”

Dick broke in with, “Say, when does this outfit eat?”

“Fine idea!” Jerry agreed heartily. “Dora, open up the grub box and hand it around, will you? I reckon we’ll need fortifyin’ for what’s going to happen next.”

CHAPTER X

A LONELY MOUNTAIN ROAD

While the four young people ate the delicious chicken sandwiches which Mrs. Newcomb had prepared for them and drank creamy milk poured into aluminum cups from a big thermos bottle, they sat gazing silently about them, awed by the terrific majesty of the scene, the girls not entirely unafraid. Below them was a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to a desert floor which was most uneven, having been cut up by torrents, which, during each heavy rain, were hurled down the mountain sides.

The effect of the desert for miles beyond was that of a little "Grand Canyon." Dora, thoughtfully gazing at it, said,—“In a few centuries, other girls and boys will stand here, perhaps, and by *that* time those canyons will be worn deep as the real Grand Canyon is today, won't they, Jerry?”

“I reckon that's right,” the cowboy replied.

Then Mary asked, “Jerry, is this old dangerous mountain road the *very* same one that the stages used to cross years ago?”

Jerry nodded, but before he could speak, Mary, shining-eyed, rushed on with, “Oh, Dora, I *know* why the boys have brought us here! *This* is the road where the three bandits held up the stage that Sven Pedersen and poor Little Bodil were riding in.”

“Of course it is!” Dora generously refrained from telling her friend that she had been convinced of *that* fact ever since they began climbing the grade.

Glowing blue eyes turned toward the cowboy. “Oh, Jerry, have you any idea where the exact spot was; where the bandits shot the driver, I mean, and where

the horses plunged over the cliff and where that poor little girl was thrown out into the road?" Excitement had made her breathless.

Jerry's admiring gray eyes smiled down at the eagerly chattering girl. "I reckon I know close to the spot. Silas Harvey said it was just at the top of Devil's Drop, and—"

Mary interrupted, horror in her tone, "Oh, Jerry, *what* a dreadful name! *What* is it? *Where* is it?" She was gazing about, her eyes startled. The road disappeared fifty feet ahead of them around a sharp curve. For answer Jerry started the motor, then, joltingly and with cautious slowness, the small car crept toward the curve. Unconsciously the girls were almost holding their breath as they gazed unblinkingly out of staring eyes at the wall of rock around which the road was winding.

When they saw "Devil's Drop," a bare, granite peak, up the near side of which the old road climbed at an angle which seemed but slightly off the perpendicular, Mary, with a little half sob, covered her eyes.

Jerry, terribly self-rebuking, wished sincerely that he and Dick had come alone. He was sure that the road was safe, for he and his father had crossed it since the last heavy rain. Mr. Newcomb had a mining claim which could be reached by no other road. So it was with confidence that Jerry tried to allay Mary's fears. "Little Sister," he said, "please trust me when I tell you that the grade *looks* a lot worse than it is. I'd turn back if I could, but it wouldn't be safe to try."

Mary, ashamed of her momentary lack of faith in Jerry's good judgment, put down her hands and smiled up into his anxious face.

"Jerry," she said, "I'm going to shut my eyes tight until we are up top. You tell me, won't you, when the worst is over?"

Dora had made no sound, but Dick, glancing at her, saw that she was staring down at the hamper at her feet as though she saw something there that fascinated her. He, also, feared that the girls should have been left at home. Nor was he himself altogether fearless. Having spent his boyhood in and around Boston, he was unused to perilous mountain rides and he was glad when the car came to a jolting stop and Jerry's voice, relief evident in its tone, sang out, "We're up top, and all the rest of our ride will be going down."

Mary opened her eyes and saw that the road had widened on what seemed to be a large ledge. Jerry climbed out and put huge stones in front and back of the wheels, then he held out his hand.

“Here’s where we start hunting for clues,” he said, smiling, but at the same time scanning his companion’s face hoping that all traces of fear had vanished.

Dora and Dick went to the outer edge of the road. “Such a view!” Dora cried, flinging her arms wide to take in the magnitude of it.

“Describe it, who can?”

“I’ll try!” Dick replied. “A bleak, barren, cruel desert lay miles below them like a naked, bony skeleton of sand and rock.”

Mary, clinging to the cowboy’s arm, joined the others but kept well back from the edge. “Jerry,” she said in an awed voice, “do you think—was this the very spot, do you suppose, where the stage was held up?”

“I reckon so,” Jerry replied, “as near as I could figure out from what Silas Harvey said.”

Dora turned. “Then somewhere along here was where poor Little Bodil was thrown into the road.”

The cowboy nodded. A saw-tooth peak rose just beyond them.

Dora, gazing at it, speculated aloud: “*Could* a wild beast have slunk around the curve there snatched the child and dashed away with it to its cave?”

“We’ll probably never know,” Dick replied. “That could have happened, couldn’t it Jerry?”

“I reckon so,” the cowboy began, when Mary caught his arm again. “Oh, Jerry,” she cried, “*are* there wild animals now—I mean living here in these mountains?”

The cowboy glanced at Dick before he replied. “None, Little Sister, that will hurt *you*. Don’t think about them.”

But Mary persisted. “At least *tell me* what wild animal lives around here that

might have dragged Little Bodil to its lair.”

Jerry, realizing that there was nothing else to do, said in as indifferent a tone as he could, “I reckon there *may* be a mountain lion or so up here, and a puma perhaps. That’s sort of a big cat, but *it’s* a coward all right! Gets away every time if it can.” He hoped that would satisfy Mary but instead she looked up at the grim peak above them, her eyes startled, searching. “I saw a picture once, oh, I remember it was in my biology book, of a huge catlike creature crouched on a ledge. It was about to spring on a goat that was on the mountain below it. Underneath the picture was printed, ‘The Puma springs from ledges down upon its unsuspecting prey.’ I remember it because it both fascinated and terrorized me.”

“Mary,” the cowboy took both her hands and smiled into her wide blue eyes, “will it make you feel better about wild animals attacking us if I tell you that Dick and I are both carrying concealed weapons?”

Mary smiled up at Jerry as she said, “You think I’m a silly, I *know* you do, and I don’t blame you. I’m not going to be fearful of anything again today.” Then, as she glanced down the steep road up which they had come, she returned the conversation to the subject from which they had so far digressed. “Jerry, which way do you suppose the three bandits came?”

“I reckon they came around the sharp curve over there. They could hide and not be seen by the driver of the stage until he was almost upon them.”

Anxiously Mary asked, “There wouldn’t be any bandits on *this* road *these* days, would there?”

It was Dora who answered, “Mary Moore, you *know* there wouldn’t be. Jerry told us that this road is abandoned by practically all travelers.” Then turning to the cowboy, Dora excitedly exclaimed, “Why, Jerry, if *this* is the spot where the stage was held up and where the horses plunged off the road, don’t you think it’s possible *something* may be left of the stage, something that *we* could find?”

“That’s what I reckoned,” the cowboy said slowly. “Dick and I were planning to climb down the side of the cliff here and see what we could unearth, but I reckon we’d better give up and go home. Dick, you and I can come back some other time—alone.”

“Oh, no!” Dora pleaded. “Mary and I are all over being afraid. We have on our divided skirts, and, if it’s safe for you to climb down Devil’s Drop, why, it’s safe for us, isn’t it, Mary?”

“If Jerry says so,” was the trusting reply accompanied by an equally trusting glance from sweet blue eyes.

Instead of answering, Jerry beckoned Dick over to the edge of the steep drop. It was not a sheer descent. Every few feet down there was a narrow ledge, almost like uneven stairs. There were scrubby growths in crevices to which the girls could cling. About one hundred feet down there was a wide-flung ledge and then another descent, how perilous that was they could not discern from where they stood.

“We could get the girls down to that first wide ledge easily enough,” Dick said, “if you think we ought.”

Jerry spoke in a low voice which, the girls could not hear. “I’m terribly sorry we brought them. My plan was to have them sit in the car up here in the road while we went down to hunt for a skeleton of that old stage coach, but now that Mary’s afraid of a wild animal attacking them, we just can’t leave them alone. They don’t either of them know how to use a gun. I reckon what we *ought* to do is go back home and—”

Dick shook his head. “They won’t let us now,” he said, and he was right, for the girls, tired of waiting, skipped toward them saying in a sing-song, “Verse seven!”

“*Two* cowgirls whom *nothing* can stop
Are now going over the Devil’s Drop.
Come, come, coma,
Coma, coma, kee.
You may come along if
You’re brave as we.”

“Great!” Dick laughed, applauding.

“Well, only down as far as the wide ledge,” Jerry told them. “That will be easy going, I reckon, and safe.” He held out his strong brown hand to Mary, and, leading the way, he began the descent.

CHAPTER XI

THE SKELETON STAGE COACH

Mary, slender, light of foot, sprang like a gazelle from step to step feeling safe, since Jerry towered in front of her. The firm clasp of his big hand on her small white one made her feel protected and cared for and she was really enjoying the adventure.

Dora, athletic of build and sure-footed, refused Dick's proffered aid, depending on the scraggly growths in the crevices for support until they reached a spot where only prickly-pear cactus grew.

"Now, Miss Independent," Dick laughingly called up to her, "you would better put one hand on my shoulder and let me be your human staff."

This plan proved successful until, in the descent, they came to a spot where the ledge below was farther than the girls could step. Jerry held up his arms and lifted Mary down. That was not a difficult feat since she was but a featherweight. Dora, broad shouldered for a girl and heavily built, was more of a problem. The boys finally made steps for her, Jerry offering his shoulders and Dick his bent back.

Dora, flushed, excited, glanced at the ledge above as she exclaimed, "Getting up again will be even more difficult."

"We won't cross bridges until we get to them," Dick began, then added, "or climb mountains either. Going down at present requires our entire attention."

But the narrow ledge-steps continued to be accommodatingly close for about fifteen feet; then another sheer descent was covered by repeating their former tactics.

“There, now we’re on the wide ledge,” Mary said, “and we can’t see a single thing that’s beneath us.” Then she cried out as a sudden alarming thought came to her. “Oh, Jerry, *what* if our weight should cause a rock-slide, or whatever it’s called, and we all were plunged—”

“Pull in on fancy’s rein, Little Sister!” the cowboy begged. “You may be sure I examined the formation of this ledge before I lifted you down upon it.” Then, turning to Dora, he said, “I reckon you and Mary’d better stay close to the mountain while Dick and I worm ourselves, Indian fashion, to the very edge where we can see what’s down below.”

“Righto!” Dora slipped an arm about Mary and together they stood and watched the boys lying face downward and wriggling their long bodies over the flat, stone ledge.

Dora noticed how slim and frail Dick’s form looked and how sinewy and strong was Jerry.

The edge reached, the boys gazed down, but almost instantly Jerry had whirled to an upright position and the watching girls could not tell whether his expression was more of terror than of exultation. Surely there was a mingling of both.

Dick, who had backed several feet before sitting upright, was frankly shocked by what he had seen.

For a moment neither of them spoke. “Boys!” Dora cried. “The stage coach is down there, isn’t it? But since you expected to find it, *why* are you so startled?”

Jerry was the first to reply. “Well, it’s pretty awful to see what’s left of a tragedy like that. I reckon you girls would better not look.”

“I won’t, if you don’t want me to,” Mary agreed, “but *do* tell us about it. After all these years, what *can* there be left?”

Jerry glanced at Dick, who, always pale, was actually white.

“I’ll confess it rather got me, just at first,” the Eastern boy acknowledged.

Dora, impatient at the slowness of the revelation, and eager to see for herself

what shocking thing was over the ledge, started to walk toward the edge, but Dick, realizing her intention, sprang up and caught her arm. “Let us tell you first what we saw, Dora,” he pleaded, “and then, if you still want to see it, we won’t prevent you. It won’t be so much of a shock when you are prepared.”

“Well?” Dora stood waiting.

The boys were on their feet. Jerry began. “When the horses reared and plunged off the road, they must have rolled with the stage over and over.”

“That’s right,” Dick excitedly took up the tale, “and when the coach struck this wide ledge, it bounded, I should say, off into space and was caught in a wide crevice about twenty-five feet straight down below here.”

“Oh, Jerry,” Mary cried, “is the driver or the horses—”

The cowboy nodded vehemently. “That’s just it. That’s the terribly gruesome part. The skeletons of the horses are hanging in the harness and that poor driver—his skeleton, I mean, still sits in his seat—”

“The uncanny thing about it,” Dick rushed in, “is that his leather suit is still on his skeleton, and his fur cap, though bedraggled from the weather, is still on his bony head.”

“But his eyes are the worst!” Jerry shuddered, although seeing skeletons was no new thing to him. “Those gaping sockets are looking right up toward this ledge as though he had died gazing up toward the road hoping help would come to him.”

Suddenly Mary threw her arms about Dora and began to sob. Jerry, again self-rebuking, cried in alarm, “Oh, Little Sister, I reckon I’m a brute to shock you that-a-way.”

Dora had noticed that in times of excitement Jerry fell into the lingo of the cowboy.

Mary straightened and smiled through her tears. “Oh, I’m so sorry for that poor man, but I must remember that it all happened years ago and that *now* we are really bent on a mission of charity.” Then, smiling up at Jerry, she held out a hand to him as she said, “*That’s* the big thing for us to remember, isn’t it? First of

all, we want, if possible, to find out if poor Little Bodil is alive and if we're sure, oh, just *ever* so sure, that she is dead, we want to get the gold and turquoise from Mr. Pedersen's rock house for the Dooleys."

Her listeners were sure that Mary was talking about their good purpose that she might quiet her nerves. It evidently had the desired effect, for, quite naturally, she asked, "If there is nothing beneath this ledge but space, how can you boys get down to the stage coach to search for clues? That's what you planned doing, wasn't it?"

Jerry nodded and gazed thoughtfully into the sweet face uplifted to his, though hardly seeing it. He was thinking what would be best for them to do.

"Dick," he said finally, "you stay here with the girls. I'm going back up to the car to get my rope. I reckon if you three will hold one end of it, I can slide down on it to that crevice and—"

"Oh no, no, Jerry, don't, *please don't!*" Mary caught his khaki-covered arm wildly. "You would never get over the shock of being so close to that ghastly skeleton and if the rope should slip—" she covered her eyes with her hands. Then, as she heard the boys speaking together in low tones, she looked at them. "Jerry," she said contritely, "I'm sorry I go to pieces so easily today. Of course I know you would not suggest going if you weren't sure that it would be absolutely safe. Get the rope if you want to. I'm going to try hard to be as brave as Dora is." Then she added wistfully, "Maybe if you weren't my Big Brother, I wouldn't care so much."

Sudden joy leaped to Jerry's eyes. How he had hoped that Mary cared a little, oh, even a *very* little, for him, but usually she treated him in the same frank, friendly way that she did Dick.

Dora, watching, thought, "That settles it. Jerry will not go. The Dooleys and Little Bodil are nothing to him compared to one second's anxiety for his Sister Mary."

And it did seem for a long moment that Jerry was going to give up the entire plan. Dick, realizing this, plunged in with, "I say, old man, I know how to go down a rope. That used to be one of my favorite pastimes when I was a youngster and lived near a fire station. The good-natured firemen would let us kids slide down their slippery pole but we had to do some tall scurrying when

the alarm sounded.”

Jerry looked at his friend for several thoughtful seconds before he spoke. What he said was, “I reckon you’re right, Dick, but my reason is this. I’m strong-armed and you’re not. Throwing the rope and pulling cantankerous steers around, gives a fellow an iron muscle. And you’re lighter too, a lot, so I reckon I’d better be on the end that has to be held. Now that’s settled, you stay here with the girls while I go up to the car and get my rope.”

CHAPTER XII

A NARROW ESCAPE

The long rope with which Jerry had captured many a wild cow was dropped over the outer edge of the wide ledge. Since the distance was not more than twenty-five feet, the lariat reached nearly to the crevice. Looking around, Jerry found a projecting rock about which he wound the upper end of the rope, but he did not trust it alone. He threw himself face downward and grasped the knot that was nearest the edge in a firm clasp. He told the girls he would not need their assistance at first, but that, if he shouted, they were to both seize the rope near the rock and pull with all their strength.

Dick, making light of the feat he was about to perform, tossed his sombrero to one side, and then, with his hand on his heart, he made a gallant bow to the girls.

Dora and Mary, standing close to the rock around which the rope was twined, clung to each other nervously. They tried to smile encouragingly toward the pretending acrobat, but they were too anxious to put much brightness into the effort.

“Kick off your boots,” Jerry said in a low voice; “you’ll be able to cling to the knots better in stocking feet.”

“Sort of an anti-climax.” Dick’s large brown eyes laughed through the shell-rimmed glasses as he removed his boots. “There, *now* I do the renowned disappearing act. I’d feel more heroic if I were about to rescue someone.”

“Dick isn’t the least bit afraid, is he, Jerry?” Mary asked in a whispered voice as though she did not want the boy who had gone over the ledge to be conscious of the fear that she felt.

“He’s all right,” Jerry reported a second later. “He’s going down the rope as nimbly as a monkey.”

“Will there be room on the edge of that crevice for him to stand when he *does* get down?” was Mary’s next question.

There was a long moment’s silence, then Jerry turned his head and smiled reassuringly. “He’s down! Oh, yes, there’s ten feet or more for him to walk on. He’s got hold of the front wheel of the old coach.” The cowboy’s voice changed to a warning shout, “I say, Dick, down there! *Don’t* try to get aboard! The whole thing might crumble and take you to the bottom of that pit.”

The girls could hear a faint shout from below. Dick evidently had assured Jerry that he would be cautious.

“I wish we could come over where you are, Jerry,” Dora said. “I’d like to watch Dick.”

“Stay where you are, please.” The order, without the last word, would have sounded abrupt. “Er—I may need your help with the rope. Keep alert.”

“I couldn’t be alerter if I tried,” Mary said in a low voice to her companion. “Every nerve in my whole body is so tense I’m afraid something will snap or—”

“Great Jumping Jehoshaphat!”

Jerry’s startled ejaculation and sudden leap to his knees caused the girls to cry in alarm, “Did Dick fall? Oh! Oh! What has happened?”

Jerry turned toward them and shook his head. “Sorry I hollered out that way. Nothing happened that matters any.”

“But something did, and if you don’t tell us, we’ll come over there and see for ourselves.” Dora’s tone was so determined that Jerry said, “Sure I’ll tell you. When Dick took hold of the front wheel of the stage, he must have jarred the seat, for, all at once, the driver’s skeleton collapsed and toppled off and down into that deep crevice. Well, that’ll be more comfortable for an eternal resting place, I reckon, than sitting upright was, the way he’s been doing this forty years past.” Then he called, “Hey, down there, *what* did you say? I didn’t hear. Your voice is blown off toward the Little Grand Canyon, I reckon.” Jerry sat intently

listening, one big brown hand cupped about his right ear. The girls could hear Dick's voice coming faintly from below. Jerry showed signs of excited interest. The girls exchanged wondering glances but did not speak until the cowboy turned toward them.

"Dick says there's a small, child-size trunk under the driver's seat. Whizzle! I wish I were down there. Together we might be able to get it out." Leaping to his feet, Jerry went to the rock around which the rope was tied. "*That* ought to hold all right!" There was a glint of determination in his gray eyes, but it wavered as he glanced at Mary who stood watching him, but saying not a word. "There isn't anything *here* to frighten you girls, is there?" He seemed to be imploring the smaller girl to tell him to go. "It's this-a-way. If there is a child-size box or trunk in the stage coach still, it was probably Little Bodil's, and don't you see, Mary, how *important* it is for us to get it. Why, I reckon a clue would be there all right."

Mary held out a small white hand. "Go along, Big Brother," she said, "if you're sure the rock will hold the rope with your weight on it."

"Shall we help the rock by holding onto the rope as well?" It was practical Dora who asked that question.

"Yes!" Jerry's expression brightened. "I wish you would."

Dora thought, "Mr. Cowboy, I know *just* what *you* are thinking. You're afraid we *might* go over to the edge and perhaps fall off, but that if you tell us to hold onto the rope here by the rock, you expect we'll stay put, but you're mistaken. As soon as I know you're safely down, I'm going to crawl over the ledge and peer down."

While Dora was thus planning, she and Mary held to the highest knot in the rope, and Jerry, having removed his boots, went over the edge without the grand flourish that Dick had made.

"Oh, I can't, *can't* hold it!" Mary exclaimed, and then Dora realized that the younger girl had been trying to hold Jerry's weight.

"Don't!" she ejaculated. "The rock can hold him. Just keep your hands lightly on the knot and pull *only* if the rope starts slipping."

It seemed but a few moments before the girls heard, as from far below, a reassuring call, "All's well!"

At once Dora let go her hold on the rope and dropped face downward as the boys had done. Mary was not to be left behind. Cautiously, they wormed their way to the edge of the cliff and peered over, being careful to keep hidden. Only their hair and eyes were over the edge, and the boys, intent on examining the skeleton stage coach, did not once glance up.

"Oh-oo!" Mary shuddered. "That black crevice looks as though it went down into the mountain a mile or more."

"Maybe it does!" Dora whispered. "Jerry said that it's more than a mile from here to the floor of the desert. The crack in the mountain may go all the way down."

"Oh, I *do* wish the boys wouldn't go so close to the edge of it!" Mary whispered frantically. "Dora Bellman, if Dick or Jerry slipped into that awful place—"

Dora's interrupting voice was impatient. "*Please* don't start *imagining* terrible things. Those boys value their own lives as much as we possibly can. Look! See how very cautiously they're taking hold of the driver's seat and testing its strength. Blue Moons!" It was Dora's turn to be horrified. "Jerry is lifting Dick. My, aren't his arms powerful? Now Dick is resting his left hand on the top of the seat and pulling on that box with his right."

Mary clutched Dora's arms, but neither spoke a word as they watched the movements of the boys with startled, staring eyes.

"It's coming slowly." Dora's voice was tense. "Hark! Didn't you hear a creak as though something about the stage had snapped suddenly?"

"Thanks be!" The words were a shout of relief. "The box is out, but oh, Mary! *Not a second* too soon! The skeleton stage coach is collapsing! It has dropped right down out of sight."

The two girls sat up with one accord and stared at each other, their faces white.

Mary was the first to speak. Her tone was reproachful. "And yet *you* were so sure the boys would do nothing to endanger their lives. If that crash had

happened one minute sooner, they would both have gone down with it. Dick couldn't have leaped back in time, and Jerry would have lost his balance, and you needn't tell me I'm using my imagination, either, for you *know* it's true."

There was no denying that the boys had had a most narrow escape and Dora willingly acknowledged that they had taken a greater risk than she had supposed they would.

"As though finding that lost Bodil, or even getting money to help the Dooleys, was worth endangering *their* lives," Mary continued with such a show of indignation that Dora actually laughed. "Since it's all over, let's forget it. I'm terribly thrilled about the box. I feel just as sure as the boys do that there will be something in it that will be a clue, or at least, lead to one."

"Listen," Mary said. "The boys are calling to us. See, the rope is swaying."

Lying flat again, Dora peered over and called, "What do you want?"

Jerry replied, "We're tying the box to the rope. Can you two girls pull it up? Don't stand near the edge to do it."

"Wait!" Dick called. Then he said something to Jerry that the girls couldn't hear. Dora saw the cowboy laugh and pound on his head. "He's calling himself a dumb-bell, looks like," she whispered to Mary. Then Jerry's voice, "I'll take back that order. You stand by the rock, will you, and grab the rope if it starts to slip. Dick will climb up and help lift the box. He's such a light weight, he and the box together won't be any heavier than I am."

The girls went back to the rock and saw that the rope held. They knelt by it in readiness to seize it if it slipped. They could tell by the tightening of the rope that Dick was ascending. In another moment, he sprang over the edge, pulled up the box without asking the girls for assistance, then dropped the rope down again. Soon they were joined by a beaming Jerry.

CHAPTER XIII

A SAND STORM

The return to the car was not without difficulties. At the spot where the natural steps were not close together, Jerry, finding the merest toe-hold in the cliff and only the scraggiest growth to which he could cling, did, however, manage to reach the step above. He then dropped one end of the rope down and Dick ascended nimbly. Then, Jerry made a swing of the lariat. Mary, flushed and laughing up at him, sat in it and was slowly lifted to the ledge above. This, being narrow, could hold no more than three. So Mary climbed still higher, then turned and watched, while Dora was lifted in the swing. The girls were told to return to the car while the boys tied the box on the end of the rope and drew it up over the sheer place.

From the road, Mary looked out far across the desert. "How queer the air looks, doesn't it?" she said, pointing to what seemed to be a huge yellow cloud of sand which was moving rapidly across the floor of the desert and shutting out the Little Grand Canyon from their view.

Jerry, with the small trunk on one shoulder joined them; Dick, whirling the lariat playfully, was not far behind.

Mary again pointed. "What is that far below there, Jerry? Is it a wind storm?"

"I reckon that's what it is," Jerry said. "Carrying enough sand with it to change things up a little. But more'n like, it will blow itself away before we get down to the valley road." He seemed little concerned about it and the girls, in their curiosity about the small trunk, also forgot it. Where they stood, in a flood of late warm afternoon sun, there was not a breath of air stirring.

"What a queer little trunk," Mary said, touching the battered top of it with an

investigating finger. “What is it made of, Jerry?”

“You’ve got me guessing,” the cowboy replied. “Some kind of a thick animal skin, I reckon, stretched over a frame. It tightened as it dried. Shouldn’t you say so, Dick?”

The boy addressed was helping to lash the small box on the running board of the car. “It looks like a home-made affair to me,” he said. “Probably they brought it over from Scandinavia.”

Dora was peering around it. “There isn’t a lock,” she observed. “I suppose whatever it was tied with rotted away long ago.” Then, as another thought came, “Oh, Jerry, if we had waited, maybe even a week, the stage coach might have crumbled, don’t you think? It couldn’t have stayed together much longer.”

“Righto!” the cowboy continued. Then, with a quick glance at Dick, he said, “Now that it’s over, I’m thankful it has gone,—the stage coach, I mean. Dick and I might have been tempted to come back and look for more clues, and believe me, we came within *one* of going to the bottom, but Jumping Steers! we didn’t, and it sure was some exciting adventure, wasn’t it, old man?”

Before Dick could reply, Mary said emphatically, “I wouldn’t have *let* you come back again, Jerry. You call me ‘Little Sister,’ and brothers *always* have to *obey*, don’t they, Dora?”

But her friend laughingly denied, “Not *my* small brother, believe me, NO. When I want him to do a thing, I ask the opposite.”

Jerry had seemed to be too intent on tying knots securely to have heard, but when he turned, his gray eyes smiled at the smaller girl, adoring her. “*This* Big Brother is the exception which proves the rule,” he quoted. “Command, Little Sister, and I will obey.”

“Bravo!” Dora teased. Then, to the other girl, “Please command that we start for home. I’m wild to get there so that we may look through the trunk.”

Jerry removed the rocks that held the wheels. Dick was glancing about the part of the road where the small car stood. “Do you plan turning here, Jerry?” he asked. “I was wondering, because I heard you say it would be miles out of our way, if we kept going straight on over the mountain.”

Before answering, Jerry stood, looking, not at the road, but down at the valley sand storm which had not decreased in density. In fact it had widened and was hiding the lower part of the mountain on which they stood.

“How much gas have we, Dick?” Jerry asked, making no comment on the sand storm.

“About four gallons. And another five in the storage can.”

“Good!” Again Jerry’s gray eyes looked thoughtfully about. They seemed to be measuring the width of the road between the peak at their right and the edge of the descent at the left. Dick stepped back and through narrowed lids, he also estimated the distance.

“A leetle more than twice the width of the car,” he guessed. “Say, old man,” Dick stepped eagerly toward the cowboy, “let *me* turn it, will you? Back East, one of the crazy things we did at school was to have contests on car turning. I was pretty durn good at it then. Could turn around on a dime, so to speak.” Still Jerry hesitated. “But you don’t know *this* car—” he began, when Dick interrupted swaggeringly, to try to make the girls think the feat would be less serious than it really would be. “Why, my dear *vaquero*, a wild car is as docile with me as a wild broncho would be with you—knows the master’s touch and all that.”

Then, as Jerry still hesitated, Dick leaped up under the wheel and called to the girls: “Stand back, if you please, and make room for the world famous—” the engine was starting, the car slowly turning. Dick did not finish his joking speech. He directed all his thought and skill to the turning of the car. There was a tense silence broken by Dora.

“Why, there was lots of room after all!” she cried admiringly.

“Gee whizzle!” Jerry had expected Dick to give up. “I reckon you didn’t rate yourself any too high when you were boasting about your skill.”

He helped Mary up to her seat, then took the place Dick had relinquished to climb in back with Dora. Slowly the small car started down the road which they had ascended hours before.

“What thrilling adventures and narrow escapes we have had today!” Dora

exclaimed, loud enough for Jerry to hear.

“I reckon they’re not all over yet,” the cowboy replied,—then wished he had not spoken.

“What do you suppose Jerry means?” Dora asked in a low voice of Dick.

The boy’s first reply was a shrug of his shoulders. “Nothing, really; at least I don’t think he does.” Then, as they rounded an outflung curve in the road and he saw the dull yellow flying cloud far below them, Dick added, as though suddenly understanding, “Oho, I savvy. Jerry is thinking of the sand storm.”

“But, of course, it *can’t* climb the mountain and equally, of course, Jerry won’t run right out into it,” Dora said. Dick agreed, then asked:

“But *what* if the sand storm lasted for hours and we had to stay in the mountain all night, wouldn’t that be another adventure, and if we should hear pumas prowling around the car wishing to devour us, wouldn’t that be a narrow escape?”

Dora laughed. “Do you know, Dick, when I first met you, I thought you were as solemn as an owl. I didn’t dream that you were, I mean, *are* a humorist.”

“Thanks for not saying clown.” Dick seemed so ridiculously grateful that Dora laughed again.

“You remind me of Harold Lloyd,” she said, “and I hope you think that’s a compliment. He looks through his shell-rimmed glasses just as solemnly as you do when he’s saying the funniest things.”

Instead of replying, Dick peered curiously ahead. “I reckon the ‘another adventure or narrow escape’ is about to happen,” he said in a low voice close to Dora’s ear. “Leastwise our vehicle is slowing to a stop.”

Jerry, making sure that the front wheels were safely wedged against the mountain, turned and inquired, “Dick, can you and Dora hear a roaring noise?”

“Now that the car has stopped rattling, I can,” Dick replied.

“It’s the sand storm, isn’t it?” Dora leaned forward to ask.

“Yes.” Jerry glanced back, troubled. “There are two valley roads forking off just below here. One goes over toward the Chiricahua Mountains where our ranch is, the other toward Gleeson where we have to go to take the girls. Now what I want to say is this. Our road is clear, but the Gleeson road is in the path of the sand storm. Of course, if the wind should change, it might catch us, but I reckon our best chance is to race across the open valley to *Bar N* ranch. You girls would have to stay all night, but Mother’d like that powerful well. We could telephone to Gleeson so your dad wouldn’t worry.”

Mary, who had been listening with anxious eyes, now put in, “But, Jerry, wouldn’t that sand storm cut down the wires? I’d hate to have Dad anxious if there was any possible way of getting home—”

“I have it,” Dick announced. “If, after we reach the ranch, we find we can’t communicate with your home, Jerry and I will ride over there on horseback. The sand storm will surely be blown away by then.” His questioning glance turned toward Jerry.

“Sure thing,” the cowboy replied. “Now, girls, hold tight! We’re going to drop down to the cross valley road. It’s smooth and hard and we’re going to beat the world’s record.”

CHAPTER XIV

“A.’S AND N. E.’S.”

The girls held tight as they had been commanded, their nerves taut and tense. Jerry’s prophecy that they might yet have another thrilling adventure and narrow escape filled them with a sort of startled expectancy. They could not see the forking valley roads until they had dropped down the last steep descent of the mountain and were almost upon them. Jerry unconsciously uttered an exclamation of relief. The road that went straight as a taut lariat across miles of flat, sandy waste was glistening in the late afternoon sun. The distant Chiricahua range, at the foot of which nestled the Newcomb ranch, was hung with a misty lilac haze. Peace seemed to pervade the scene and yet they could all four distinctly hear a dull ominous roar.

Before starting to “beat the world’s record,” Jerry stopped the car and listened. His desert-trained ear could surely discern the direction of the roaring sound. They were still too close to the mountain to see the desert on their right or left.

Turning to Dick, he asked, “Is there any water left in the canteen?”

“Yes,” the other boy replied, sensing the seriousness of the request, “about a gallon, I should say. It’s right here at our feet.”

“Good! Have the top loose so that you can drench our handkerchiefs at a split second’s notice. Have them ready, girls.”

“Why, Jerry,” Mary’s expression was one of excited animation, “do you expect the sand storm to overtake us?”

“No, I really don’t.” The cowboy was starting the engine again. “But it’s always wise to take precautions.” Then, addressing the small car, “Now, little old ‘tin

Cayuse,' show your stuff."

The start was so sudden and so violent that Dora was thrown forward. Dick drew her back and they smiled at each other glowingly.

"Life is a jolly lark today, isn't it, so full of a.'s and n. e.'s."

"I suppose you mean adventures and narrow escapes." Dora straightened her small hat that had been twisted awry. Then, as they sped away from the shelter of the grim, gray towering mountain, they all four looked quickly to the right and left. The desert lay dreaming in the sun. To the far south of them the air was full of a sinister yellow wall of flying sand and dust. It was surely headed in the opposite direction. Jerry did not doubt it and since he did not, the girls and Dick had no sense of fear. The ominous roaring sound had lessened, although, of course, they could hear little when that small car was speeding, its own squeaks and rattles having been increased.

Mary turned a face flushed with excitement and called back to Dora, "Ten miles! Only ten more to go."

It was a perfect road, recently completed. There was almost no sand on it and very few dips.

Dick waved up toward a low circling vulture. "That fellow's eyes are popping out in amazement, more than likely," he shouted to Dora.

She laughed back, holding tight to her hat. "He probably thinks this is some new kind of a stampede."

Again Mary's pretty glowing face appeared in the opening back of the front seat. "Fifteen miles! Only five more to go."

Dick's expression became anxious. He said, close to Dora's ear, "If Jerry feels so sure that the sand storm is headed toward Mexico, I don't think he ought to race this little machine. He may know a lot more than I do about busting bronchos, but—"

An explosion interrupted Dick's remark, then the car zigzagged wildly from side to side. Jerry turned off the spark and the gas. Dick, without thought, leaped out onto the running board and put his weight over the wheel with the blow-out in its

tire.

Almost miraculously the car stayed in the road. The girls had been wonderful. White and terrorized, yet neither had clutched at her companion, nor hindered his doing what was best for their safety.

When the car stopped, the front right tire was almost off the road. The girls, quivering with excitement, got out and exclaimed simultaneously, "Another adventure and narrow escape!"

Dick, knowing better than the girls how truly narrow their escape had been, stepped forward, his dark eyes serious, and extended a hand to the cowboy. "Jerry," he said earnestly, "I won't say again that I probably know more about managing cars than you do. If it hadn't been for your quick thinking and skill, we would surely have turned turtle in the sand and if the spark had been on, the car might have gone up in flames."

But Jerry would not accept the compliment. He shook his head as he removed his sombrero and wiped beads of moisture from his forehead. "Dick," he said, "thanks just the same, but I reckon I was needlessly reckless. I wasn't right sure about the sand storm, just at first, but later when I saw that it was heading south all right, I kept on speeding."

Turning to the smaller girl who stood very still; seemingly calm, though her lips quivered when she tried to smile, the cowboy said contritely, "Little Sister, if you won't stop trusting me, I'll swear to never again take any such needless risks."

Dora, watching the two, thought, "It matters such a terrible lot to Jerry what Mary thinks about him. Some day she's going to wake up and realize that he loves her."

Dick was removing his coat, and Jerry, evidently satisfied with Mary's low-spoken reply, turned to get tools out from under the front seat.

Half an hour later the small car was again on its way. The sun was setting behind the mountains where so recently they had been.

Mary looked back at them. Grim and dark and forbidding they were, deep in shadow, but the peaks were aglow with flame color. The floor of the desert valley about them was like a sea of shimmering golden water; the ripples and

dunes of sand were like glistening waves.

“Such a gloriousness!” Dora exclaimed, turning a radiant face toward her companion.

“I can see the color of it in your eyes,” the boy told her, and a sudden admiration in his own dark eyes caused Dora to think that Dick was really seeing her for the first time.

It was lilac dusk when the small car drove along the lane of cottonwood trees and stopped at one side of the *Bar N* ranch house.

Mrs. Newcomb’s round pleasant face looked out of a kitchen window, then her apron-covered person appeared in the open side door. Her arms were held out to welcome Mary.

“My dear, my dear,” she said tenderly, “how glad I am that you blew over to *Bar N*.”

“We almost literally *did* blow over,” Mary laughingly replied. “That is, we were running away from a sand storm.” Then, suddenly serious, she asked, “Oh, Aunt Molly, may I use your telephone at once? Dad doesn’t know that I’m here and he will be expecting us back for supper.”

“Of course, dear. You know where it is, in the living-room.” Then, when Mary had skipped away, Dora following her, Mrs. Newcomb asked, “Has there been a sand storm in the valley? I hadn’t heard about it.”

Jerry was about to drive the small car around to the old barn and so Dick replied, “Yes, Mrs. Newcomb. That’s what Jerry called it. We first saw it on the other side of the range back of Gleeson. Later we saw it far away to the south. It didn’t cross this part of the valley at all, but Jerry thought we’d better not try the Gleeson road.”

“He was wise. I hope the wires aren’t down.”

The good woman’s anxiety was quickly ended by the reappearance of the girls. “All’s well!” Mary announced. Then to Dick, “Your mother answered the phone. She said that they had heard the roaring and had seen some dust in the air but that the storm had passed around our tableland.”

“Well, you girls had quite an adventure and perhaps a narrow escape as well.” Little did Mrs. Newcomb realize that she was repeating the phrase they had so often used that day. “Now, Mary, you take your friend to the spare room and get ready for supper. Your Uncle Henry will be in from riding the range pronto, and starved as a lean wolf, no doubt. He’s been gone since sun-up and he won’t take along what he ought for his mid-lunch.”

The girls were about to leave the kitchen when Jerry called to Dick and away he went into the gathering darkness.

“The boys sleep in the bunk house out by the corral,” Mrs. Newcomb explained. “They’ll be back, I reckon, soon as you’re ready.”

The spare room was large, square, with a small fireplace in it. The bed was an old-fashioned four-poster and looked luxuriously comfortable.

A table, a dresser, two chairs of dark wood and a bright rag rug completed the furnishings.

“How quiet it is,” Mary said. “There isn’t a neighbor nearer than those Dooleys and Jerry said they are way over in the canyon.”

Dora, wondering if Mary could be contented if she became Jerry’s wife, some day in the future, asked, “Would *you* like to live on a ranch, do you think?”

Innocently, Mary replied as she lighted the kerosene lamp on the bureau, “Why, yes, I’m sure I would, if Dad could be with me.”

Dora sighed as she thought, “Poor Jerry. She’s still blind and I *did* think today that her eyes were opened.”

CHAPTER XV IN THE BARN LOFT

“Jerry, what did you do with the box?” Mary managed to whisper as the cowboy drew out a chair for her at the supper table.

“In the old barn loft, snug and safe,” he replied. Then he sat beside her. Dora and Dick, on the opposite side of the long table, beamed across, eager anticipation in their eyes. Although they had not heard the few words their friends had spoken, they felt sure that they had been about Little Bodil’s box.

“We won’t wait for your father, Jerry,” Mrs. Newcomb had said. “He may have gone in somewhere for shelter if he happened to be riding in the path of the storm.”

The kerosene lamp hanging above the middle of the table had a cherry-colored shade and cast a cheerful glow over the simple meal of warmed-over chicken, baked potatoes, corn bread, sage honey and creamy milk, big pitchers of it, one at each end of the table. For dessert there was apple sauce and chocolate layer cake.

Mr. Newcomb came in before they were through, tall, sinewy, his kind brown face deeply furrowed by wind and sun. His eyes brightened with real pleasure when he saw the guests. Dora, he had met before, and Mary he had known since she was a little girl.

He shook hands with both of them. “Wall, wall, if that sand storm sent you girls this-a-way, I figger it did some good after all.”

Jerry glanced at his father anxiously when he was seated at the end of the table opposite his wife.

“Dad, do you reckon any of our cattle were hit by it?” he asked.

The older man helped himself to the food Mary passed him, before he replied, “No-o, I reckon not. I was riding the high pasture when I heard the roaring. I went out on Lookout Point and stood there watching, till the dust got so thick I had to make for the canyon.”

It was Dick who spoke. “There aren’t many cows pastured down on the floor of the valley, anyway, are there, Mr. Newcomb? There’s so much sand and only an occasional clump of grass, it surely isn’t good pasture.”

“You’re right,” the cowman agreed, “but there’s a few poor men struggling along, tryin’ to eke out an existence down thar. I reckon they was hit hard. I knew a man, once, who had a well and was tryin’ to raise a garden. One of them sand storms swooped over it, and, after it was gone, he couldn’t find nary a vegetable. Either they’d been pulled up by the roots and blown away or else they was buried so deep, he couldn’t dig down to them.”

“Oh, Uncle Henry,” Mary smiled toward him brightly, “I see a twinkle in your eye. Now confess, isn’t that a sand-story?”

“No, it’s true enough,” the cowman replied, when Jerry exclaimed: “Dad, I know a bigger one than that. You remember that man from the East, tenderfoot if ever there was one, who started to build him a house on the Neal crossroad? He heard the storm coming so he jumped on his horse and rode into Neal as though demons were after him. When the wind stopped blowing, he went back to look for his house and there, where it had been, stood the beginning of a sand hill. The adobe walls of his unfinished house had caught so much sand, they were completely covered. That was years ago. Now there’s a good-sized sand hill on that very spot with yucca growing on it.”

“Poor man, it was the burial of his dreams,” Dora said sympathetically.

“He left for the East the next day,” Jerry finished his tale, “and—”

“Lived happily ever after, I hope,” Mary put in.

Mrs. Newcomb said pleasantly, “If you young people have finished your meal, don’t wait for us. Jerry told me you’re going out to the loft in the old barn for a secret meeting about something.”

“We’d like to help you, Aunt Mollie, if—”

“No ‘ifs’ to it, Mary dear.” The older woman gazed lovingly at the girl. “Your Uncle Henry and I visit quite a long spell evenings over our tea. It’s the only leisure time that we have together.”

Jerry lighted a couple of lanterns, and the girls, after having gone to their room for their sweater coats, joined the boys on the wide, back, screened-in porch.

“I’ll go ahead,” Jerry said, “and Dick will bring up the rear. We’ll be the lantern bearers. Now, don’t you girls leave the path.”

“Why all the precautions?” Dora asked gaily, but Mary knew.

“Rattlesnakes may be abroad.” She shuddered. “Have you seen one yet this summer, Jerry?”

“Yes, this morning, and a mighty ugly one too; coiled up asleep in the chicken yard. I shot it, all right, but didn’t kill it. Before I could fire again, it had crawled under the old barn.”

“Oh-oo gracious! That’s where we’re going, isn’t it?” Dora peered into the darkness on either side of the path.

“I suppose it had a mate equally big and ugly under the barn?” Mary’s statement was also a question.

Dick replied, “Undoubtedly, but if they stay *under* the barn and don’t try to climb up to the loft, they won’t trouble us any.”

Mary, glancing up at the sky that was like soft, dark blue velvet studded with luminous stars, exclaimed, “How wonderfully clear the air is, and how still. You never would dream that a sand storm had—”

She stopped suddenly, for Dora had gripped her arm from the back. “Listen! Didn’t you hear a—”

“Gun shot?” Dick supplied gaily. “Now that we’re about to open up Little Bodil’s box, I certainly expect to hear one. You know we heard a gun fired, or thought we did, when we passed through the gate in front of Lucky Loon’s rock

house, and again when old Silas Harvey was telling us the story. Was that what you thought you heard, Dora?"

"No, it was not," that maiden replied indignantly. "I thought I heard a rattle." She had stopped still in the path to listen, but, as Jerry and Mary had continued walking toward the old barn, Dora decided that she had been mistaken and skipped along to catch up. Dick, sorry that he had teased her, evidently at an inopportune time, ran after her with the lantern. "Please forgive me," he pleaded, "and don't rush along that way where the path is dark."

Jerry turned to call, "We're going in the side door, Dick." Then anxiously, "You girls can climb a wall ladder, can't you?"

"Of course we can," Dora replied spiritedly. "We're regular acrobats in our gym at school."

Having reached the barn, Dick opened a low door, then holding the lantern high, that the girls might see the step, he assisted them both over the sill and followed closely.

Mary was standing in the small leather-scented harness-room, looking about the old wooden floor with an anxious expression.

"I was wondering," she explained when the light from a lantern flashed in her face, "if there are any holes in the floor large enough for those rattlers to crawl through."

"I'm sorry I mentioned that ugly old fellow," Jerry said contritely, "and yet we do have to be constantly on the watch, but we're safe enough now. Here's the wall ladder and the little loft storeroom is just above us. The only hard part is at the top where one of the cross bars is missing."

Dick suggested, "We boys can go up first and reach a hand down to the girls when they come to that step."

"Righto," Jerry said. "I'll leave my lantern on the floor here. You take yours up, old man. Then we'll have illumination in both places."

The girls had worn their knickers under their short skirts as they always did when they went on a hike or a mountain climb and so they went up the rough

wall ladder as nimbly as the boys had done. The last step was more difficult, but, with the help of strong arms they soon stood on the floor of the low loft room. All manner of discarded tools, harness and boxes were piled about the walls.

Dora was curious. “Jerry, *why* did you select this out-of-the-way place for Bodil’s trunk?”

“Because I reckoned no one would disturb us. The Dooley twins overrun the old barn sometimes but they can’t climb up here with the top board missing.”

The battered leather box lay in the middle of the room and the two girls looking down at it had a strangely uncanny feeling. Jerry evidently had not, for he was about to lift the lid when Mary caught his arm, exclaiming, “Big Brother, *what* was it Silas Harvey said about a ghost? I mean, didn’t Mr. Pedersen threaten to haunt——”

The interruption was the crackling report of a gun that was very close to them.

“Great heavens, *what* was that?” Mary screamed and clung to Jerry terrified.

“It wasn’t a ghost who fired that shot,” the cowboy told them. “It was someone just outside the barn. Don’t be frightened, girls. It can’t be anyone who wants to harm us. Wait, I’ll call out the window here.”

Jerry pulled open a wooden blind and shouted, “*Who’s* there?”

His father’s voice replied, “Lucky I happened along when I did. An ugly rattler was wriggling, half dead from a wound, right along the path here and its mate was coiled in a sage bush watching it.”

Dora seized Dick’s arm. “I heard it!” she cried excitedly. “*That’s* what I heard when you began to——”

“Aw, I say, Dora,” Dick was truly remorseful, “I’m terribly sorry. I just didn’t want you to be using your imagination and frightening yourself needlessly.”

Mary sank down on a dusty old box. “I’m absolutely limp,” she said. “Now, if a ghost appears when we open that trunk, I’ll simply collapse.”

CHAPTER XVI

SEARCHING FOR CLUES

The four young people in the loft listened as Mr. Newcomb closed the gate to the hen-yard, then, when they heard him leaving, Jerry said, "I reckon we're alone now, so let's get ahead with the box opening ceremony."

"Oh, Big Brother," Mary, quite recovered from her recent fright, exclaimed. "Let's make a *real ceremony* of it, shall we? Let's kneel on the floor; you boys at the sides and we girls at the ends. There now, let's all lift at once and together."

"Wait!" Dora cried, detaining them. "Just to add to the suspense, let's each tell what we expect to find in the box."

Mary looked across at her friend vaguely. "Why, I'm sure I don't know. What do *you* hope that we'll find, Jerry?"

"I reckon what we *want* to find is something that will help us locate Little Bodil," the cowboy replied.

"And yet," Dick put in wisely, "since Little Bodil was thrown from the stage coach forty years ago, how can *anything* that was already *in* her trunk prove to us whether she was devoured by wild animals or carried away by bandits?"

"Oh-oo!" Mary shuddered. "I don't know *which* would be worse."

Dora was agreeing with Dick. "You're right of course," she said thoughtfully, "but, nevertheless I've a hunch that we'll find something that will, in some roundabout way, prove to us whether Little Bodil is dead or alive."

"Now, if *that's* settled, let the ceremony proceed," Jerry announced. In the dim

lantern light Mary's fair face and Dora's olive-tinted glowed with excited animation as they took hold of the trunk ends.

The top, however, did not come off as readily as they had anticipated. The many winter storms and the burning summer heat to which the box had been exposed had warped the cover, binding it tight. Jerry, glancing about the room, found a broken tool which he could use as a wedge. With it he loosened the cover. Then it was easily removed.

The first emotion was one of disappointment. The small trunk contained little, nothing at all, the young people decided, that could be considered as a clue. There was a plaid woolen dress for a child of about eight or ten and the coarsest of home-made underwear, knit stockings and a small pair of carpet slippers with patched soles.

A hand-carved wooden doll, in a plaid dress, which evidently had been made by the child, had been lovingly wrapped in a small red shawl. Lastly, tied up in a quilted blue bonnet with the strings, was a carved wooden bowl and spoon.

In the flickering lantern light, the expression on the four faces changed from eager excitement to genuine disappointment.

"Not a clue among them," Dora announced dramatically.

"Not a line of writing of any kind, is there?" Mary was confident that she knew the answer to her question before she asked it.

Dick was closely scrutinizing the empty leather box. "Usually in mystery stories," he looked up from his inspection to say, "there's a lining in the trunk and the lost will, or, what have you, is safely reposing under it, but unfortunately Little Bodil's trunk has no lining nor hide-it-away places of any kind."

Mary was holding the small doll near to the lantern and the others saw tears in her pitying blue eyes. Suddenly she held the doll comfortingly close as she said, a sob in her voice, "Poor little old wooden dollie, all these long years you've been waiting, wondering, perhaps, why Little Bodil didn't take you out and mother you."

"Like Eugene Fields' 'Little Toy Dog,'" Dora said, looking lovingly at her friend. Then, "Mary, you can write the sweetest verses. Someday when we're

back at school, write about Little Bodil's wooden doll. It may make you famous." Then she modified, "At least it will help you fill space in 'The Sunnybank Say-So.'"

"Promise to send me a copy if she does," Jerry said.

Dick, who had not been listening, had at last given up hope of finding a scrap of writing. He had felt in the small pocket of the plaid dress and had closely examined the quilted hood.

"Well," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, "since there isn't a clue to be found, shall we put the things back into the trunk and go in?"

"I reckon we might as well," Jerry acquiesced. "We'll have to be up early tomorrow so that we can drive the girls over to Gleeson along about noon."

Dora was examining the hand-carved wooden bowl and long wooden spoon. "I wonder if Little Bodil's father made this leaf pattern on the handle," she said, then began, jokingly, "If I were a trance medium, I would say, as I hold this article, I feel the presence of someone who, when alive in the flesh, dearly loved the child, Little Bodil. This someone, this spirit presence that we cannot see with our outward eyes, wishes very much to help us find a clue." Dora's voice had become mysteriously low.

Lifting her eyes slowly from the wooden bowl, she gazed intently at a dark corner where junk was piled.

Mary's gaze followed. "Goodness, Dora!" she implored nervously, "don't stare that way into space. Anyone would think that you saw someone and—"

"I'm not sure but that I do see something." Dora's tone had changed to one of startled seriousness. "Jerry," she continued, pointing toward the dark corner, "don't *you* see a palely luminous object over there?"

"I reckon I do," the cowboy agreed. "But one thing I'm sure is, it can't be a ghost since there isn't any such thing."

"How do we know that—" Dora began when Mary, clutching her friend's arm, whispered excitedly, "I see it now! Oh, Jerry, if it isn't a ghost, *what* is it?"

“We’ll soon know.” There was no fear in the cowboy’s voice as he leaped to his feet and walked toward the corner. The girls watched breathlessly expecting to see the apparition fade into darkness, but, if anything, it seemed clearer, as Jerry approached it.

His hearty laugh dispelled their fears before he explained, “The moon is rising. That’s moonlight coming in through a long crack in the wall.” Then, with a shrug which told his disbelief in *all* things supernatural, he dismissed the subject with, “I reckon *that’s* as near being a ghost as anything ever is.”

Mary was tenderly placing the coarse little undergarments back into the small trunk. Dora less sentimental than her friend, nevertheless felt a pitying sadness in her heart as she refolded the little plaid dress and laid it on top. Before closing the box, Mary, still on her knees, looked up at Jerry, her eyes luminous. “Big Brother,” she said, “do *you* think Little Bodil would mind if I kept her doll? It’s a funny, homely little thing with only a wooden heart, but I can’t get over feeling that it’s lonesome and needs comforting.”

Jerry’s gray eyes were very gentle as he looked down at the girl. His voice was a bit husky as he replied, “I reckon Little Bodil would be grateful to you if she knew. She probably set a store by that doll baby.”

He held out a strong brown hand to help her to rise and there was a tenderness in the clasp.

Dora had not packed the wooden bowl and spoon. “I would so like to keep these,” she said, adding hastily, “Of course, if Little Bodil is found, I’ll give them back to her. Don’t you think it would be all right?”

“Sure thing!” Dick replied. Stooping, he picked up the worn little carpet slippers, saying, “You overlooked these, girls, while you were packing.”

“Oh, so we did.” Dora reached up a hand to take them, then she hesitated, inquiring, “Why don’t you and Jerry each take one for a keepsake, or don’t boys care for such things?” Dick took one of the slippers and dropped it, unconcernedly, into a deep leather pocket. The other slipper he handed to Jerry who stowed it away. The boys replaced the cover of the box, not without difficulty, and then they all four stood for a silent moment looking down at it with varying emotions. Mary spoke in a small awed voice. “What shall we do with the little box?”

“I reckoned we’d leave it here,” Jerry began, then asked, “What were *you* thinking about it?”

“I was wondering,” Mary said, looking from one to another with large star-like eyes, “if it wouldn’t be a good plan to take the box up to the rock house and leave it *there*.”

“Why, Mary Moore,” Dora was frankly amazed, “you wouldn’t *dare* climb up there and be looked at by that Evil Eye Turquoise, would you?”

Before Mary could reply, Jerry said, “The plan is a good one, all right, but we’d better leave it here, I reckon, till we know if there’s any way to get up to the rock house. The cliff that broke off in front of it used to be Mr. Pedersen’s stairway.”

Mary agreed and so they ascended the wall ladder. As they stood in the harness-room below, Mary said in a low voice, “Although we have *not* found a clue, that trunk has done one thing; it has made me feel in my heart that Little Bodil was a *real* child. Before, it seemed to me more like a fanciful story. Now, more than ever, I hope that *somewhere* we will find a clue that will someday prove to us that no harm came to the little girl.”

Jerry had picked up the second lantern and, taking Mary’s arm, he led her through the low door and along the dark path. Neither spoke. Dora and Dick followed, walking single file. Dora, remembering the dead snakes, glanced about, but Mr. Newcomb had thoughtfully buried them, not wishing the girls to be needlessly startled.

At the kitchen door, the boys said good night and returned to their bunk house out near the corral.

CHAPTER XVII

A WOODEN DOLL

The girls, with the lantern Jerry had given them, tip-toed through the darkened hall to their bedroom. Mary placed the lantern on the table, and, after having kissed the little wooden doll good night, she put it to bed on a cushioned chair. She smiled wistfully up at Dora. "What is there about even a poor forlorn homely wooden doll that stirs in one's heart a sort of mother love?"

"I guess you've answered your own question," Dora replied in her matter-of-fact tone. "I never felt that way about dolls. In fact, I never owned one after the cradle-age." Then, fearing that Mary would think that she was critical of her sentiment, she hurried on to say, "I always wanted tom-boy, noisy toys that I could romp around with." Then, gazing lovingly at Mary, she added, "Someday you'll make a wonderful mother. I hope you'll want to name one of your little girls after me. How would Dorabelle do?"

"Fine!" Mary smiled her approval of the name. "There must be four girls so that the oldest may have my mother's name and the other three be called Dorabelle, Patsy and Polly. What's more, I hope each one will grow up to be just like her name-mother, if there is any such thing."

A few moments later, when they were nestled in the soft bed, Dora asked in a low voice, "What kind of a man would you like to marry?"

Mary's thoughts had again wandered back to Little Bodil and so she replied indifferently, "Oh, I don't know. I've never thought that far. I *do* want a home and children, someday, of course, but first, for a *long* time, I hope, I'm going to keep house for Daddy."

Dora was more than ever convinced that Mary thought of the cowboy merely as

the Big Brother, which so frequently she called him. However, before entirely giving up, she asked, "If you have little boys, what will you name *them*?"

Mary laughed, not at all suspecting her friend's real reason for all the questioning. "That's an easy one to answer," she said artlessly. "The oldest, of course, will be named after Dad. The other two—if—why, Dick and Jerry will do as well as any, and yet," she paused and seemed to think a bit, then merrily she said, "Dora, let's postpone all this christening for ten years at least. The fond father of the brood may want to have a finger in the pie."

Dora thought, "Mary's voice sounds amused. Maybe she's wise to my scheming. I'd better soft pedal it, if I'm ever going to get at the truth."

Aloud she said with elaborate indifference—yawning to add to the effect, "Oh, well, it really doesn't matter. After all I had quite forgotten our agreement to both remain old maids, me to teach school and you to keep house for me." Again she yawned, saying sleepily, "Good night and pleasant dreams."

It was daybreak when the girls woke up. Already there were sounds of activity within and without. Barnyard fowls were clamoring, each in its own way, for the breakfast which Dick was carrying to them.

Jerry—in the cow corral—was milking under difficulties as a long-legged calf was noisily demanding a share.

From the kitchen came faintly the clatter of dishes, a sizzling sound and a most appetizing fragrance of coffee, bacon and frying potatoes.

"Let's get up and surprise the boys," Mary whispered.

This they did and were in time to help pleased Mrs. Newcomb carry in the hot viands.

Jerry and Dick welcomed them with delighted grins and Mr. Newcomb gave them each a fatherly pat as he passed.

"How will you girls spend the morning?" Jerry inquired. "Dick and I have branding to do and I reckon you wouldn't care to 'spectate' as an old cowboy we once had used to say."

Mary shuddered. “I *certainly do not*,” she declared. “I hope branding doesn’t hurt the poor calf half as much as it would hurt *me* to watch it.”

“The thing that gets me,” Dick, still a tenderfoot, commented, “is the smell of burning hair and flesh. I can’t get used to it.” Then, glancing half apologetically toward Mrs. Newcomb, he said, “Not a very nice breakfast subject, is it?”

Placidly that good woman replied, “On a ranch one gets used to unappetizing subjects—sort of like nurses do in hospitals, I suppose. During meals is about all the time cowmen have to talk over what they’ve been doing and make plans.”

“You haven’t told us yet what you’d like to do this morning,” Jerry said, as he glanced fondly at the curly, sun-gold head close to his shoulder.

Mary replied, with a quick eager glance at the older woman, “Aunt Mollie, can’t you make use of two very capable young women? We can sweep and dust and —”

“No need to!” was the laughing reply. “Yesterday was clean-up day.”

“I can do some wicked churning,” Dora assured their hostess.

“No sour cream ready, dearie.” Then, realizing that the girls truly wished to be of assistance, Mrs. Newcomb turned brightly toward her son. “Jerry, I wish you’d saddle a couple of horses before you go. I’d like to send a parcel over to Etta Dooley. What’s more, I’d like Mary and Dora to meet Etta. She’s about your age, dear.” She had turned toward Mary. “A fine girl, we think, but a mighty lonesome one, yet *never* a word of complaint. She has four to cook for—five counting herself—and beside that, there’s the patching and the cleaning. Then in between times she’s studying to try to pass the Douglas high school examinations, hoping someday to be a teacher. You’ll both like Etta. Don’t you think they will, Jerry?”

“Why, I reckon she’s likeable,” the cowboy said indifferently. He was thinking how much more enthusiasm he could have put into that reply if his mother had asked, “Etta will like Mary, won’t she, Jerry?” Rising, he smiled down at the girl of whom he was thinking. “I’ll go and saddle Dusky for you,” he told her. “She’s as easy riding as a rocking horse and as pretty a creature as we ever had on *Bar N*.”

When the boys were gone, the girls insisted on washing the breakfast dishes. Then they made their beds. As they expected, they found the saddled ponies waiting for them near the side door.

Mrs. Newcomb gave Mary a flat, soft parcel. “Slip it over your saddle horn, dear,” she suggested, “and tell Etta that the flannel in the parcel is for her to make into nighties for Baby Bess.”

Dusky was as beautiful a horse as Jerry had said. Graceful, slender-limbed, with a coat of soft gray-black velvet—the color of dusk. Dora’s mount was named “Old Reliable.” Mrs. Newcomb smoothed its near flank lovingly. “I used to ride this one all over the range, and even into town, when we were both younger,” she told them.

The girls cantered leisurely down the cottonwood shaded lane and then turned, not toward the right which led to the highway, but toward the left on a rough canyon road that ascended gradually up a low tree-covered mountain.

Brambly bushes grew along the trail showing that the ground was not entirely dry. A curve in the road revealed the reason. A wide, stony creek-bed was ahead of them, and, in the middle of it, was a crystal-clear, rushing stream.

The horses waded through the water spatteringly. Old Reliable seemed not to notice the little whirlpools at his feet, but Dusky put back his ears and did a bit of side stepping. Mary, unafraid, spoke gently and patted his glossy neck. With a graceful leap, the bank was reached. There was a steep scramble for both horses; loose rock rattled down to the brook bed.

When they were on the rutty, climbing road again, Dora laughingly remarked, “Dusky already knows the voice of his mistress.” If there was a hidden meaning in Dora’s remark, Mary did not notice it, for what she said was, “Dora, who would ever expect a cowboy to be poetic, but Jerry surely was when he named this horse, don’t you think so?”

“Yeah!” Dora replied inelegantly. To herself she thought, “That may be a hopeful sign, thinking Jerry is a poet in cowboy guise.”

“It’s lovely up this canyon road, isn’t it?” All unconsciously Mary was gazing about her, contentedly drinking in the beauty of the cool, shadowy, rocky places on either side. Aspen, ash and cottonwood trees grew tall, their long roots

drawing moisture from the tumbling brook.

Half a mile up the canyon there was a clearing, and in it stood a very old log hut with adobe-filled cracks. A lean-to on one side had recently been put up. In a small, fenced-in yard were a dozen hens, and down nearer the brook was a garden patch. Two small, red-headed boys in overalls were there busily weeding. Near them, on a grassy plot, a spotted cow was tethered. Back of the house, hanging on a line, was a rather nondescript wash, but, nevertheless, it was clean.

The front door stood open but no one was in sight. Mary and Dora, leaving the road, turned their horses toward the small house.

“I feel sort of queer,” Mary said, “sort of story-bookish—coming to call on a strange girl in this romantic canyon and—”

“Sh-ss!” Dora warned. “Someone’s coming to the door.”

CHAPTER XVIII

A STRANGE HOSTESS

Etta Dooley, evidently unused to receiving calls, stood in the open door, her rather sad mouth and her fine hazel eyes unsmiling. Her plain brown cloth dress hid the graceful lines of her young form. She was wondering and waiting.

Mary and Dora dismounted, and, as the red-headed, ten-year-old twins had come pell-mell from the garden, Mary, smiling down at them in her captivating way, asked them not to let the horses wander far from the house. Then, with the same irresistible smile, she approached the still silent, solemn girl.

“Good morning, Etta,” Mary said brightly, pretending not to notice the other girl’s rather disconcerting gaze. “We are friends of Mrs. Newcomb, and she wanted us to become acquainted with you. I am Mary Moore. I live in Gleeson across the valley and Dora Bellman is my best friend from the East.”

Etta’s serious face lighted for a brief moment with a rather melancholy smile as she acknowledged the introduction.

Dora thought, “Poor girl, if *that’s* the best she can do, how cruel life must have been to her, yet she isn’t any older than we are, I am sure. I wish we could make her forget for a moment. I’d like to see her really smile.”

Etta had stepped to one side and was saying in her grave, musical voice, “Won’t you come in?” Then a dark red flush suffused her tanned face as she added, not without embarrassment, “Though there aren’t two safe chairs for you to sit on. The children made them, such as they are, out of boxes.”

Mary, ever able to blithely cope with any situation, exclaimed sincerely, “Oh, Etta, it’s so gloriously lovely outdoors today, let’s sit here. I’ll take the stump and

you two may have the fallen tree.”

Then, as Etta glanced back into the room, half hesitating, Mary asked, “Were you busy about something?”

“Nothing special,” Etta replied. “I wanted to see if we had wakened Baby Bess. She sleeps late and I like to have her.” Again the hazel eyes were sad. The reason was given. “She hasn’t been well since Mother died.” There was a sudden fierce tenderness in her voice as she added, “I can’t lose Baby Bess. She’s so like our mother.”

Then, as though amazed at her own unusual show of feeling before strangers, Etta sank down on the log and shut herself away from them behind a wall of reserve.

But Mary, baffled though she momentarily was, knew that Aunt Mollie was counting on the good their friendship would do Etta, and so, glancing about, she exclaimed, “I love that rushing brook! It seems so happy, sparkling in the sun and singing all the time.”

Dora helped out with, “This surely is a beauty spot here under the trees. It’s the prettiest place I’ve seen since I’ve been in Arizona.”

“I like it,” Etta said, then with unexpected tenseness she added, “I’d love it, oh, *how* I’d love it, if it were our own and not *charity*.”

Dora thought, “Now we’re getting at the down-deepness of things. Poor, but so proud! I wonder who in the world these Dooleys are. The name doesn’t suggest nobility.” But aloud she asked no questions. One just didn’t ask Etta about her personal affairs.

Dora groped for something that she could say that would start the conversational ball rolling, but, for once, she had a most unusual dearth of ideas.

Luckily there came a welcome break in the silence which was becoming embarrassing to the kindly intentioned visitors.

A sweet trilling baby-voice called, “Etta, I’s e ’wake.”

Instantly their strange hostess was on her feet, her eyes love-lighted, her voice

eager. "I'll bring her out. It's warm here in the sunshine."

While Etta was gone, Mary and Dora exchanged despairing glances which seemed to say, "We've come to a hurdle that we can't jump over." Aloud they said nothing, for, almost at once Etta reappeared. In her arms was a two-year-old; a pretty child with sleep-flushed cheeks, corn-flower blue eyes and tousled hair as yellow as cornsilk. Etta's expression told her love and pride in her little darling.

Baby Bess gazed unsmilingly at Dora as though she knew that here was someone who did not care for dolls, then she turned to look at Mary. Instantly she leaned toward her and held out both chubby arms, her sudden smile sweet and trusting.

Dora, watching Etta, saw a fleeting change of expression. What was it? Could Etta be jealous? But no, it wasn't that, for she gave Mary her first real smile of friendship.

"Baby Bess likes you," she said. "That means you must be *very* nice. Would you like to hold her?"

"Humph!" Dora thought as she watched Mary reseating herself on the stump and gathering the small child into her arms, "I reckon then I'm *not* nice."

After that, with the child contentedly nestling in Mary's arms, the ice melted in the conversational stream. Of her own accord Etta spoke of school. She asked how far along the girls were and astonished them by telling what she was doing, subjects far in advance of them.

Then came the surprising information that her father and mother had both been college graduates and had taught her. She had never attended a school. She in turn taught the twins. Then, in a burst of confidence which Dora rightly guessed was very foreign to her reserved nature, Etta said, "My father lost a fortune four years ago. He made very unwise investments. After that Mother's health failed and we came West. Dad did not know how to earn money. He grew old very suddenly," then, once again, despair made her face far older than her years. She threw her arms wide. "All this tells the rest of our story."

Mary's blue eyes held tears of sympathy which she hid in the child's yellow curls. Etta would not want sympathy.

Luckily at that moment there came a welcome interruption. A gay hallooing lower down the road announced the approach of Dick and Jerry.

Dora could see Etta rebuilding her wall of reserve. She acknowledged the introduction to Dick with a formal, unsmiling bow. Baby Bess kept the situation from becoming awkward by welcoming Jerry with delighted crows and leaps. The tall cowboy, his sombrero pushed back on his head, took her in his strong hands and lifted her high. The child's gurgling excited laughter was like the rippling laughter of the mountain brook. After a few moments Jerry gave the baby to Etta. The twins came around a clump of cottonwood trees leading the horses, their freckled faces bright with wide grins, their Irish blue eyes laughing. Not for them the anxiety and sorrow that so crushed their big sister.

Jerry tossed them coins to pay them for the care they had taken of the ponies. Dora, glancing quickly at Etta, saw that the troubled expression was again brooding in her eyes.

Later, when Mary and Dora had said goodbye to their new friend and were riding away up the canyon road, Dora said, "Jerry, doesn't it seem queer to you that the boys are so different from their sister? I should almost think that *she* belonged to an entirely different family."

"A changeling, perhaps," Dick suggested.

"Me no sabe," the cowboy replied lightly. He was thinking of a very pleasant dream of his own just then.

Mary said with fervor, "Anyway, *whoever* she is, I think she is a darling girl and the baby is adorable. I wish that we lived nearer that we might see her oftener, Dora." Then, before her friend could reply, Mary added brightly, "Oh, Jerry, I know where you are taking us. You want to show Dick your own five hundred acres, don't you? It's the loveliest spot in all the country round, I think."

Jerry's gray eyes brightened. "That's what I *hoped* you would think, Little Sister," he said in a low voice, which the other two, following, could not hear.

They had gone about half a mile up the winding, slowly climbing road when Jerry stopped. The mountain had flattened out in a wide grass-covered tableland moistened by many underground springs.

Jerry waved his left hand. "This all was blue and yellow with wild flowers after the spring rains," he told them. Mary turned her horse off the road and went to the edge of the hurrying brook.

"See, Dick," she called, "this is where Jerry is going to build him a house some day. His granddad willed it to him. It takes in the part of the canyon where the Dooleys are, doesn't it?"

"Close to it," Jerry replied. "Their garden is on my line, but Dad and I will never put up fences."

"Of course not!" Dora exclaimed. "Since you are the only child, it will all be yours."

"There's a jolly fine view from here," Dick said admiringly as he sat on his horse gazing across the valley to the far range beyond Gleeson.

As they rode back down the valley Dora was thinking, "How can Mary help knowing that Jerry hopes that *she* will be the one to live in the house he plans building?" Then, with a little shrug, her thought ended with, "Oh well, and oh well, the future will reveal all."

Down the road Mary was saying, "Jerry, I didn't give that flannel to Etta. I just couldn't. I was afraid she would think that we had come *only* for charitable reasons. Of course we did in the beginning, but, afterwards, I was so glad something had given me a chance to meet her."

A solution was offered by the sudden appearance of the twins by the roadside.

Jerry, slipping the parcel from Mary's saddle horn, tossed it down, calling, "This is for Baby Bess, tell Sister Etta."

Mary flashed him a bright, relieved smile as they went on down the canyon road.

CHAPTER XIX

A GUN SHOT

Early that afternoon Jerry and Dick drove the small car around to the side door of the ranch house and hallooed for the girls, who appeared, one on either side of a beaming Aunt Mollie.

“We’ve had a wonderful time, you dear.” Mary kissed the older woman’s tanned cheek lovingly.

“Spiffy-fine!” Dora’s dark glowing eyes seconded the enthusiasm of the remark. “Please ask us again.”

“Any time, no one *could* be more welcome, and make it soon.” After the girls had run down to the car, Mrs. Newcomb turned back into the kitchen where she was keeping Mr. Newcomb’s mid-day meal warm as he had not yet returned from riding the range.

The boys leaped out and Jerry opened the front door with a flourish. He glanced at Mary suspiciously. “You girls look as though you were plotting mischief.”

“Not that,” Mary denied. “We’ve just been composing Verse Eight for our Cowboy Song. You know they have to be forty verses long. Ready, Dora?”

Then together they laughingly sang—

“Two jolly girls and cowboys twain
Start out adventuring once again.

 Come, come, coma,

 Coma, coma, kee.

 Come, come, coma,

Come with we.”

“Not so hot!” Dick commented. “Wait till I’ve had time to cook up one. Jerry, we’ll do Verse Nine after awhile.”

“Drive fast enough to cool us, won’t you, Jerry, for it surely *is* torrid today,” Dora urged as she sprang nimbly into the rumble followed by Dick. “You two have your heads sheltered but we poor exposed pussons are likely to have frizzled brains.”

Dick, sinking down as comfortably as possible in the rather cramped quarters, grinned at his companion affably. “Luckily for us Jerry didn’t hear that or he would have sprung that old one, ‘what makes you think you have any?’”

Dora turned toward him rather blankly. “Any what?” she questioned, then added quickly, “Oh, of course, brains. I was wondering what those cows, that are watching us so intently, think that we are.”

“Some four-headed, square-bodied fierce animal that rattles all its bones when it runs, I suspect, and if they could hear Jerry’s horn, they’d take to the high timber up around the Dooleys’ clearing.”

Suddenly Dora became serious. “Dick,” she said, “isn’t that Etta a strange, interesting girl? Would you call her beautiful?”

“I wouldn’t call her at all,” Dick said sententiously; “I’m quite satisfied with my present companion.”

Ignoring his facetiousness, Dora continued, “Etta told us that her father lost a fortune four years ago. He evidently had inherited it. He couldn’t have made it himself, because, when it was lost, he was simply helpless. He didn’t know how to work and earn more. That implies that he belonged to a rich family, doesn’t it?”

“Possibly. In fact probably,” Dick agreed, looking with mock solemnity through his shell-rimmed glasses at the interested, olive-tinted face of his companion. “Is all this leading somewhere? Do you think that there *may* be rich relatives who ought to be notified of the Dooleys’ plight?”

Dora laughed as she acknowledged that she hadn’t thought that far. “Aren’t you

afraid we'll get sort of mixed up if we try to solve two mysteries at once?" Dick continued. "You know we're already hot on the trail of a clue that will unravel the Lucky Loon—Little Bodil mystery."

Dora turned brightly toward him. "Dick Farley," she announced, as one who had made an important discovery, "here is something! Little Bodil is described as having had deep blue eyes and cornsilk yellow hair."

"Sure thing, what of it? Etta's hair is dark brown."

"I'm talking about that Baby Bess, silly!" Dora told him. "Surely you noticed that she had—"

"Hair and eyes? Sure thing!" Dick finished her sentence jokingly, "but, according to my rather limited observation of the infant terrible, it usually starts life with blue eyes and yellow hair. Now are you going to tell me that this baby and Little Bodil have another similarity?"

Dora had turned and was looking out over the desert valley, which, for the past half hour, they had been crossing. Dick thought she was offended by his good-natured raillery, but, if she had been, she thought better of it and replied, "I had not noticed any other similarity."

"Well, neither had I," Dick, wishing to mollify her, confessed, "except that both of their names start with B."

The small car had turned on the cross road which led toward Gleeson. As they neared the high cliff-like gate which was the entrance to the box-shaped sandy front yard of Mr. Pederger's rock house and tomb, Dick leaned forward and called, "Hi there, Jerry! Dora suggests that we stop and visit Lucky Loon's estate. We aren't in any particular hurry, are we?"

The rattling of the car was stilled as Jerry drew to one side of the road and stopped. He got out and glanced up at the sun. It still was high in a gleaming blue sky. "It's hours yet before milking time," he replied. Then to Mary, "What is *your* wish, Little Sister?"

Dora thought, "*Never* a brother in all this world puts so much tenderness into *that* name. Leastwise *mine* don't!"

Mary had evidently replied that she would like to revisit the rock house, for Jerry was assisting her from the car. Dick had learned from past experience that Dora scorned assistance. Two girls could *not* be more unlike.

Before they entered the rock gate, Dick implored with pretended earnestness, "For Pete's sake, don't any of you imagine you hear a gun shot, will you?"

"Not unless we really *do* hear one," Mary said.

Dora, to be impish, declared, "I'm prophesying that we *will* hear a gun fired before we leave this enclosure."

The sand was deep and the walking was hard. Jerry, with a hand under Mary's right elbow, helped her along, but Dora ploughed alone, with Dick, making no better headway, at her side.

"When we first visited this place," Dora began, "I felt that there was sort of a deathlike atmosphere about it. It's so terribly still and with bleached skeletons lying around. Now that I *know* it is Lucky Loon's tomb," she glanced up at the rock house and shuddered, "it seems more uncanny than ever."

Dick, having left the others, wandered along the base of the cliff on which stood the rock house. The front of it had broken away leaving a wide gap at the top.

"Here's where Lucky Loon went up, I suppose." Dick pointed to irregular steps that seemed to have been hewn out of the leaning rock. "We *could* go up these stairs to the top of this rock, but nothing short of a mountain goat could leap that chasm."

"I reckon you're right," Jerry agreed.

Dick was regarding the gap speculatively. "If a fellow could throw a rope from the top of this leaning rock over to the house and make it secure somehow—"

Dora teasingly interrupted, "I didn't know, Doctor Dick, that *you* could walk a tight rope."

"Oh sure, I can do anything I set out to!" was the joking reply. "However, I meant to walk across it with my hands."

“It can’t be done.” The cowboy shook his head.

“Anyhow,” Dick declared, “you all wait here while I see how far up these old stairs I can climb. From the top I can better estimate how big a goat will be required to carry me over.”

“Dick,” Mary laughed, “I never knew you to be so nonsensical.”

Dora tried to detain him, saying, “If you succeed in climbing up to the top of this leaning rock, you *might* be directly opposite the open door of the rock house.”

“Well, what of it!” Dick was puzzled, for Dora’s expression was serious and almost fearful.

“That Evil Eye Turquoise *might* look right out at you!”

“Surely *you* don’t believe *that* yarn!” Dick smiled down at her from the first step, for he had started to climb. He reached up to catch at a higher step with one hand when he uttered a terrorized scream and fairly dropped back to the ground, his arm held out. Clinging to his coat sleeve, perilously close to his wrist, was a huge lizard, a Gila Monster, thick-bodied, hideously mottled, dull-yellow, orange-red, dead-black. It had a blunt head and short legs that were clawing the air. The girls echoed Dick’s scream. Jerry, leaping forward, gave a warning cry. “*Don’t drop your arm!*” Then the quick command, “*Girls, get back of me!*” Whipping out his gun, he fired. The ugly reptile dropped to the sand, its muscles convulsing.

Dora ran to Dick and pulled back his sleeve. “Thank heavens,” she cried, “he didn’t touch your wrist.”

“I reckon you’ve had a narrow escape all right, old man,” Jerry declared, his tone one of great relief. Then, self-rebukingly, “I ought to have warned you. *Never* put your feet or your hands *anywhere* that you can’t see.”

“Do you suppose there’s any poison in my coat sleeve?” Dick asked anxiously.

“No, I reckon not,” the cowboy said. “A Gila Monster packs his poison in his lower jaw and he has to turn over on his back before he can get it into a wound he makes.” Then, glancing at Mary and seeing that she still looked white and was trembling, he exclaimed, “Come, let’s go. I reckon it’s too hot in here at this

hour.”

Dora, hardly knowing that she did so, clung to Dick’s arm as they waded through the sand to the gate.

“Oh, how I do hope we’ll never, *never* have to come to this awful place again,” Mary said. “To think that Dick might have lost his life here.”

“Well, I didn’t!” Dick replied. Then, with an effort at levity, he added, “Dora, *you won!* We *did* hear a gun shot.”

CHAPTER XX

INTRODUCING AN AIR SCOUT

As they were nearing Gleeson, Dick leaned forward and called, "Jerry, Dora and I were wondering if we ought to tell old Silas Harvey that we have found Little Bodil's trunk?"

Not until the small car had climbed the last ascending stretch of road to the tableland and had stopped in front of the ancient corner store did he receive a reply. Then, jumping out, Jerry said in a low voice, "Mary and I have been talking it over and we reckon that we'd better wait awhile before telling." Then to the girl on the front seat, "Shall I get your mail?"

"And mine! And mine!" a chorus from the rumble.

There were letters and papers but one that especially pleased the girls.

"Another bulgy-budget from Polly and Patsy," Dora exulted.

"They're our two best friends back East at Sunnybank-on-the-Hudson where I live." This she explained to Dick as the little car started to rattle up the hill road through the deserted ghost town.

"I can tell you the rest," Dick recited. "Polly is fat and jolly and eats chocolates by the box. Patsy is clever, red-headed and a boy-hater. Have I got it right? Anyway I'm sure that's what you said the first time you told me about them. Oh, yes—all together you call yourselves 'The Quadralettes.'"

"Righto. Go to the head of the class. Although you did draw one minus. Patsy is no longer a boy-hater. She's met her conqueror. Or at least so their last letter reported. I'm wild to get home so that we may read this." Then leaning forward,

she called through the opening in the old top which covered the front seat, "Jerry, can't you boys stay awhile? I'd like to share this letter with you and Dick."

"Oh, yes, please do," Mary seconded brightly. "I'm sure it isn't time yet to milk that cow." This was teasingly added, remembering what Jerry had said soon after the noon hour.

"You don't have to plead, Little Sister," Jerry smiled down into the eager, upturned face that looked so fair to him; "if it was time to milk the cow, I reckon I'd let the calf do it. We only need milk enough for the family and this morning Bossie was extra generous."

When the Moore house was reached, Mary, anxious to see her dad, hurried indoors and went directly to his room. He had just awakened from his nap and looked so much better that Mary exclaimed gladly, "Dad, you'll be sitting out on the porch next week. I'm just ever so sure that you will." Then, to the nurse who had entered, "Oh, Mrs. Farley, isn't Dad wonderfully improved? Don't you think he'll be well enough to go back East with me in October when school opens?"

"I'm sure of it!" the kind woman replied, then, dismissing the girl, she added, "It's time for the alcohol rub, dearie. Come back at four and you may read to your dad until supper time."

"Oh, I surely will." For a long moment Mary's rosebud cheek pressed the thin wan one she so loved, then she slipped away.

Dick had spoken with his mother a brief moment when Mary had first gone in and she had been pleased to see the deepening tan on his face. The boy had not told her of his recent narrow escape, as Jerry had called it when the Gila Monster had set its cruel jaws on his coat sleeve. Brave as he was, Dick could not recall the terror of that moment without experiencing it all over again. He was sure he would have nightmares about it for a long time to come.

When Dora tripped down from upstairs where she had been to tidy up, she found Dick waiting for her in the lower hall.

"Where are the two Erries?" she asked, then laughed as he looked mystified. "Mary and Jerry. Of course if it were spelled Merry, it would be better."

“In the kitchen,” Dick replied. “I was told to guide you thence.”

They heard spoons rattling in glasses. “Oh, good!” Dora exclaimed. “That sounds like a nice, cool drink.”

Nor was she wrong. There at the table in the shady corner of the kitchen stood Mary mixing fruit juices she had poured from cans which Jerry had opened.

“Yum! Yum!” Dora exclaimed in high appreciation. “What is better than pineapple and strawberry juice and cold water from the spring cellar?”

“Sounds good to me,” Dick said, smacking his lips with anticipatory relish.

Mary called over her shoulder, “Dora, fetch some of Carmelita’s cookie snaps.” Then, as she placed the four tall glasses around the table, she added, “Sit wherever you want to. When the party is over, we’ll read the letter.” The refreshment lived up to its name and tasted even better than it looked. Dick, being on the outside, cleared away the things and Dora opened the letter.

The languid scrawl which so fitted Polly’s indolent personality was first in evidence, “Dear Absent Ones,” Dora read aloud—

“Greetings from Camp Winnichook in the Adirondacks—(so cool that we have to wear our sweater coats)—to the sizzling sands of desert Arizona.”

Then Patsy’s quick, jerky penmanship interrupted. “Crickets, just reading that made me wipe my freckled brow. Ain’t it awful? Those reddish brown dots that were so piquant on my pert pug nose have soared to my brow, spread to my ears, and dived to my chin. But, even with my beauty thus blemished, H. H. thinks I’m—”

Big sprawling words cut in with, “It must be a case of love them and leave them then, for his winged lordship is about to fly away.” There was a blot of ink at that point as though there had been a struggle over the pen. Evidently Patsy had won, as her small scratchy penmanship followed. “Since H. H. is *my* friend, I consider it my sacred right to reveal all. Harry Hulbert, surely you remember all about him and his perfectly spiffy silver plane, which honestly looks like a big seagull. Oh, misery! I’m getting all tangled up. What I’m trying to say is that we had told you that he’s studying to be a pilot and that when he got his papers, he was to fly West and be an air scout. Well, he’s had ’em and he’s done gone! The whole

object of this epistle is to introduce you to Harry before he drops down upon you. Heavens, I hope he won't do it literally. Wouldn't it be awful to have an airplane crash through your roof?"

Dora paused and looked glowingly across at Mary. "This flying Apollo is coming to Gleeson, I judge."

Mary replied, "I'm terribly disappointed. Of course I knew it *couldn't* happen, but I *did* wish, if *he* came, he could bring Patsy and Polly along with him."

Jerry asked, "What's this flying seagull going to do when he gets here?"

"He's going to be attached to the border patrol," Mary replied. "When there's been a holdup, of a train or a stage, I suppose, Harry Hulbert is to fly over that region and watch for the escaping bandits."

"Jolly!" Dick ejaculated. "That sounds like a great kind of an adventure to me. Jerry, let's welcome him like a long lost brother; then, at least, he'll take us up in his Seagull."

Before the cowboy could reply Dora had continued reading, "Polly has told you that I'm goofy about H. H. but don't you believe a word of it. I picked him out for *you*, Mary, so take him and be grateful."

Dora wanted to look up at Jerry, but was afraid it would be too pointed, so she turned a page and exclaimed with interest, "Aha, *here* we have him in person. The Seagull's photograph no less."

It was an amusing snapshot. Under it was written, "Patsy Ordelle introducing Harry Hulbert to Mary Moore and Dora Bellman—also the ship."

A pert, pretty girl with windblown hair and laughing eyes was pointing toward the youth at her side, who, dressed in flying togs, stood by his ship. He was making a bow, evidently to acknowledge the introduction, and so his face was not fully revealed. This was remedied by another snapshot of the boy alone standing with one hand on his graceful silver plane. Although not good looking, really, he had a fine, sensitive face, was slenderly built and had keen alert eyes.

"Now I'll turn the mike over to Polly," the pert handwriting ended. The languid scrawl took up the tale.

“Guess I was wrong about Pat’s being dippy about the silver aviator. He’s been gone two days and she’s been canoeing with ‘The Poet’ from ‘Crow’s-Nest-Camp’ up in the hills from dawn till dark and even by moonlight. For a once-was boy-hater, she’s going some.

“Well, say hello to Harry for us. He really is a decent kid. Write us the minute he lands. Wish I’d thought to send you a batch of fudge I’d made. Nuts are just crowded in it. Oh, well, up so near the sun it would probably have melted. Tra-la for now.

From Poll and Pat.”

Mary looked thoughtfully at Jerry. “If Harry Hulbert left the Atlantic coast two days before this letter started, he must be in Arizona by now.”

“I reckon so. A mail pilot makes it in less than three days.”

Dora thought, “Poor Jerry, I ‘reckon’ *he* didn’t like that part about H. H. being donated to his Mary, but he isn’t going to say so, not Jerry!”

A small clock on the kitchen shelf back of the big stove made four little tingling noises. Mary sprang up. Holding out her hand to the cowboy, she said, “Stay for supper if you think the calf can milk the cow. I’m going to read to Dad for an hour. Then I’ll be back again.”

CHAPTER XXI

A POSSIBLE CLUE

At five, which was the invalid's supper hour, Mary emerged from the living-room and heard excited voices from behind the closed door of her father's study across the hall.

Dora, who had been listening for her friend's footsteps, threw the door wide. Her olive-tinted face told Mary that something had happened even before Jerry exclaimed: "Little Sister, come here and see what Dick has found. We think it's a clue."

"A clue about Little Bodil *here* in Dad's study?" Mary's voice was amazed and doubting.

"Oh, it's something Dick himself brought into the house. Don't tell," Dora implored the boys. "See if Mary can guess."

The fair girl gazed thoughtfully at the other three. Dick, beaming upon her, was holding something behind his back.

"Hmm. Let me see." Mary put one slim white finger against her head, as though trying to think deeply. Then she laughed merrily. "I'd like to seem terribly dumb and drag out the suspense for you all, but, of course, it's as plain as the sun on a clear day. Dick only kept *one* thing from the trunk, and that one thing was a small carpet slipper. But I don't see how *that* could possibly be a clue."

"Very well, my dear young lady, we will show you." Dick handed the slipper to her. "First, thrust your dainty fingers into its toe. Do you find a clue there?"

"No, I do not." Mary was frankly curious.

“Now, turn the slipper over. What do you see?”

Mary turned the small worn slipper wonderingly and reported, “A loose patch.” Then, gleefully, “Oh, I know, Dick, that patch is some kind of coarse paper and on the inside of it, there’s writing. Is that it? Have I guessed right?”

“Well,” Dick confessed, “you know now as much as we do. We were just about to remove the patch when you came in. Jerry, let me take your knife. I left mine on a fence post over at *Bar N.*”

The four young people stood close to one of the long windows while Dick cut the coarse thread that held the patch.

“Oh, do hurry!” Dora begged. “Your fingers are all thumbs. Here, let me do that.” But Dick shook his head, saying boyishly, “It’s my slipper, isn’t it?”

“One more stitch and we shall know all,” Jerry said, then, smiling across at Mary, he asked, “What do *you* reckon that we will know?”

“I can’t guess what’s *in* the letter, of course,” that little maid replied, “but it *can’t* be anything that will tell us whether the child was eaten up by wild animals or carried off by bandits.”

The ragged piece of brown paper, which had evidently been torn from a package wrapping, was removed and opened. Although there had been writing on it at one time, it was so blurred that it was hard to decipher. Mary found a magnifying glass in her father’s desk. Dora, Dick and Jerry stood with their heads together back of the younger girl’s chair, and when they thought they had figured a word out correctly, Mary, seated at the desk, wrote it down. After half an hour, they had made out only two words of the message and had guessed at the blurred signature.

“lonesome—write—Miss Burger,
Gray Bluffs,
New Mexico.”

There were several other words which they could not make out.

Mary took the letter, spread it on the desk before her and gazed intently at it through the magnifying glass. Then, smiling up at the others, a twinkle in her

eyes, she said, “This is it—perhaps.

‘Dear Little Bodil,

When you reach the strange place where you are going, you may be lonesome. If you are, do write often to your good friend,

Miss Burger.’”

“Well, I reckon that’ll do pretty nigh as well as anything else,” Jerry said. Then, glancing out of the window at the late afternoon sun, he grinningly announced that since the calf, by that time, had milked the cow, he and Dick would accept Mary’s previously given invitation and stay for supper.

“Oh, Jerry!” Mary stood up and caught hold of the cowboy’s arm. “I know by the gleam in your eyes that you think this bit of paper *may* be a clue worth following up.”

“Yes, I sure do,” was the earnest reply. “I reckon this Miss Burger, if we got the name right, was a friend to the little girl somewhere, sometime.”

“Shall we write to her now?” Mary dropped back into the desk chair. “If she’s living, she will surely answer.”

“But,” Dick was not yet convinced that it was a helpful clue, “*how* can Miss Burger know—”

“Stupid!” Dora interrupted. “Of course Miss Burger *won’t* know whether Little Bodil was eaten by wild animals or carried off by bandits, but *if* the child lived, it’s more than likely, isn’t it, that she *did* write and tell this friend.”

“True enough!” Dick agreed. “But, Lady Sleuth, if Bodil wrote Miss Burger telling where *she* was, isn’t it likely that Mr. Pedersen also wrote the same woman telling where *he* was, and presto, his long search would be over. He would have found his child.”

“Oh, of course, Dick! You weren’t stupid after all.” Dora was properly apologetic. Then, she added ruefully, “Since this clue isn’t any good, we got

thrilled up over it for nothing at all.”

Jerry spoke in his slow drawl. “I cain’t be sure the clue is no good until we’ve heard from this Miss Burger.”

“Well spoken, old man,” Dick commended. “If we could send a night-letter, we *might* have an answer at once, if—”

“That ‘if’ looms large,” Dora commented dubiously. “There isn’t a telegraph office in *this* ghost town, and, moreover, Miss Burger may not be alive and if she is, wouldn’t she be *awfully* ancient?”

“Not necessarily,” Mary replied, glancing up at the others thoughtfully. “If Little Bodil *is* alive, she will be about fifty. This Miss Burger may have been a very young woman.”

“About that night telegram,” Jerry said. “We can have one sent out of Tombstone up to nine o’clock. What, say that we ride over there as soon as we’ve had supper.”

“Great!” Dick ejaculated. “There’ll be a full moon to light us home again.”

Mary sprang up and clapped her hands gleefully. “It will be jolly fun anyway. And it *may* be a good clue. Come on now, let’s storm the kitchen and help Carmelita. We ought to start as soon as we can.”

* * * * *

It was early twilight when the faithful little car (that always seemed just about to fall apart but which never did) drew up in front of the combination blacksmith shop-oil station on the edge of Gleeson.

Seth Tully, one of the grizzled, leathery old-timers, hobbled out of a small, crumbling adobe building. It was evident that he was much excited about something and eager to have someone to talk to.

“Howdy, folks,” he began in his high, uncertain, falsetto voice, “I reckon as you-all heerd how a freight train was held up last night over in Dead Hoss Gulch.” Then, seeing the boys’ amazement and the girls’ dismay, he went on exultingly, “Yes, siree! Thar was bags of rich ore in one o’ them cars—the hindmost one,

an', time take it, if them thar bandits wa'n't wise to it. The train allays goes durn slow along that steep grade climbing up out o' the gulch. Well, sir, *what* did them bandits do?" The old man was becoming dramatic in his delight at having such thrilled listeners. "Dum blast it, if a parcel of 'em didn't hold up the engineer and another parcel of 'em cut loose that hind car. *Crash* it went back'ards down that thar grade, jumped the track and smashed to smithers."

"Oh, Mr. Tully," Mary cried, "was anyone killed?"

The old man shook his head. "Nope, the guard wa'n't kilt, but them bandits reckoned as how he was, 'totherwise they'd have plugged him. He come to, but they'd cleared out, the whule pack of 'em, an' they'd tuk the ore with 'em."

Dora, watching the old man's glittering, pale-blue eyes that were deep-sunken under shaggy brows, thought that he seemed actually pleased about it all, nor was she wrong as his next remark showed.

"Say, Jerry-kid, that thar holdup smacks o' old times. It was gettin' too gol-darned quiet around these here parts. Needed suthin' like this to sort o' liven us up." He ended with a cackling laugh that made Mary shudder.

When they were again rattling along the lonely, rutty road which led to Tombstone, the nearest town of any size, Mary, nestling close to Jerry, asked, "Big Brother, is Dead Horse Gulch near here?"

"No, Little Sister, it isn't, and, as for the bandits, they're over the border in Mexico by now, I reckon. Don't you go to worrying about *them*!"

In the rumble seat, a glowing-eyed Dora was saying: "Dick Farley, *what* if this should be the *same* robber gang—oh, I'm trying to say—"

"I get you!" Dick put in. "You're wondering if the three bandits who held up the stage and may have kidnapped Little Bodil are *in* this gang. I doubt it. They'd be *old* fellows by now. It takes young blood to do deeds of daring."

Dora's eyes were still glowing. "Dick," she said prophetically, "I have a hunch that *this* robbery is going to do a lot to help us solve the mystery about Little Bodil. I *may* be wrong, but, *you* may be surprised."

CHAPTER XXII

AN INTERESTING ARRIVAL

The road to Tombstone was narrow, rutty and lonesome. Every now and then it dipped down into a gravelly wash, arroyos in the making, that were, year after year, being deepened by the torrents that rushed down the not-distant mountain sides after a cloudburst. Along the banks of these dry creek-beds grew low cottonwood trees, making shelters behind which bandits *might* lurk if they were so inclined. But the girls, having been assured by Jerry that the train robbers had long since crossed the Mexican border, were not really fearful. For once, even Mary was not using her imagination to a frightening extent.

“Big Brother,” she said, “I was just thinking about that aviator friend of Patsy’s. Don’t you think it must be wonderful to be flying at night up under those lovely white stars? They look so close to the earth here in Arizona as though Harry Hulbert might almost have to weave his way among them.”

Jerry, evidently more desirous of talking of stars than of the aviator of the “Seagull,” stated matter-of-factly, “It’s the clear air here that makes the stars look so large and close—sort of like lanterns hung in a blue-black roof over our heads.”

Just then a huge star shot across the heavens leaving a trail of fire. Mary whirled to call back, “Oh, Dora, did you wish on that shooting star?”

“Nope! Didn’t see it!” was the laconic reply.

“Did you?” Jerry asked in a low voice. How he hoped Mary had echoed *his* wish, but what she said was, “Yes, I hoped the Seagull would make a safe landing. It must be terribly dangerous landing among so many mountain peaks, or, one might even be forced down in the middle of a barren stretch of desert, oh,

miles from water or anyone!”

If Jerry were disappointed, he made no comment. Dora leaned forward to call, “From the top of the next little hill we’d ought to be able to see the lights of Tombstone, hadn’t we, Jerry?”

“I reckon we will, lest be the power plant’s out of commission.”

The rather feeble lights of the rattly old car did little to illumine the well of darkness in which they were riding. The wash they were crossing was wide and deep and the girls were both glad when they climbed that last little hill and were nearer the stars again. From the top, they could see the black wall of mountains to the distant right of them, which Jerry had called “The Dragoons.” A desert valley at its foot stretched away for many miles shimmering in the starlight. Not far ahead of them was a cluster of sand hills—“the silver hills”—on which stood the small mining-town of Tombstone. The power plant was in order, as was evidenced by the twinkling of lights. A friendly group of them marked the main street, and scattered lights, farther and farther apart, were shining from the windows of homes. Down the little hill the car dropped, then began the last long climb up to the town.

On the main street there were unshaven, roughly dressed men, some from the range, others from the mines, loitering about in front of a lighted pool hall. They were talking, some of them excitedly, about the recent train robbery. Jerry drew his car to the curb and leaped out. Three young cowboys called a greeting to him. He replied in a friendly way, but turned at once to assist Mary. Dick and Dora followed the other two into a low adobe building labeled “Post Office.” A light was burning in a small back room. Jerry opened the door and entered. A middle-aged man, whose gauntness suggested that he had come there to be cured of the “white plague,” smiled affably. “Evening, Jerry-boy,” he said. “Wait till I get this message. The wires are keeping hot tonight along of that train robbery.”

The uneven clicking of the instrument ended; the man scribbled a few words, called a lounging boy from a dark corner and dispatched him to Sheriff Goode. Jerry introduced his companions to Mr. Hale, then explained the object of their visit.

Mr. Hale shook his head. “Well, that’s just too bad,” he said. “I happen to know that Gray Bluffs country well. Stopped off when I first came West, health-

hunting, but it didn't agree with me there; nothing like this Tombstone shine and air to make sick lungs well."

His tanned face and bright eyes told his enthusiasm, but he added quickly, "*That* won't interest you any. What I started to say is that Gray Bluffs isn't a real town, that is not *now*. It was, of course, when they first found gold in the bluffs, but it petered out, the post office moved to another place and so did the folks who'd lived there."

"Did you ever hear of a woman named Burger over there?" Jerry asked.

"Sure! That was the name of the postmistress, Miss Kate Burger. She died, though, along about five years ago."

Just then the instrument began an excited clicking. The operator turned his attention to it. "Say, that's great!" he ejaculated as though addressing whoever was sending the message.

"Oh, Mr. Hale, *have* they caught the robbers?" Mary asked eagerly.

"No, not that." The man was scribbling rapidly. "Say, hasn't that kid—oh, here you are, Trombone. Take this back to the Deputy Sheriff's office. Dep's been loco all day." Then to the interested listeners, he explained, "He'd been promised the help of an air scout from the East; thought maybe he'd had a smashup; was due this morning early. Well, that last message was from the head office of the border patrol. The air scout will be along any time now."

"Oh, Mr. Hale, is his name Harry Hulbert?" Mary, her pretty cheeks flushed, listened eagerly for the answer.

"Don't know! Haven't heard! Say, Jerry." The man looked up quickly, and Dora thought she'd never seen such keen, eagle-like eyes. "You boys had better drop out the back way if you can. Dep Goode is rounding up all the able-bodied fellows he can find for the next posse that's to start as soon as this air pilot does a little scouting."

Mary, suddenly panicky at the idea, caught the cowboy's arm. "Oh, Big Brother," she cried, forgetting that the name would sound strange to a man who knew that Jerry had no sisters, "can't we get away somehow before we're seen?"

Jerry looked at her tenderly, but shook his head. “No, I cain’t dodge my duty. I *must* volunteer!” Then, to the other boy, “Dick, you drive the girls back to Gleeson, will you? I reckon the Deputy Sheriff’ll let you off. He isn’t after tenderfoot help, meaning no harm, they’d be more of a hindrance.”

Dick flushed, but knowing that Jerry always meant whatever he said in the kindest way, he expressed his disappointment. “Oh, I say, Jerry, can’t I come back after I’ve taken the girls home? I’d like awfully well to hang around and watch what happens. I’ll promise not to get underfoot or be in the way.”

Before Jerry could reply, Mary caught his coat sleeve and exclaimed, her eyes like stars, “Hark, don’t you hear an airplane?”

They all listened and heard distinctly from above the hum of a motor. Dick sprang toward the door. “Come on, everyone, let’s be among those present on the reception committee,” he said. Then, remembering his manners, he stepped back and held the door open for the girls to pass out.

“Good night, Mr. Hale, and thanks a lot,” Mary called with her sweetest smile.

“Hope you’ll all drop in again.” The man had only time to nod before his attention was again called to the busy little instrument.

Out in the street, there were many more men. As the news of the robbery had spread by horseback riders and remote ranch telephones, men had galloped into town eager to offer their services. Now they all stood or sat their horses, silent, for the most part, as they watched the great silver bird which was slowly circling round and round over their heads.

The moon had risen above distant peaks and was high enough to make the street dimly lighted.

“Oh, it *must* be Harry!” Mary whispered excitedly as she clutched Jerry’s arm not knowing that she did so. “That plane *is* as silvery as a seagull, just as Patsy and Polly wrote us.”

“Wonder why he doesn’t land,” Dick commented.

“I reckon there isn’t but one safe landing place in this town, and that’s right here where the crowd is standing. This square, out front of the post office, has been

landed on before now.”

“See! Something’s falling from the plane.” Dora pointed upward. “It’s a small something! What *can* it be?”

The object fell like a plummet and landed at their feet. “It’s an aluminum bottle. Oh, look! There’s a note attached to it.” Dora picked it up.

“Here comes Deputy Sheriff Goode,” Jerry told the others. “Give it to me! I’ll hand it to him.”

The Deputy Sheriff’s restless horse did not stop prancing while the man opened and read the note. Then he flung it to the ground, pocketing the small bottle.

Dick, feeling sure that the message had not been of a private nature, picked it up and with the aid of his flash he read: “Whirl a lantern, will you, where I’m supposed to land. A. S. H. H.”

“A. S. means air scout, of course,” Dick said.

“And H. H. is Harry Hulbert. Oh, Dora, think of our meeting Patsy’s aviator.” Mary’s eyes were shining with excitement.

Jerry could not help hearing Dora’s reply. “*Not Patsy’s!*” was said teasingly. “Remember *this* young hero was chosen for *you*.”

“Oh, silly!” Mary retorted, but her rebuke did not seem to be voicing displeasure.

“Move back! Move back everyone! Scuttle! Five seconds to clear this square!” Cowmen on horseback were acting as mounted police and were so effective that in short order the big square was vacant and ready for the landing.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SILVER PLANE

There was an almost breathless silence for a moment as the small silver plane swooped gracefully down and made an easy landing; then the enthusiasm of the crowd burst forth in shouts of welcome.

“Say, Kid, *you’re* all right!”

“That’s the kind of a cayuse to be riding!”

“A silver airship for the silver city!”

“Hurrah for the skidder of the skies!”

Horses on the outskirts of the crowd, unused to such commotion, reared and pranced on their hind legs. Then, seeming to believe that something *might* be lacking in the warmth of their welcome, a cowboy shot off his gun into the air. Instantly Deputy Sheriff Goode shouted for silence.

“Nixy on that!” he commanded. “All of you fellows get to shootin’ an’ we won’t do much creepin’ up on the gang.”

“Goodness!” Mary said to Jerry. “He must think those bandits are hiding somewhere *near here*. They couldn’t possibly hear the shooting if they were over the border in Mexico, could they?”

The cowboy shook his head. “It’s just that he doesn’t want to take any chances, I reckon.” Then, generously, he added, “You girls will want to meet Harry Hulbert, won’t you? He’s talking to the ‘Dep’ now. Jehoshaphat! That’s too bad. He’s going right up again.”

“I guess the Deputy Sheriff wants Harry to start in scouting and not waste time visiting with girls,” Dora remarked.

“Back! Back everyone!” the deputized cowboys rode around the square, clearing it again, for the curious and interested crowd had pressed close to the plane.

“There, up she goes! Whoopee!” Some cowboy shouted in Mary’s ear. “Me for the air!” he waved his sombrero so close that it fanned her cheek.

“Ain’t that the plumb-beatenest way to go places?” another cowboy was actually addressing Dora in such a friendly manner that she replied in like spirit, “Yes, it’s great!”

Jerry turned to Dick. “Take the girls back to where we left the car, will you? I’m going to speak to Goode. Be over in a minute.”

“Oh, Big Brother,” Mary caught his hand, “don’t do anything that *might* be dangerous, will you? It would be terrible for your mother if anything happened to you.”

Hope and love had, for a moment, lighted the cowboy’s eyes, but the last part of Mary’s importuning had seemed to be entirely for another, and so, as he turned away, Jerry’s heart was heavy.

Mary’s gaze, he noticed, had quickly turned from him up to the sky where a silver plane was still discernible riding toward the moon.

Dick took an arm of each girl and the crowd made a path for them.

“I like these cowmen and boys, don’t you, Dora?” Mary had climbed into the rumble with her friend. “They have such nice, kind faces and they’re so picturesque with their wide hats and colored shirts and handkerchiefs.”

Dora nodded. “There’s a boy over there on horseback. See his leather chaps are fringed and he has spurs on his boots.”

“They act as though this was some sort of a celebration, don’t they, Dick?”

The boy was leaning against the car watching the milling throng which was being augmented in numbers by newcomers riding in from the dark desert.

“What’s the big show?” A weazened, grizzly-headed man in tattered clothes had suddenly appeared at Dick’s side. He had a canvas-covered roll strapped to his back and carried a stout stick. His pinched face was starved-looking and his eyes were feverishly bright.

Dick explained what was happening and, without a word, the queer creature scuttled out of sight in the crowd.

“That poor man!” Mary exclaimed sympathetically. “What *can* he be?”

“Don’t ask me,” Dick replied. “I haven’t been out here long enough to know all the types.”

A pleasant voice said, “That’s a typical desert rat. He digs around and sometimes finds a little gold, but mostly he lives on sand, I reckon.”

Mary recognized the speaker as a clerk in the grocery store. Before she could ask more about the poor unfortunate, someone hailed their informant and he hurried away.

Jerry returned and his face was grave. “I hardly know what to say,” he began. “I don’t want to frighten you girls unnecessarily, but Deputy Sheriff Goode thinks it would be unwise for you to return over that lonely road to Gleeson tonight, or, at least not until the hiding place of the bandits has been discovered.”

“Oh, Jerry!” Mary’s one thought was concern for her father. “I *must* let Dad know that I am safe and that I may not be home at once. Won’t you please telephone him? You will know best what to say.”

“Yes, I’ll be back in a minute.” They watched him pushing his way toward the one drug store in the town.

Mary turned toward Dick. “Now, what does *that* mean, do you suppose?”

“I think it merely means that the ‘Dep’ isn’t sure that the robbers *did* cross into Mexico. He thinks they may be hiding nearer here than that.”

“I thought as much,” Dora commented, “when he was so upset because a cowboy started shooting.”

Jerry was not gone long. "I explained to your mother, Dick. She said Mr. Moore is asleep and that she will not waken him. Her advice is that you girls take a room in the little old hotel here and wait until morning."

The girls were relieved as they had neither of them relished the idea of returning over that desolately lonesome road with bandits at large.

Jerry was continuing. "Mrs. Goode runs the hotel and she's just as nice and friendly as she can be. The mothering sort. Dick, you stay here in the car, will you, while I escort the girls across the road?"

"With the greatest of pleasure!" the Eastern boy said.

Dora teased, as she permitted him to assist her out of the rumble. "You ought *not* to say that you're pleased to have us *leave* you."

"Not *that*; NEVER!" Dick assured her, then in a low voice he confided, "I've been wild to be *in* on all this, and if I'd been sent home with you girls, I—"

Dora laughingly interrupted. "You might have been *in* it more than any of the others." She shuddered at the thought. "We three might have—"

"Now, who's using her imagination?" Mary inquired. Then, after scanning the heavens, she added, "Big Brother, the Seagull has flown entirely out of sight, hasn't it?"

"I reckon it has. Back in a minute, Dick."

Mary and Dora were thrilled with excitement and thought all that was transpiring a high adventure, although they *were* a little troubled, fearing that the three boys in whom they were interested might be in danger before the night was over.

The old adobe two-story building to which Jerry led the girls was across the wide square from the post office. The large office was filled with people, most of them women of the town who had gathered there. Many had come from the lonely outskirts. They had been afraid to stay alone in their homes while their men were bandit-hunting.

Jerry soon saw the pleasant face of the rather short, plump Mrs. Goode. He led the girls to her and explained their presence.

“So *you* are Mary Moore grown up!” the woman said kindly. “I knew your mother well when she came here as a bride. Everyone loved her in these parts; they sure did.” Then, to the tall cowboy who stood waiting, although impatient to be away, she assured him, “I’ll take good care of them, don’t fear!”

“I know you will. Good night, Mary and Dora.” The cowboy held out a hand to each then was gone.

Dora thought, “Oho, *something has* happened. There was no tenderness in *that* parting. Hum-m, what can it be? Ah, I believe I see light!”

Mary was saying, “I do hope that Harry Hulbert is all right. Isn’t it the most heroic thing that he is doing?”

“Who’s he, dearie?” Mrs. Goode, having heard, asked. “Oh, yes, the sky pilot. A nice face he has. I gave him a cup of coffee. His manners are the best ever. Well, come along upstairs. I’ll give you the front corner room where you can watch the goings-on, if you’d like that.”

“Oh yes, please do, Mrs. Goode. I never was more thrilled in all my days.” It was Dora speaking. “I know that I won’t sleep a single mite, will you, Mary?”

“I don’t intend to try,” that fair maid replied as they followed up the broad carpeted stairway and entered a plainly furnished hotel room. There were two large windows overlooking the square below and the girls, having said good night to their hostess, went at once to look down upon the crowd.

The men had divided into small groups and were talking earnestly together. A group of younger cowboys just in front of the hotel, were making merry. One of them strummed a guitar and several of them flung themselves about dancing wildly, improvising as they went along. Their efforts were applauded hilariously.

“No one would guess that they thought they *might* be going to battle with bandits before morning,” Mary said. Then she looked up at the moon-shimmered sky. For a long time she gazed intently at one spot.

“Is that a pale star or is it the little silver plane coming nearer?” she asked.

Dora watched the faintly glittering object, then exclaimed glowingly, “It surely is the Seagull. Oh, Mary, *do* you suppose Harry Hulbert has located those

bandits?”

CHAPTER XXIV

A LONG NIGHT WATCH

Someone in the crowd saw the approaching plane. A shout went up which was augmented to a roar of welcome. Once again a space was cleared; this time without the command from the Deputy Sheriff.

The girls threw open the window and leaned out as the plane landed and the men closed in about it. How they wished they could hear what was being said. They saw Harry Hulbert leap out and, by his excited gestures, the girls were sure that he had made some discovery which he considered important.

“He seems to be pointing toward ‘The Dragoons.’” Mary looked over the scattered buildings of the town, across the gray desert to the dull red cliffs that loomed dark in the moonlight.

Dora caught her friend’s arm and held it tight. “Mary Moore,” she cried, “if we had gone home tonight, we would have passed the side road that leads to ‘The Dragoons,’ wouldn’t we?”

Mary nodded, but said nothing. She knew what her friend was thinking.

“Watch what they’re doing now. The sheriff is having the men who are armed show their guns. Here come boys from the jail bringing more firearms.” Mary turned a face, white with alarm. “Oh, Dora, don’t you wish this was all over? Look, Jerry and Dick and Harry are getting up on horseback. I do hope Harry knows how to ride. Good gracious, Dora, those three boys are going with the sheriff to lead the posse. Isn’t that terrible?”

“I don’t know as it is,” was the surprisingly calm reply. “Naturally Harry would be the one to lead the men to the place where he saw the bandits hiding.”

Women in the office of the hotel, seeing that their men were about to ride away, rushed out to bid them goodbye.

The young boys and old men were not taken. After the others were gone, there was an almost deathlike stillness down in the square. The women returned indoors. Old men, many of them gray-bearded, stood in groups on the sidewalks talking in low tones and shaking their grizzled heads ominously. The boys trooped over to the pool hall. The proprietor had been among the men who had ridden away and so the boys could play without charge which they did gleefully.

Mary sank down on a low rocker near the window and her sweet blue eyes were tragic as she gazed up at her friend. "Dora," she said "if you were a boy, would you have dared to ride into a robber's den the way—"

"Sure thing," was the brief reply. Dora still stood gazing at the desert valley. Although the road disappeared from their sight when it first dipped down from the town, she knew that the riders would again be visible as they crossed to "The Dragoons."

"If we can see them crossing the valley, so can the bandits," she said, thinking aloud. "Of course, the robbers must have look-outs if that's what men are called who spy around to warn the others of danger."

"There they are! There they are!" Mary leaped to her feet to point. Dark distant objects were moving rapidly across the moonlit sands of the valley.

Suddenly Mary turned, a new alarm expressed in her face. "Dora," she cried, "now that only old men and boys are left here to protect this town, what if the bandits should circle around and rob the stores and the post office—"

"And carry off the beautiful young damsels," Dora laughingly added, "like a chapter out of an old-time story-book."

"It may be amusing to you," Mary seemed actually hurt, "but things *do* happen even *now* that are worse than anything I ever read in a book."

"Righto! Ah agrees, as Sambo says." Dora turned and slipped an arm about her friend, and then, as though trying to change her thought, she went on, "I wonder if that old darky and Marthy, his wife, will be working at Sunnybank Seminary next fall when we go back."

“That all seems so far away and so long ago, almost like a dream,” Mary replied, as she gazed down at the silver plane which had been left in the care of the old men. They were walking around it now, looking it over with frank curiosity.

Dora tried again. “How I do wish Patsy and Polly were here! Pat, especially, would get a great ‘kick,’ as she’d call it, out of all this excitement.”

“More than I am, no doubt,” Mary confessed. “My imagination is getting wilder and wilder every minute. I’m expecting something awful to happen right here and—what was that?” She jumped and put her hand on her heart.

“Someone knocked on the door.” Dora went to open it. Mrs. Goode, looking anxious in spite of her smile, said, “Don’t you girls want something to eat? It’s almost midnight and you must be hungry.”

“Oh, thank you, Mrs. Goode, I suppose we are hungry. We’re so terribly nervous, I don’t know as we could eat, really.”

“Well, try, dearies. Here’s Washita with a tray.”

Washita was an Indian girl with black, furtive eyes and a red woolen dress. She also had red rags twined in with her long black braids. She carried a tray into the room. Silently, she placed it on a table and glided out. Mary shuddered unconsciously. “Indians give me the ‘shilly-shivers’ as Pat says.”

“Washita is harmless. I’ve had her for two years now. She’s almost the last of a powerful tribe of Apaches which, long ago, had ‘The Dragoons’ for their fortress,” Mrs. Goode was explaining, when Mary begged, “Oh, do tell us what you think the outcome of this raid will be. You know we have three dear friends in the posse.”

Dora thought, “Aha! Harry Hulbert is a dear friend, is he, even before we have met him.”

Mrs. Goode was replying. “I have a husband and two dearly loved sons among those men, but, they *must* do their duty. The life of a sheriff’s wife is one of constant fear. I am feeling sure, though, that they will all come back soon with their captives. The jail is ready for the bandits. Now I must go back to the office. If you want me, ring the bell. I’ll send Washita up for the tray—”

“Oh, Mrs. Goode, please don’t! Somehow she startles me.” It was Mary imploring, although she knew her fears were foolish.

Mrs. Goode merely replied, “All right, dear. The tray can wait until morning.”

Dora moved the kerosene lamp from the bureau to the small table. Then they sat down and nibbled at the chicken sandwiches which had been temptingly made. The milk was creamy and Dora succeeded in finishing her share.

Mary, carrying a half-eaten sandwich, went to the window and looked across the desert. She whirled and beckoned, then pointed. “Don’t you see a horseman galloping this way?”

“I do see some object that seems to be coming pretty fast,” Dora conceded. “Now it’s out of sight below the silver hills.”

Almost breathless they waited until the horseman again appeared. “He’s probably the bearer of some sort of message,” Dora decided when the man leaped from his horse and ran into the hotel.

Mary had put the partly eaten sandwich back on her plate and sat with clenched hands waiting—hoping that they would soon learn the news which the man brought.

“Don’t expect the worst,” Dora begged.

Although Mary was hoping there would come a knock at their door, she jumped again when she heard it. Once more it was Dora who went to admit their caller. A young cowboy, hot and panting, stood there holding out an envelope.

“The writin’ ain’t in it, it’s on the back of it,” he informed them.

It had evidently been an old letter Dick had found in his pocket as it bore his name on the envelope. The scribbled note was:

“We’re all right. The worst is over. Surprised the men while they were all drunk except the sentinels. We’re fetching them in. Be back by daybreak. Better get some sleep now.” Dick’s name was signed to it.

“Thanks be.” Mary finished her sandwich when the cowboy was gone, while

Dora, who was turning back the bedspread, said, “We’ll take Dick’s advice and go to sleep or at least try to.”

“Well, I’ll lie down,” Mary was removing her shoes as she spoke, “but I don’t expect to sleep a wink.”

They removed their outer clothing, then drew a quilt up over them. The boys from the pool room had crossed to hear the news and many of them returned to their homes with their mothers. They evidently believed implicitly that all of the bandits had been captured and so they had nothing to fear.

The humming of voices in the office was stilled and soon there were no sounds in the street below.

Dora, no longer anxious, went to sleep quickly and although Mary had been sure she wouldn’t sleep at all, at daybreak they neither of them heard the men returning. It was hours later when there came a rap on their door. Mary sat up looking about wildly. “Who’s there?” she called, almost fearfully, then remembering that all was well, she jumped up and opened the door a crack. Mrs. Goode smiled in at her. “Dearie,” she said, “Jerry sent me up to ask if you girls will come down to breakfast now.”

“Of course we will. Thanks a lot.” Still Dora slept on. Mary shook her laughingly as she said, “Wake up, Dodo! The hour is here at last when we are to meet Pat’s aviator.”

Dora sprang out of bed and hurriedly dressed. “I feel in my bones,” she prophesied, “that you and I will *share* in some excitement today. See if we don’t!”

CHAPTER XXV

A CRY FOR HELP

The three boys glanced toward the stairway as the girls descended. Dick advanced to meet them, then introduced the tall, lithe young stranger as the "hero of the hour."

Harry Hulbert's rather greenish-blue eyes had a humorous twinkle which softened their keenness. He looked down at the girls with sincere pleasure in his rather thin face.

"This is great!" he exclaimed. "I've heard so much about you from your friends Patsy and Polly that I feel well acquainted with both Miss Moore and Miss Bellman."

"Oh, don't 'Miss' us, *please!*" Dora begged. "It makes me feel old as the hills."

"Then I won't until I'm far away," he replied gallantly. "I'm really awfully glad to be able to say Mary and Dora."

Harry's glance at the fairer, younger girl was undeniably admiring and Dora thought, "I wonder if *he knows* that Pat has given him to Mary. Poor Jerry, he looks sort of miserable." Aloud Dora exclaimed, "Dick, do lead us to the dining-room. I'm famished."

The cafe was in a low, adjoining building. There had been no pretense at beautifying the place. It was plain and bare but clean and sun-flooded.

It was late and whoever may have breakfasted there had long since gone so the young people had the place to themselves. They chose a table for six though there were but five of them. Harry was at one end with Mary at his right. He had

led her to that place without question. Dick escorted Dora to the opposite end and sat beside her. Jerry took the seat across from Mary, at Harry's left.

"He's a trump!" Dora thought as she noted how unselfishly Jerry played the gracious host.

Mrs. Goode took their order, and Washita silently, and, with what to Mary seemed like stealthy movements, served it.

While they were eating, the curious girls begged to hear all that had happened, but Dick said, "Why drag it out? Harry saw and we all conquered. Not a gun was fired, not a drop of blood was spilled. The bags of ore were discovered and are now locked up in the cellar of the jail."

"Oh, Jerry," Mary exclaimed instinctively turning to her older acquaintance, "how can you be sure that the bandits were *all* captured? Couldn't one or two of them have been away scouting or something?"

"That we can't tell for sure, of course, but I reckon we got them all." Then turning to Dick, he added, "We'd better be getting back to *Bar N* soon as we can."

Mary, flushed and shining-eyed, leaned toward the young aviator. "You're going to fly over to Gleeson, aren't you, so that we may get really acquainted?"

"I'd like to, awfully well, but Jerry tells me that there isn't a safe landing anywhere for miles around."

"Aha," Dora thought, "Jerry scores there." But she was wrong, for the cowboy was saying generously, "I'm sure Deputy Sheriff Goode will loan you a car. He has two little ones besides the town ambulance. I'd ask you to ride with us but my rattletrap will only hold four."

Jerry's suggestion was carried out. Deputy Sheriff Goode had a small car he was glad to loan to Harry. The proprietor of the pool hall agreed to watch the "Seagull" and warn all curious boys to stay away from it.

"I won't be able to stay long," Harry told them. "I'll have to fly back to headquarters in Tucson this afternoon to report." Then, glancing at Mary, invitation in his eyes, he asked, "Must I ride all alone in this borrowed flivver?"

“Of course not! I’ll ride with you if the others are willing. I mean,” Mary actually blushed in her confusion, “if you would like to have me.”

For answer Harry took her arm and led her across to the small car which stood waiting in front of the hotel. “We’ll follow where you lead, Jerry,” he called to the cowboy.

“Righto!”

Since Dora was already in the rumble, Dick climbed in beside her and Jerry started his small car and turned toward the valley road. Dora said not one word but the glance her dark eyes gave her companion spoke volumes. His equally silent reply was understanding and eloquent.

Harry had a moment’s difficulty in starting his borrowed car and they did not overtake the others until they were out of the town and about to dip down into the desert valley. Then, when Jerry’s car was not far ahead, the young aviator slowed down and smiled at Mary in the friendliest way.

“So this is actually *you*,” he said. His tone inferred that it was hard to believe. “Pat had a picture of you in a fluffy white dress. That photographer was an artist all right. He caught the sunlight on your hair so that, to *me*, you looked, honestly, just like an angel from heaven come down. I thought the girl who had posed for *that* picture must be the earth’s sweetest.”

Wild roses could not have been pinker than Mary’s cheeks. She protested, “You mustn’t flatter me that way. I *might* believe it.”

“I rather hoped you *would* believe it,” the boy said earnestly, then abruptly he changed the subject. “This is a great country, isn’t it? And to think that *you* were born here. It’s all so rough and rugged, it’s hard to picture a frail flower—”

Mary laughingly interrupted. “You should see the exquisite blossoms that grow on a thorny cactus plant,” she told him. Then, seeing that Jerry had stopped his car and was waiting for them to come alongside, she exclaimed, “I wonder what Big Brother wants. We’re close to the side road, aren’t we, where you turned last night when you went over to ‘The Dragons?’”

“I believe we are,” Harry replied absently, then asked, “Why do you call Jerry Newcomb ‘Big Brother?’”

“Oh, because we were playmates years ago when we were small and I’ve always called his mother ‘Aunt Mollie.’ He takes good care of me just like a real brother,” she ended rather lamely.

Harry was bringing his small car to a standstill near the other. He leaned close to Mary and said in a low voice, “I’m glad it’s *only* brother.”

Although the occupants of the other car could not hear the words, they had seen the almost affectionate way in which the words had been spoken.

Dora thought, “Aviators are evidently lightning workers.”

Jerry’s expression did not reveal his thoughts. He spoke to both Dick and Harry. “I did something last night, I reckon, I *never* did before. I laid my six shooter down on a rock and in all the excitement I plumb forgot it. Would you mind if we went up this road a piece—”

“Oh, Jerry,” Dora cried, “can’t we go with you all the way and see where you found the bandits?” Then, as the cowboy hesitated, Dick said, “I think it would be perfectly *safe* to go, don’t you?”

“I reckon so.” Jerry was about to start his car when Mary called, “Jerry Newcomb, I never once thought to ask you or Dick if there were any *old* men among those bandits, I mean, any who *might* have been the ones who held up the stage and kidnapped Little Bodil.”

Jerry replied, “I reckon not. They were too young.” Then he turned his car into the side road.

Harry, following, exclaimed, “What’s all this about a kidnapping? It sounds interesting.”

Mary was glad to have something to talk about which could not possibly suggest a compliment to her. She found it embarrassing to be so much admired by a boy who was almost a stranger to her. She told the story briefly, but from the beginning, and Harry was an appreciative listener. “That’s a bang-up good mystery yarn!” he said. “I’d like mighty well to be along when Jerry and Dick climb up into that rock house. Gruesome, isn’t it, knowing that the old duffer buried himself alive? Clever, that’s what he was, to make up a yarn about an Evil Eye Turquoise that would keep thieves all these years away from his gold.”

The side road into the mountains was in worse condition than the one they had left, and so, for some moments, Harry was silent that he might give all his attention to guiding the car over an especially dangerous spot. Then he turned and smiled at Mary. “And so *you* had hoped that one of those bandits who were captured last night *might* have been Bodil’s kidnapper. That would hardly be possible. Such things don’t happen in real life and, also, as you say, the little girl may have been dragged away to the lair of a mountain lion.”

Mary’s attention had been attracted by the car ahead. “Jerry’s stopping again,” she said.

Harry put on the brakes. The cowboy had leaped out and was coming back toward them. “I don’t believe we’d better try to go any further along this road,” he told them. “Harry, if you will stay with the girls, Dick and I will—”

“Hark, Big Brother, *what* was that?” Mary held up a finger and listened intently. On their left was a deep brush-tangled arroyo. They all heard distinctly a low moan that seemed to form the word “Help.”

The boys looked at each other puzzled and wondering. Jerry’s hand slipped instinctively to his holster and, finding it empty, he held out his hand for Dick’s gun. Then he went cautiously to the rock-piled edge of the arroyo. Dora asked, “Does Jerry think it’s one of the bandits, do you suppose, who tried to get away and was hurt somehow?”

“Probably,” Dick replied. He leaped out to the road and Harry joined him. They watched Jerry’s every move, ready to go to him if he beckoned. Suddenly Mary screamed and Harry leaped back to her. They had heard the report of a gun although Jerry had not fired.

CHAPTER XXVI

IS IT A CLUE?

The shot undeniably had been fired from the brush-tangled arroyo. Jerry stepped back that he might not be a helpless target while he conferred with the other boys.

“I cain’t understand it at all,” he said. “If we missed getting one of the bandits, he wouldn’t be staying around here. By this time, he’d be miles away.”

“You’re right about that,” Dick agreed. “My theory is that the man who called for help was the one who fired the shot.”

Harry said, “Don’t you think that possibly someone is hurt and fearing that his call wasn’t heard, he fired his gun to attract our attention? He may have heard our cars climbing the grade. They made noise enough.”

Jerry, feeling convinced that this was more than likely a fact, went again to the edge of the arroyo, and, keeping hidden behind the jagged pile of rocks, he looked intently through the dark tangle to the dry creek in the arroyo bottom. As his eyes became accustomed to the dimness he saw the figure of an old man lying on his back, one leg bent under him, his arms thrown out helplessly. One hand held a gun. Undeniably he it was who had fired the shot.

Without waiting to inform the others of his decision, Jerry leaped over the rocks and crashed through the brush. Dick and Harry followed a second later.

As they stood looking down at the wan face of a very old man their hearts were touched.

“Poor fellow,” Jerry said, kneeling and lifting the hand that held the gun. “I

reckon firing that shot was the last act he did in this life.”

“I’m not so sure.” Dick had opened the old man’s torn shirt and was listening to his heart. “He’s still alive. Hadn’t we better get him back to Tombstone to a doctor?”

For answer the boys lifted the stranger who was lighter than they had dreamed possible and carried him slowly back up to the road. The girls, awed and silent, asked if they could help, but Jerry shook his head. At his suggestion the old man was placed at his side. The girls rolled their sweater coats to place under his head and shoulders. Dick, from the back, through a tear in the curtain, held him in position.

Turning the cars was difficult but not impossible. Awed and in silence they returned to town.

Dr. Conrad, luckily, was in his office in a small adobe building near the hotel. The old man was still breathing when he was carried in and laid on a couch. Restoratives quickly applied were effective and soon the tired sunken eyes opened. The unkempt grizzled head turned restlessly, then pleadingly he asked, “Jackie, have you seen him?”

There was such a yearning eagerness in the old man’s face that Mary hated to have to shake her head and say, “No.”

Jerry asked, “Who is Jackie?” But the old man did not reply. As though the effort had been too much for him, he closed his eyes and rested.

Dick exclaimed eagerly, “Jerry, you know that young boy we brought over with the bandits. Couldn’t we ask Deputy Sheriff Goode to bring him over here? He would know if this old man belongs to the robber band, although that boy certainly didn’t look like a criminal.”

The plan seemed a good one and was carried out. The boy, fair-haired and about nine years old, cried out when he saw the old man and running to him, threw himself down beside the lounge and sobbed, “Granddad! Granddad! Oh, *do* wake up. I’m so glad you found me. I thought *this* time they’d make away with me for sure.”

Slowly a smile spread over the wan features. The sunken eyes opened and

looked directly at the tear-wet face of the boy. “Jackie,” the old man said, and there was infinite love in his voice. “Thank God you’re safe! They’ve ruined me. They *mustn’t* ruin you. Go to Sister Theresa. Hide there.” For a long moment he breathed heavily, his gaze on the face of the boy he so loved. Then he made another effort to speak. “I’m dying, Jackie. I give you to Sister Theresa. Goodbye. Be—a—good boy.”

The girls, unable to keep back their tears, turned away, but Mary, hearing the child’s pitiful sobs, went over to him and, kneeling at his side, put a comforting arm about him. Trustingly he leaned his head against her shoulder and clung to her as though he knew she must be a friend.

Later, when the boy’s grief had been quieted, the young people, at the doctor’s suggestion, took him into another room and questioned him.

“How had he happened to be with the robber band?”

“Who was his grandfather?”

“Where would they find Sister Theresa that they might take him there as his granddad had requested?”

Still in the loving shelter of Mary’s arm, the boy, at first chokingly, then more clearly, told all that he knew. His grandfather, he said, had been a marked man by that robber band. He had done something *years ago* to turn them against him, Jackie didn’t know what. They had robbed him. They had destroyed his ranch and his cattle. They had stolen Jackie once before, but he had gotten away that time, but this time they had watched him too closely. Granddad had been hunting for him.

Sister Theresa? She was a nun and lived in a convent on the Papago reservation up to the north, quite far to the north, Jackie thought.

Deputy Sheriff Goode came in and listened to what Jerry had to tell him of the child’s story. He nodded solemnly. “I know that good woman,” he said; “she is one of the world’s best. I reckon the kid’s telling the truth. If you have the time, Jerry, I wish you’d take him over there right away.”

The combination ambulance and police car was brought out. That it was seldom used was evidenced by the sand on the seats and floor. Jerry drove it to a gas

station and had the tank filled. Jackie, who clung to Mary as though she alone could understand his grief, nestled close to her in the big car.

Harry said to Jerry, "Old man, I think I'd better fly over. The Papago reservation is close to Tucson, isn't it, and I must turn in a report. Then I'll join you all and come back with you perhaps."

"Oh, please do!" Mary called to him. "I want you to meet the nicest dad in the world. He'll be so interested in hearing about your trip from the East."

A crowd of townspeople had gathered in the square and silently watched as the big police car started and the "Seagull" took to the air.

As they were rumbling along, Dora, across from Mary, silently pointed at the boy. "He's asleep, little dear," she said softly.

Dick was on the driver's seat with Jerry.

"Dora," Mary whispered, "how tangled up things are. We *were* hunting for one child and find another. Something seems always to lead us farther away from solving the mystery of poor Little Bodil."

"I know," Dora agreed, "but after all, we could hardly expect, I suppose, after all these years, to unravel *that* mystery."

It was not a long ride. The road was smooth and hard. The car rolled along so rapidly that the forty miles were covered in less than an hour. Dora, looking out of the opening in the back of the wagon, was delighted when she saw tepees along the roadside. Also, there were small adobe shacks with yucca stalk fences and drying ears of corn and red peppers in strings hanging over them.

"Oh, how fascinating this place is!" she whispered. "Do look! There's a Papago family. The mother has her baby strapped to her back." The convent was an unpretentious rambling adobe building painted a glistening white. Jerry turned in through an arched adobe gate over which stood a wooden cross.

At a side door he stopped, got out and, climbing a few steps, pulled on a rope which hung there. Almost at once the door was opened by a sweet-faced nun who smiled a welcome. Jerry asked, "May we speak with Sister Theresa?"

“Yes, will you come in?” Then, glancing out at the car and seeing the two girls, she added hospitably, “all of you.”

Jerry lifted out the sleeping boy and carried him into the long, cool waiting room. The sister who had opened the door had gone to call Sister Theresa and so she did not see the child.

Mary glanced skyward before she entered the convent and, seeing the silver plane circling about, wondered if Harry would be able to land. Evidently he decided that it would be unwise, for he was dropping the small aluminum bottle once again. Mary ran to the spot where it fell and read the note. “Unsafe to land on the sand. Will return to Tombstone and wait for you there.”

Dora glanced at Mary’s face and saw an expression which told her disappointment. Once again she thought, “Poor Jerry!”

Dick, who had waited for them, said, “He’s a wise bird, that Harry Hulbert. He takes no chances.” Then they three went indoors and joined Jerry who, seated on a bench, held the sleeping child.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT WAS A CLUE

Jackie wakened and opened wondering eyes at the moment when a kind-faced woman in nun's garb entered from an inner corridor. With a glad cry he slipped from Jerry and ran with arms outstretched.

The young people rose and waited, sure that this woman, who had stooped to comfort the sobbing child, must be the Sister Theresa to whom he had been given. She was evidently questioning him and brokenly he was telling that the robbers had carried him off and that Granddad was dead.

She lifted a sorrowful face toward the strange young people and without questioning their identity, she said, "It was very kind of you all to bring Jackie to me. Did Mr. Weston send me a message?"

Jerry, realizing that formal introductions were unnecessary at a time like this, replied, "Yes, Sister Theresa. The old man was so nearly dead when we found him in an arroyo over near 'The Dragoons' that he could say little. However, he *did* give Jackie to you."

The nun had seated herself and had motioned the others to do likewise. The boy, standing at her side, was looking up into her face with tear-filled, anxious eyes.

"Poor little fellow," she said. "His life has been full of fear, but now, if those tormentors of his grandfather are in prison, he will be free of the constant dread of being kidnapped."

"Sister Theresa," Mary leaned forward to ask, "*why* did those cruel men wish to harm so helpless a child?"

The nun shook her head sadly. "It is a long story," she said, "and one that causes me much pain to recall, but I will tell you. Years ago this good man, who had the largest cattle ranch in these parts, was riding over the mountains carrying about his person large sums of money. He was overtaken by two highwaymen, who, after robbing him, forced him to continue with them over a lonely mountain road. When they were at a high spot, they heard a stage coming and they forced Mr. Weston to hide with them around a curve. When the stage was almost upon them, the bandits rode out, shot the driver and stole the bags of gold they found. The frightened horses plunged over a cliff taking with it the dead driver and one man passenger. A child, that man's sister, was thrown into the road. The bandits thought only of escape, and, for a time, they forgot their captive. Seeing a chance to get away, he turned his horse and galloped back toward his ranch. Finding the child in the road, he took time to snatch her up and take her with him. He brought her to this convent where she has been ever since."

The listeners, who, one and all had guessed the speaker's true identity, could hardly wait until she had finished to ask if she were the long lost Little Bodil.

Tense emotion brought tears to the woman's kind eyes. "My dears," she said, looking from one to another of them. "My dears, *can* you tell me of my brother, Sven Pedersen? I have always thought that he must have been killed when the stage plunged over the cliff. At first I hoped this was not true, but when he never came to find me—"

Mary interrupted, "Oh, Sister Theresa, your brother never stopped trying to find you."

Jerry said, "He advertised in newspapers."

The nun shook her head. "We do not take newspapers here and Mr. Weston, who had a nervous collapse for a long time, was not permitted to read. Yes, that accounts for it. My poor brother! How needlessly he grieved."

Jerry and Dick exchanged glances and Dick's lips formed the word "money."

The cowboy said, "Sister Theresa, from the tale of an old storekeeper in Gleeson, who knew your brother well, we have learned that he has a letter for you written in Danish which tells where he left some money for you."

"I shall be glad to have the letter," the woman said, her face lightening, "not

because of the money which I will use for others, as we here take the vow of poverty, but because of some message I am sure the letter will contain.”

Mary, thinking of the Dooleys, wanted to ask if the money might, part of it at least, be used for *them* but she thought better of it.

The nun, looking tenderly down at the boy who still nestled close to her, said lovingly, “Poor Little Jackie, how I wish I *could* keep him here with me, but that would not be permitted since he is a boy.” As though inspired, she told them, “If that money is found, I will give a good part of it to someone who will make a happy home for this little fellow.”

Mary also was inspired. “Oh, Sister Theresa,” how eagerly she spoke. “I know the very nicest family and they’re in great need. Caring for Jackie would be a godsend to them and bring great happiness into *his* life, I’m sure of that.”

Then she told—with Jerry’s help—all that she knew of Etta Dooley and her family.

The nun turned to the cowboy. “I like what you tell me about that little family. If there is money to pay her, I would like to see your friend Etta.” She was rising as she spoke. A muffled gong was ringing in the inner corridor. The young people also rose.

“I am sure Etta will come, Sister Theresa,” Mary said.

Jerry promised to try to bring the letter on the morrow. The nun, smiling graciously at them all, held out her hand to first one and then another, saying, “Thank you and goodbye.” The little boy echoed, “Goodbye.” He was to remain with Sister Theresa until she had met and approved of Etta Dooley.

As the young people were about to leave the convent, the young nun who had admitted them appeared and said, “Sister Theresa invites you to lunch. It is long after the noon hour.”

She turned, not waiting for a possible refusal and so they followed her through a side door, along a narrow corridor which ended in descending steps. They found themselves in a bare basement room. There were plain wooden tables, clean and white, with benches on both sides. No one was in evidence as the noon meal had been cleared away. The young nun motioned them to a table, then glided away to

the kitchen. She soon returned with four bowls of simple vegetable soup, glasses of milk and a plain coarse brown bread without butter.

“I hadn’t realized how starved I am!” Dora said when they were alone.

“Isn’t it too story-bookish for anything, our finding Little Bodil at last?” Mary exclaimed as she ate with a relish the appetizing soup.

“Righto. It sure is,” Jerry agreed.

Dick asked, “Do you think Etta Dooley will be too proud to take the money?”

“I don’t,” Mary said with conviction. “She won’t suspect that we had *wanted* to find some way of giving her the money. She’ll think that our first thought had been to recommend a good home for Jackie. That will make it all right with her, I’m sure.”

Dora glanced at Jerry somewhat anxiously. “They can stay where they are, can’t they? Etta said that if it weren’t for her feeling of being dependent on charity, she would simply love being there.”

Jerry nodded thoughtfully. “I’m sure Dad will be glad to have them. I reckon he hasn’t any other plans for that cabin. We could lease them, say three acres, and if they paid a little rent that would make Etta feel independent.”

Dora added her thought, “If Etta passes those examinations she’s going to take in Douglas, maybe she could be teacher in that little school near your ranch, Jerry.”

The cowboy’s face brightened. “Say, that’s a bingo-fine idea! That school had to close because we hadn’t any children. All we need are eight youngsters to reopen it. Let’s see, there are the twins, Jackie will make three.” Then, anxiously he glanced at Mary. “How soon can Baby Bess go to school?”

“She’d *have* to go if Etta did,” was the laughing reply.

Dora suggested, “Couldn’t there be a kindergarten department?”

“I reckon so.” The cowboy’s face was troubled. “Four kids aren’t eight.”

Dick, remembering something Mr. Newcomb told his wife, inquired, “Jerry, your

dad asked your mother if she minded having a cowboy next winter who had a wife and six children.”

“Jolly-O!” Dora cried. “What did Mrs. Newcomb say?”

It was Mary who replied, “You know what dear, big-hearted Aunt Mollie would say. I can almost hear her tell Uncle Henry that ‘the more the merrier.’”

“Of course,” Jerry told them, “even if we can work the school plan, the salary is mighty small. It wouldn’t more than pay their grocery bill but it’ll help all right, along with—”

Mary caught the cowboy’s arm, her expression alarmed. “Jerry, *what* if there *isn’t* any money in that rock house after our planning?”

“Tomorrow we will know,” Dick said. Then, as the young nun reappeared, they arose and thanked her for the good meal. Dora noticed that as Dick passed out he dropped a coin in a little box labeled, FOR THE POOR.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NEW COMPLICATION

In the lumbering old police ambulance, the four young people returned to Tombstone and found Harry Hulbert sitting in a rocker on the hotel porch waiting for them. He ran toward them waving his cap boyishly. The “Seagull” reposed in the middle of the square surrounded by interested and curious cowboys who had ridden in from the range for the mail. Many of them had come from far and had heard nothing of the “Seagull’s” part in the recent raid.

“Where do we go from here?” Harry asked when he had learned of the morning adventure.

“If you can take Mr. Goode’s small car,” Mary began, but Harry interrupted with, “Can’t be done! They’re both out, one gone to Bisbee and the other to Nogales.”

“Oh, Big Brother,” Mary exclaimed, “couldn’t Harry sit in the front side door of your car? We girls used to ride that way at school sometimes.”

“Sure thing!” the cowboy agreed. “All aboard, let’s get going.”

Mary smiled up at him happily. “If the calf has been milking the cow all this time, it—”

Jerry shook his head. “No such luck—for the calf. Mother can milk in an emergency.”

The ride to Gleeson was a merry one. Harry sat, literally, at Mary’s feet, looking up at her admiringly and directing his conversation to her almost entirely. Jerry was very silent. No one but Dora noticed that. When Gleeson was reached, the

small car stopped in front of the store and they all rushed in and astounded the old storekeeper with their exultant shout, "We've found Little Bodil!"

"'Tain't so!" He stared at them unbelievably. "Arter all these years! Wall, wall! I'll be dum-blasted! So Little Bodil is one o' them nun-women." While he talked, he went behind his counter, took an old cigar box from a high shelf, opened it and held out an envelope, yellowed with age. He handed it to Jerry. "Take it to Little Bodil. I'll be cu'ros to hear what all's in it."

"So are we, Mr. Harvey," Mary began, then exclaimed contritely, "Oh, how terrible of us. We haven't introduced the hero of the hour. Mr. Silas Harvey, this is the air scout who located the train robbers, Harry Hulbert. He seems like an old friend to us, doesn't he, Jerry?"

"Sure thing!" the cowboy replied, then glancing at the old dust-covered clock, he quickly added, "Dick, I reckon I must be getting along over to *Bar N.*"

"Goodbye, Mr. Harvey. Glad to have met you." Harry shook hands with the old man.

When they were outside the post office, the air scout turned to the cowboy. "Jerry, can't I be your letter carrier?" he asked. "While I was waiting for you in Tombstone I enquired about the stage. I can get back there in about an hour. Then I must fly to Tucson for a meeting at headquarters tonight. I can motor out to the convent and be back here tomorrow morning with the letter translated."

"Sounds all right to me," Jerry said.

"And during the hour that you have to wait for the stage," Mary turned brightly toward Harry, "you may become acquainted with the nicest dad in the world."

Forgetting the presence of the others, Harry replied, "Is *that* why his daughter is the nicest girl in the world?"

Mary flushed bewitchingly, but it was evident that she was embarrassed.

Jerry drove them up to the Moore house, waited while Dick bounded indoors to speak to his mother, then they two rode away, promising to return as soon as they could the next day.

Dora, who had been watching Jerry's face, knew that he had been deeply hurt, but she was sure he would not say anything to influence Mary. Dora thought, "He wants her to choose the one of them who would make her happier, I suppose. Believe me, it wouldn't take *me* long to decide."

Mr. Moore had heard nothing of the robbery or the raid. Mrs. Farley had not wished to cause him a moment's anxiety about the safety of his idolized daughter. She had told him that the girls were spending the night with Mrs. Goode in Tombstone, and, since the wife of the Deputy Sheriff had been a close friend of Mary's mother, he had thought little of it. Even now that it was all over, they decided to merely introduce Harry as a friend of Patsy and Polly, who had come West to be attached to the border patrol.

Mr. Moore welcomed the boy gladly, and, for half an hour, they talked together of the East and the West. Mary and Dora slipped away and returned with lemonade and a plate of Carmelita's cookie-snaps.

Then the two girls walked down to the cross road with Harry and waited until he climbed aboard the funny old 'bus and rode away.

He bent low over Mary at the last moment. Dora had not heard his whispered words, but she knew by the sudden flush that they had been complimentary.

Arm in arm they turned and walked back up the gently ascending hill-road toward their home.

"How do you like the newcomer?" Dora tried to make her voice sound indifferent.

Mary laughingly confessed, "I'd really like him lots better if he didn't flatter me so much."

Dora replied, "I know how you feel. I'd heaps rather have a boy be just a good pal. It makes a person feel, oh, as if she were the sort of a girl a boy thought he had to make love to, or she wouldn't be having a good time. I've known steens of them, fine fellows really, who came over from Wales Military to our dances. They thought the only way they could put it over big was to flatter their partners. You know *that* as well as I do. Why, we Quadralettes have compared notes time and again and found the same boy had said the same complimentary thing to all four of us." Mary made no reply, so Dora continued, "Dick and Jerry are the sort

of boy friends I like. They treat us as if we could be talked to about something besides ourselves. I tell you, the girl who can win the love of Jerry Newcomb is going to win one of the finest men who walks on this green earth.”

Dora’s tone was so earnest that Mary laughed. “Goodness!” she teased. “Why all this eloquence? There isn’t any green earth around here for Jerry to walk on. It’s all sand.”

Suddenly Dora changed the subject. “Why do you suppose Little Bodil is called Sister Theresa?” she asked.

Mary replied rather absently, “Oh, I think they give up their own and choose a saint’s name. Anyhow, I’ve heard they do.”

It was evident she was thinking deeply of something else.

Her thoughtfulness continued until after supper.

“What a wonderful moonlight night!” Dora said as the two girls seated themselves on the top step of the front porch to gaze out across the shimmering desert valley, below the tableland on which they lived. “I wish Jerry and Dick would come and take us for a ride.” Hardly had she said the words when they saw a dark object scudding along on the valley road.

“Somebody *is* coming toward Gleeson from the *Bar N* ranch way,” Mary said, and Dora noted that her voice was eager, as though she wanted, *very much wanted*, to see her silent cowboy lover.

For a long time they sat watching the narrow strip of cross road beyond the post office. If the car turned, it would surely be coming to the Moore place. If it passed, it would be going on to Tombstone probably. It turned. More slowly it climbed the grade.

“It’s the little ‘tin Cayuse,’ all right,” Dora said. She was watching the eager light in Mary’s face, lovely in the moonlight. Then, suddenly its brightness was shadowed, went out. Dora saw the reason. On the front seat with Jerry was another girl, a glowing-eyed, truly beautiful girl, Etta Dooley. In the rumble with Dick were two freckle-faced boys, the twins. Their ruddy faces were glowing with grins of delight. “Hurray!” they shouted as the small car stopped near the front porch. “We’re out moonlight riding.”

Dick quieted them, remembering that Mr. Moore might be asleep. Mary, looking pale in the silver light, went down to the car and asked Etta if she wouldn't get out. "No, thank you," that maiden replied, "I've left Baby Bess with Aunt Mollie and we've been gone more than an hour now, I do believe."

"It hasn't seemed that long, has it?" Jerry was actually looking at Etta and not at Mary.

"Oh, indeed not!" was the happily given reply. "It's a treat for the twins and me to fly through space. Once upon a time I had a little car of my own, but that seems *ages* ago."

This did not seem like the same Etta Dooley who had been so reserved when the girls had called at her cabin home. *What* had happened to change her, Dora wondered.

When the car turned and the small boys, remembering to be quiet, had nevertheless performed gleeful antics, Mary went up the steps and into the house.

"I'm going to bed," she said and her voice sounded tired.

Dora, wickedly pleased, could not let well enough alone. "I didn't know that Etta was so well acquainted as to call Jerry's mother Aunt Mollie." She wisely did not add her next thought, "You'll have to look to your laurels, Mary-mine. Etta's a mighty attractive girl and she simply loves the *Bar N* ranch."

When Dora spoke again, it was on an entirely different subject. "Isn't it wonderful, Mary, to think that we've solved the mystery of Little Bodil and that tomorrow, perhaps, the boys are going to defy that Evil Eye Turquoise."

"I suppose so," Mary replied indifferently. Dora turned out the light and with a shrug got into bed with her friend.

CHAPTER XXIX

AN OLD LETTER

The next day, directly after breakfast, Mary and Dora began to expect someone to arrive. The roof of the front porch was railed around and when they had made their bed and tidied their room they stepped out of the door-like window and stood there gazing about them. From that high elevation they had a view of the road coming from Tombstone as it climbed to the tableland and also they could see for miles across the desert valley toward the *Bar N* ranch.

“Who do you think will be the first to arrive?” Dora asked as she slipped an arm about her friend’s waist.

Mary shook her head without replying. Then, because her conscience had been troubling her, Dora said impulsively, “Mary, dear, I didn’t mean, last night, that Harry Hulbert says nice things to you without meaning them. No one could help thinking you’re—”

Mary laughed and put a finger on her friend’s lips. “Now, who’s flattering?” Then, excitedly, “I hear a car, but I don’t see it.”

“There it is, by the post office,” Dora pointed, then, in a tone of disappointment, “Oh, it’s only that funny little Jap vegetable man from Fairbanks.”

A moment later, when they were looking in different directions, they both exclaimed in chorus, “Here come Jerry and Dick!”

“There’s the Deputy Sheriff’s little car.”

In through the window they leaped, down the front stairway they tripped and were standing in the graveled walk between the red and gold border-beds when

the two cars arrived, Jerry's in the lead.

Mary's heart was heavy, though she tried to smile brightly, when she saw that Etta Dooley was again on the front seat with Jerry. Dick, this time, was quite alone. Harry Hulbert, although in the rear, leaped out and bounded to Mary so quickly that he reached her first.

Her welcome, though friendly, lacked the eager graciousness of the day before. Harry, however, did not seem to notice it. "I've got the translation here," he said, waving the old yellow envelope.

Jerry got out of his car, turned to speak to Etta and then walked toward the waiting group. Dick had already disappeared into the house in search of his mother.

Etta, remaining in the car, called, "Good morning" to the girls. Jerry explained, "I haven't told Etta the whole story, just the part about Little Bodil and the rock house. She was so interested, I told her we'd be glad to have her go with us."

Mary smiled at him rather wistfully, Dora thought. Then she walked to the side of the car and said, "Won't you get out, Etta, while we read the letter?"

Jerry, who had followed her, said, "Dick wanted us to wait till we got to the rock house before we read the letter. Can you girls go now?"

"Yes, I'll get my hat." Mary turned to go indoors. Dora went with her and they were back almost at once to find Jerry beside Etta, with Dick waiting to help Dora to her usual place in the rumble.

Harry, his rather thin face alight with pleasure, took Mary's arm and, giving it a slight pressure, exclaimed in a low voice, "The gods are kind! I hardly dared hope that your old friends would let me have you today. I've thought of you every minute since I left you last night."

Mary, seated at his side in the small car, turned serious eyes toward him. "Harry," she said almost pleadingly, "please don't talk to me that way. I—I'd rather you wouldn't."

An expression of sadness for a moment put out the eager light in his eyes, then, good sportsman that he was, he said, "Very well, Mary. I think I understand."

After that his conversation was interesting, but general, until they reached the towering rock gate where Jerry's car was standing, waiting.

"What a lonely, awesome spot this is!" Harry exclaimed.

"If you think *this* is awesome," Mary laughed, "wait until we pass through those gates."

Jerry climbed out, helped Etta, then turned to call, "Don't get off the road, Harry. The sand's so soft we'd have a time pulling you out."

Dora and Dick leaped from the rumble and were joined by Mary and Harry. "We walk the rest of the way," Dick told the air scout, "and believe me it's hard going."

Mary glanced ahead, saw Jerry assisting Etta as in former times he had assisted her when her feet sank ankle deep in the soft, white sand. Harry gallantly took her arm to aid her. Mary smiled at him wanly. "Thank you," she said. "I wish I were the self-reliant athletic type like Dora. She never needs help."

Harry bit his lip to keep from saying aloud what he thought. Before he could think of something else to say, Dick looked back and called to him, "Were you ever any place where there was such a deathlike stillness as there is in this small walled-in spot?"

Harry shook his head. "Never!" he replied. Then, glad of the interruption, he asked, "That's the rock house, up there, isn't it?"

Dick nodded. "That's where the poor old fellow they called 'Lucky Loon' buried himself alive, if there's any truth in the yarn."

"Believe me, that would take more courage than I've got," Harry declared with a shudder.

Jerry, glancing back, and finding that he and Etta were quite far ahead, turned and waited, still holding his companion's arm.

Etta's intelligent face *never* had seemed more attractive to Mary. The melancholy expression, which the girls had noticed, especially, the day they had called upon her, had vanished. Her eyes were bright with interest.

They walked on in a close group. "I'm simply wild to know what's in the letter Little Bodil translated," Dora exclaimed.

Dick laughed. "I suppose we will call that dignified Sister Theresa 'Little Bodil' till the end of time," he said.

When they reached the foot of the leaning rock, which had one time been the stairway to the rock house, they gathered about Jerry who was opening the yellowed envelope. Intense interest and excitement was expressed in each face.

Sister Theresa had written a liberal translation between the almost faded lines of her dead brother's letter.

"Dear Little Bodil—

"In my heart I feel you are alive. I have hunted all over Arizona, New Mexico and across the border. No one has heard of you. I can't search any longer.

"Before I die I want to tell you where my gold is. Silas Harvey will tell you where my rock house is. Secret entrance—"

Jerry paused and looked in dismay at the interested listeners.

"What's up?" Dick asked.

"The old writing was so faded Sister Theresa couldn't make it out."

"How terrible!" Dora cried. "How to get *into* the rock house is the *very thing* we need to know."

"Well, at least we know there *is* a secret entrance," Mary told them. "Isn't there any more of the translation, Jerry?"

The cowboy had turned a page. He nodded. "Yes, here's something but I reckon it won't help much. There are only a few words." He read, "Find money—walled in—turquoise eye." Jerry looked from one to the other and said, "That's all. Doesn't help out much, does it?"

Mary took the letter. "Here's a note at the bottom. Sister Theresa wrote, 'I am

sorry I could not make out the entire message. I do hope this much will aid you in finding the money if it has not been stolen.’”

“Well,” Dick was looking along the base of the almost perpendicular cliff on which the rock house stood, “I vote we start in hunting for a secret entrance.”

“O. K.,” Harry said. “Let’s divide our forces, one going to the right and the other to the left.”

Jerry, as though it were the natural thing to do, said to Etta, “Shall we go this way?”

Mary turned and started in the opposite direction. Harry was quick to follow her. Dora and Dick remained standing directly under the rock house. Dora said, “I’m puzzled! *Not* about the secret entrance but about Mary and Jerry.”

“Oh, that’ll come out all right.” It was plain that Dick wasn’t giving romance much thought, for he added, “I’m going in between the main cliff and this broken off piece.”

Dora, going to his side, peered into the crack. The winds of many years had blown sand into it. She was surprised to see Dick start pulling the sand away from the wall.

“Have you a hunch?” she asked with interest.

“No, not really,” he told her. Then remarked, “Wish I had a shovel.”

“You may have one,” Dora said, “if you want to go back to the road. I saw a shovel and an axe fastened under the Deputy Sheriff’s car.”

Jerry and Etta, having found nothing, were returning.

“What are you uncovering, Dick?” the cowboy called.

“Say, fetch a shovel, will you?” was the answer he received. “Dora says there’s one under the ‘Dep’s’ car.”

“Righto.” The cowboy’s long legs carried him rapidly toward the rock gate. He had returned with the shovel just as Mary and Harry came up. They had found

nothing that could possibly be a secret entrance.

“What’s your reasoning, Dick, old man?” Jerry asked as he handed him the shovel.

“Well, there’s *something* here that caught and held the sand,” Dick replied. “It may not be what we’re looking for but I’m curious to know what it is.”

CHAPTER XXX

SECRET ENTRANCE TO THE ROCK HOUSE

The boys took turns in throwing the sand out of the crack. The faces of the three girls, standing idly near, expressed different emotions. Mary's sweet sensitive mouth and tender eyes were wistful, almost sad. She was not thinking of the secret entrance. Dora, watching her, was troubled and wished she knew just what Mary was thinking. Etta, alone, watched the boys as they threw shovelful of sand out of the crack. Her eyes shone with a new light. Dora, glancing at her, wondered if she were watching Jerry's splendid strength as he hurled the sand. Once he caught her encouraging glance and smiled at her.

Etta turned and, seeing Mary beside her, she slipped an arm about her. With a fleeting return of her old seriousness, she said, "You girls can't know what it means to me to be included in all this. I've been so lonely for companions of my own age."

Mary was about to say that she was glad, also, when a shout from the boys attracted their attention. They hurried toward the crack where the three diggers stood intently examining something they had uncovered.

It was a huge stone about three feet round which leaned against a hole in the base of the cliff.

"That hole *must* be the secret entrance." Dick glowed around with the pride of discovery. "The rock caught and held the sand, you see," he explained to the girls.

"Not so fast, old man." Harry Hulbert was measuring the space between the rock and the hole. "If Mr. Pedersen buried himself alive up there in his rock house, he *had* to have room to crawl *into* his entrance. You'll all agree to that."

They silently nodded, then Jerry said, "I reckon Sven Pedersen was very thin, sick as he was."

Etta alertly suggested, "I think the hole might have been uncovered then, but that the weight of the sand has gradually pushed the rock down against the opening."

"Righto!" Jerry's smile was approving.

Dora remarked, "Since we are not hunting for the old man's bones, isn't the important question whether or not this hole leads up into the rock house?"

"And the only way to find out is to get this stone out of the way," Dick told them. "Now everybody push."

It was a difficult task and after what seemed a long hard effort, there was barely room for one of the boys to get in.

Jerry crawled into the hole but backed out almost at once.

"It's black as a pocket," he reported. "It would be foolhardy to go in until we have a light."

"I'll get one," Dick volunteered. "The Deputy Sheriff has a powerful flash in his car. Back in a minute."

While he was gone, Jerry told his impressions of the hole.

"It seems to be a slanting tunnel, not high enough to stand in. I reckon that at some past time it was made by rushing water, it's worn so smooth."

"Oh, Jerry, please don't go in there all alone." It was Mary imploring. "I'm smaller than you are. Let me go with you."

Jerry's grateful glance was infinitely tender and so was his voice as he replied, "Little Sister, I'll be careful not to run into danger."

Again he crawled into the hole. The watching young people saw the flash of the light, then they heard his voice sounding uncanny and far off. "The tunnel goes up, sort of like a waterfall. I reckon I can climb it all right, but don't anybody try to follow me, lest-be I'm gone too long; more than fifteen minutes, say."

The color left Mary's face and she clung to Dora, but she tried not to let the others see how truly anxious she was.

"One minute." Dick was looking at his watch.

Harry on his knees peered up into the darkness, but could not even see Jerry's light.

"Five minutes," Dick reported.

Mary asked tremulously, "That couldn't be the cave of a mountain lion or a puma or a—"

"Nixy on that!" Dick replied emphatically. "No wild animal, not even my friend, a Gila Monster, would care to try to climb *that* smooth toboggan slide. Puzzle to me is how Jerry is doing it."

"Hark!" Mary whispered, holding up one finger. "Did you hear—"

Dick plunged in with "a gun shot?"

"Not at all!" Mary flared at him. She ran to the hole and knelt by it and listened. "I thought I heard Jerry call far, *far* away," she said as she stood up and went back to stand by Dora.

"Ten minutes." Dick glanced from his watch to Harry. "Go back a way, will you, and look up at the rock house. If Jerry called, maybe it was from up there."

Mary, no longer trying to hide her anxiety, ran beyond the leaning ledge and looked up. How her face shone with joy and relief!

"It's Jerry!" she cried, beckoning the others. "He's up there standing in the door."

Harry cupped one hand about his ear. "What say, Jerry? All right. Sure thing."

"What did he say?" Jerry had disappeared in the house when the others joined Mary and Harry.

"He said there's an old wire ladder contraption that he's going to drop down to

us,” Harry explained as Jerry reappeared on the ledge. Gradually a wire-rope ladder slid down the steep cliff.

“Dick, you and Harry come on up,” Jerry called. “It’s safe all right.”

“You girls won’t mind being left alone, will you?” Harry asked in his chivalrous way, of all of them, although he looked at Mary.

“No, indeed,” she replied. “Go along.”

The boys went up the swaying ladder so easily that Mary, usually the less courageous one of the two, said to Dora, “I’m going up. Catch me if I fall.”

The three boys were in the rock house and did not know that the girls had climbed the ladder until they saw them standing near the open door.

Jerry leaped toward them. “Little Sister,” he said, “*what* if you had fallen?”

Dora thought complacently, “Well, I guess *that* lover’s misunderstanding is patched up all right. It didn’t matter, evidently, whether or not Etta fell, and as for Dora Bellman—” she laughed and shrugged her broad, capable shoulders.

Mary was asking, “Has anyone seen the Evil Eye Turquoise?”

“Not yet. Come, let’s look for it,” the cowboy called, adding, as he turned to his neighbor, “Etta, I didn’t tell you that part of the story, did I?”

Smilingly, and evidently untroubled by the recent by-play between the cowboy and Mary, she replied in the negative. So, standing near the open door, they all told parts of the tale to the interested listener.

“But if something terrible *always* happens when that turquoise eye looks at an intruder,” Etta said, “aren’t you afraid something terrible will happen now?”

“I reckon I *would*, if I believed the yarn,” Jerry replied. “Let’s see! Where was it?”

“In the back wall, gazing *straight out* of the front door,” Mary reminded him.

“Well, it isn’t there *now* anyway.” Harry fearlessly had crossed the small bare

room to investigate.

“But it must have been there,” Dick insisted. “Don’t you remember that Smart Aleky fellow who *did* climb up and who really *did* fall over the cliff, paralyzed, when he saw the Evil Eye?”

“I reckon we do,” Jerry agreed. Having found a stout stick cane in one corner, he poked it into the sand that covered the floor.

“Hi-ho!” he cried. “I see what’s happened. The Eye fell off of the wall and is buried here in the sand.”

“Bully for you!” Dick shouted, and before any of them could stop him, he had seized the fateful stone and had turned the flashlight full upon it. Mary screamed and clutched Dora, but they had all looked at the Eye and *it* had looked at them, yet nothing had happened.

Dora, secretly proud of Dick’s courage, asked, “What is it made of?”

“You impostor!” Dick hissed at the Eye. “You are only adobe with a blue stone in your middle.” Then calmly he pocketed it as he grinningly announced, “Nobody objecting, I’m going to keep it for Lucky Stone and a paper weight.”

“Ugh!” Mary shuddered. “You’re welcome to it.”

Dora was asking, “Where do you think we’d better look for the money?”

“In the old codger’s tomb, I should say.” Harry was greatly enjoying his share in this rather uncanny adventure.

They all agreed that the walled-in tomb would be the most likely place to find the treasure.

Jerry looked anxiously at the three girls who stood close together watching, wide-eyed. “I reckon you all ought to have stayed down below,” he told them.

Dora replied courageously, “Oh, don’t mind us. Open up the tomb if you want. There won’t be anything but a skeleton, and we see those every day on the desert.”

Harry and Dick, prying around, discovered a large stone that was loose, but when it was lifted out, they found only a small niche. *In it was an iron box which the boys removed. Then they replaced the stone.* After all they had not needed to open up the tomb.

When they all had descended the wire-rope ladder, they left it hanging, believing that some day they might want to revisit the rock house.

“Now,” Jerry said, “let’s take the box to Sister Theresa.”

CHAPTER XXXI

A WONDERFUL SECRET TOLD

The boys took turns carrying the heavy box back to the cars and the girls walked three abreast, laughing joyfully in their efforts to keep each other from stumbling in the sand. They whispered together just before they passed through the rock gate and when the boys turned toward them, after having stored the box safely under the seat of the Deputy Sheriff's car, Mary made a bow and said, "We've forgotten what verse it is, but we'll sing for you anyway." Then merrily Dora and Etta joined her:

"Three girl sleuths you now behold
Who have helped you find the gems and gold.
Come, come, coma,
Coma, coma, kee.
To Phantom Town
For a cup of tea."

"Which means," Mary interpreted, "that it's noon by the sun and I'm sure we're all hungry. I told Carmelita to make an extra large tamale pie." Then, before anyone could reply, Mary added mischievously: "Dick, I'm going to ride in the rumble with you."

Harry chivalrously bowed to the girl nearest him, saying, "May I have the pleasure?" It was Etta and she flashed him a bright smile of acceptance.

"Poor Jerry!" Dora condoned as she took the seat beside the cowboy. "Some imp has got into Mary." But the glance that he gave her was far more pleased than disturbed.

Carmelita welcomed them at the kitchen door with a beaming smile that revealed

her gleaming white teeth. Jerry introduced the air scout who surprised the girls by replying in perfect Spanish.

“I’m green with envy!” Dora told him. “I’m going to study Spanish next fall if it’s taught at our Sunnybank Seminary.”

“So you two are going back East to school this fall,” Harry said as they seated themselves around the kitchen table, cheerful with its red cloth and steaming tamale pie.

“Yes,” Mary nodded brightly. “Dad is well enough to go with me, Mrs. Farley says. Jerry has one more year over at the State University and Dick is going back East to study medicine. Oh, I forgot to say that Mrs. Farley is going to stay with us and help me take care of Dad. We three are going to rent a little house near Dora’s home.”

The conversation changed to the box. “I’m eager to know what is in it,” Mary said.

“I wanted Little Bodil to be the one to open it,” Jerry explained.

“How shall we get it to her?” Etta asked.

“I have a suggestion,” Harry said. “It will end the suspense sooner than any other way.”

“What? Do tell us!” came in eager chorus.

“Guess,” Harry turned to Mary.

“*You* will take the box in your Seagull.”

“Right you are,” Harry told her. Then to Jerry, “If Etta would like to fly over with me, I’d be glad to have company.”

“Oh, I’d love to fly,” Etta said, “but I ought not to be the one; surely you, Mary, or Dora—”

“We can all go up later,” said Jerry.

As they were about to start, Jerry drew Harry aside and said: “You understand we want Etta to believe the plan comes from Sister Theresa.”

Harry nodded. When he was in the car, Jerry called: “When you come back, you can land in the barnyard at *Bar N*. We’ll all be there.”

“Oh, what *fun* that will be!” Mary flashed a bright smile at Jerry; then taking Dora by the hand, she skipped indoors.

When they rejoined Jerry and Dick, after telling Mrs. Farley where they were going, the cowboy assisted the fair shining-eyed girl up on the front seat and sat beside her.

There was wistfulness in Jerry’s tones when he spoke. “I reckon you’re mighty pleased that your dad’s well enough to go back East.”

Mary’s eyes were glad bits of June blue skies. “Pleased isn’t a joyful enough word.”

When they came to the long road that crossed over the desert for many miles without a curve, she whispered, “Jerry, let’s fly across.”

The cowboy shook his head. “I reckon you’ve forgotten what happened once before—”

“No, I haven’t.” Then suddenly changing the subject, she asked, “How long before the Seagull will get to *Bar N*, do you suppose?”

“I reckon soon after we do,” Jerry said. Dick scanned the sky. Far away there was a speck growing larger. Lower and lower the circling Seagull dropped, then landed gracefully and easily. Before the others could reach them, Harry had helped Etta out of the pit. A small boy clambered out without help.

“All is well!” Dora said to Dick. “Sister Theresa has given little Jack to Etta.”

“Oh, it was simply too wonderful for words,” Etta told the girls. “We went so high that the mountain ranges looked like, well, a row of tents, maybe.” Then, as Jackie nestled close to her, she told what had happened. “There was real gold money in that box and Government bonds and beautiful blue gems. Harry took it all to the bank that looks after the convent’s finances, and, oh, I guess you’re

wondering why little Jack is here. Sister Theresa asked me if I'd be willing to let him live with us."

"I'm ever so glad for the little fellow," Mary hurried to say. "And now," she added, whirling to look from one to another, "if no one is too tired, I want to ride up to Jerry's own ranch. I want to look at the view from there before I go."

Dora and Dick exchanged puzzled glances. They were sure that Mary's flushed excitement had something to do with her plan, but *what?* Harry was enthusiastic as they rode in the shade of the trees. "*What* a place for a summer home," he exclaimed, "so cool and restful."

Mary and Jerry were some distance ahead. They reached the far-flung ledge where the cowboy had said he someday planned to build a house. Riding close to him, the fair girl asked, "Big Brother, *when* are you going to build a house here?"

"Never," the cowboy said, "unless someday *you'll* be willing to make a real home of it."

Mary put a frail hand on the brown one that held the reins. "Please start the house," she said in a low happy voice. "I'll be ready as soon as I graduate next June."

Transcriber's Notes

- Preserved the copyright notice from the printed edition, although this book is in the public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected a few typos (but left nonstandard spelling and dialect as is).
- Rearranged front matter to a more-logical streaming order and added a Table of Contents.

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