

Raymond Evelyn

Dorothy on a Ranch



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«Public Domain»

Raymond E.

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CHAPTER I THE TRIP IN THE ERMINIE

The “Erminie,” private car of “Railway Boss, Dan Ford,” stood side-tracked at Denver, and his guests within it were the happy people whom, some readers may remember, we left keeping a belated Christmas in the old adobe on the mesa, in southern California.

To Dorothy, the trip thus far had been like a wonderful dream.

“Just think, Alfie Babcock, of owning a real car, going and stopping just as you please, same’s riding in a carriage with horses! Even darling Aunt Betty, who’s been ’most everywhere and seen ’most everything, in her long life, never travelled ‘private coaching’ this way before. I hate to think it’s over, that I’ll have to say good-by to her so soon. Seems if I ought not. Seems if she’ll be dreadful lonesome without me all summer. I’m her own folks and I – I believe I shall go home with her after all, ’stead of into the mountains to that ranch with the Gray Lady.”

Alfaretta gave a vigorous tug to the shawl-strap she was fastening about a curious assortment of her personal belongings and answered:

“That’s enough of your ‘seems-if-ing,’ Dolly Doodles! It’s all settled, isn’t it? And when a thing’s fixed – it ought to stay fixed. Mrs. Calvert don’t want either of us. She said so, more ’n once, too. She’s tickled to death to think there’s such a good time comin’ for us. She’s got all that prop’ty that got itself into trouble to look after, and she’s got them ladies, her old friends, that’s been in San Diego all winter, to go home to New York with her. You better stop frettin’ and lookin’ out o’ winder, and pick up your things. You’ve lots more ’n I have and that’s sayin’ consid’able. The way that Mr. Ford moves makes other folks hustle, too! Hurry up, do! He said we was all to go to a big hotel for our dinners and I’m real ready for mine. I am so! Car-cookin’s well enough, but for me – give me a table that won’t go wobblety-wobble all the time.”

Dorothy roused from her idleness and began to collect her own “treasures.” They had accumulated to a surprising degree during this journey from San Diego to Denver; for their genial host had indulged his young guests in all their whims and, at the various stops along the way, they had purchased all sorts of things, from baskets to blankets, horned toads on cards, centipedes in vials of alcohol, Indian dolls and pottery, and other “trash,” as Aunt Betty considered it. In the roomy private car these had given but little trouble; now Alfaretta expressed the thought of both girls as well as of the lad, Leslie, when after a vain effort to pack an especially ugly red-clay “image,” she exclaimed:

“A fool and his money! That’s what I was. Felt as rich as a queen, startin’ out with all them earnin’s and presents in my pocket-book. Now I haven’t got a cent, hardly, and I’d ha’ been better off if I hadn’t a had them! There! that paper’s busted again! Does beat the Dutch the way things act! Just plain *things*! If they was folks you could box their ears, but you can’t do a thing to things, not a thing! Only – ”

“Throw them away! That’s what I’m going to do with my stuff!” cried Leslie, from a far corner, standing up and wiping his face, after his own bit of packing. “This old musket that that man in uniform assured me had belonged to General Custer – Dad says never saw a soldier’s hands, let alone Custer’s. Says he knew that all the time, even when I was dickering for it. Says – ”

Dorothy looked up from her own task to ask:

“Why should he let you buy it then?”

“For experience, likely. That’s the way he likes to have us learn, he claims.”

“Humph! But Aunt Betty says it’s wicked to waste money. One ought only to use it for some good purpose.”

A shout of derision came from both Alfie and Leslie, at this remark, and they pointed in high glee at a basketful of things Dorothy was vainly trying to make look a tidy bundle. She had to join in the laughter against herself and Mr. Ford came forward to lend a hand or offer advice, as need be.

“So you’re up against a tough proposition, are you, youngsters? How much of all that stuff do you really want?”

“Not a scrap!” said Alfaretta, frankly.

“Good enough! Well, let me tell you. There’s a poor old fellow hangs out just beyond this station who makes his scanty living selling just such ‘trash.’ I’ll give you just five minutes to select whatever you really wish to keep, five minutes more to stow them compactly for our long buckboard-drive, and about as much longer to make the acquaintance of my lame peddler and give him your leavings. Five seconds wasted already, staring at me! Begin, begin!”

The gentleman’s face was aglow with happiness and mischief, but there was a tone in his voice which compelled instant obedience; and long before the first five minutes had passed all three young folks had heaped the most of their “things” in a pile in the center of the car. The rest was quickly strapped in the beautiful Navajo blankets which Mrs. Ford, or the “Gray Lady” – as they best loved to call her, had purchased and given them as souvenirs of this wonderful trip. Blankets that were almost priceless, as only Dorothy knew from Aunt Betty’s explanation, but that Alfaretta considered far less attractive than a plain white wool one.

A porter, laden with baskets, appeared at that moment, as if by previous instruction; and into the baskets were tossed or tumbled the odd collection, everybody working swiftly yet already half-regretfully that they hadn’t kept more.

“That horned toad’ll get a rush of blood to his head!” cried Leslie, as Alfaretta threw her recent “treasure” into the mess.

“Take care, boy! Don’t break that alcohol bottle. That centipede mayn’t be as dead as he looks! The horrid leg-gy thing! How in the world did I ever fancy it? Take care!” warned Dorothy, as Leslie dropped an uncouth Indian “image” upon the vial.

“Hi, dere! Massa Leslie! Jed’ll do de res’!” cried Mr. Ford’s own especial servant, coolly pushing the lad aside and rapidly making a better arrangement of the articles. Then he shouldered his baskets and left the car, Mr. Ford following, with the three young people trailing after him. At the door Alfaretta turned and rapidly surveyed the luxurious coach in which she had spent the past few days. To her it had been a veritable fairyland, and quick tears sprang to her eyes as she exclaimed:

“I never had such a good time in all my life as I’ve had in this ‘Erminie,’ and I never expect to again! It ’most breaks my heart to say good-by to it!”

“Don’t say it then! I shan’t, though I feel as bad as you do. But our worst good-by is to come when Aunt Betty starts east and we west. I can’t – how can I? – let her go alone?”

This was sufficient to arouse all Alfie’s sympathy. She promptly forgot her own regret in soothing her friend, for Dorothy’s grief was most sincere. Ever since that day when she had learned that Mrs. Calvert was her own kin she had loved the lady with all her heart and had, during the past winter of Aunt Betty’s lameness, felt that she must now take care of her. She did not realize that the one-time invalid was now quite well and as independent of aid as ever. Indeed, the Gray Lady had laughingly declared:

“Dear Mrs. Betty is the youngest-hearted of us all!”

After that happy day when Dorothy had helped to bring about the reunion of the long parted Fords, the “Railroad Boss” had taken his wife and son away for a little time; but they had soon returned to *El Paraiso*, that charming home in the southwestern city and had remained as members of Mrs. Calvert’s household till the spring days came. Then Mr. Ford had announced his summer plans:

“I’m going to give myself a long vacation. I own a ranch in the Colorado mountains and I’m going to take you all, each and everyone, to enjoy it with me. My wife, Erminie, claims it her turn to play hostess, so we’ll all become cowboys and cowgirls, and have a wild-west show of our own, with a continuous performance for three jolly months. All in favor, say Aye!”

“Aye! Aye! Aye!” the youngsters had it, so heartily that, for a moment, nobody noticed that Aunt Betty was silent. Then, when Dorothy observed this, with a down-sinking of her own spirits, the lady made haste to explain:

“Nothing could please me better for Dorothy, and for myself if I were able to accept. But I can’t. As you know, my business affairs have become tangled in some way and I must go home to really understand what is amiss. Indeed, I don’t know yet where I may have to be during the warm weather and I’m delighted for my little girl, and for Alfaretta, to have such a fine chance. I fancy you’ll all come east in the autumn, as brown as the Indians who’ll be your neighbors, and in fine health. How soon do you leave, Mr. Ford? That I may make some arrangement about this dear old house, for I shan’t want to stay in it after you’re gone.”

Then it was his turn to explain:

“I have felt all along, ever since I found Erminie here with our boy, that the place should never become again just ‘a house to rent.’ So I’ve bought it. I’ve found Padre Nicolas, the old priest whom the Indians love and trust, and deeded it to him in trust for them as a Home. Here Lazaro Gomez and the other ancients of his race shall dwell in comfort for the rest of their days. The only proviso is that Father Nicholas shall admit none who hasn’t reached the age of discretion – say, eighty-odd years, or so! Nor shall any of his charges be compelled to tame wild beasts and sell them for a livelihood. The good old priest is ready to take possession as soon as we vacate and will put everything into what Alfie calls ‘apple-pie order,’ according to a red man’s fancy. So, when everybody is ready – Don’t hurry, please! – we’ll board my car, the ‘Erminie,’ and take our leisurely way northward. It isn’t as if we had to say good-by, you see, for we’ll be all together still. As for Mrs. Calvert’s plan – maybe we can persuade her to postpone business awhile for a taste of real ranch life. Eh?”

But Mistress Elisabeth Cecil-Somerset-Calvert was a matron who never said “No” when she meant “Yes;” and she smilingly kept to her own purpose, yet took good care that no shadow of a coming separation should darken her beloved Dorothy’s wonderful trip in a private car. Just here we may recall to the readers’ attention that this young girl’s earlier experiences have been told in “Dorothy’s Schooling,” her “Travels” and “House Party” and best of all “In California.”

Now those happy days of travel and sightseeing had ended in the city of Denver. The “Erminie” was to be stripped and renovated and put aside to await its owner’s further orders. From this point the ranchers were to proceed by a coaching tour over the long and delightful road to the distant Rockies: while Mrs. Calvert, her black “boy,” Ephraim, and some women friends were to speed eastward by the fleetest “limited” express. One more short hour together, in a hotel dining-room, and the parting was due. Aunt Betty and Mrs. Ford had already been driven away to this hotel as Leslie and his girl guests followed his father from the “Erminie,” and seeing the downward droop of Dorothy’s lip he tried to divert her by exclaiming:

“There was never such a man as Dad! He never forgets. Never. I believe he knows every cripple between New York and San Francisco. I do, indeed. This fellow we’re going to give that ‘trash’ to is one of his pets. I remember him now. Got hurt in a railway smash but is as independent as they make ’em. Wouldn’t sue the company and wouldn’t take money from it when offered. Claimed he was stealing a ride and only got what he calls his ‘come-uppance’ when he got hurt. Dad was so astonished when he heard about that, he said the man ought to be ‘framed and put on exhibition, as the only case of his kind on record.’ Then he suggested this way of earning his living. He has the ‘boys’ keep him fixed up in a little sort of stand just yonder and they see to it that his stock never fails. The cripple’s as proud as Punch. Boasts that any honest man can do well in America if he tries. He hasn’t any legs left and his arms aren’t worth much but his spirit is the bravest ever. It would break his heart if he

guessed that most of the stuff he sells is bought for my father by some of his employees, all on the sly. But he'll never know it. That's the best of Dad! His 'boys' love him. They think he's just rippin'! And he is. Look now. See how that man's face lights up when he hears that 'Halloo'!"

Dorothy stopped short to exclaim:

"Bought the stuff and gave us most of it, and now will buy it over again just to throw away! I never heard anything like that!"

"Reckon you didn't, for there is only one Dan Ford! But he doesn't have it thrown away. He has it burned. He says, 'Burned toads tell no tales,' and the worst trouble the boys have is to get folks enough to buy the things for them. When they see a likely lookin' tourist edging around the stand they use him, if they can. If they can't it's a 'short day' for Cripple Andy, but that doesn't worry him. 'The fat and the lean,' he calls it. Oh! I say, he's almost as rippin' as Dad himself, he's so plucky!"

The cripple's face did indeed light up as Mr. Ford appeared before him and shouted that gay "Halloo!"

"Well, well, well! If you ain't the best sight I've had since I saw you last. Halloo, yourself and see how you like it!" With this attempt at facetiousness, the seller of notions leaned forward over his stand and extended his best hand toward his benefactor.

"How's business, Andy?"

"Tollable, sir, fairly tollable. Been sellin' a lot o' truck, lately, to some Cookies, and there was a reduction-school-ma'am-racket that nigh cleaned me out. See that your man Jed here has got a heap more things. How'd he come by them? Must ha' cleared the country of reptiles, judgin' by them samples."

"Oh, he came by them fairly enough, Andy. These youngsters couldn't live without the things when they first saw them, but now they'll be grateful if you'll take them off their hands. Maybe you can make something from them, maybe not. In any case they're not going to *San Leon* on a buckboard with me! Take them off our hands, lad, and do a good deed once in your life!"

By this time Mr. Ford had placed his own two strong hands over the shrivelled one of the peddler and was pressing it warmly, while the two looked into one another's eyes with mutual respect and liking. Then when the hands unclasped there was left on Andy's palm a glittering double eagle.

Dorothy, watching, wondered at this, after hearing Leslie's boast of the cripple's independence; and there did a flush rise in his face for a moment, till Mr. Ford said:

"For Laddie, you know. If you can't use it – pass it on!"

The flush died out of the vender's cheek and a soft look came over it. "So I will, man, so I will. Thank God there's always somebody poorer than me! Good-by, and good luck, Boss! By that token I never seen you look that happy as you do this day, man alive, never!"

"I never had such reason to be glad, Andy boy! Good-by, good-by!"

Mr. Ford started off at a brisk pace, the young folks trying to equal his long strides, and Alfaretta asking:

"Is that cripple crazy? What'd he mean by sellin' things to 'Cookies' and what's a 'school-ma'am-racket'?"

Leslie laughed and answered:

"A 'racket' of that sort has nothing to do with tennis, Miss Babcock, at your service; and 'Cookies' are just Cook's tourists. All railroaders call them that; and I suppose the 'racket' was a cheap excursion the school-ma'ams were taking. Odd, isn't it? That though all Andy's trouble came from the railroad he claims to belong to it as one of its 'boys.' He's rippin', Andy is. He told father 't he 'teached school' himself, once! But he got so tired of it that the sight of a spelling-book made him sick."

"It does me, too," said Alfie, with sympathy.

"So he 'cut and run,' and rode on trains in every direction as long as his money held out. Then he stole the ride that ended his travels right here in Denver. Hello! where's Dad?"

They had loitered along the way and he had simply outstripped them. So without even a quarter in his purse but in his most lordly air, Leslie hailed a cab to carry them to the hotel he knew was that habitually patronized by his father; and a few minutes later they rode up to the entrance in state.

An attendant hastened to the curb to assist the “young ladies” out of the cab, but the hackman laid a detaining hand upon Leslie’s shoulder with the remark:

“Fares, please.”

“Eh? Just settle that with Mr. Daniel Ford, inside. Here, Buttons, you find Mr. Ford and ask him to step here. It’ll be all right, Jehu, and let’s hurry, girls, else we’ll be late for dinner.”

He started to enter the building but the cabman retained his hold on the lad’s shoulder and remarked:

“No, you don’t! You may be all right and so may your Mr. Ford but, as for me, I never heard tell of him and money talks. Fares, please.”

Dorothy and Alfaretta clung together, really afraid of the cabman who was now growing decidedly angry. He was a stranger to that city and had just embarked in a rather losing business, his outfit of horse and cab being a second-hand one and too shabby for most patrons.

Also, “Buttons,” as Leslie had called the bell-boy, now returned to say that “no name of Ford was on the register and the clerk wouldn’t bother.”

Here was a dilemma. The trio who had ridden in state now felt very small, indeed, and glanced at one another in dismay. Then Leslie surveyed the name over the hotel entrance and exclaimed:

“Pshaw! This isn’t the place at all. That donkey of a driver has brought us to the Metropole and not the Metropolitan. I might have known Dad wouldn’t put up at such a third-rate tavern as this! Now, you idiot, we’ll get in again and you take us where you were bid! and there, it’s likely, you’ll make the acquaintance of Mr. Daniel Ford in a way you don’t like! Get in, Dorothy – Alf! We can’t stand foolin’ here!”

But the cabman closed the door of his vehicle with a bang and calmly folded his arms to wait. Dolly pulled out her little purse. It contained one nickel and two cents. She had carefully cherished these because coins smaller than a nickel are not plentiful in California; but she tendered them to Leslie who smiled and shook his head. Alfaretta discovered a dime, but it was her “luck piece,” wrapped in pink tissue paper and carried thus in order that she “might always have money in her pocket,” and she hated to give it up. Both she and Dolly thought regretfully of the little pocket-hoard they had begged the Gray Lady to keep for them, lest they spend it on the trip. However, neither the cabman nor Leslie accepted their offering, and the latter exclaimed:

“Ain’t this rippin’? Lost in a strange city, in the middle of the day, and not a soul willing to help us out! What in the world will Dad say!”

“What, indeed! But look here, Leslie Ford, we’ve got enough to pay for telephoning that other hotel, if the man in here will let us use his ’phone! Then your father will send somebody after us or do something. Please try. I feel so queer with so many folks staring at us as if we’d done something bad!”

By this time the hotel clerk had become more amiable. The name of Ford had impressed him if it hadn’t the hackman, and though he, too, was new to the town he bade Leslie:

“Go ahead! Call him up, if there is such a man.”

With a glance of angry contempt Leslie put the receiver to his ear and rang up “Dad;” only to hang it up again in disgust, as the answer came back: “Line’s busy!”

CHAPTER II

A SPILL BY THE WAY

The “line” remained busy for so long that the loungers in the hotel lobby grew amused at Leslie’s impatience while the two girls became very anxious.

“It was only an hour or so, Mr. Ford said, before Aunt Betty’s train would leave and I shall be too late to see her – to bid her good-by – and it’s for all summer – a whole long summer! I must go, I must find her, I shall – I will!” cried poor Dorothy, her own words increasing her fear of this calamity, and with a sudden burst of tears. For an instant she tried to keep them back, then careless who might see her crying, darted outward to the curbstone and to the hackman waiting there.

In so doing she collided with a gentleman entering, who staggered backward from the impact, then quietly put his hands upon the girl’s shoulders, to steady her also.

“Beg pardon, little miss! and hello! What’s wrong? Did I hurt you? Beg pardon twice, in that case!”

The tone was kindly and to Dorothy it was a case of “any port in a storm.”

“No, no, sir, you didn’t! But I’m – we’re – in dreadful trouble. Do you know – do you? – where that other hotel is, that Metropolitan?”

“Surely, I know. Why?”

“Is it far? Can I run there quick? The cabman – we haven’t any money – it was a mistake – and I must go, I must!”

Leslie laid a soothing hand on Dorothy’s, which she had clasped imploringly before the stranger, and told their story.

The effect was surprising. This gentleman was the proprietor of this establishment and he well knew Mr. Ford, by reputation at least. With one angry glance around the lobby and at the now obsequious clerk, he wheeled about, strode to the cab, opened the door and lifted Dorothy within. Then he as promptly settled Alfaretta beside her, himself took the forward seat and motioned Leslie to follow. Then he ordered:

“Now, cabby, drive like lightning! It’ll be worth your while. Straight ahead, five blocks – east two – north three! Drive, I tell you.”

And “drive” the man did, as fast as his slow horse could be urged, while within the carriage the three young folks sat in anxiety, Dorothy leaning far forward, as if by that means she could reach her destination sooner.

Their new friend beamed upon her, asking a few questions which drew out a brief history of their trip and the plans for their coming summer. Then almost before the cab was halted before a big hotel he had opened its door again and taking the hands of the two girls piloted them straight into it and through some great halls to the dining room. There he halted and gave the name:

“Mr. Daniel Ford and party.”

“At dinner, sir, private dining room. May not wish to be disturbed. I’ll send to inquire – step into the reception room please,” bowed and explained the employee the gentleman had summoned.

“That’s all right. Direct us. I’m Darby of the Metropole. These young people belong to Mr. Ford’s party.”

A moment later they had met Mr. Ford himself, issuing from his private room, vexed and anxious at their delay and starting out in their pursuit.

“Well, laggards! What does this mean? Wasting the time when there’s so little of it? Mrs. Calvert’s fretting so she can’t eat her dinner and – in with you! In with you! There’s but fifteen minutes before her train starts east!”

When a good natured man is angry he seems another person and Dorothy drew back in fear. But Alfaretta's own temper rose and she exclaimed:

"Don't scold us, please, Mr. Ford, it wasn't our fault!" while Leslie vainly tried to explain: "A gentleman, a stranger, brought us here and paid our cab fare. I want a dollar, Dad, to refund him."

But, for once, the doting father was deaf to his son's words. He did not even pause in his rapid stride along the corridor, fairly dragging Dorothy off her feet in his unconscious haste, and finally depositing her in an empty chair beside Aunt Betty's, with the remark:

"Here's your 'bad penny' again! She – they all – will learn some lessons up at San Leon, this summer, or I'm a mistaken man. The one thing nobody should dare lose is – time!"

Mrs. Calvert gave him a surprised look but she had also been hurt by Dorothy's absence during the brief space that remained to them together, and she hastened to deliver the many last charges and bits of advice that seemed needful before their parting.

A waiter placed their dinner before the three young folks and Alfie and Leslie fell to work upon it with hungry zeal, but Dorothy could not eat. Her eye had discovered a clock on the wall, with the hands pointing five minutes to three. At ten minutes past that hour the "Eastern Limited" would roll out of the station and she be left behind. In a sudden impulse, she threw her arms about Aunt Betty's neck, begging:

"Take me with you! Please take me with you! I – I love you best of all the world, so why shouldn't we keep together?"

If there were tears in Mrs. Calvert's bright, dark eyes, she did not allow them to fall. Unclasping her darling's arms and gently laying them down, she silently signalled to Mrs. Ford and almost as silently left the room.

The "Gray Lady" followed and Aunt Betty whispered:

"I'm getting too old for good-bys. I'm going to slip away in the hotel stage and don't let Dolly follow me, please, till it's too late. She'll be all right again, directly, and – and so shall I. Good-by to you, though, and – that's all."

Dolly dropped her head on the edge of the table, as Aunt Betty loosened her arms. She was bravely trying to overcome the sudden loneliness which possessed her and in this was helped by Alfie's warning:

"Dolly Doodles! Take your head out of your soup plate! Are you crazy? There goes your ribbon right into the mess!"

The head was lifted so suddenly that the ribbon flew off and fell into the dish and its owner's tears ended in a giggle. Then her face flushed at thought of her own awkwardness and she looked down expecting a reprimand from Mrs. Calvert. When none came she lifted her eyes and found the next chair empty. This was a relief. She'd hide the ribbon before her aunt discovered it! But already the waiter had whisked that plate away and was supplying her with another.

Funny! Where Aunt Betty had gone! But, of course she'd merely left the room for a minute and would be back to say good-by. Then she picked at her food for a moment, wondering why Mr. Ford had also disappeared, and at the eagerness with which Leslie and Alfaretta enjoyed the good things served to them.

Gray Lady slipped back to her own place between the other two young people and began to ask them about the adventure which had delayed them. Presently they were all talking together, even Dorothy adding her comments and forgetting to look again at that warning clock.

Besides, she was listening to the grumbles of Leslie who, for once, was angry against his father and was explaining to his mother:

"I never felt so ashamed of myself. The idea of letting that stranger, and the proprietor of a rival hotel, pay our cab fare! I wish you'd hand me the cash and I'll send a boy to hunt him up and settle. I –"

Mrs. Ford stopped his further complaints by a nod of her head and the odd remark:

“They must have arrived by this time and the others must be gone. Yes, they ought to be here. I hope they’ll not delay us, too, as you did. Money? No, dear, I can’t give you that. Not in this case when your father has denied it. Ah! Fifteen minutes after three! Then our friends must be well out of the city by now.”

Lady Gray, as her son still loved to call her, now took her eyes from the clock she had been studying and cast a tender look upon the face of Dorothy. The girl had sprung up from her chair and had fixed her own gaze upon the time-piece while the color left her cheeks and she trembled violently. But Mrs. Ford’s arm was about the slender waist and her voice was comforting:

“Your Aunt Betty thought it was the best. She shrank from the good-bys for both your sakes. She’s a wonderful woman and thinks of everything that will make people happier. She said she’d just postpone the farewells till you meet again. She went away as cheerfully as possible and you must follow her example. Ah! hark!”

Dorothy’s bent head lifted slightly. There was a sound of merry, youthful voices in the corridor, the genial tones of Mr. Ford mingling with them, and presently the portieres were parted and the opening was filled by a group of faces matching the voices and belonging to – Could it be? Could it!

“Molly Breckenridge! Helena! Oh! Oh! Jim – you dears!” cried the astonished Dolly, rubbing her eyes that had been so dimmed by tears, and gazing at the faces in the doorway as if she couldn’t believe her own sight.

There, too, was Alfaretta, clasping the hands of all the newcomers, fairly dancing up and down in her excitement, “hail-fellow-well-met” with them all, forgetful for once of the difference in their social positions which had used to make her shy and restrained.

“Be I awake or asleep? How in my senses have you all got away out here to this jumpin’ off place of all creation? Jim Barlow, you darlin’ old Jim! How’s Ma Babcock? How’s Pa? How’s every single one the precious folks up-mounting? Oh! I could just squeeze the life out of you, I’m so terrible glad to see you!” almost screamed the girl, as she now for a moment forsook the “ristocratic” of the party to hug and kiss James Barlow.

He, poor fellow, rid himself of her clasping arms as soon as possible, reddening yet laughing, and casting an appealing look upon the lady who had risen from the table and stood smiling her welcome to them all.

“Don’t mind Alf, ma’am; she always did have to be the middle of things,” begged the lad, overcoming his own shyness rather than have that beautiful lady think he was a “softie” who liked kissing girls. Also, he was thankful that Dorothy had contented herself with merely holding tight to his hand and simply looking her affection.

“Oh! that’s all right. We love Alf; and this, I see, is that wonderful ‘Jim’ of whom I’ve been told so much. I – we – are delighted that you were able to take your holiday with us; and though we are not there yet, I bid you hearty welcome to San Leon,” said Lady Gray, now moving forward and warmly shaking the hand of the “work boy” as Dorothy released it.

“Isn’t it splendid? Is it a surprise? Didn’t you know a thing about it, Dolly Doodles?” demanded pretty Molly, hugging her friend, then standing back to hold her at arm’s length and study the changes which a few months’ separation had made in the beloved face.

Helena Montaigne, too, was trying to clasp her in equally tender arms, and Molly reluctantly released Dorothy, while she let Mr. Ford lead her to his wife, introducing her as:

“The daughter of my old friend, Judge Breckenridge. He and I were classmates once, and come here, Leslie boy! I’ve heard this little lady spoken of as ‘Jolly Molly,’ and you must make it your business that not one day of her coming summer with us shall be anything save ‘jolly.’ Ah! Erminie, young people on a ranch!”

Evidently, Leslie was as much in the dark as Dorothy and Alf had been, this visitation of so many young strangers a complete surprise to him; but he was trained to good manners and at

once captivated Molly's admiration by his cordial greeting. So that, a moment later, she whispered to Dorothy:

"Isn't he a dear! I declare he's just a heavenly handsome boy, with his blue eyes and – and his *air!* He really is too sweet for words, that boy!"

Whereat Dolly laughed and answered:

"Oh! you funny Molly! You don't change a bit! Still 'doting on boys' as much as ever! How's Melvin?"

"Melvin's a poke. The invitation included him, too, but he sets himself up stiff as stiff and said he had no time to waste visiting. He'd got to learn the business soon as he could, for his mother – Oh! a lot of bosh about his mother, and her trusting him. Even my father –"

"Never mind him, then, but tell me how in the world you happened to come just here and now?"

The two had retreated to the window and stood with arms about each other and Dorothy's eyes now free from tears. Indeed, so surprising was this whole affair that she had, for a moment, forgotten Aunt Betty's departure.

"Why, it's this way. Mr. Ford is an old friend of Papa's and when he found out that you knew us, too, he just planned the whole thing for a grand treat to you! He wrote Papa that he was under 'lifelong obligation to you' because – well, of something or other. I wasn't told what, but it doesn't matter. The thing that does matter is that we're to be together all summer long, at least for three whole months. Think of that, girlie, just think of that! He wrote Papa, too, that he'd have liked to gather the whole 'House Party' together if it had been practical, but his wife didn't think it would. I reckon she knew she'd have her hands full enough, chaperoning eight youngsters, without asking more. We came pretty near not getting Helena and Herbert, though! Mr. Montaigne fancied it was too much like an imposition to let them come, because he didn't know the Fords. Helena wrote me that, so I got Dad to send him a letter to make him stop and think! Besides, Jim – that boy is just grand! He –"

"Of course, honey. He's a boy, you know."

"Laugh away! I'm too happy to care. I do like boys best. Why shouldn't I? They're heaps more fun than girls – except you. And to think! Helena and Jim were the real chaperons of our trip, though Helena's governess, Miss Milliken, was called such. But she's a stick! I had the time of my life, keeping her scared all the way on. Oh! I'm glad to be off that train. Mr. Ford says we're to finish our journey in wagons. I like that."

"But I don't see Miss Milliken, Molly."

"No. She knows some people here in Denver and they met her at the station and carried her off to dine with them. I wish she'd get belated and left behind. She was a regular kill-joy all the way out."

"Poor, meek, timid woman! She used to have so little snap that Herbert nicknamed her 'The Worm.' It was horrid –"

"Well, she's 'turned,' then. Of course, we were pretty full of fun and scared her with some of our pranks. But – Ah! there she is now! You can't lose that woman! Mrs. Montaigne told her that 'the lives of her precious children were entrusted to her hands,' and the governess feels her responsibility to the full, I tell you. Even Helena –"

"Dinner for the newcomers!" called Mr. Ford, interrupting, as a fresh meal was placed upon the table and they were invited to their seats. The zeal with which they accepted and the fine appetites they displayed sent a satisfied smile to their host's lips, and he nodded merrily to his wife:

"No invalids among them! Glad of that! But youngsters, eat first, chatter afterwards! The wagons will be at the door very soon and I want to get in a good thirty miles before bedtime!"

They tried to check their eager talk but they were all too excited for quiet, and presently rose from the table, ready for the ride, while Mr. Ford said:

"Now, Erminie, wife, you do the pairing off of the youngsters, and arrange how we shall divide. First, count noses! Eight youngsters, three oldsters, two 'boys' – thirteen passengers in all! Miss Milliken, did you ever 'cross the plains' before?"

The prim little lady, who had been standing beside Mrs. Ford, appeared not to hear the gentleman's question, but turned with an air of anxiety to ask in turn:

"Madam, did I hear there were 'thirteen,' THIRTEEN?"

"Yes, Miss Milliken. Why?"

"Then I think you'll have to excuse me. I might follow you later if there were some way but I positively decline to make the thirteenth of any party."

There certainly was nothing wormlike, or undecided, about the governess, whose lips had closed in such a thin line of obstinacy as changed her whole appearance, while her would-be hostess inquired with amusement:

"Are you superstitious, Miss Milliken? Surely, with your culture and –"

Helena advanced with an air of authority:

"Milliken, this is absurd! Please get back your common sense. Remember we are guests and have no right to object to anything."

The chaperon bridled, but kept silence, till Mr. Ford explained:

"Thirteen doesn't mean the whole party. There'll be three drivers, besides. Possibly more men picked up along the road. Moreover, thirteen is my 'lucky number,' if 'luck' is anything. Well, Mrs. Ford, have you arranged the company?"

"No, I cannot. I know them so slightly, as yet, and the best way is to draw lots. How many will the first buckboard carry?"

"Eight, all told. A dozen, if need be. Well, time's precious! Here's a lot of matches. The whole ones go in number one, the next lengths in wagon two, and the little ones in the last. See, I've snapped them off, and Miss Milliken, as head of the expedition, please draw first!"

The lady flushed and drew. Her lot was in the last and smallest buckboard which would carry but two more beside the driver; and it fell out that her companions would be Alfaretta and Monty Stark. The driver was known as Silent Pete, and it certainly was an odd combination which had resulted from the first "drawing."

To the leading wagon the "lots" assigned the three Fords and Jedediah, their colored "boy," with Molly, Helena and Herbert – their driver, Lem Hunt, the most talkative man at San Leon but, also, the crack whip of the ranch.

The driver of the second team was "Tenderfoot Sorrel," so called because of his red hair and his comparatively recent arrival from the east. He was less familiar with the country than the other two teamsters and had been assigned to the place in the middle of the little cavalcade, so that "he can't lose himself afore or ahind, ary way," as Lemuel explained it.

Naturally, everybody was disappointed at the result of the lots, Mrs. Ford protesting that it was inhospitable to put all her family in one vehicle, and that the best, but that "a Ford should have been in each."

"Let's change, then," begged Monty, "and let one of the girls settle it as she knows we'd like it."

But Alfie gave him such a frown that he ducked his head, avoiding an imaginary blow, while Miss Milliken as vigorously declared:

"You mustn't do that. Oh! don't do that! 'Twould be the very worst luck of all. Something would surely happen!"

"Well, if there doesn't I shall be disappointed! We're all eager for adventures, and that's why I took this long, roundabout way to the ranch. We could have gone there in next to no time, by rail, but that's too humdrum a thing. Anyhow, I bow to Miss Milliken's prejudices for the time being. We shall be in sight of each other all the time, I expect, and meet at Roderick's for our suppers and beds! All off for San Leon that's going!" cried Mr. Ford, in imitation of a steamboat steward, and taking his wife's arm led her and her guests out of the hotel.

The trunks and heavier luggage had already gone ahead in other wagons and only suit-cases and hand-bags were on hand. These were hastily bestowed in the boxes of the two less crowded

buckboards, and no attention paid to their ownership, since it was expected that all would meet at “Roderick’s,” where every traveller could find his own.

With a blast on his coach horn, a crack of his long whip over his four-in-hand, proud Lemuel led the way along the city street, out of the town, and into the open country beyond.

All the horses attached to the blackboards were the picked ones of the San Leon stables, with a record known as well in the far east as in that wide western land. As one spectator of this gallant start remarked:

“It goes without saying that Dan Ford will drive no second-rate horseflesh, any more ’n he will a second-class railroad. My! See ’em travel! At that gait they’ll pick up the stretch ’twixt here and ‘Roderick’s’ long before nightfall, or I’m no judge.”

“Likely enough, likely enough. Only I don’t like the looks of that second span – I mean the one to the middle buckboard. Them blacks. The boys up to S’ Leon hadn’t no right to trust a tenderfoot to drive them critters!” remarked another observer, as the fretful animals passed out of sight, following their leaders.

Even Lem Hunt looked back once or twice, as they left the city limits, and waved a warning hand toward “T. Sorrel,” who merely tossed his red head and continued to draw upon the reins he should have loosened. Also, Silent Pete opened his lips for once and hallooed to the man ahead:

“Let ’em out, you fool! Give ’em their heads, I say!”

Then he relapsed into his normal condition, attending strictly to his own business and making himself deaf to the timid shrieks of Miss Milliken, from the rear seat. He was known to “hate silly women” and felt his fate a hard one in having to escort such a one as the governess. She, accustomed only to the sedate pace of the fat Montaigne steeds, felt that the spirited animals before that wagon were simply on the road to destruction and nowhere short of it! She clung to her seat-arm with one hand and clutched Pete’s coat collar with the other, frantically beseeching him:

“Do stop! Oh! you – man – just stop – and let me get my breath! I – I bump so – I – I can’t even think!”

But this western jehu merely flicked her fingers off as he would a troublesome fly, while Monty coolly advised:

“Don’t try, Miss Milliken. Fast? Why, they call this mere walkin’ out here. I’m going to take a nap.”

He settled himself sidewise on his seat, folded his arms upon its back, dropped his face upon them and tried to sleep. He was cross. He had wanted to ride in the foremost vehicle with the fine four-in-hand. He hated being put at the tail end of the procession with stupid Alfaretta Babcock, a speechless man, and a nervous, half-hysterical woman for companions. But the chuckle that escaped him a moment later proved that his slumber was only a pretended one. At a particularly rough spot in the road and a particularly shrill scream from Miss Milliken, the angry ranchman faced about and rudely ordered: “Shut up!” Then his lips closed with a click and nothing further escaped them during all that drive.

Alfaretta giggled; then strained her eyes again to pierce the distance which she had been studying for some time. Then she laid a hand on Monty’s head and shook it vigorously:

“Wake up, boy! Look ahead and see if either wagon is in sight! ’Tisn’t so awful dark yet but I wish – I wish I could get a glimpse of Dolly and Jim. That fool driver might have taken the wrong road where it branched off a ways back.”

Silent Pete heard and guessed this was the truth, but he ventured no reply. His business was to drive his own horses and let the tenderfoot look out for himself. But Monty roused himself enough to assure Alf:

“He wouldn’t do that! Why, that road is nothing but a trail through the woods. Dark as midnight. Don’t worry.” Then he settled himself to sleep again.

Now the fact was that “T. Sorrel,” as his fellow ranchmen called him, had more conceit than common sense. He had heard that the branch road was a short cut to “Roderick’s,” but not that it was impassable for a team. A man on horseback might pass safely over it, by daylight and with a trustworthy mount. Not otherwise; and though the opening was fairly clear the trail entered a hopeless tangle of underbrush and fallen timber but a short way further on. To go forward then became impossible, and equally so the turning back. The lively blacks resented the scratching of briars and broken branches upon their tender limbs and pranced and fretted wildly. A molly cottontail scurried across the track before them and with a mutual, frenzied impulse they shied and sprang into the air.

The buckboard flew upward, turned turtle, scattered its load in all directions, then settled into a broken heap, while the light traces yielded to the strength of the horses, and they rushed madly forward out of sight.

At that very moment it had been, that Silent Pete and his wagon had passed the entrance of that trail; and even in that dusk his trained eye had noted fresh wheel and hoof prints. But it was not his business to stop and investigate. He had been set to bring his party to “Roderick’s”, not to take care of a tenderfoot who ought to have a nurse, the fool!

CHAPTER III

THE MIDNIGHT SEARCHING PARTY

The night was growing late and there were anxious hearts at “Roderick’s.” The four-in-hand had arrived hours before, and Silent Pete had also brought his party safely in – to the mutual relief of himself and Miss Milliken, the latter really surprised to find she had arrived sound in body and limb. She had promptly retired to the little chamber assigned herself and Helena, only to reappear in fresh distress.

“My suit-case with my night-things! I can’t find it anywhere. The one they gave me has a lot of boys’ things in it-all jumbled together. I’d like my suit-case, please. I’m worn out with that awful ride and if I’ve got to repeat it to-morrow, I must get to rest;” but as the buxom maid to whom she appealed paid her scant attention, she turned to Helena with her wail: “Oh, Miss Helena! *Won’t* you make them give me the right case?”

The emphasis put on the “won’t” suggested a desperate need, but merely annoyed her young mistress, who requested:

“Don’t make a nuisance of yourself, Milly. The loss of a suit-case is nothing compared to – Oh! if Dolly were only safely here!”

“She will be, of course. Haven’t I, with my nerves, lived through that ride? But, you don’t understand, dear, I *want my things*. I can’t wear a boy’s pajamas – all mussed up, at that. I want, I want to go to bed.”

“Then, for goodness’ sake – go!” cried Monty Stark, who had come up to the pair. “That’ll give us a rest, too.”

“I shall have to sit up all night, then,” still moaned the lady, “for your case isn’t to be found either, Miss Helena.”

Then finding no greater sympathy from her mistress than from that saucy boy, the governess betook herself out of the way. She was the only one of the party which had so gaily left Denver that now cared for anything except the appearance down the road of the missing buckboard.

Molly and Leslie, congenial spirits, had tried to laugh off their anxiety and to convince the others that everything was “all right, of course.”

“Likely Dolly Doodles has discovered some new sort of flowers somewhere and has wandered off to get them. She’s always doing that kind of thing,” Molly assured her hostess, who had gently answered:

“We’ll hope it’s only that. But she’d scarcely look for wild flowers at night, nor do anything to make us anxious by her delay. Our Dorothy is a very considerate girl and I wish – they would come.”

Linking her arm within Helena’s, the lady set her steps to suit the girl’s and resumed the pacing up and down the long piazza. The house was a one-storied building, stretching along the roadway to a size that was unusual for such a locality. It had been added to at different periods, as need arose; each addition being either a little lower or higher than its neighbor, according to the cash in hand, but invariably with the continuance of the comfortable piazza. This now afforded a long promenade, and all the people gathered at the wayside inn that night, were using it to walk off their impatience at the delay of “Tenderfoot Sorrel” to bring in his team.

Supper had been put back till it was spoiled, and having been telegraphed for beforehand, good Mrs. Roderick had wasted her best efforts upon it. But, at last, seeing Monty and Molly peering through the kitchen windows in a hungry sort of way, Mr. Ford ordered it served and all repaired to the dining room, feeling that the meal would be a farce, yet something with which to kill time.

However, the long ride in the keen air had given all a fine appetite and despite the landlady’s laments over the “dried-up stuff,” the table was nearly cleared of its food when they left it. Moreover,

everyone felt better and brighter for the refreshment and so hopeful now for the speedy arrival of the laggards, that Mr. Ford suggested to the waitress:

“Just have a few things kept warm for the others. There’ll be four of them. If they aren’t here within a half-hour, now, I’ll go back in search of them. Something may have happened to the wagon and they left to come on a-foot.”

“Dear, did you ask the man you call Silent Pete if he passed them anywhere along the road?”

“Surely, I did that the first thing. He had neither passed nor seen them, he said.”

“Well, I’m going to interview him again. Come on, Miss Molly, to the stable with me,” cried Leslie.

“‘Molly,’ without the ‘Miss,’ please, and I’m ready enough! It seems as if I must be doing something, for everybody is looking so worried,” she answered, catching his outstretched hand and racing with him down the long porch and around to the stables in the rear.

Silent Pete had not gone to the loft where the workmen slept. He had wrapped himself in a blanket and, with another for a pillow, had settled himself in a corner of the loose box next the stalls where his team stood. He was so devoted to them that he couldn’t leave them alone in a strange stable, though from the snores which already came from him he didn’t seem a great protection to anything.

But Silent Pete was wily. He had heard the voices of the pair without the building, asking a groom to tell where Pete could be found, and had resented being disturbed. He had done his day’s work, he had no intention of joining in any search that might be made for the delinquents, and he promptly pretended slumber. But he hadn’t reckoned upon Leslie’s persistence nor his own uneasy conscience.

“Wake up there, Peter, if that’s your name! I’m your boss’s son, and I want a word with you. Wake up, man!”

The snores deepened. Rarely had the nose of mortal man emitted such ear-splitting sounds as now issued from the nostrils of the ranchman, as Leslie shoved aside the sliding door of the loose box and stepped within.

“Here, Molly-without-the-Miss, take the lantern and hold it so I can find the head inside that roll of blankets! Feet are big enough. Can’t miss them,” said the lad, stumbling over the protruding boots of the sleeper. “I’ll take this pitchfork and prod him up a bit. Hello, Pete! I say, Pete, you’ve earned your name one way – but you hardly deserve it another. ‘Silent!’ You’ll certainly keep the horses awake and – Wake up, I say! You shall!”

Leslie thrust the pitchfork into the boards of the floor so uncomfortably near that snoring nose that Pete hitched aside and so admitted himself awake. Molly ran into the box and held the lantern low, while the boy squatted at the teamster’s head and thumped it soundly. Both were giggling, which incensed their victim still further, and he suddenly tossed off his blanket with such force that it hit Molly’s face and made her jump away, while Leslie ordered:

“Quit that! Don’t you know how to treat a lady?”

There was no answer, save a frown directed toward the laughing girl, and the lad demanded:

“You’re to open your lips and tell us what you think has happened to that tenderfoot driver and his team. Why doesn’t he come in? They say you’re the oldest driver round, know the most about the roads, or trails, and your opinion’s wanted. Give it quick, because – Well, there’ll be some thing doin’ if you do know anything and don’t tell it. I don’t understand why I suspect you’re hiding things but I do; unless it’s that grudge I heard some men say you had against the ‘Sorrel’ fellow. Now, you talk. Where do you think that buckboard is?”

“Gone to smash.”

Molly screamed at this cool answer, and Leslie threatened his pitchfork. But it was neither of these things which moved Pete to tersely disclose his private opinion:

“I know nothin’. I guess shortcut and destruction. Lem knows the trail. T. Sorrel ain’t wuth huntin’, nor them boys. Little gal – might – Talk to Lem. Clear out.”

Having relieved his conscience of this much information the man buried his face again in his blanket and resumed his interrupted repose. Leslie wasted one moment of indignation upon him, as a heartless human being, then hurried out of the place and to his father.

When consulted, Lem Hunt hesitated for an instant only, then advised:

“Best get right a-doin’ things! No wagons, but fresh hosses and as many of ’em as want to go. Jiminy cricket! If T. Sorrel branched off where Pete thinks he did he’s done for hisself an’ all consarned. Let’s be steppin’!”

Fortunately, there were plenty of fresh horses at “Roderick’s” that night. A drove of them were corralled behind the inn, *en route* from a distant ranch to Denver, and thence eastward to market. All of them were well broken, to the saddle at least, and the best were promptly led out for Mr. Ford’s selection, leaving his own beasts to rest for the next day’s travel. Also, the drivers eagerly offered their own company, mounting without their saddles, which they insisted upon lending to the less experienced riders.

Excitement followed Lemuel’s advice to “Be steppin’,” and a very few minutes’ of bustling activity saw the cavalcade lined up before the inn with him for leader. It numbered Mr. Ford, Herbert and Monty, of that party; with Noll Roderick himself and three drovers. That Leslie had not joined the riders was due to his mother’s anxiety for his health, though his father had rather favored his going. The lad had been indignant at the “molly-coddling” and had hurt the tender heart of the Gray Lady by some angry words. Then he had walked away to the extreme end of the long piazza, whence he watched the disappearance of the rescuers down the moonlight road. As the horses’ footfalls died in the distance, his grumblings were interrupted by a light touch on his arm.

“Come around this corner, boy! Hurry up!”

He turned to find Molly Breckenridge beside him, her finger on her lip, and a wild light in her eyes. She was trembling with excitement and could scarcely wait to whisper:

“I’m going, too!”

“Girl, how can you?”

“Horseback, course. Roderick’s daughter’s lending me her own pony. Mattie, her name is, and she was all for going with the others but her mother can’t spare her. I told her I was just crazy, thinking of my Dorothy; hurt maybe, lost anyway, and nobody but a lot of men to speak to, even if they find her. Do you s’pose I’ll desert her? That I love best of all the world? I guess not. I’m a Breckenridge! Good-by!”

There was mischief in her eyes as she turned to leave him and Leslie laughed:

“Course! You’re thoroughbred – I saw that right away. And you’re my guest! Could I, as a gentleman, let you ride off alone on a lonely road at night? Hurray! You’re A 1! You’re rippin’!”

Molly sped around the house. She wasn’t familiar, as yet, with Leslie’s “rippin’” but she knew he’d approved of her wild prank and would join her in it. She was a far better rider than he, for in her own southern home she had been reared to the saddle and was never happier than when she had a good horse at command. Mattie’s pony was swift and easy, and Molly sprang to its back with the feeling that now she was “really doing something,” and that very speedily she would have her arms about her missing friend and all would be well. She had also begged Mattie to get a mount for Leslie, foreseeing that he would follow her – exactly as he did. Another instant, and the pair were off along a little by-path, toward the main road and the pursuit of the searching party. As they struck into the smoother going Molly touched the calico pony with her whip and called to Leslie:

“Come on! Hurry up! We’ll have to ride like the wind to catch up with the rest!”

“All right – I’ll do my best but – but this – old nag – wait a little bit!”

Molly wheeled about and did so, but the delay made her extremely impatient, and with some contempt she remarked, as the lad came alongside:

“Why, I supposed you could ride! You looked like a boy who knew how!”

“So I do! But this thing I’m on – Call this a horse? I’d rather have a mule! How dared they give me such a thing?”

In her hurry Molly had not observed the animal which had stood saddled at the stable door, and that now seemed as ugly and tiresome a beast as her own little pony was fine. Pity then banished vexation and she exclaimed:

“You poor fellow! I don’t believe Matty meant you to have that beast. But, come on, anyway. Maybe he’ll warm up after a bit, and I’ll take that back – that I said about your riding. I reckon you’re all right. Anybody must be who can stick on the rack-o’-bones you’ve got. Touch him up a little – I’ll set the pace.”

Away she sped while the gaunt creature which Leslie bestrode planted his forefeet firmly on the ground and refused to lift them thence. Molly was fast passing around a curve in the road and would then be out of sight, and Leslie’s temper rose to its height. He forgot everything except his own awkward position and the fact that his lively young guest could have the laugh on him when that night’s tale was told.

“Oh! you hateful beast! You won’t go, eh? Well, go you shall! Hear me? Take that – and that – and – THAT!”

Blows rained hard and fast, till the lash of the whip gave out, and the butt took its place. Then, as if the astonished horse had just aroused to the state of things, it bolted! and the way its old heels picked up that road was the most amazing thing of all that evening’s happenings.

Then, indeed, did Leslie prove himself a better horseman than he looked, and, for all time to come, his full ability to “stick.” Riding ahead at a smart pace, but not her pony’s best, Molly heard the footfalls behind her and swerved out of the way – not a minute too soon! Evidently, the maligned “rack-o’-bones” would otherwise have ridden her down. He passed her like a whirlwind and then – she after him. Followed, a race to be remembered! The big horse keeping the lead, the little “calico” pit-pattering along behind in a hopeless effort to get even.

Thus for what seemed an endless time, the long dusty road was desolate of any travellers except this pair of runaways. Sometimes a coyote yelped in the distance; occasionally some creeping thing barred the track before them; and a screech owl sent its blood-curdling cries into their ears. Otherwise they were alone in the wilderness and the night, and beyond speaking distance even of one another.

The effect was to set each culprit thinking. How wild a thing they had done! How thoughtless, how selfish! What fresh anxiety they had added to the troubled hearts back there at “Roderick’s,” as soon as their absence was discovered! How flat their jolly adventure had fallen!

Molly had bound Mattie to secrecy, and there was that about the western girl that convinced the other that the secret would be kept. If Mrs. Roderick did guess what had become of them, and said so, it would be no comfort to Lady Gray and Helena; and the longer Molly pondered the matter, the more ashamed and terrified she felt. What would Aunt Lucretia say? And what her father – could he see his madcap at that moment?

In a bitter reaction of feeling the girl dropped her head upon the pony’s neck, though still mechanically urging the willing creature to her utmost speed. Her thoughts were far away when, suddenly, she felt a check upon the rein and lifted her startled face.

“Why, Leslie! You scared me!”

“Were you asleep?”

“No.”

“What then? Your head was down. The ‘calico’ was taking her own way. What’s the matter?”

“It’s none – I mean, if you must know, I was crying.”

“Oh! horrors! Why?”

“Because I’ve done such a dreadful thing. It was wicked. I had no right and – and – ”

“Yes, I know. You were frightened. Well, I was, too.”

Molly straightened her shoulders and pretended contempt, saying:

“I didn’t know as gentlemen – ‘thoroughbreds,’ you know – western thoroughbreds ever were fr-fri-ghtened. What – was – that?”

A curious cry had reached them and Molly finished her speech in a whisper. The horses, also, had heard it and had thrust back their ears in fear.

Just there the road skirted the edge of a forest and the cry had come from its depths. They peered into the shadows but could see nothing, and edging the pony close to Beelzebub, as Leslie’s mount was named, Molly repeated her question.

“Likely a wild cat, puma, or wolf. I don’t know,” he answered.

“Have you heard it before? Was it that scared you?”

“No, I was afraid something would happen to you, left behind, alone. I fancy we’re in no danger that way – ” pointing forestward. “But – ”

“‘But’ – what? If you thought about me why didn’t you come back to look for me?”

“I couldn’t. Once he got in motion this beast wouldn’t stop till he – ran down like a clock.”

“Pooh! You should go to a riding school! Let’s go on, now, or else back. I can’t stop here with lions and panthers yelling at us! I – I – Oh! do come on! But keep tight hold of the pony’s rein. Don’t get away from me again.”

“I shan’t. I can’t.”

“Oh! come!”

“I tell you I can’t. We’re planted.”

Molly’s lip quivered, but she restrained her tears and tremulously entreated:

“Oh, Leslie, don’t! I can’t stand teasing now. This isn’t funny – not a bit. Shall we go back? Or try to overtake the others?”

“We can’t do either one. I tell you we’re simply stuck. Settled down and gone to housekeeping. Beelzebub has finished. He won’t take another step. Fact. We’ve got to make the best of it. If that pony of yours was as big as a decent calf we might ride double and leave this wretch to starve and think it over at his leisure. I don’t see why that girl gave me such a creature. Let’s get off and sit down on that rock and wait. Something’s bound to happen – sometime – if we live long enough. The folks’ll come back this same road, course.”

He jumped to the ground and held out his hand to her but, for a moment, she would not dismount; then as he coolly left her and walked to the rock he had pointed out, she slipped from her saddle and followed him. But she still held fast to her bridle rein and the pony offered no resistance to the leading, though the big brute of the profane name remained in the middle of the road, his forefeet pointed forward, his hind ones backward, his whole attitude one of stubborn ugliness.

Leslie had reached a point where the ludicrous side of things appeared and he remarked:

“Looks like the potato-horses I used to make when I was a kid, with matches stuck in for legs. I wonder how long he’ll stand there!”

Molly smiled faintly. At present there were no alarming sounds from the forest and the boy’s apparent indifference to their lonely situation relieved her own fears.

“Well, it’s an ‘ill wind that blows nobody good,’ you know. That Beelzy thing is the toughest I ever rode. He’s bumped me up and down till I ache all over and this rock is actually soft in comparison. Here. I’ll put some of these big ferns for a cushion for you, and, after all, we’ll meet our folks just as soon by waiting as by going on. They must come back, you know, sure as fate. This is the only road leads to ‘Roderick’s’, I heard them say. Hello! Why – Beelzebub, good boy!”

A whim had seized the obstinate animal to approach his late rider and fawn about his feet, nibbling the scant grass which grew there, as the pony was already doing. In surprise at this change both Leslie and Molly laughed and forgot, for the time, that they were in such a desolate place at so late an hour.

The horse’s action reminded Molly of an animal her father had once owned and she began to tell stories about him; stories that the boy matched with marvelous ones of his own. That some of

these were fiction made no difference. Molly disdained to believe them but they served to pass the time as well as any better ones might have done. Indeed, fear had now left them. The rest after their hard ride was pleasant and both felt that they were simply waiting for their friends' return.

So they sat on, as composedly as if they were safe at home, till Molly's eyes, fixed upon the distant road, suddenly grew startled again.

Leslie's latest yarn had been of an Indian outbreak, or uprising, of recent date and in this neighborhood. He had heard it that evening from the men at the inn and had not paused to consider how unlikely was such an incident so near to the city of Denver. In truth, the "boys" had invented the whole story, just for the sake of impressing the young "tenderfeet" – Monty, Herbert and Leslie; and it had satisfied the jokers that these youngsters "swallowed it hull."

But Leslie had a gift for dramatic recital and listening to him the affair seemed very real to the girl. The scene and the hour suggested a possible repetition of the occurrence; and as there now came to her ears the sound of distant hoofbeats on the road, and presently, to her eyes the sight of a company of horsemen approaching, she gave one terrified cry and darted into the forest behind her.

"The Indians! The – Indians! They'll kill us!"

Moved by his own eloquence and still believing the story he had been told, the boy followed her flight. He did not even turn to look where she had pointed but, with a headlong rush, dashed into the wood and into a mass of briars which threw him face downward in their midst. Also, at that same instant both the deserted horses set up a continued neighing, which confirmed the fears of their riders who, both now prone upon the ground, felt that their last hour had come.

CHAPTER IV

THE WATCHERS AT RODERICK'S

As soon as Molly and Leslie had ridden away, Mattie Roderick disappeared within her own room and became deaf to all the inquiries made outside her door. She was a high-spirited, "wild western" girl, accustomed to obeying little else than her own impulses. She had a fine record as a horsewoman and had been disappointed that she could not go with the searching party. This being the case, it was next better to lend her pony to that other lively girl who was so like herself.

But Mrs. Roderick was certain that the missing Molly and Leslie had followed the first party and could give no comfort to anxious Mrs. Ford beyond the statement:

"Things don't happen often, 'twixt here an' Denver. Been one or two hold-ups, of men known to carry money, but beyond a murder or so, ain't been no excitement this long spell."

"Murder!" cried Helena aghast, and folding her arm a bit more tightly about Gray Lady's trembling body.

"Oh! yes'm. A few has been. But nobody'd touch to harm them children. You needn't worry. They've thought it smart to take a hand in the business, that's all. Mattie won't say 'yes' nor 'no' to my askin', but the 'calico's' out of the corral and Long Jim's Bezezebub ain't hitched no longer. Ha, ha, ha! If either them kids tries to ride Beelzy – Hmm. But Chiquita, now, she's little but she's great. Pa and Matt claim she's worth her weight in gold. She's likely, anyway. An' don't fret, lady. They'll all be home to breakfast, an' seein's I've got that to cook, I'll hump myself to bed and advisin' you to do the same. If not, make yourselves comfortable's you can, and good night."

After the landlady's departure the house became strangely quiet. The men who had been talking outside sought their own rest, and the anxious watchers missed the murmur of voices and the sense of protection which the presence of even these strangers gave.

While Mrs. Ford was still restlessly pacing the long piazza, Alfy slipped within. With her keen observation of details, she had seen where the woodpile was and that the fire on the hearth in the main room of the house had about died out. This had been lighted for the guests' enjoyment, the inn folks caring nothing for it and therefore easily forgetting to replenish it. When she had gathered an armful of wood, Alfy carried it to the fireplace and lustily blew upon the embers till a little blaze started. Then she heaped the sticks upon this and presently had a roaring flame. At once the room grew cheerful, its bareness furnished, as it were, by this open fire.

"Now, dear Lady Gray, please come right inside. You'll get your death out here in this night air, with not even your cloak on. Come, Helena, you both come in," said Alfaretta, appearing on the porch.

But her first words had started the mother's tears.

"Lady Gray." That had been her son's pet name for her, its use still more frequent than "Mother," and with a little cry she murmured:

"Ah! my boy! Shall I ever hear you say that again!"

"I don't see why not," said practical Alfaretta, nodding to Helena to help persuade the woman to take a needed rest. "You heard that landlady tellin' how 't they'd all be home to breakfast. Well, then, she knows. She's lived here a power o' time and we've only just come. Say, Helena, let's make a pot of coffee and set the table. I can do it right on them coals, after the fire burns down a mite. If I can't there, 'twon't be the first cook stove I've tackled in my life, and I know one thing if I don't any more: that is, when those searchers and Dolly an' Jim do come they'll be so tearing hungry they could nigh eat ten-penny nails. Come on. Let's get supper for 'em. You boss the job, Mrs. Ford, and then it'll be done right. I saw a lot of chickens in a back room, as I come through, all fixed to fry. Well now, you both know I can fry chicken to the queen's taste, and I'll just lay myself out this time!"

Her energy and cheerfulness were not to be resisted. Mrs. Ford followed the two girls inside and with a little shiver, from her exposure outside, drew a chair to the hearth and bent to its warmth. Then, as if she had been in her own home, Alfaretta whisked about, dragging small tables from the dining room into this larger one, ordering Helena to do this and that, and all with a haste that was almost as cheering as the fire.

“Now, Helena, here’s the dish-closet. You set the table. My! Ain’t these the heaviest plates and cups you ever saw? Ma Babcock’d admire to get some like ’em; our children break such a lot of things. But Mis’ Calvert wouldn’t think she could drink tea out of such. She wants her ’n to be thin as thin! and she’s got one set, ’t belonged to her grandmother – great-grandma, I guess it was – come over from England or somewhere – that she won’t let no hands except her own touch to wash. I wish you could see Aunt Betty wash dishes! ’Twould set you laughing, fit to split, first off. It did me till I begun to see the other side of it, seems if. First, she must have a little porcelain tub, like a baby’s wash-tub, sort of – then a tiny mop, doll’s mop, I called it, and towels – Why, her best table napkins aren’t finer than them towels be. And dainty! My heart! ’Tis the prettiest picture in the world when that ’ristocratic old lady washes her heirloom-china! But this – your hands’d get tired enough if you had to do much of this. Hurry up! Don’t you know how to set a table yet, great girl like you? Well, do the best you can. I’m going into that kitchen to cook. I can’t wait for this fire to get low. I surely can’t, because, you see, they might be here any minute – any single minute – and nothing done yet, not even the table set. Mrs. Ford, you better cut the bread. Here’s a lot of it in a tin box, and a knife with it, sharp enough to cut a feller’s head off. You best not touch it, Helena, you’re so sort of clumsy with things. Now I’m off to boil ’tatoes and fry chicken!”

It was impossible to retain gloomy forebodings while Alf’s cheerful tongue was running on at this rate, and as she left the living-room for the kitchen at the rear both Lady Gray and Helena were laughing, partly at their own awkwardness at the tasks assigned them as well as at her glib remarks.

“I never set a table in my life!” cried Helena, in glee.

“And I never sliced a loaf of bread!” said Gray Lady; “though I’ll admit it is time I learned. Indeed, I’ve never had a home, you know, and I’m looking forward to my housekeeping as eagerly as a child to her playhouse.”

“I’m wondering what the landlady will say, when she finds how we’ve invaded her pantry,” continued Helena, carefully arranging the coarse stone-china upon the oilcloth covered tables. She had begun very reluctantly but found that the labor was a delightful relief from worry, and, with the good sense she possessed, now went on with it as painstakingly as if she expected a fashionable and critical company. Indeed, her first table-setting, copied, as near as she could remember, from the careful appointments of her own mother’s board, was to be an object lesson to others besides herself.

For presently there was the sound of voices in the kitchen; Alfaretta’s, of course, with another equally gay and girlish.

Mattie Roderick had slept lightly. She had been excited over the arrival of the Ford party in the first place, and doubly so from the later events of the night. So as she lay sleepless and listening, she heard the rattle of cooking things in the kitchen below and soon the odor of frying. With a little grumble she got up and put on the few garments she had discarded.

“It can’t be near morning yet. I don’t see what’s set Ma to cooking, ’less they’re on the road back and nigh starved. One thing I know! I shan’t marry no tavern-keeper! It’s nothin’ but fry, roast, bake, an’ bile, the hull endurin’ time. I’m goin’ to quit and go east fur as Denver, anyhow, soon’s I get my age. I’d like to look same’s them girls do, and they ain’t no prettier ’n me. It’s only their clothes makes ’em look it, and as for that Molly, they call her, that’s rid off on Chiquita, she’s just as plain and folksy as get out! So’s the red-headed one with the high-falutin’ name, out of that song Pa sings about the ‘blue Juniata’ and ‘bright Alfaretta,’ or some such trash. Them boys – Well, they hain’t took no notice o’ me yet – but I can show ’em a thing or two. I bet I can shoot better than any of ’em. I

bet, if they don't hurry off too early to-morrow, I'll get up a match and teach 'em how a Colorado girl can hit the bull's-eye every time!"

With these ambitious reflections the inn-keeper's daughter arrived at the kitchen and the presence of the red-headed girl in it, instead of the portly form of her mother.

"What on earth does it mean?" demanded Mattie, scarcely believing her own eyes.

It didn't take Alfie long to explain, and she added the warning:

"You keep it up! Don't you let on to Mrs. Ford that there's the least misdoubt in your mind but what them searchers will be back, right to once, same's I'm pretending! Oh! I hope they do! I hope they do! I hope it so much I dassent hardly think and just have to keep talking to stop it. If I had hold that Molly Breckenridge I'd shake her well! The dear flighty little thing! To go addin' another scare to a big enough one before, and now about that Leslie. He's a real nice boy – Leslie is – if you let him do exactly what he wants and don't try to make him different. His ma just sets all her store by him. I never got the rights of it, exactly, Aunt Betty Calvert – she 't I've been hired out to – she never approved of gossip. She said that folks quarrellin' was just plain makin' fools of themselves, or words to that effect. The Fords had done it and now, course, they was thicker 'n blueberries again and didn't want to hear nothing about the time they wasn't. Don't leave them 'tatoes in that water so long! Why, child o' grace, don't you know yet, and you keepin' tavern, that soon's a potato is cooked it ought to be snatched out the pot and set to steamin', to get dry? Soggy potatoes gives you the dyspepsy and that's a disease I ain't sufferin' to catch. It makes folks so cross."

By this time Mattie had entered into the spirit of the thing and had never been happier in her life. This Alfaretta was so jolly, so friendly, so full of talk. So wholly satisfied in her conscience, too, now that "one of the family" was beside her to share the risk she had assumed of using other people's provisions so recklessly.

But in that she had misjudged her genial hosts. Nothing was too good for their guests, these or any others, and if the chickens meant for breakfast were pre-empted for this midnight meal, why there were plenty more in the hennery.

So, secure in her better knowledge of the elder Rodericks, Miss Mattie sped about, flew in and out of the sitting-room, to tend the fire or add some delicacy to Helena's daintily set table; the same that made her stare at its difference from ordinary. Didn't seem possible that the mere arrangement of cups and saucers, of knives and forks, could give such an "air" to the whole place.

"Like brook trout, Mis' Ford?" asked the girl, upon one entrance. "You men-folks like 'em, too?"

Assured that they were considered a great treat, Mattie advised:

"Well, you just wait! I know where there's a lot, in a basket in the pool. Pa caught 'em to have 'em ready and I'll hike after 'em to onct. You like to go along, Helena?"

Stately Helena smiled at the free masonry of the westerner and glanced at Mrs. Ford, in inquiry:

"Yes, dear, go with her. I shan't be lonely, with Alfaretta left, flying in and out busily. I declare, those kitchen odors *are* savory! I hope the wanderers will soon be here, that this new meal won't be kept till spoiled, as Mrs. Roderick complained of the other."

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