

Chase Josephine

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Old Apache Trail



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Jessie Graham Flower

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CHAPTER I

THE CALL OF THE WILD

"I HAVE asked you to visit me for a twofold reason," announced Grace Harlowe to her friends of the Overton Unit. "In other words, I have a vacation proposal to make to you."

"Which, translated into plain English, means that you wish to lead us into new fields of adventure," interjected Emma Dean.

"Perhaps," smiled Grace.

"I suspected as much when I received your invitation to come here," nodded Elfreda Briggs.

"Curiosity has taken full possession of me, Grace. What is the big idea?" urged Anne Nesbit eagerly.

"So far as I am concerned, no plans have been made," replied Grace. "The original suggestion may have been mine – that is, the suggestion that we get together for a real outing. From that nucleus, Hippy says he has worked out a plan that promises entertainment, health and adventure for the jaded Overton girls after their strenuous war service. Hippy and Nora will be here in a few moments. He will tell you all about it."

"Dark mystery," murmured Emma.

"Let me ask you girls something," resumed Grace. "Since we returned from France, where we all did our bit, has each of you been perfectly contented with the simple life, well content to remain at home without feeling one little moment's yearning to see something stirring? Search your innermost consciousness and tell me what you find there in answer to my question."

For a moment no one essayed an answer; then Elfreda spoke up.

"To be frank with you, Loyalheart, I have been perfectly miserable," declared Miss Briggs thoughtfully.

Grace nodded and smiled.

"In France, amid the activity and excitement of war, not to speak of the peril, I was positive that once out of it, once back in my peaceful home, I never again should feel the slightest inclination to wander," continued Elfreda. "For a few months, following my return from the war zone, I really was contented, delightfully so, luxuriously so, I might say, for I was 'living the lazy life of Reilley,' as the doughboys say.

"Well, finally I awakened from my dream. I was restless, ill at ease. While away to war my law practice of course had gone to smash. It had not met me at the train upon my return, either, and the way I felt I didn't care; but upon awakening I realized that what I needed was activity. However, the sort of activity that my particular ailment demanded was not at hand, and I was on the verge of doing something desperate when your letter came asking me to join our friends at your home to talk over a vacation trip. Grace Harlowe, you are a life saver. That is the honest-to-goodness truth and the whole truth," finished Elfreda amid laughter.

"That is what I say, or rather what I probably should have said had I the eloquence of our legal friend, Elfreda Briggs," bubbled Emma. "Give me excitement or I die!"

Grace glanced at Anne, who nodded and smiled.

"I follow where you lead, Loyalheart," said Anne. "Too bad that the rest of the Unit are unable to be with us, but those not otherwise engaged are mostly roaming over the face of the earth, just as we are proposing to do. By the way, what are we to do – where are we to go and how?"

"We are all suffering a reaction from the war, but a strenuous few weeks in the open surely will settle us down," said Grace. "There come Hippy and Nora. Now you will know all about it," she added, stepping to the veranda to greet the newcomers. "Welcome, Nora Wingate. How are you, Lieutenant?"

"All present or accounted for," answered Hippy jovially. "Happy to meet you, ladies," he greeted, bowing profoundly as he entered the house. "I haven't been so pleased over anything since I downed my first Boche plane in France. There, there, Nora darling, don't monopolize the girls. Give your hero husband a chance. I take it that you are to join out with us in our big mid-summer vacation?" questioned Hippy, addressing himself to Emma Dean.

"Are you going to lead the party?" demanded Emma.

"I may have that honor." Hippy bowed humbly.

"Count me out!" emphasized Emma.

"No, no, no," protested Anne and Elfreda laughingly.

"Before jumping at conclusions perhaps it would be as well for us to listen to Lieutenant Wingate's plan," suggested Grace, rising. "Dinner is being served. Come! We can talk while we eat," she added, leading the way to the dining room whose windows overlooked the sloping green lawns of Grace Harlowe's much-loved home.

Elfreda, Anne and Emma had, within the hour, arrived at Haven Home where Grace had been living quietly and restfully since her return from France, in which country she and her friends of the Overton Unit had been serving with the Red Cross during the closing year of the war.

Grace's husband, Captain Tom Gray, was still in Russia where he had been sent from France on a military mission, and Yvonne, her adopted daughter, was a pupil in a private school in New England, so she felt free to invite the girls of her Unit to join with her in a summer's outing that would offer both recreation and adventure.

Anne Nesbit, Elfreda Briggs and Emma Dean were the only members of the Unit who had not already made their plans for the summer.

While Grace would have been pleased to have all the girls of the Overton Unit join in her proposed outing, she was just as well pleased that her invitation had not been more generally accepted. The present party was of about the right size, as she reasoned it. Then again, the members of the party had been close associates for many years; they had shared their girlhood joys and sorrows; they had suffered together in those desperate days in France when it seemed to them that the very universe were rending itself asunder, and from all this had been born a better understanding of each other and a greater love and respect.

It was, therefore, a happy gathering that sat down to dinner in Grace Harlowe's Oakdale home on that balmy mid-summer afternoon. For a time there was chatter and laughter, the reviving of old college and war memories, intermingled with occasional chaffing of Hippy Wingate, always a shining mark for the Overton girls' teasing.

"Girls," finally announced Grace, "Hippy has a dark secret locked in his heart, to be brought to light only when we girls are present."

"I could see the moment he came in that he had," interrupted Elfreda. "Hippy always was a poor dissembler."

"Yes, that's what Nora says," replied Hippy sheepishly.

"I believe that you girls are not all aware of the fact that Hippy is now a man of affairs," resumed Grace. "Therefore, his words must be given weight accordingly. Hippy, being too modest to tell you about it himself, I would have you all know that, upon his return from the war, he found himself a rich man, following the death of a wealthy uncle who was so proud of our Flying Lieutenant's great

achievements in the war that he left Hippy all his worldly possessions. Our Hippy, it is rumored, is now lying awake nights trying to devise new ways to spend his fortune.”

“No, no, nothing like that,” protested Hippy Wingate, with a disapproving shake of the head. “What I really am trying to figure out is how *not* to spend it – that is, not all at once. Of course, so far as my dear friends are concerned, that is another matter,” added Hippy quite seriously.

“My ancestors originated in Missouri. You will have to demonstrate,” observed Emma Dean amid much laughter.

“What we are at the moment most interested in is the dark secret. You have something to say to us,” reminded Miss Briggs.

“Yes, Hippy, do not keep us in suspense,” urged Grace.

“Go on, darling. They will walk out and leave you if you don’t start pretty soon,” warned Nora.

“Ahem!” began Lieutenant Wingate.

“Are you going to make a speech?” demanded Emma apprehensively.

“What I am about to say will answer your question. Grace has been suggesting that this outfit get together and spend the latter part of the summer in the open. That set my brain in operation.”

“Your what?” interrupted Emma.

Grace laughed merrily, and then begged Hippy’s pardon.

“Upon my return from the war,” resumed Hippy, unheeding the interruption, “my friend, Captain Jamieson, of the State Constabulary, asked me to volunteer to serve in the troop with him on strike duty. I did so. Girls, you have no idea of the joy I found in ‘packing leather,’ as the horsemen call it – horseback riding. After that experience with the troop, when Grace was speaking about an outing in the open, it occurred to me that the Overton Unit might work off its surplus energy in the saddle, and at the same time have a glorious outing. Brown Eyes, tell them of your experience in the saddle.”

Grace related how, after having been made an honorary member of the troop, she had taken up horseback riding and what a wonderful revelation it had been to her.

“Take my word for it, too, Brown Eyes already is as fine a rider as there is in the troop. The captain says she is a natural born horsewoman,” declared Hippy with enthusiasm. “Even my Nora promises that, hereafter, riding horseback is to be her own principal recreation. How many of you girls ride?”

Elfreda and Anne said they had ridden some when younger, but not recently. Emma Dean owned a pony, she said, but had not been on its back in more than two years.

“Good!” exclaimed Lieutenant Wingate. “You all at least know how to stick on leather, so we will proceed to the next stage of the journey. My great secret is no longer a secret. You already know what I am about to propose. Do you girls wish to join out with us for a month or so in the saddle?”

“To go where?” questioned Elfreda.

“That is for us girls to decide upon,” interjected Grace. “The first question to be settled is, who will go?”

“All in favor of taking a horseback trip say ‘aye’; contrary ‘no,’” cried Hippy.

The answer was a chorus of ayes.

“The ayes have it! We go,” announced the lieutenant, smiling his pleasure at the decision.

“Have you a suggestion to offer as to where we might go?” asked Anne.

“It was my thought that we might tour New England,” answered the lieutenant.

“New England!” cried Emma Dean. “There isn’t any fun in doing that. When I go out for adventure I wish the real thing. Adventure in New England! Huh! It hasn’t existed in New England since the Indians put down an arrow barrage on the Pilgrim Fathers. You will have to think of something more exciting than New England if you expect me to go with you.”

“Where do we get the saddle horses?” was Elfreda’s query.

"Hippy will arrange for that," Grace informed her. "I agree with Emma that, so long as we are going out for adventure, we should get as far from the beaten paths as possible. Roughing it in the real meaning of the term is what we girls need."

"That is what I say," cried Emma. "No weak lemonade trips for me. Give me a wild west or give me an automobile."

"I am certain that Loyalheart has a suggestion to offer," said Miss Briggs, nodding in Grace's direction.

"Yes, I have," admitted Grace. "My advice is that we adopt Emma's suggestion and go west. Speaking for myself, there is one place out there that always has held a great fascination for me. I refer to the Old Apache Trail in Arizona. From what I have read of that part of the country, one should be able to find adventure in a horseback journey over the old trail. Going so far by train, before we start with horses, will make it rather an expensive trip, but I do not believe it will be beyond our means."

Emma's eyes widened.

"Indians? Are there Indians there?"

"Every bush hides a lurking Apache," Lieutenant Wingate gravely informed her.

"Oh!" exclaimed Emma under her breath.

"I do not believe it is quite so alarming as that," laughed Grace. "Even though there are Indians, we probably shall not be troubled by them. Are there any further suggestions, girls?"

"The Apache Trail sounds interesting to me," admitted Anne.

"Both interesting and alarming," averred Elfreda. "However, we know from past experiences that trouble always goes hand in hand with Grace Harlowe, so we are fully prepared in advance for whatever may come to us. What do we take with us, and how are we to dress?"

"It has occurred to me that we can wear our old army uniforms, without insignia," replied Grace. "They will be appropriate for riding, but we should wear campaign hats in place of our overseas caps. Such changes of clothing as we shall require can be carried in our steamer trunks which we will send ahead by express. My advice is not to carry any finery. Let us keep in the simple atmosphere at all times, bearing in mind that this will not be a Pullman car outing after we reach our starting point. How soon can you girls be ready?"

Elfreda said she would be prepared to leave in about ten days, having some office legal matters to clear up before going away. The others said they could be ready in even less time than that, so it was decided that they should meet at Oakdale for the start for the west on August first. Hippy, in the meantime, would, so far as possible, arrange by correspondence for the horses they were to ride, and for such equipment as had to do with his part in the preparations.

The following few days were busy ones for all, between riding horseback, taking short gallops out into the country on such mounts as they could find at livery stables, and planning for their vacation in the saddle. On these rides, Hippy and Grace taught the others such riding points as they had learned in their riding experiences, all save Emma quickly adapting themselves to the saddle, so that the week's vacation at Haven Home lengthened to twelve days before Elfreda and Emma entrained for home. Anne remained with Grace, there being no reason why she should return home, as her husband, still in the service of his country, was on the other side of the Atlantic.

In the intervening days before the start for the west, Hippy corresponded by wire and letter, with the postmaster at Globe, Arizona, who informed the lieutenant that there were two stock farms near that place, where mounts suitable for the Overton girls' needs might be purchased or hired at reasonable prices. It was decided, however, that no definite arrangement for horses should be made until Hippy had had opportunity to look them over, with all the girls present to approve of his selection.

Grace, having completed most of her preparations for their outing, now made a brief journey to the city to visit Yvonne at her school, returning home in time to welcome Elfreda and Emma, who arrived at Oakdale looking trim and pretty in their new tailor-made serge traveling suits. Grace looked her two friends over critically on their arrival.

“Becoming, but not quite suitable for horseback riding,” she observed, referring to their costumes.

“Our riding suits are in our steamer trunks,” explained Elfreda. “I know – you said we were not to take any finery along, but surely, while traveling on a train we should wear something other than our uniforms.”

Grace admitted that perhaps this would be advisable, and decided that the party would be less conspicuous in traveling clothes.

It was a merry company at Haven Home that evening, the eve of the Overton girls' departure for the west on what, each one instinctively felt, was destined to be an eventful journey. Several neighbors came in and there was music, with Irish songs by Nora, a characteristic speech from the lips of Lieutenant Wingate, followed by dancing, refreshments and much chatter, until a late hour.

After the neighbors had said their good-byes the Overton girls put the finishing touches to their packing and closed their trunks.

“To be opened when we reach Arizona,” announced Grace, placing her trunk key in her purse, smiling at her friends with that rare smile that so attracted people to her.

Quite a party was at the station to see the outfit off next morning, though naturally the crowd was neither so great nor so boisterous as when, upon her arrival home from the war, Grace Harlowe had been literally carried from the train to her home, a heroine, not in theory, but in fact, as the crosses of war of two nations, pinned to her blouse, bore evidence.

Farewells were waved from car windows, the tall maples and spreading elms of Haven Home melted into the distance as the journey toward the setting sun was begun.

“Somehow I have a feeling that this vacation of ours is not to be an unalloyed sweet summer's dream,” sighed Elfreda Briggs, settling herself resignedly for the journey.

CHAPTER II

ON THE OVERLAND COACH

"OH, girls, I've made a perfectly marvelous discovery," cried Grace Harlowe as she burst into the parlor of the hotel at Globe, Arizona, on the morning following their arrival from the east.

"Which means, watch your step, Overton Unit," reminded Elfreda Briggs. "What is the nature of your discovery, a long lost brother or something of that sort?"

"My discovery is a genuine old Deadwood stagecoach," Grace informed her companions.

Elfreda regarded her narrowly.

"Our Flying Lieutenant, Hippy Wingate, is examining it now to see if it is really fit for use," continued Grace with no abatement of her enthusiasm.

"A Deadwood stagecoach?" wondered Emma Dean.

"That is the kind of coach they used in the old stagecoach days of the early west," Elfreda Briggs explained.

"Eh? The kind that the bandits used to hold up, and rob the passengers? That husband of mine used to read all about it when he was a youngster. He declares that had the war not come along when it did, he might have been a bandit himself," asserted Nora Wingate. "What does he want to look over that old stagecoach for?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Hippy is thinking of taking a ride in it," smiled Grace. "Listen to me, girls! I will tell you what Hippy and I have to suggest."

"It is about time," muttered Elfreda.

"The suggestion is," resumed Grace, "that we girls take a trip in the Deadwood coach, say out as far as the Apache Lodge on the trail. There is no reason why we should not, at least, make a night drive, say up to about midnight, go into camp for a few hours' sleep, and then drive back to Globe in the early morning. Should we like the coaching well enough we can go on and do the entire hundred and twenty miles of the Old Apache Trail in that way."

"This is all very well, but what about the ponies that the lieutenant has hired for the ride over the trail?" questioned Anne.

"We can have the ponies led through to Phoenix and ride them back, camping along the way back for the rest of our vacation," replied Grace. "Hippy will arrange that matter, and make a deal with the stagecoach owner after he has carefully looked the old wagon over to make certain that it will go through the trip without falling apart."

"You think it will be a perfectly safe thing to do, do you, Grace?" questioned Elfreda Briggs.

"Yes, if the stagecoach holds together," answered Grace smilingly.

"If!" muttered J. Elfreda under her breath.

"But, Grace, suppose a band of bad men hold us up and rob us?" urged Emma apprehensively.

"No danger whatever, my dear. Those days have passed in the great west, as have the savage Apaches of olden time, though the trip will take us over the ground on which they fought many fierce battles. Ah! Here comes Hippy now. How about it, Lieutenant?"

"All set, Brown Eyes. The owner of the stagecoach says he has a new set of wheels that he will put on, as the old ones would not stand up under the load we shall have. Otherwise, the old rattler is good for many a journey over the trail. I think the owner got a good idea from us, and that he will make the Deadwood stagecoach trip a regular attraction for tourists. What do you say, girls?"

"Grace is the one to say," averred Elfreda. "On our journey out here you will remember that we decided she should be our captain. I may have my doubts about the advisability of the proposed coaching trip, but I will agree to it with a certain mental reservation. *Alors!* Let's go!"

"Have you seen the owner of the ponies?" asked Grace, turning to Lieutenant Wingate.

Hippy nodded.

“He doesn’t care what we do, so long as he gets his money.”

“When will the stagecoach be ready?” questioned Grace.

“Within an hour, if you decide to make the trip.”

“That is all very well, so far as it goes,” observed Nora Wingate. “What I wish to ask is how are we going to sleep and eat?”

“We shall take with us twenty-four hours’ rations and a small tent, which can be carried on the roof of the stagecoach. Hippy can sleep on the floor of the coach and we girls will sleep in the tent,” Grace informed her companions.

“Any old place is good enough for Hippy,” complained Lieutenant Wingate.

“A man like yourself, who has slept on a cloud, hovering over the German lines on the French front, ought not to complain about having to sleep on nice, soft blankets on the floor of a stagecoach,” teased Grace.

“Who’s complaining?” retorted Hippy. “What is the verdict?”

“Unless there are objections which argument cannot overcome, I shall decide for taking the stagecoach,” announced Grace.

“Ladies, please give voice to your preferences, and be quick about it,” urged Hippy.

The vote was unanimous for the stagecoach.

“Brown Eyes, will you attend to getting the food?” he asked.

“Yes, with Nora’s assistance. We will go shopping at once, Nora dear. Hippy, please tell the stagecoach man that we will take the coach, and that we shall be ready to leave at four o’clock this afternoon. Please see that the A tent is shipped aboard our craft. By the way, what does he propose to charge us for the trip out and back?”

“Twenty dollars,” replied Hippy. Lieutenant Wingate added, that, if Grace would give him a memorandum of exactly what she wished to carry along, he would get the equipment together at once.

“I will do that now,” replied Grace. “Upon reflection, I would suggest that you tell the man who owns the ponies we have hired, to hold the animals here, as we shall be back here to-morrow. I have about decided that one night with the stagecoach will give us all the thrills we are looking for in that direction. Anyway, we are out here to ride horseback, so you girls must not look too hard for comfort in your surroundings. Riding in this part of the country is work, and you will discover that it is not at all like galloping about a ring in a riding academy or pleasant jaunts through shady country lanes.”

“Or a trip in a luxurious automobile,” suggested Elfreda.

“Or a flight into the blue in a plane,” added Hippy. “Give me the air every time, the freedom of the skies, the azure and the birds and the – ”

“Look out! Your motor is going to stall,” warned Emma Dean amid general laughter.

“I agree with you,” nodded Elfreda.

Lieutenant Wingate went out laughing and chuckling to himself, and after his departure Grace assigned their duties to each of the girls, then herself started out with Nora to purchase supplies. These consisted of a small quantity of canned goods, potatoes, bacon, coffee, and salt and pepper, with a few other odds and ends, all of which Grace ordered done up in a large package and delivered to the stagecoach man. The purchases were quickly made and within a very short time Grace and Nora were back at the hotel.

“Does the drosky drive up to the hotel for us?” greeted Emma Dean, as the two girls entered.

“It does not. I should not care to make our outfit so conspicuous as that,” rebuked Grace.

“Oh, fiddlesticks! What is the use of making a splurge when there is no one to see it?” grumbled Emma.

“Wurra, child!” cried Irish Nora. “This is no traveling show for the benefit of the natives.”

“Nora is perfectly right,” agreed Grace. “We are here for our own enjoyment, and, though perhaps we may be a show in ourselves, we do not propose to perform for the edification of the public if we can avoid it.”

“What is this I hear about a show?” cried J. Elfreda, at that moment entering the hotel parlor with Anne.

Nora explained that Emma wished to drive away in style.

“Wait! Just wait, Emma, until we return from this trip of ours. If we do not show the Globites something new in styles after we have passed through the refining influences of the Apache Trail, I shall admit that I am not a prophetess,” laughed Elfreda. “I just now saw Hippy with his coat off working on that old ark, that he calls a stagecoach, before an admiring audience of natives. He *was* making himself conspicuous. Are we expected to trust life and limb to that ancient craft, Grace Harlowe?”

“We are and we shall,” answered Grace.

“Then I think those of you who have property had better make your wills before embarking. Nora, this applies especially to you and Hippy who so recently have come into a fortune. Grace made her will before going overseas to drive an ambulance on the French front, but Emma, having spent all her money on finery, had no need to make a will.”

“How about yourself?” questioned Grace teasingly.

“I am merely a struggling young lawyeress who isn’t supposed to have money to will, and who most assuredly has no clients to pay her any. Isn’t it about time for luncheon?”

Grace said it was, but that they were waiting for Hippy so that all might sit down together.

Lieutenant Wingate came in shortly after that, covered with dirt, and a beauty spot on one cheek.

“You are a sight, Hippy Wingate,” chided Grace. “How did you get yourself in such a condition?”

“Helping the man grease the wagon.”

“You go right up to our room and make yourself fit to sit down with civilized persons,” ordered Nora. “I am ashamed to own you as my husband.”

“Isn’t that a fine way to order around a fellow who has fought the Boche on high, and who will go down in history as a brave air fighter?” teased Anne.

“Some husbands have to be ordered. Mine is one of them,” answered Nora, giving Hippy’s ear a tweak. “Now run along, little man.”

Hippy kissed Nora and ran upstairs laughing to himself. Nora’s scolding did not even penetrate skin deep with Lieutenant Wingate, nor did she intend that it should.

Soon after that the Overton College girls filed into the dining room where a number of tourists were having luncheon. The girls, in their overseas uniforms, attracted attention at once, many of the guests having been told who the young women, with the tanned faces and familiar uniforms, were. The guests also had been informed that the man with the party was Lieutenant Wingate, a noted American air fighter who stood high up in the list of those who had downed more than twenty enemy planes.

As she took her seat at the table, Grace bowed smilingly to two ladies who had come in on the train with them that morning.

“Girls, what shall we eat?” she asked.

“Speaking for myself as a modest person, I think I shall begin at the top of the menu and eat my way all the way down to the bottom,” observed Hippy solemnly amid the laughter of the others.

Luncheon finished, the party went out sight-seeing, and for a look at the ponies that Hippy had hired for the trip over the Old Apache Trail, on which journey they would have started on the following morning had Grace not chanced to discover the old Deadwood stagecoach.

At three o’clock that afternoon the party of Overton girls loaded their belongings, such as would be needed for a twenty-four hour jaunt, into an automobile, and drove to the stable where the stage

driver, Ike Fairweather by name, was preparing to harness up the four horses that were to draw the coach.

Hippy removed his coat and assisted in the operations, while the girls inspected the stagecoach and stowed away their belongings.

Emma's nose went up ever so little when she peered into the interior of the vehicle, observing the old rickety wooden seats, the tattered curtains and the cracks in the warped flooring.

"If this old ark lasts until we get out of town, I am no prophet," she declared. "What if it breaks down?"

"We can walk, just as some of us have had to do in France when an ambulance went out of commission," answered Grace laughingly. She then placed blankets on the hardwood seats and packed their provisions underneath.

By this time Ike was hooking up the four horses. That he was an experienced man Grace saw after observing him critically for a few moments, and she was certain that they could safely trust themselves to his driving.

"I have a lurking idea that the girls of this outfit are in for a ride that they will not soon forget, even though things look favorable," she thought, smiling to herself.

"Grace Harlowe, what are you laughing at?" demanded Anne.

"I was thinking of something very, very funny," replied Grace.

"Let me in on the joke, please," begged Emma.

"Not now. Perhaps later on."

Elfreda regarded her frowningly.

"If you play any tricks on us, Loyalheart, you will be sorry," warned Miss Briggs.

"How can you even suggest such a thing?" cried Grace. "Did you ever know me to play pranks on my friends?"

"There have been occasions when suspicions assumed real shapes in my mind," retorted Elfreda.

"See to it that this is not one of those occasions. I believe we are about ready to make our start. Mr. Fairweather, where is there a good place for us to make camp to-night? I do not think we should try to make the Lodge this evening. All we desire is to take the coach into the mountains, make camp, and come back in the early morning. It doesn't matter whether or not we go so far as the Lodge."

"Squaw Valley or just beyond I reckon is as good as any place on the trail," observed the driver, reflectively stroking his whiskers.

"How far is that from here – I mean Squaw Valley?"

"Nigh onto thirty mile, I reckon."

"That, I think, will be about as much of a trip as my companions can stand, so we will say Squaw Valley, or the next available point. I leave the selection of the camping place to your judgment. What time do you think we shall reach the Valley?"

"'Bout ten o'clock. Have to go slow when we get into the hills, an' we bump 'em right smart after leavin' Globe. Sharp turns and narrow trail in spots, but it ain't much like the days when I driv a coach an' four in the hills an' carried the mail an' kep' a weather eye out for bandits. Since then them buzz wagons has took all the starch out of livin'. Ever drive one?"

"I drove an ambulance at the front for nearly a year of the war," answered Grace quietly.

"You don't say?" Ike regarded the slender figure of the young Overton girl, his gaze finally coming to rest on her well-tanned face. "Come to look you over, you've got a mighty steady eye an' a good jaw. I've seen thet kind before an' sometimes behind a gun. Thet kind is fine till you get them riled, then look out for the lightnin'. Where you goin' to ride?"

"Outside with you until we reach Squaw Valley, if I may," answered Grace smilingly.

"Glad to have you. All aboard thet's goin'!"

"Please get in with the girls, Hippy. Later on you and I will change seats, if that will suit you," said Grace.

The lieutenant stood aside until the four girls were safely stowed away in the stagecoach, Grace, in the meantime, having swung herself up to the front seat with the driver. The door slammed, Ike cracked his whip, and the coach started with a jolt that brought strong protest from the passengers down below.

"Hey there, you!" shouted Hippy, thrusting his head out. "I haven't got my safety belt on, so don't take off like that again or you will throw me out."

"Hang on, Lieutenant!" urged Grace, her laughing eyes peering over the edge of the coach into the red, perspiring face of Hippy Wingate. "That is the way I had to do when I went flying with you in France. If you will recall, you said yesterday that you must have excitement. I am simply providing it for you, and I have an idea you will get all you wish by the time we have done with this journey."

The lieutenant drew in his head and they heard nothing more from him for some time.

The Deadwood stagecoach swept out with a rattle and a clatter and a groaning in every joint, that aroused the apprehension, not only of its passengers, but of persons on the streets who paused to see the outfit wheel past them, the four horses at a brisk trot.

Leaving the town quickly behind them, the stagecoach swept out into the open. The smoke of the Old Dominion and Inquisition smelting furnaces hung gray against the sky, but the Overton girls were soon past the tall black buildings of cooling copper, riding away toward the west at a pace that caused the stagecoach to complain even more bitterly than before.

It was to be a mere outing, a jaunt in an historic old stagecoach, over an equally historic trail, but that was all, so far as Grace Harlowe and her friends had planned it. What the "jaunt" developed into was an exciting adventure, which had in it all the elements of a real tragedy. Grace already was glorying in the fresh air, the roll of the vehicle under her, and the uncertainty of what the next moment held for her.

"Will our wagon stand a lively run down the grade?" she questioned, as they topped a rise and she saw a stretch of about half a mile of trail falling away and disappearing in the valley below them.

"I reckon it will," grinned the driver.

"How about the horses?"

"That's all right. Don't you worry 'bout the nags, Miss."

"Then shake them out. Let's stir up those people in the coach and show them what riding in a Deadwood stagecoach really means," eagerly urged Grace Harlowe.

Ike did. He gave the reins a shake and cracked the long-lashed whip that sounded to Grace like the report of a pistol.

The horses responded instantly, starting down the steep grade at a lively gallop, accompanied by encouraging yelps from Ike Fairweather.

"That's the way we driv when we thought the Redskins was after us," he called to Grace without turning his head.

Twenty seconds later the coach was rolling like a ship in a heavy sea, accompanied by a medley of shrieks and shouts of protest from the jumbled cargo of passengers inside.

"Faster! Faster, Mr. Fairweather," urged Grace.

Ike's yelps grew louder and closer together, and the gallop of the four-horse team became a run. About this time the occupants on the inside of the coach, having reached the limit of their endurance, registered a violent protest.

CHAPTER III

A THRILLING HALT

"HI, up there! Cut the gun!" bellowed the voice of Hippy Wingate, using an aviator's term for shutting off the power. "Stop it, I say! You will have us all in the ditch!"

Grace grinned at Ike and Ike grinned at his team. Neither made any reply to Hippy's wail of distress. Grace's hat was now off, her hair was blowing in the wind, and her eyes were snapping.

"Oh, that *was* glorious, Mr. Fairweather," she cried as the stagecoach reached the bottom of the grade and lurched around a sharp curve on two wheels, a proceeding that brought another series of shrieks from the occupants of the coach.

Hippy was still protesting and threatening, then suddenly Grace and Ike were startled at hearing the lieutenant's voice close behind them, right at their ears, it seemed.

Grace turned and found herself looking into the flushed face of Hippy Wingate whose head and shoulders were above the top of the coach. He was standing on the window sill of the door and clinging to the edge of the roof of the stagecoach.

"Get down, Hippy! You will be thrown off and hurt," begged Grace.

"I can't be any worse injured than I am now after being played football with inside of this old box. What's the matter? Isn't there a brake on this bundle of junk?"

"I don't know. Sorry, but I thought you might enjoy a few sideslips to remind you of France. Please stop, Mr. Fairweather. He will break his neck if he tries to get down while we are in motion."

Ike applied the brake and pulled up the horses, whereupon Hippy sprang down to the trail and swung aboard again.

"If you do that again I'll walk," was his parting threat.

"How'd you like it, Miss?" grinned the driver.

"Splendid! I have not had such an exciting ride since one time when I was racing with my ambulance in France to clear a cross-roads ahead of a shell that was on the way there," declared Grace.

"I was goin' to ask you 'bout the war. You must have seen some big ones – big shells?"

"Many of them."

"Never got hit, did you!"

"I was wounded three times."

"You don't say!" Ike gazed at her with new interest. "Was he in the war, too?" referring to Hippy.

"Yes, as an aviator, and fought many battles in the air. All the young women who are with us on this drive also saw service in the war zone in France. They were a part of the Overton College Unit that went overseas for the Red Cross."

"Must have been purty bad business, thet."

"It was, but I would not have missed it for anything. Did many men from your city go to the war?"

Ike nodded.

"Some didn't come back, neither. S'pose your ambulance got hit once, anyway?"

"I lost four cars during the time I was driving. Two were blown up and the others were wrecked in accidents," Grace informed her companion on the driver's seat. "My husband is still in the service. He is now in Russia where he was sent after the armistice was signed."

"Your husband? You don't say! I wouldn't think it. Why, you don't look like more'n a school girl. I'll bet he'd like to be here right this minute."

"And I'll bet I should like to have him here, too," answered Grace smilingly. "Do you think we shall be able to stir up any excitement on the trail? We propose to do the entire journey on our ponies, you know, starting the day after to-morrow."

"Mebby, mebbby," reflected Ike.

"Are there any Apaches left in the mountains?" questioned Grace.

"Yes. Too many of 'em."

"Friendly?"

"Sometimes when they want to beg or steal somethin' from you. Don't trust 'em, Miss. An Indian's an Indian, 'specially when he's an Apache. They'd do a heap lot more than they do if they dared. Can you shoot?"

"Some," admitted Grace.

"I'll bet you're a dead shot. If them eyes was behind a gun thet was pinte at me, I'd put up my hands without bein' asked a second time."

"Were you ever held up by bandits?" asked Grace, eager to get the old stagecoach driver started talking of his experiences.

"Regular thing in the old days."

"What did you do in those emergencies?"

"Ginerally put up my paws when I was invited to. Such fellows can shoot and most always does."

"But, Mr. Fairweather, did your passengers never venture to defend themselves!"

"Once a man did. He's down there now, near where we're goin' to stop for chuck – in Squaw Valley."

"He was not quick enough! Is that it, sir!"

"You said it. Was the Germans quick on the trigger?"

"Their sharpshooters were very quick. Good shots, too, all of them, but our sharpshooters could beat them at stalking. You know our boys like to fight Indian style, while the German fights by rule and orders."

The driver nodded his understanding, and began admonishing the off-wheel horse who was using his heels rather too freely.

"Thet critter would run away if I give him half a show," grinned Ike.

"Of course if he were to do that and turn the coach over, you could not help yourself, could you, Mr. Fairweather?" questioned Grace innocently.

Ike gave her a quick sidelong glance, but Grace Harlowe's face was guileless.

"I b'lieve you'd like to have him run away," he chuckled.

"Oh, no, nothing like that, sir. My friends might get hurt. Otherwise, I should not mind it at all."

"You shore are a queer one," muttered Ike. "Over beyond the rise you see ahead is Squaw Valley. Good water there and fine place to have chuck. How much further do you reckon on goin'?"

"I was about to suggest that you decide that. If we ride until ten o'clock it will be late enough. I imagine, too, that our friends in the coach will have had enough of it by then. After leaving the Valley, if we decide to go further, I will go inside, giving Lieutenant Wingate an opportunity to ride outside with you. Perhaps you may be able to induce him to tell you how he fought the Huns above the clouds. I know you will enjoy hearing of it from a man who has fought that way."

"Shore, I would. Never was a prisoner over there, was you?" asked Ike.

"Yes, the Boches got me once and sent me to a prison camp, but I made my escape. They came near getting me twice after that."

"Huh! Got a family?" Ike was determined to get all the information he could. He had been doing it for years from the passengers who rode with him on top of the stage.

"If you mean children, I have a daughter, an adopted French girl. I found her in a deserted French village one night, the village at the time being under heavy artillery fire. I adopted the little one later, and she is now at school back east. Isn't that Squaw Valley?" asked Grace, pointing.

"Thet's her."

A few moments later the stagecoach drew out to one side of the trail and stopped.

"All out for mess," cried Grace, springing to the ground. "How do you folks feel after that delightful ride?"

"Ride, did you call it?" demanded Hippy Wingate, getting out laboriously and limping about to take the kinks out of his legs. "It's worse than hitting one of those bumpy white clouds with an airplane."

"Grace Harlowe, I believe you gave us that shaking up on purpose," accused Elfreda Briggs.

The others voiced their protests in no uncertain manner.

"You will forget all about it after we have made tea and cooked our bacon," comforted Grace, neither admitting nor denying the accusation. "There is nothing like a good shaking up to accelerate one's appetite."

Under Grace Harlowe's skillful hands a little fire was soon flickering beside the trail, the driver eyeing the blaze with approval; then the Overton girls got briskly to work preparing the supper.

"Where'd you learn to make an Indian cook-fire?" demanded Ike.

"My husband taught me. He is a forester, you know," replied Grace.

"Know how to make a lean-to?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"You'll do. No tenderfoot 'bout you. Reckon I'll fetch water for the folks and horses now."

The party ate sitting on the ground, Ike's interest during the meal being divided between Grace Harlowe and Lieutenant Wingate. They were the first real heroes that he had ever known, and he proposed to make the most of his opportunity.

"Well, Mr. Fairweather, shall we go on?" asked Grace after they had finished the meal.

"Reckon so. Better camping ground further on."

Equipment was quickly packed away and Ike hooked up for the start, but before leaving, Hippy Wingate and Elfreda issued a solemn warning that there was to be no more speeding.

The night, now upon them, was moonless, but the stars shed a faint light on the trail causing it to stand out dimly for a short distance ahead of them, save here and there, where overhanging rocks threw it into a deep shadow. It was an ideal night for traveling, cool but invigorating, with the breath of mountain and canyon heavy on the still evening air.

Lieutenant Wingate was riding with the driver, Grace now being inside the coach with the other girls. To protect themselves from the chill mountain air, Elfreda, Anne, Emma and Nora had wrapped themselves in blankets and were dozing off to sleep.

Grace was not sleepy, though the slow movement of the stagecoach as the horses climbed the steep grade was monotonous. She was too keenly alive to the wonders of the mountains to think of sleep, anyway. Grace leaned well out, with head down, watching the white trail that had echoed to the scuff of the moccasin of the savage redmen so many times in the past, and that was slipping slowly from under her, now and then gazing ahead along the narrow way with wondering eyes. The distant conversation of Lieutenant Wingate and Ike Fairweather drifted down in undistinguishable murmurs.

"Hippy is filling Ike with war stories, and he is drawing the long bow too, I'll venture to say. What's that?" Grace drew a sharp breath and her heart gave a thump.

The Overton girl thought she had seen a figure dart to the side of the road and into the shadow of the rocks as the coach swung around a sharp bend on the mountain trail.

"Yes, there is another! Something is going on here!"

Grace opened the coach door on the opposite side. There was a long, sloping bank on that side, the right side, leading down, she did not know how far, for the bottom was in deep shadow.

"Perhaps there are Indians on the trail," muttered Grace, slipping out to the trail, and closing the coach door behind her as she trotted along beside the slowly moving stagecoach. She then hopped to the step where she crouched, clinging to the door frame with one hand. Grace could still hear Hippy and Ike Fairweather speaking, and so interested were they in their conversation that they failed to see what Grace Harlowe's keen eyes had discovered.

“After all, what I saw may be simply prowlers,” reflected Grace, though her intuition told her that the figures she had discovered on the trail ahead meant something more than mere prowling.

Grace Harlowe’s intuition, in this instance, was not at fault.

Two rifle reports close at hand broke the mountain stillness, and the coach stopped with a sudden jolt as Ike Fairweather brought his horses to their haunches, so quickly did he pull them up.

A cry, which Grace recognized as having been uttered by Emma Dean, was heard in the coach.

“Flat down on the floor, every one of you, and not another sound!” commanded Grace in a low voice, dropping on all fours to the trail, and in that position crawling under the coach on hands and feet.

Before ducking under, a quick upward glance had shown Grace that Lieutenant Wingate’s hands were thrust above his head, and that Ike Fairweather was holding his as high as possible.

“All out, and keep your hands above your heads!” commanded a stern voice on the mountain side of the coach. “Quick!”

Grace Harlowe unlimbered her little automatic revolver from its holster under her blouse, the weapon that she had carried through the war.

Four frightened girls, crouching on the floor of the Deadwood coach, had not uttered a sound since the command to step out was uttered, nor had they made a movement to obey that command.

“Come out of that on the jump!” ordered the same stern voice that Grace had first heard, but this time in a new and more menacing tone.

A pair of booted legs appeared before Grace at the side of the coach, and she heard the coach door jerked open, followed by a scream from Emma.

Without an instant’s hesitation, Grace thrust her revolver forward until its muzzle was close to one of the booted legs, and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER IV

THE BATTLE WITH THE BANDITS

THE highwayman uttered a yell, and leaped clear of the ground, dropping his rifle, which clattered to the trail within easy reach of the Overton girl's hand.

Bang! Bang!

Two rifle bullets ripped through the roof of the old stagecoach.

"The cowards!" fumed Grace under her breath.

Snatching up the rifle that the highwayman had dropped, she crawled out from under the coach, and ran around behind it just as two more bandit shots rang out.

Grace threw the rifle to her shoulder and fired at a shadowy figure that she could barely see, and, in the next second, Lieutenant Wingate's heavy army revolver cracked spitefully from the front seat of the coach. With Grace Harlowe's first shot Hippy had unlimbered, and his revolver was now banging away to good purpose, as Grace realized when she heard another yell of pain.

"Look out, Grace, I'm coming!" warned Hippy as he leaped from the top of the coach to the trail.

"Disarm this fellow, please! He is wounded only in the leg, and he's dangerous. I will take care of the others while you are doing that," said Grace, starting to creep forward with rifle ready to fire.

Bang!

A revolver flashed from behind a jutting shelf of rock.

Bang!

The rifle in Grace Harlowe's hands answered the revolver shot. She heard her bullet smack against the shale rock and pieces of stone patter on the trail.

"Ouch!" grunted the bandit who had fired at her.

Grace was certain that she had not hit the man, but she believed that a splinter of rock had accomplished what her bullet had missed doing.

While all of this was going on, Hippy was removing the weapons from the bandit through whose leg Grace had fired a bullet from her automatic revolver.

The Overton girl was still cautiously creeping forward.

"If any of you highwaymen fires another shot it will be your last," she warned.

"Look out, Mrs. Gray! I reckon there's another of them critters behind that pint of rock," drawled the calm voice of Ike Fairweather, who sat holding his horses, observing the fight with fascinated eyes. Ike, eager as he was to get into the fight, dared not leave his team, knowing that, if he did so, they would promptly run away with the coach and outfit.

"I have my eye on him, Mr. Fairweather," replied Grace in a voice that was without a trace of excitement. "You heard what I said, fellow!" she added, addressing the bandit lurking behind the rock. "Toss your weapons into the road! Toss them out!"

Bang!

Again Grace Harlowe had fired at the same rock, and again she heard a scattering rain of shale that her bullet dislodged.

The highwayman hiding there threw his rifle away. She heard it fall on the trail, but was certain that the man still possessed at least one revolver, and perhaps two.

"The rest of them! You have two more weapons. Out with them, quick!"

Two revolvers followed the rifle and fell on the trail, just as she was about to emphasize her command with another shot, as a reminder that she meant what she said.

With rifle at ready, Grace now sprang boldly to the ledge of rock where she saw a man standing leaning against a tree, a hand pressed to his forehead. A few yards further on were two others, one lying beside the trail, the other sitting with his back against a rock.

"How many of you are there?" demanded Grace of the standing man.

"Three others," weakly answered the bandit.

"Are the two here badly hurt?"

"I – I don't know."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Splinter of rock hit me on the head," groaned the fellow.

"You stand where you are if you know what is good for you," directed Grace. "Get up!" she ordered, stepping over to the sitting bandit.

"I can't. Got smacked in the laig an' haid. I reckon I'll git you yet fer this bizness."

"Don't threaten. Hippy!"

"Righto!"

"When you can leave your patient, please come here."

Lieutenant Wingate approached at a brisk trot. By now the rest of the Overton girls, having found their courage, had crept from the stagecoach and were hiding behind it, peering out through troubled eyes. Elfreda finally stepped out and walked slowly toward the scene of activity, but halted a little distance from it, not wishing to detract Grace's attention from her work.

"Please search the fellow sitting here and remove his weapons, Hippy. Also, please see if I have killed the one on the ground there. I can't quite bring myself to touch either of them," said Grace.

The man referred to was not dead, but he was unconscious.

"He will be out of his trance soon, I think," announced Hippy after a brief diagnosis. "He has a dandy scalp wound. Good work, Brown Eyes. Any more of his kind looking for trouble?"

"I think not. Have you searched each one, Hippy?"

"Yes." Lieutenant Wingate was still working over the unconscious bandit. "He is coming around now."

"Elfreda!"

"Yes, Grace."

"Where are the girls?"

"Hiding behind the coach until the smoke of battle has cleared."

"Please tell them to watch the fellow that I winged first, and to shout if he tries to crawl away. You ask Mr. Fairweather if he has any rope. When we get these fellows in condition to move we shall have to tie them."

Elfreda walked back to the coach, returning a few moments later with a coil of clothesline.

"Is there anything more that I can do to assist you, Grace?" she asked.

"Yes. Tell Mr. Fairweather to turn the coach around, for we must return to Globe as quickly as possible. The prisoners must have attention, and then –"

"Jail," suggested Elfreda.

Grace nodded.

"The driver says he will have to unhook the horses and turn the coach around by hand," Miss Briggs reported.

"Tell him to do so. What will he do with the horses while turning the vehicle?"

"He says he must stake them down," replied Elfreda, "because the team will run away the instant his back is turned."

Grace made no reply, but stepped over to Lieutenant Wingate.

"How is your man?" she questioned.

"He will be ready for jail by the time Ike is ready to start. That's all right, old pard," he added, speaking to the man he was working over. "Don't struggle, for I can't spare the time just now to clout

you over the head. You thought this wagonload of girls would be an easy mark to rob, didn't you? I reckon you have several other guesses coming. Of course you couldn't be expected to know that this crowd is right out of the war zone in France, every mother's daughter of them just eager for trouble. The matter with you amateurs is that you don't know how to start a real mix-up."

"Please don't nag the man, Lieutenant," admonished Grace.

"I'm not. I'm giving him brotherly advice for the good of his physiognomy. How is the bird there by the coach?"

Grace said the girls were watching that bandit. She handed the clothesline to Hippy.

"You must tie his feet. He promises to be troublesome," she warned, referring to the man that Hippy had restored to consciousness. "Be humane about it, and do not hurt him unless you have to. Should that be necessary make a quick, clean job of it." This was said principally for the benefit of the prisoner.

"Leave him to me," growled Lieutenant Wingate.

"When the patient is able to be moved, please carry him to the coach. Mr. Fairweather will help you, if you need him. While you are doing that I will keep watch over the fellow with the damaged head."

"I don't need any assistance, thank you," returned Hippy, who, after tying the feet of his prisoner, grasped the bandit under the arms and dragged him to the coach, where he dumped the man on the ground.

"Here's two of the birds, Isaac," chuckled the lieutenant. "Two more over there are being guarded by Mrs. Gray. Think we girls are able to take care of a cheap bunch of highwaymen, such as these fellows?" he demanded.

Ike stroked his whiskers.

"Between you and that little woman over there, I shore reckon you could clean up 'bout three times your weight in mountain lions. Never did see anythin' like the way she lit into 'em. Bah!" growled Ike, giving the man whom Grace had shot in the leg a prod with the toe of his boot.

"Lucky for you, you sneak, that the woman banged you in the leg. She could just as easy put that lead through your head. She's the little lady that can put 'em where she wants 'em to go, any old time," finished the driver.

"How soon will you be ready?" questioned Lieutenant Wingate. "We'll be on our way right smart, I reckon. Where do you figger on putting 'em?"

"Two on the floor on blankets, so it will not be so hard on them. The other two bandits can sit up and I will do the watching. There will be room for myself and three women inside. The other two passengers can squeeze in on top of the coach with you. That all right, Ike?" "Shore. Have it any way you like. Mebby they won't be surprised back in Globe when we come crackin' in with these birds. I'll bet a stockin' full of marbles that the sheriff'll be glad to get his hands on 'em. Mebby these are the fellows that have been stealin' things at both ends of the trail."

"There!" exclaimed Hippy, straightening up. "I think you two will now stay tied until I get ready to untie you. Nora, will you watch them? If one of them so much as speaks to you, you yell for me."

Ike, having staked down his horses at the edge of the trail, now began turning the coach around. Lieutenant Wingate, in the meantime, had rejoined Grace.

"Are they behaving themselves?" he asked.

"Perfectly, Lieutenant. I can't help feeling that it was unsportsmanlike in me to shoot that fellow through the leg without even giving him a chance to defend himself."

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Hippy. "I shall have to repeat that to Nora. Listen to these words of wisdom from a man of wisdom. When you set out to finish a poisonous snake, wallop him! Do not wait for him to coil, nor strike from a letter S position. Get him! That is the method I followed in fighting Boches in the air. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be here, but some other fellows would be there still. Hulloo! What is going on back yonder? Run, Grace! I believe the prisoners are trying to get away."

They could hear the girls uttering cries of alarm.

Grace wheeled like a flash, but she did not run. Instead, she uttered a peal of laughter.

“Oh, that is too bad,” she cried, suddenly changing her tone.

“What is it? What is it?” demanded Hippy.

“Nothing worth worrying about. The old stagecoach got away from Mr. Fairweather while he was turning it, and it went over the edge of the trail into the canyon, that’s all. Listen! You will hear it strike the bottom in a few seconds.”

“There she goes! Good-bye, old Deadwood,” added Grace as a distant crash was borne faintly to their ears.

“Now we surely are in a fix,” groaned Lieutenant Wingate.

CHAPTER V

WANTED BY THE SHERIFF

“WATCH the prisoners, Hippy! Anybody hurt?” called Grace as she came running to the scene of the disaster.

“No, but Mr. Fairweather’s feelings are considerably ruffled,” replied Miss Briggs.

Ike, after having been dragged to the very edge of the trail by the coach, had picked himself up and was brushing the dirt from his clothes, for he had been dragged right across the trail, but let go just in time to save himself.

“Why, Mr. Fairweather, what in the world has happened?” begged Grace solicitously.

“Don’t ask me, woman, or I’ll say somethin’. I’m mad clean through.”

“I do not blame you,” answered Grace sympathetically. “How did it occur?”

“The blamed thing got away from me while I was backin’ it around by hand, that’s all. Ought to have known better’n to tackle it alone.”

“How long will it take to get the coach back on the trail so that we may go on?” questioned Emma Dean innocently.

“Get it on the trail?” Ike Fairweather groaned hopelessly. “We’ll never get it up, Miss. She shore is a basket of kindlin’ wood now, an’ I don’t know what we’re goin’ to do.”

“We can walk,” answered Grace confidently. “How far are we from Globe?”

“Nigh onto thirty mile, I reckon.”

“Walk thirty miles?” cried Emma. “I should simply expire.”

“I reckon you’ll have to walk if you want to get back,” grumbled Ike.

“Walking is most excellent exercise, and I am certain that it will do all of us good. I have a plan, Mr. Fairweather,” spoke up Grace.

“Thought you would have.”

At this juncture, Lieutenant Wingate came up leading the two wounded men who had been left down the trail. He too wished to know what the plan was for getting back to town.

“I was about to suggest something to Mr. Fairweather,” replied Grace. “We shall have to use the coach horses to help carry us.”

“Do not forget our prisoners in your calculations,” reminded Hippy Wingate. “Surely, you do not propose to let them go?”

“I have not forgotten. No, sir, we are not going to release them after all the bother they have put us to. Let me see, there are four prisoners and five girls.”

“And two men,” interjected Hippy.

“By placing two bandits on a horse, that will leave two horses to carry the rest of us. The girls can ride two on a horse, which will take care of Nora, Anne, Elfreda and Emma. You two men and myself will walk. Should we walkers get foot weary, we can change places with the girls who are riding. Does that meet with your approval, Mr. Fairweather?”

“It shore does.”

Hippy suggested, instead, that he be permitted to ride back to town for assistance, but Grace objected to this.

“The prisoners need medical attention, and we shall have to go on short rations as it is, so we have no time to lose. We will tie the four men on two horses and tie the pair of horses together; Mr. Fairweather can lead the animals; you, Hippy, will walk alongside of them and I will bring up the rear.”

“What if one of the bandits drops off and gives us the slip?” questioned Hippy.

“I shall see to it that he doesn’t get far,” answered Grace significantly.

"Huh!" grunted Ike. "I thought the lieutenant was givin' me a fairy story 'bout your doin's in the war. Jedgin' from what I've seen to-night I reckon he hasn't told the half of what there is to tell. Why, lady, if you was to live out here you'd be sheriff of the county at the next election. I reckon I know of one vote you'd get."

"Thank you. Then you approve of my plan?" asked Grace.

"From the ground up."

"And you folks?" she questioned, turning to her companions.

All nodded their heads in approval.

"I wish I had an airplane," grumbled Hippy Wingate. "I never did like to walk when I had to."

"We will take the rifles and revolvers of the highwaymen with us. I do not believe they will have use for their weapons. We may need them ourselves. Mr. Fairweather, if you will get the horses ready we will load up and start."

Ike removed his sombrero and wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

"Yes, I'll get 'em ready, but what Ike Fairweather wants to say, he can't, 'cause somehow it sticks in his crop an' won't come out. You're the real thing, all of you is, an' any galoot that says you ain't – well, Ike Fairweather will take care of that critter."

"You fellows, I have a word for you," announced Grace, turning to the prisoners. "I warn you that if you try to get away I shall shoot."

"Which, altogether an' in partic'lar means that the everlastin' daylights will be blown out of the critter that tries to get away," reminded Ike. "Fair warnin's fair warnin'."

"But not Fairweather," chuckled Hippy Wingate, which brought a groan of disapproval from the Overton girls.

Placing the prisoners on the horses and tying them securely was a proceeding that took some little time, so that it was fully an hour later before the procession started out, Elfreda, Anne, Emma and Nora riding on the two leading horses, Ike leading the prisoners' mounts, Hippy in the middle of the procession, and Grace Harlowe, with a bandit's rifle slung in the crook of her right arm, bringing up the rear.

The highwaymen were sullen, not uttering a word, so far as Grace had heard, though she had no doubt that they had quietly exchanged confidences. The one who was most severely wounded was the man whose scalp a bullet had raked, but he apparently was in no danger, though still weak from loss of blood.

"Is there a place where we can get breakfast, if still on the trail in the morning?" called Anne.

"Narry a place," answered Ike Fairweather.

They plodded on, Grace, if anything, being the most cheerful and contented member of the party. At break of day they halted, having made about ten miles of the thirty. From the little kit pack in which each one carried emergency rations, they eked out a slender breakfast, though they had neither coffee nor tea, that part of the food supply being at the bottom of the canyon in the wreckage of the old Deadwood coach. The prisoners, however, refused to eat, maintaining a sullen silence as they watched their captors partaking of breakfast.

At the noon halt, Grace and Elfreda dressed the prisoners' wounds, binding them up with skillful hands with pieces of cloth torn from skirts. It was not the first time that either Grace Harlowe or Elfreda Briggs had dressed bullet wounds, both having been called upon to do so in numerous instances on the western front in France. The prisoners watched the dressing operations without uttering a word of comment, but the expressions on their faces were not pleasant to look upon.

Ike, who had been regarding the wound-dressing with interest, turned, as the girls finished their work, and walked away running his fingers through his whiskers.

The prisoners were placed on the horses and secured, after which the party started on again.

"Horses comin' up the trail," announced Ike, a few moments later, holding up a hand for the party to stop.

Grace ran forward to halt the two horses carrying the four girls.

“Some one is coming, girls. Go back and get out of the way in case there should be trouble,” she directed.

Grace joined Ike after the girls had taken up a safe position, Hippy standing expectantly by the prisoners, the outfit, with rifles in hand, ready to meet whatever trouble might be in store for them.

Three horsemen swept around a bend in the trail, and the instant they hove in sight, Ike Fairweather uttered a shout.

“It’s Deputy Sheriff Wheelock,” he cried. “Now we’re all right. Howdy, Wheelock!”

The deputy, upon recognizing Ike, swung down from his horse, doffed his hat to Grace, and turned to Mr. Fairweather.

“What do you reckon you’ve got here!” demanded the deputy.

Ike explained who and what his outfit was, relating briefly the story of the loss of the stagecoach and the capture of the bandits.

“This little woman did the business. Deputy Sheriff Wheelock, Mrs. Gray,” introduced Ike.

“Do you know the prisoners, sir?” she asked.

After looking the bandits over closely, the deputy shook his head. He asked Ike if he needed any assistance to get the prisoners in. Grace answered the question by saying that they did not.

“We’re going out after a fellow who lives in the mountains and who has been shooting game out of season, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do, I’ll send one of my men to Globe in a hurry and have him ride out to the sheriff’s ranch and get him,” offered the deputy. “That will save you waiting for the sheriff when you get in. I reckon maybe these are fellows that Sheriff Collins has been looking for. Take your men right to the jail, Ike, and Collins will do the rest.”

After starting one of his men back toward Globe, Mr. Wheelock, mounted, waved a hand, and, with his assistant, galloped on. The Overton party assumed its former formation and plodded on, weary, but encouraged by the realization that only a few hours now separated them from their goal.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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