

Marlowe Amy Bell

Frances of the Ranges: or, The Old Ranchman's Treasure



Amy Marlowe

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CHAPTER I

THE ADVENTURE IN THE COULIE

The report of a bird gun made the single rider in sight upon the short-grassed plain pull in her pinto and gaze westerly toward the setting sun, now going down in a field of golden glory.

The pinto stood like a statue, and its rider seemed a part of the steed, so well did she sit in her saddle. She gazed steadily under her hand—gazed and listened.

Finally, she murmured: “That’s the snarl of a lion—sure. Get up, Molly!”

The pinto sprang forward. There was a deep coulie ahead, with a low range of grass-covered hills beyond. Through those hills the lions often came down onto the grazing plains. It was behind these hills that the sun was going down, for the hour was early.

As she rode, the girl loosened the gun she carried in the holster slung at her hip. On her saddle horn was coiled a hair rope.

She was dressed in olive green—her blouse, open at the throat, divided skirts, leggings, and broad-brimmed hat of one hue. Two thick plaits of sunburned brown hair hung over her shoulders, and to her waist. Her grey eyes were keen and rather solemn. Although the girl on the pinto could not have been far from sixteen, her face seemed to express a serious mind.

The scream of that bane of the cattlemen—the mountain lion—rang out from the coulie again. The girl clapped her tiny spurs against the pinto’s flanks, and that little animal doubled her pace. In a minute they were at the head of the slope and the girl could see down into the coulie, where low mesquite shrubs masked the bottom and the little spring that bubbled there.

Something was going on down in the coulie. The bushes waved; something rose and fell in their midst like a flail. There was a voice other than that of the raucous tones of the lion, and which squalled almost as loudly!

A little to one side of the shrubs stood a quivering grey pony, its ears pointed toward the rumpus in the shrubs, blowing and snorting. The rider of that empty saddle was plainly in trouble with the snarling lion.

The cattlemen of the Panhandle looked upon the lion as they did upon the coyote—save that the former did more damage to the herds. Roping the lion, or shooting it with the pistol, was a general sport. But caught in a corner, the beast—unlike the coyote—would fight desperately. Whoever had attacked this one had taken on a larger contract than he could handle. That was plain.

Urged by the girl the pinto went down the slope of the hollow on a keen run. At the bottom she snorted and swerved from the mesquite clump. The smell of the lion was strong in Molly’s nostrils.

“Stand still, Molly!” commanded the girl, and was out of the saddle with an ease that seemed phenomenal. She ran straight toward the thrashing bushes, pistol in hand.

The lion leaped, and the person who had been beating it off with the shotgun was borne down under the attack. Once those sabre-sharp claws got to work, the victim of the lion’s charge would be viciously torn.

The girl saw the gun fly out of his hands. The lion was too close upon its prey for her to use the pistol. She slipped the weapon back into its holster and picked up the shotgun. Plunging through the bushes she swung the gun and knocked the beast aside from its prey. The blow showed the power in her young arms and shoulders. The lion rolled over and over, half stunned.

“Quick!” she advised the victim of the lion’s attack. “He’ll be back at us.”

Indeed, scarcely had she spoken when the brute scrambled to its feet. The girl shouldered the gun and pulled the other trigger as the beast leaped.

There was no report. Either there was no shell in that barrel, or something had fouled the trigger. The lion, all four paws spread, and each claw displayed, sailed through the air like a bat, or a flying squirrel. Its jaws were wide open, its teeth bared, and the screech it emitted was, in truth, a terrifying sound.

The girl realized that the original victim of the lion’s attack was scrambling to his feet. She dropped to her knee and kept the muzzle of the gun pointed directly for the beast’s breast. The empty gun was her only defense in that perilous moment.

“Grab my gun! Here in the holster!” she panted.

The lion struck against the muzzle of the shotgun, and the girl—in spite of the braced position she had taken—was thrown backward to the ground. As she fell the pistol was drawn from its holster.

The empty shotgun had saved her from coming into the embrace of the angry lion, for while she fell one way, the animal went another. Then came three shots in rapid succession.

She scrambled to her feet, half laughing, and dusting the palms of her gantlets. The lion was lying a dozen yards away, while the victim of its attack stood near, the blue smoke curling from the revolver.

“My goodness!”

After the excitement was all over that exclamation from the girl seemed unnecessary. But the fact that startled her was, that it was not a man at all to whose aid she had come. He was a youth little older than herself.

“I say!” this young man exclaimed. “That was plucky of you, Miss—awfully plucky, don’t you know! That creature would have torn me badly in another minute.”

The girl nodded, but seemed suddenly dumb. She was watching the youth keenly from under the longest, silkiest lashes, it seemed to Pratt Sanderson, he had ever seen.

“I hope you’re not hurt?” he said, shyly, extending the pistol toward the girl. She stood with her hands upon her hips, panting a little, and with plenty of color in her brown cheeks.

“How about you?” she asked, shortly.

It was true the young man appeared much the worse for the encounter. In the first place, he stood upon one foot, a good deal like a crane, for his left ankle had twisted when he fell. His left arm, too, was wrenched, and he felt a tingling sensation all through the member, from the shoulder to the tips of his fingers.

Beside, his sleeve was ripped its entire length, and the lion’s claws had cut deep into his arm. The breast of his shirt was in strips.

“I say! I’m hurt, worse than I thought, eh?” he said, a little uncertainly. He wavered a moment on his sound foot, and then sank slowly to the grass.

“Wait! Don’t let yourself go!” exclaimed the girl, getting into quick action. “It isn’t so bad.”

She ran for the leather water-bottle that hung from her saddle. Molly had stood through the trouble without moving. Now the girl filled the bottle at the spring.

Pratt Sanderson was lying back on his elbows, and the white lids were lowered over his black eyes.

The treatment the range girl gave him was rather rough, but extremely efficacious. She dashed half the contents of the bottle into his face, and he sat up, gasping and choking. She tore away his tattered shirt in a most matter-of-fact manner and began to bathe the scratches on his chest with her kerchief (quickly unknotted from around her throat), which she had saturated with water. Fortunately, the wounds were not very deep, after all.

“You—you must think me a silly sort of chap,” he gasped. “Foolish to keel over like this —”

“You haven’t been used to seeing blood,” the girl observed. “That makes a difference. I’ve been binding up the boys’ cuts and bruises all my life. Never was such a place as the old Bar-T for folks getting hurt.”

“Bar-T?” ejaculated the young man, with sudden interest. “Then you must be Miss Rugley, Captain Dan Rugley’s daughter?”

“Yes, sir,” said the girl, quietly. “Captain Rugley is my father.”

“And you’re going to put on that very clever spectacle at the Jackleg schoolhouse next month? I’ve heard all about it—and what you have done toward making it what Bill Edwards calls a howling success. I’m stopping with Bill. Mrs. Edwards is my mother’s friend, and I’m the advance guard of a lot of Amarillo people who are coming out to the Edwardses just to see your ‘Pageant of the Panhandle.’ Bill and his wife are no end enthusiastic about it.”

The deeper color had gradually faded out of the girl’s cheeks. She was cool enough now; but she kept her eyes lowered, just the same. He would have liked to see their expression once more. There had been a startled look in their grey depths when first she glanced at him.

“I am afraid they make too much of my part in the affair,” said she, quietly. “I am only one of the committee – ”

“But they say you wrote it all,” the young fellow interposed, eagerly.

“Oh—*that!* It happened to be easy for me to do so. I have always been deeply interested in the Panhandle—‘The Great American Desert’ as the old geographies used to call all this great Middle West, of Kansas, Nebraska, the Indian Territory, and Upper Texas.

“My father crossed it among the first white men from the Eastern States. He came back here to settle—long before I was born, of course—when a plow had never been sunk in these range lands. He belongs to the old cattle régime. He wouldn’t hear until lately of putting wheat into any of the Bar-T acres.”

“Ah, well, by all accounts he is one of the few men who still know how to make money out of cows,” laughed Pratt Sanderson. “Thank you, Miss Rugley. I can’t let you do anything more for me – ”

“You are a long way from the Edwards’ place,” she said. “You’d better ride to the Bar-T for the night. We will send a boy over there with a message, if you think Mrs. Edwards will be worried.”

“I suppose I’d better do as you say,” he said, rather ruefully. “Mrs. Edwards *will* be worried about my absence over supper time. She says I’m such a tenderfoot.”

For a moment a twinkle came into the veiled grey eyes; the new expression illumined the girl’s face like a flash of sunlight across the shadowed field.

“You rather back up her opinion when you tackle a lion with nothing but birdshot—and one barrel of your gun fouled in the bargain,” she said. “Don’t you think so?”

“But I killed it with a revolver!” exclaimed the young fellow, struggling to his feet again.

“That pistol throws a good-sized bullet,” said the ranchman’s daughter, smiling. “But I’d never think of picking a quarrel with a lion unless I had a good rope, or something that threw heavier lead than birdshot.”

He looked at her, standing there in the after-glow of the sunset, with honest admiration in his eyes.

“I *am* a tenderfoot, I guess,” he admitted. “And you were not scared for a single moment!”

“Oh, yes, I was,” and Frances Rugley’s laugh was low and musical. “But it was all over so quickly that the scare didn’t have a chance to show. Come on! I’ll catch your pony, and we’ll make the Bar-T before supper time.”

CHAPTER II

“FRANCES OF THE RANGES”

The grey was a well-trained cow-pony, for the Edwards' ranch was one of the latest in that section of the Panhandle to change from cattle to wheat raising. A part of its range had not as yet been plowed, and Bill Edwards still had a corral full of good riding stock.

Pratt Sanderson got into his saddle without much trouble and the girl whistled for Molly.

“I'll throw that lion over my saddle,” she said. “Molly won't mind it much—especially if you hold her bridle with her head up-wind.”

“All right, Miss Rugley,” the young man returned. “My name is Pratt Sanderson—I don't know that you know it.”

“Very well, Mr. Sanderson,” she repeated.

“They don't call me *that* much,” the young fellow blurted out. “I answer easier to my first name, you know—Pratt.”

“Very well, Pratt,” said the girl, frankly. “I am Frances Rugley—Frances Durham Rugley.”

She lifted the heavy lion easily, flung it across Molly, and lashed it to the saddle; then she mounted in a hurry and the ponies started for the ranch trail which Frances had been following before she heard the report of the shotgun.

The youth watched her narrowly as they rode along through the dropping darkness. She was a well-matured girl for her age, not too tall, her limbs rounded, but without an ounce of superfluous flesh. Perhaps she knew of his scrutiny; but her face remained calm and she did not return his gaze. They talked of inconsequential things as they rode along.

Pratt Sanderson thought: “*What* a girl she is! Mrs. Edwards is right—she's the finest specimen of girlhood on the range, bar none! And she is more than a little intelligent—quite literary, don't you know, if what they say is true of her. Where did *she* learn to plan pageants? Not in one of these schoolhouses on the ranges, I bet an apple! And she's a cowgirl, too. Rides like a female Centaur; shoots, of course, and throws a rope. Bet she knows the whole trade of cattle herding.

“Yet there isn't a girl who went to school with me at the Amarillo High who looks so well-bred, or who is so sure of herself and so easy to converse with.”

For her part, Frances was thinking: “And he doesn't remember a thing about me! Of course, he was a senior when I was in the junior class. He has already forgotten most of his schoolmates, I suppose.

“But that night of Cora Grimshaw's party he danced with me six times. He was in the bank then, and had forgotten all 'us kids,' I suppose. Funny how suddenly a boy grows up when he gets out of school and into business. But me —

“Well! I should have known him if we hadn't met for twenty years. Perhaps that's because he is the first boy I ever danced with—in town, I mean. The boys on the ranch don't count.”

Her tranquil face and manner had not betrayed—nor did they betray now—any of her thoughts about this young fellow whom she remembered so clearly, but who plainly had not taxed his memory with her.

That was the way of Frances Durham Rugley. A great deal went on in her mind of which nobody—not even Captain Dan Rugley, her father—dreamed.

Left motherless at an early age, the ranchman's daughter had grown to her sixteenth year different from most girls. Even different from most other girls of the plains and ranges.

For ten years there was not a woman's face—white, black, or red—on the Bar-T acres. The Captain had married late in life, and had loved Frances' mother devotedly. When she died suddenly the man could not bear to hear or see another woman on the place.

Then Frances grew into his heart and life, and although the old wound opened as the ranchman saw his daughter expand, her love and companionship was like a healing balm poured into his sore heart.

The man's strong, fierce nature suddenly went out to his child and she became all and all to him—just as her mother had been during the few years she had been spared to him.

So the girl's schooling was cut short—and Frances loved books and the training she had received at the Amarillo schools. She would have loved to go on—to pass her examinations for college preparation, and finally get her diploma and an A. B., at least, from some college.

That, however, was not to be. Old Captain Rugley lavished money on her like rain, when she would let him. She used some of the money to buy books and a piano and pay for a teacher for the latter to come to the ranch, while she spent much midnight oil studying the books by herself.

Captain Rugley's health was not all it should have been. Frances could not now leave him for long.

Until recently the old ranchman had borne lightly his seventy years. But rheumatism had taken hold upon him and he did not stand as straight as of old, nor ride so well.

He was far from an invalid; but Frances realized—more than he did, perhaps—that he had finished his scriptural span of life, and that his present years were borrowed from that hardest of taskmasters, Father Time.

Often it was Frances who rode the ranges, instead of Captain Rugley, viewing the different herds, receiving the reports of underforemen and wranglers, settling disputes between the punchers themselves, looking over chuck outfits, buying hay, overseeing brandings, and helping cut out fat steers for the market trail.

There was nothing Frances of the ranges did not know about the cattle-raising business. And she was giving some attention to the new grain-raising ideas that had come into the Panhandle with the return of the first-beaten farming horde.

For the Texas Panhandle has had its two farming booms. The first advance of the farmers into the ranges twenty-five years or more before had been a rank failure.

“They came here and plowed up little spots in our parsters that air eyesores now,” one old cowman said, “and then beat it back East when they found it didn't rain 'cordin' ter schedule. This land ain't good for nothin' 'cept cows.”

But this had been in the days of the old unfenced ranges, and before dry-farming had become a science. Now the few remaining cattlemen kept their pastures fenced, and began to think of raising other feed than river-bottom hay.

The cohorts of agriculturists were advancing; the cattlemen were falling back. The ancient staked plains of the Spanish *conquistadors* were likely to become waving wheat fields and smiling orchards.

The young girl and her companion could not travel fast to the Bar-T ranch-house for two reasons: Pratt Sanderson was sore all over, and the mountain lion slung across Frances' pony caused some trouble. The pinto objected to carrying double—especially when an occasional draft of evening air brought the smell of the lion to her nostrils.

The young fellow admired the way in which the girl handled her mount. He had seen many half-wild horsemen at the Amarillo street fairs, and the like; since coming to Bill Edwards' place he had occasionally observed a good rider handling a mean cayuse. But this man-handling of a half-wild pony was nothing like the graceful control Frances of the ranges had over Molly. The pinto danced and whirled and snorted, and once almost got her quivering nose down between her knees—the first position of the bucking horse.

At every point Frances met her mount with a stern word, or a firm rein, or a touch of the spur or quirt, which quickly took the pinto's mind off her intention of “acting up.”

“You are wonderful!” exclaimed the youth, excitedly. “I wish I could ride half as good as you do, Miss Frances.”

Frances smiled. “You did not begin young enough,” she said. “My father took me in his arms when I was a week old and rode a half-wild mustang twenty miles across the ranges to exhibit me to the man who was our next-door neighbor in those days. You see, my tuition began early.”

It was not yet fully dark, although the ranch-house lamps were lit, when they came to the home corral and the big fenced yard in front of the Bar-T.

Two boys ran out to take the ponies. One of these Frances instructed to saddle a fresh pony and ride to the Edwards place with word that Pratt Sanderson would remain all night at the Bar-T.

The other boy was instructed to give the mountain lion to one of the men, that the pelt might be removed and properly stretched for curing.

“Come right in, Pratt,” said the girl, with frank cordiality. “You’ll have a chance for a wash and a brush before supper. And dad will find you some clean clothes.

“There’s dad on the porch, though he’s forbidden the night air unless he puts a coat on. Oh, he’s a very, very bad patient, indeed!”

CHAPTER III

THE OLD SPANISH CHEST

Pratt saw a tall, lean man—a man of massive frame, indeed, with a heavy mustache that had once been yellow but had now turned grey, teetering on the rear legs of a hard-bottomed chair, with his shoulders against the wall of the house.

There were plenty of inviting-looking chairs scattered about the veranda. There were rugs, and potted plants, and a lounge-swing, with a big lamp suspended from the ceiling, giving light enough over all.

But the master of the Bar-T had selected a straight-backed, hard-bottomed chair, of a kind that he had been used to for half a century and more. He brought the front legs down with a bang as the girl and youth approached.

“What’s kept you, Frances?” he asked, mellowly. “Evening, sir! I take it your health’s well?”

He put out a hairy hand into which Pratt confided his own and, the next moment, vowed secretly he would never risk it there again! His left hand tingled badly enough since the attentions of the mountain lion. Now his right felt as though it had been in an ore-crusher.

“This is Pratt Sanderson, from Amarillo,” the daughter of the ranchman said first of all. “He’s a friend of Mrs. Bill Edwards. He was having trouble with a lion over in Brother’s Coulie, when I came along. We got the lion; but Pratt got some scratches. Can’t Ming find him a flannel shirt, Dad?”

“Of course,” agreed Captain Rugley, his eyes twinkling just as Frances’ had a little while before. “You tell him as you go in. Come on, Pratt Sanderson. I’ll take a look at your scratches myself.”

A shuffle-footed Chinaman brought the shirt to the room Pratt Sanderson had been ushered to by the cordial old ranchman. The Chinaman assisted the youth to get into the garment, too, for Captain Rugley had already swathed the scratches on Pratt’s chest and arm with linen, after treating the wounds with a pungent-smelling but soothing salve.

“San Soo, him alle same have dinner ready sloon,” said Ming, sprinkling ‘I’s’ indiscriminately in his information. “Clapen an’ Misse Flank wait on pleaza.”

The young fellow, when he was presentable, started back for the “pleaza.”

Everything he saw—every appointment of the house—showed wealth, and good taste in the use of it. The old ranchman furnished the former, of course; but nobody but Frances, Pratt thought, could have arranged the furnishings and adornments of the house.

The room he was to occupy as a guest was large, square, grey-walled, was hung with bright pictures, a few handsome Navajo blankets, and had heavy soft rugs on the floor. There was a gay drapery in one corner, behind which was a canvas curtain masking a shower bath with nickel fittings.

The water ran off from the shallow marble basin through an open drain under the wall. The bed was of brass and looked comfortable. There was a big steamer chair drawn invitingly near the window which opened into the court, or garden, around which the house was built.

The style of the building was Spanish, or Mexican. A fountain played in the court and there were trees growing there, among the branches of which a few lanterns were lit, like huge fireflies.

In passing back to the front porch of the ranch-house (farther south it would have been called *hacienda*) Pratt noted Spanish and Aztec armor hanging on the walls; high-backed, carven chairs of black oak, mahogany, and other heavy woods; weapons of both modern and ancient Indian manufacture, and those of the style used by Cortez and his cohorts when they marched on the capital city of the great Montezuma.

In a glass-fronted case, too, hung a brilliant cloak of parakeet feathers such as were worn by the Aztec nobles. Lights had been lit in the hall since he had arrived and the treasures were now revealed for the first time to the startled eye of the visitor.

The sight of these things partially prepared him for the change in Frances' appearance. Her smooth brown skin and her veiled eyes were the same. She still wore her hair in girlish plaits. She was quite the simple, unaffected girl of sixteen. But her dress was white, of some soft and filmy material which looked to the young fellow like spider's web in the moonlight. It was cut a little low at the throat; her arms were bared to the elbow. She wore a heavy, glittering belt of alternate red-gold links and green stones, and on one arm a massive, wrought-gold bracelet—a serpent with turquoise eyes.

"Frances is out in her warpaint," chuckled Captain Rugley's mellow voice from the shadow, where he was tipped back in his chair again.

"You gave me these things out of your treasure chest, Daddy, to wear when we had company," said the girl, quite calmly.

She wore the barbarous ornaments with an air of dignity. They seemed to suit her, young as she was. And Pratt knew that the girdle and bracelet must be enormously valuable as well as enormously old.

The expression "treasure chest" was so odd that it stuck in the young man's mind. He was very curious as to what it meant, and determined, when he knew Frances better, to ask about it.

A little silence had fallen after the girl's speech. Then Captain Rugley started forward suddenly and the forelegs of his chair came sharply to the planks.

"Hello!" he said, into the darkness outside the radiance of the porch light. "Who's there?"

Frances fluttered out of her chair. Pratt noted that she slipped into the shadow. Neither she nor the Captain had been sitting in the full radiance of the lamp.

The visitor had heard nothing; but he knew that the old ranchman was leaning forward listening intently.

"Who's there?" the captain demanded again.

"Don't shoot, neighbor!" said a hoarse voice out of the darkness. "I'm jest a-paddin' of it Amarillo way. Can I get a flop-down and a bite here?"

"Only a tramp, Dad," breathed Frances, with a sigh.

"How did you get into this compound?" demanded Captain Rugley, none the less suspiciously and sternly.

"I come through an open gate. It's so 'tarnal dark, neighbor –"

"You see those lights down yonder?" snapped the Captain. "They are at the bunk-house. Cook'll give you some chuck and a chance to spread your blanket. But don't you let me catch you around here too long after breakfast to-morrow morning. We don't encourage hobos, and we already have all the men hired for the season we want."

"All right, neighbor," said the voice in the darkness, cheerfully—too cheerfully, in fact, Pratt Sanderson thought. An ordinary man—even one with the best intentions in the world—would have been offended by the Captain's brusque words.

A stumbling foot went down the yard. Captain Rugley grunted, and might have said something explanatory, but just then Ming came softly to the door, whining:

"Dinner, Misse."

"Guess Pratt's hungry, too," grunted the Captain, rising. "Let's go in and see what the neighbors have flung over the back fence."

But sad as the joke was, all that Captain Rugley said seemed so open-hearted and kindly—save only when he was talking to the unknown tramp—that the guest could not consider him vulgar.

The dining-room was long, massively furnished, well lit, and the sideboard exposed some rare pieces of old-fashioned silver. Two heavy candelabra—the loot of some old cathedral, and of Spanish manufacture—were set upon either end of the great serving table.

All these treasures, found in the ranch-house of a cowman of the Panhandle, astounded the youth from Amarillo. Nothing Mrs. Bill Edwards had said of Frances of the ranges and her father had prepared him for this display.

Captain Rugley saw his eyes wandering from one thing to the other as Ming served a perfect soup.

“Just pick-ups over the Border,” the old man explained, with a comprehensive wave of his hand toward the candelabra and other articles of value. “I and a partner of mine, when we were in the Rangers years and years ago, raided over into Mexico and brought back the bulk of these things.

“We cached them down in Arizona till after I was married and built this ranch-house. Poor Lon! Never have heard what became of him. I’ve got his share of the treasure out of old Don Milo Morales’ *hacienda* right here. When he comes for it we’ll divide. But I haven’t heard from Lon since long before Frances, here, was born.”

This was just explanation enough to whet the curiosity of Pratt. Talk of the Texas Rangers, and raiding over the Border, and looting a Mexican *hacienda*, was bound to set the young man’s imagination to work.

But the dinner, as it was served in courses, took up Pratt’s present attention almost entirely. Never—not even when he took dinner at the home of the president of the bank in Amarillo—had he eaten so well-cooked and well-served a meal.

Despite his commonplace speech, Captain Rugley displayed a familiarity with the niceties of table etiquette that surprised the guest. Frances’ mother had come from the East and from a family that had been used to the best for generations. And the old ranchman, in middle age, had set himself the task of learning the niceties of table manners to please her.

He had never fallen back into the old, careless ways after Frances’ mother died. He ate to-night in black clothes and a soft, white shirt in the bosom of which was a big diamond. Although he had sat on the veranda without a coat—contrary to his doctor’s orders—he had slipped one on when he came to the table and, with his neatly combed hair, freshly shaven face, and well-brushed mustache, looked well groomed indeed.

He would have been a bizarre figure at a city table; nevertheless, he presided at his own board with dignity, and was a splendid foil for the charming figure of Frances opposite.

In the midst of the repast the Captain said, suddenly, to the soft-footed Chinaman:

“Ming! telephone down to Sam at the bunk-house and see if a hobo has just struck there, on his way to Amarillo. I told him he could get chuck and a sleep. Savvy?”

“Jes so, Clapen,” said Ming, softly, and shuffled out.

It was evident that the tramp was on the Captain’s mind. Pratt believed there must be some special reason for the old ranchman’s worrying over marauders about the Bar-T.

There was nothing to mar the friendliness of the dinner, however; not even when Ming slipped back and said in a low voice to the Captain:

“Him Slilent Slam say no hobo come to blunk-house.”

They finished the meal leisurely; but on rising from the table Captain Rugley removed a heavy belt and holster from its hook behind the sideboard and slung it about his hips.

Withdrawing the revolver, he spun the cylinder, made sure that it was filled, and slipped it back in the holster. All this was done quite as a matter of course. Frances made no comment, nor did she seem surprised.

The three went back to the porch for a little while, although the night air was growing chill. Frances insisted that her father wear his coat, and they both sat out of the brighter radiance of the hanging lamp.

She and her guest were talking about the forthcoming pageant at the Jackleg schoolhouse. Pratt had begun to feel enthusiastic over it as he learned more of the particulars.

“People scarcely realize,” said Frances, “that this Panhandle of ours has a history as ancient as St. Augustine, Florida. And *that*, you know, is called the oldest white settlement in these United States.

“Long, long ago the Spanish explorers, with Indian guides whom they had enslaved, made a path through the swarming buffaloes up this way and called the country *Llano Estacada*, the staked

plain. Our geographers misapplied the name 'Desert' to this vast country; but Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma threw off that designation because it was proven that the rains fell more often than was reported."

"What has built up those states," said Pratt, with a smile, "is farming, not cattle."

The Captain grunted, for he had been listening to the conversation.

"You ought to have seen those first hayseeds that tried to turn the ranges into posy beds and wheat fields," he chuckled. "They got all that was coming to them—believe me!"

Frances laughed. "Daddy is still unconverted. He does not believe that the Panhandle is fit for anything but cattle. But he's going to let me have two hundred acres to plow and sow to wheat—he's promised."

The Captain grunted again.

"And last year we grew a hundred acres of milo maize and feterita. Helped on the winter feed—didn't it, Daddy?" and she laughed.

"Got me there, Frances—got me there," admitted the old ranchman. "But I don't hope to live long enough to see the Bar-T raising more wheat than steers."

"No. It's stock-raising we want to follow, I believe," said the girl, calmly. "We must raise feed for our steers, fatten them in fenced pastures, and ship them more quickly."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Pratt, admiringly, "you talk as though you understood all about it, Miss Frances."

"I think I *do* know something about the new conditions that face us ranchers of the Panhandle," the girl said, quietly. "And why shouldn't I? I have been hearing it talked about, and thinking of it myself, ever since I can remember."

Secretly Pratt thought she must have given her attention to something beside the ranch work and cattle-raising. Of this he was assured when they went inside later, and Frances sat down to the piano. The instrument was in a big room with a bare, polished floor. It was evidently used for dancing. There was a talking machine as well as a piano. The girl played the latter very nicely indeed. There were a few scratches on the floor of the room, and she saw Pratt looking at them.

"I told Ratty M'Gill he shouldn't come in here with the rest of the boys to dance if he didn't take his spurs off," she said. "We have an old-time hoe-down for the boys pretty nearly every week, when we're not too rushed on the ranch. It keeps 'em better contented and away from the towns on pay-days."

"Are the cowpunchers just the same as they used to be?" asked Pratt. "Do they go to town and blow it wide open on pay-nights?"

"Not much. We have a good sheriff. But it wasn't so long ago that your fancy little city of Amarillo was nothing but a cattleman's town. I'm going to have a representation of old Amarillo in our pageant—you'll see. It will be true to life, too, for some of the very people who take part in our play lived in Amarillo at the time when the sight of a high hat would draw a fusillade of bullets from the door of every saloon and dance-hall."

"Don't!" gasped Pratt. "Was Amarillo ever like *that*?"

"And not twenty years ago," laughed Frances. "It had a few hundred inhabitants—and most of them ruffians. Now it claims ten thousand, has bricked streets that used to be cow trails, electric lights, a street-car service, and all the comforts and culture of an 'effete East.'"

Pratt laughed, too. "It's a mighty comfortable place to live in—beside Bill Edwards' ranch, for instance. But I notice here at the Bar-T you have a great many of the despised Eastern luxuries."

"Do-funnies' daddy calls them," said Frances, smiling. "Ah! here he is."

The old ranchman came in, the holstered pistol still slung at his hip.

"All secure for the night, Daddy?" she asked, looking at him tenderly.

"Locked, barred, and bolted," returned her father. "I tell you, Pratt, we're something of a fort here when we go to bed. The court's free to you; but don't try to get out till Ming opens up in the

morning. You see, we're some distance from the bunk-house, and nobody but the two Chinks are here with us now."

"I see, sir," said Pratt.

But he did not see; he wondered. And he wondered more when, after separating from Frances for the night, he found his way through the hall to the door of the room that had been assigned to him for his use.

On the other side of the hall was another door, open more than a crack, with a light shining behind it. Pratt's curiosity got the better of him and he peeped.

Captain Dan Rugley was standing in the middle of the almost bare room, before an old dark, Spanish chest. He had a bunch of keys in one hand and in the other dangled the ancient girdle and the bracelet Frances had worn.

"That must be the 'treasure chest' she spoke of," thought the youth. "And it looks it! Old, old, wrought-iron work trimmings of Spanish design. What a huge old lock! My! it would take a stick of dynamite to blow that thing open if one hadn't the key."

The Captain moved quickly, turning toward the door. Pratt dodged back—then crept silently away, down the hall. He did not know that the eye of the old ranchman watched him keenly through the crack of the door.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT

Frances looked through her barred window, out over the fenced yard, and down to the few twinkling watch-lights at the men's quarters. All the second-story windows of the ranch-house, overlooking the porch roof, were barred with iron rods set in the cement, like those on the first floor. The Bar-T ranch-house was a veritable fort.

There was a reason for this that the girl did not entirely understand, although her father often hinted at it. His stories of his adventures as a Texas Ranger, and over the Border into Mexico, amused her; but they had not impressed her much. Perhaps, because the Captain always skimmed over the particulars of those desperate adventures which had so spiced his early years—those years before the gentle influence of Frances' mother came into his life.

He had mentioned his partner, "Lon," on this evening. But he seldom particularized about him.

Frances could not remember when her father had gone into Arizona and returned from thence with a wagon-train loaded with many of the most beautiful of their household possessions. It was when she was a very little girl.

With the other things, Captain Rugley had brought back the old Spanish chest which he guarded so anxiously. She did not know what was in the chest—not all its treasures. It was the one secret her father kept from her.

Out of it he brought certain barbarous ornaments that he allowed her to wear now and then. She was as much enamored of jewelry and beautiful adornments as other girls, was Frances of the ranges.

There was perfect trust between her father and herself; but not perfect confidence. No more than Pratt Sanderson, for instance, did she know just how the old ranchman had become possessed of the great store of Indian and Spanish ornaments, or of the old Spanish chest.

Certain she was that he could not have obtained them in a manner to wrong anybody else. He spoke of them as "the loot of old Don Milo Morales' *hacienda*"; but Frances knew well enough that her good father, Captain Dan Rugley, had been no land pirate, no so-called Border ruffian, who had robbed some peaceful Spanish ranch-owner across the Rio Grande of his possessions.

Frances was a bit worried to-night. There were two topics of thought that disturbed her.

Motherless, and with few female friends even, she had been shut away with her own girlish thoughts and fears and wonderings more than most girls of her age. Life was a mystery to her. She lived in books and in romances and in imagination's pictures more than she did in the workaday world about her.

There seems to be little romance attached to the everyday lives we live, no matter how we are situated. The most dreary and uncolored existence, in all probability, there is in the world to-day is the daily life of a real prince or princess. We look longingly over the fence of our desires and consider all sorts and conditions of people outside as happier and far better off than we.

That was the way it was with Frances. Especially on this particular night.

Her unexpected meeting with Pratt Sanderson had brought to her heart and mind more strongly than for months her experiences in Amarillo. She remembered her school days, her school fellows, and the difference between their lives and that which she lived at present.

Probably half the girls she had known at school would be delighted (or thought they would) to change places with Frances of the ranges, right then. But the ranch girl thought how much better off she would be if she were continuing her education under the care of people who could place her in a more cultivated life.

Not that she was disloyal, even in thought, to her father. She loved him intensely—passionately! But the life of the ranges, after her taste of school and association with cultivated people, could not be entirely satisfactory.

So she sat, huddled in a white wool wrapper, by the barred, open window, looking out across the plain. Only for the few lights at the corrals and bunk-house, it seemed a great, horizonless sea of darkness—for there was no moon and a haze had enveloped the high stars since twilight.

No sound came to her ears at first. There is nothing so soundless as night on the plains—unless there be beasts near, either tamed or wild.

No coyote slunk about the ranch-house. The horses were still in the corrals. The cattle were all too far distant to be heard. Not even the song of a sleepy puncher, as he wheeled around the herd, drifted to the barred window of Frances' room.

Her second topic for thought was her father's evident expectation that the ranch-house might be attacked. Every stranger was an object of suspicion to him.

This did not abate one jot his natural Western hospitality. As mark his open-handed reception of Pratt Sanderson on this evening. They kept open house at the Bar-T ranch. But after dark—or, after bedtime at least—the place was barred like a fort in the Indian country!

Captain Rugley never went to his bed save after making the rounds, armed as he had been to-night, with Ming to bolt the doors. The only way a marauder could get into the inner court was by climbing the walls and getting over the roof, and as the latter extended four feet beyond the second-story walls, such a feat was well-nigh impossible.

The cement walls themselves were so thick that they seemed impregnable even to cannon. The roof was of slates. And, as has been pointed out already, all the outer first-floor windows, and all those reached from the porch roof, were barred.

Frances knew that her father had been seriously troubled to-night by the appearance of the strange and unseen tramp in the yard, and the fact that the arrival of that same individual had not been reported from the men's quarters.

Captain Rugley telephoned and learned from his foreman, Silent Sam Harding, that nobody had come to the bunk-house that night asking for lodging and food.

Frances was about to seek her bed. She yawned, curled her bare toes up closer in the robe, and shivered luxuriously as the night air breathed in upon her. In another moment she would pop in between the blankets and cuddle down —

Something snapped! It was outside, not in!

Frances was wide awake on the instant. Her eyelids that had been so drowsy were propped apart—not by fear, but by excitement.

She had lived a life which had sharpened her physical perceptions to a fine point. She had no trouble in locating the sound that had so startled her. Somebody was climbing the vine at the corner of the veranda roof, not twenty feet from her window. She crouched back, well sheltered in the shadow, but able to see anything that appeared silhouetted between her window and the dark curtain of the night.

There was no light in the room behind her; indeed every lamp in the ranch-house had been extinguished some time before. It was evident that this marauder—whoever he was—had waited for the quietude of sleep to fall upon the place.

Back in the room at the head of Frances' bed hung her belt with the holster pistol she wore when riding about the ranges. In these days it was considered perfectly safe for a girl to ride alone, save that coyotes sometimes came within range, or such a savage creature as had been the introduction of Pratt Sanderson and herself so recently. It was the duty of everybody on the ranges to shoot and kill these "varmints," if they could.

Frances did not even think of this weapon now. She did not fear the unknown; only that the mystery of the night, and of his secret pursuit, surrounded him. Who could he be? What was he

after? Should she run to awaken her father, or wait to observe his appearance above the edge of the veranda roof?

A dried stick of the vine snapped again. There was a squirming figure on the very edge of the roof. Frances knew that the unknown lay there, panting, after his exertions.

CHAPTER V

THE SHADOW IN THE COURT

A dozen things she *might* have done afterward appealed to Frances Rugley. But as she crouched by her chamber window watching the squirming human figure on the edge of the roof, she was interested in only one thing:

Who was he?

This question so filled her thought that she was neither fearful nor anxious. Curiosity controlled her actions entirely for the few next minutes. And so she observed the marauder rise up, carefully balance himself on the slates of the veranda roof, and tiptoe away to the corner of the house. He did not come near her window; nor could she see his face. His outlines were barely visible as he drifted into the shadow at the corner—soundless of step now. Only the cracking of the dry branch, as he climbed up, had betrayed him.

“I wish he had come this way,” thought Frances. “I might have seen what he looked like. Surely, we have no man on the ranch who would do such a thing. Can it be that father is right? Did the fellow who hailed us to-night come here to the Bar-T for some bad purpose?”

She waited several minutes by her window. Then she bethought her that there was a window at the end of a cross-hall on the side of the house where the man had disappeared, out of which she might catch another glimpse of him.

So she thrust her bare feet into slippers, tied the robe more firmly about her, and hurried out of the room. Nor did she think now of the charged weapon hanging at the head of her bed.

She believed nobody would be astir in the great house. The Chinamen slept at the extreme rear over the kitchen. Their guest, Pratt Sanderson, was on the lower floor and at the opposite side, with his windows opening upon the court around which the *hacienda* was built.

Captain Rugley's rooms were below, too. Frances knew herself to be alone in this part of the house.

Nothing had ever happened to Frances Rugley to really terrify her. Why should she be afraid now? She walked swiftly, her robe trailing behind, her slippered feet twinkling in and out under the nightgown she wore. In the cross-hall she almost ran. There, at the end, was the open window. Indeed, there were no sashes in these hall windows at this time of year; only the bars.

The night air breathed in upon her. Was that a rustling just outside the bars? There was no light behind her and she did not fear being seen from without.

Tiptoeing, she came to the sill. Her ears were quick to distinguish sounds of any character. There *was* a strange, faint creaking not far from that wide-open casement. She could not thrust her head between the bars now (she remembered vividly the last time she had done that and got stuck, and had to shriek for Daddy to come and help her out), but she could press her face close against them and stare into the blackness of the outer world.

There! something stirred. Her eyes, growing more accustomed to the darkness, caught the shadow of something writhing in the air.

What could it be? Was it alive? A man, or —

Then the bulk of it passed higher, and the strange creaking sound was renewed. Frances almost cried aloud!

It was the man she had before seen. He was mounting directly into the air. The over-thrust of the ranch-house roof made the shadow very thick against the house-wall. The man was swinging in the air just beyond this deeper shadow.

“What can he be doing?” Frances thought.

She had almost spoken the question aloud. But she did not want to startle him—not yet.

First, she must learn what he was about. Then she would run and tell her father. This night raider was dangerous—there was no doubt of that.

“Oh!” quavered Frances, suddenly, and under her breath. The uncertain bulk of the man hanging in the air had disappeared!

For a minute she could not understand. He had disappeared like magic. His very corporeal body—and she noted that it had been bulky when she first saw him roll over the edge of the veranda roof and sit up—had melted into thin air.

And then she saw something swinging, pendulum-like, before her. She thrust an arm between the bars and seized the thing. It was a rope ladder.

The whole matter, then, was as plain as daylight. The man had climbed to the porch roof, with the rope ladder wound around his body. That was what had made him seem so bulky.

Selecting this spot as a favorable one, he had flung the grappling-hook over the eaves. There must be some break in the slates which held the hook. Once fastened there, the man had quickly worked his way up to the roof, and Frances had arrived just in time to see him squirm out of sight.

There were a dozen questions in Frances' mind. How did he get here? Who was he? What did he want? Was he the man Captain Rugley had seemed to be expecting to try to make a raid upon the ranch-house? Was he alone? How did he know he could make the hook of his ladder fast at this point? Was there a traitor about who had broken a slate in the roof? Or was the broken place the result of an accident, and the marauder had noted it by daylight from the ground?

Question after question flashed through her mind. But there was one query far more important than all the others:

Where was the man going over the roof?

Frances let the ladder swing away from her clutch again. If she held it the fellow above might become alarmed.

She turned from the window and darted back along the hall. At the end was a door leading out onto the balcony which surrounded the inner court of the house at the level of the second story. The roof sloped out from the main wall of the building at this inner side, just as it did in front—indeed, the eaves were even longer. But the pillars of the balcony met the overhang at its verge, making it very easy indeed for an active person to swarm down from the roof.

Once on the balcony, the interior of the house was open to a marauder by a dozen doors, while there were likewise two flights of stairs descending directly into the court.

There were no lamps in the court now. It was a well, filled with grey shadows. Frances leaned over the balustrade and heard no sound. She looked up. The edge of the roof was a sharply defined line against the lighter background of the sky. But there was no moving figure silhouetted against that background.

Where had the man gone who had climbed the rope ladder? He could not so quickly have descended into the court; Frances was positive of that.

She shivered a little. There was something quite disturbing about this mysterious marauder. She wished now she had aroused her father immediately on first describing the man.

She started around the gallery. Her father's room lay upon the other side of the house. She could reach his windows by descending the outside stairway there. Her slippered feet made no sound; the wool robe did not rustle. Had she been seen by anybody she might have been taken for a ghost. But the black shadow of the roof of the gallery swathed Frances about, and it would have taken keen eyes indeed to distinguish her form.

Down the stair she sped. She was almost at its foot when something held her motionless again. She halted with a gasp, while before her, from the direction of the softly playing fountain, a figure drifted in.

Frances held her breath. Was *this* the man who had come over the roof of the house? Or was it another?

She crouched silently behind the railing. The figure passed her, going toward her father's windows. She dared not whisper, for she did not think it bulky enough for her father's huge frame.

On the trail of the figure she started, her heart palpitating with excitement, yet never for a moment considering her own peril.

There were other bedrooms beside that of Captain Rugley in this direction. And there was that small apartment in which the old Spanish chest was so carefully locked.

Captain Rugley never allowed the key of this door or the key of the chest to go out of his possession. He had always intimated that if a thief ever tried to break into the Bar-T ranch-house, he would first of all try to get at the treasure chest.

There were plenty of valuable things scattered about the house, but they were bulky—hard for a thief to remove. Although Frances did not know just what her father's treasure consisted of, she believed it must be of such a nature that it could be removed by a thief.

Frances, her eyes now well used to the gloom, hurried along in the wake of the drifting shadow, without sound. She came to the first window opening into her father's sleeping apartment. Like a wraith she glided in, believing at last that her duty was to awaken her father.

But when she reached his bed she found it undisturbed. It seemed his pillow had not been lain upon that night. She felt swiftly over the smooth bed, and with growing alarm—not for herself, but alarm for the missing man.

Where could he have gone? What had happened here since the lights went out and that mysterious marauder had come in over the ranch-house roof?

CHAPTER VI

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

Frances knew her way about her father's room in the dark as well as she did about her own. She knew where every piece of furniture stood. She knew where the chair was on which he carelessly threw his outer clothing at night.

Like most men who for years have slept in the open, Captain Rugley did not remove all his clothing when he went to bed. He usually lay between blankets on the outside of his bed, with his boots and trousers ready to jump into at a moment's notice. Of some of the practices of his life on the plains, with the dome of heaven for a roof-tree, he could not be broken.

She fumbled for the chair, and found it empty. She reached for the belt and holster which he usually hung on a hook at the head of the bed. They, too, were gone, and Frances felt relieved.

She did not withdraw from the room through either of the long windows. Instead, she crept through her father's office and out of the door of that room into the great, main hall.

Along this a little way was the door of the room to which Pratt Sanderson had been assigned, and that of the treasure room as well.

Frances scarcely gave Pratt a thought. She presumed him far in the land of dreams. She did not take into consideration the fact that about now the scratches of the mountain lion would become painful, and Pratt correspondingly restless. Frances was mainly troubled by her father's absence from his room. Had he, too, seen the mysterious shadow in the court? Was he on the watch for a possible marauder?

By feeling rather than eyesight she knew the door to the treasure room was closed. Was her father there?

She doubled her fist and raised it to knock upon the panel. Then she hesitated. The slightest sound would ring through the silent house like an alarm of fire.

Inclining her ear to the door, she listened. But the oak planking was thick and there was no crevice, now the portal was closed, through which any slight sound could penetrate. She could not have even distinguished the heavy breathing of a sleeping man behind the door.

Uncertain, wondering, yet quite mistress of herself again, Frances went on along the corridor. Here was an open door before her into the court. Had that shadow she had seen come this way? she wondered.

The hiss of a voice, almost in her ear, *did* startle her:

"My goodness! is it you, Miss Frances?"

A clammy hand clutched her wrist. She knew that Pratt Sanderson must have been horribly wrought up and nervous, for he was trembling.

"What is the matter? Why are you out of your bed, Pratt?" she asked, quite calmly.

"I couldn't sleep. Fever in those scratches, I s'pose," said the young man. "I got up and went outside to get a drink at the fountain—and to bathe my face and wrists. Isn't it hot?"

"You *are* feverish," whispered Frances, cautiously. "Have you seen daddy?"

"The Captain?" returned Pratt, wonderingly. "Oh, no. He isn't up, is he?"

"He's not in his room –"

"And you're not in yours," said Pratt, with a nervous laugh. "We all seem to be out of our beds at the hour when graveyards yawn, eh?"

Frances had a reassuring laugh ready.

"I think you would better go to bed again, Pratt," she said. "You—you saw nothing in the court?"

"No. But I thought I heard a big bird overhead when I was splashing the water about out there. Imagination, of course," he added. "There are no big night-flying birds out here on the plains?"

“Not that I know of,” returned she.

“I made some noise. I didn’t know what it was I scared up. Seemed to be on the roof of the house.”

Frances thought of the mysterious man and his rope ladder. But she did not mention them to Pratt.

“Put some more of father’s salve on those scratches,” she advised. “It’s an Indian salve and very healing. He was taught by an old Indian medicine man to make it.”

“All right. Good-night, Miss Frances,” said Pratt, and withdrew into his room, from which he had appeared so suddenly to accost her.

Pratt’s mention of “the bird on the roof” disturbed Frances a good deal. She turned to run back upstairs and learn if the ladder was still hanging from the eaves. But as she started to do so she realized that the door of the treasure room had been silently opened.

“Frances!”

“Oh, Dad!”

“What are you running about the house for at this time o’ night?” he demanded.

She laughed rather hysterically. “Why are you out of your bed, sir—with your rheumatism?” she retorted.

“Good reason. Thought I heard something,” growled the Captain.

“Good reason. Thought I *saw* something,” mocked Frances, seizing his arm.

She stepped inside the room with him. He flashed an electric torch for a moment about the place. She saw he had a cot arranged at one side, and had evidently gone to bed here, beside the treasure chest.

“Why is this, sir?” she demanded, with pretty seriousness.

“Reckon the old man’s getting nervous,” said Captain Rugley. “Can’t sleep in my reg’lar bed when there are strangers in the house.”

Frances started. “What do you mean?” she cried.

“Well, there’s that young man.”

“Why, Pratt is all right,” declared Frances, confidently.

“I don’t know anything *for* him—and do know one thing *against* him,” growled the old ranchman. “He’s been up and about all night, so far. Weren’t you just talking to him?”

“Oh, yes, Dad! But Pratt is all right.”

“That’s as may be. What was he doing wandering around that court?”

“Oh, Dad! Don’t worry about *him*. His arm and chest hurt him – ”

“Humph! didn’t hurt him when he went to bed, did they? Yet he was sneaking along this hall and looking into this very room when the door was slightly ajar. I saw him,” said the old ranchman, bitterly.

Frances was amazed by this statement; but she realized that her father was oversuspicious regarding the interest of strangers in the old Spanish chest and its contents.

“Never mind Pratt,” she said. “I came downstairs to find you, Daddy, because there really *is* a stranger about the house.”

“What do you mean, Frances?” was the sharp retort.

The girl told him briefly about the man she had observed climbing up to the veranda roof, and later to the roof of the house by aid of the rope ladder.

“And Pratt tells me he heard some sound up there. He thought it was a big bird,” she concluded.

“Come on!” said her father, hastily. “Let’s see that ladder.”

He locked the door of the treasure room and strode up the main stairway. Frances kept close behind him and warned him to step softly—rather an unnecessary bit of advice to an old Indian trailer like Captain Rugley!

But when they came to the window through which Frances had seen the dangling ladder it was gone. The old ranchman shot a ray of his electric torch through the opening; but the light revealed nothing.

“Gone!” he announced, briefly.

“Do—do you think so, Dad?”

“Sure. Been scared off.”

“But what could he possibly want—climbing up over our roof, and all that?”

Captain Rugley stood still and stroked his chin reflectively. “I reckon I know what they’re after

—
“They? But, Daddy, there was only one man.”

“One that was coming over the roof,” said her father. “But he had pals—sure he did! If one of them wasn’t in the house — ”

“Why, Dad!” exclaimed Frances, in wonder.

“You can’t always tell,” said the old ranchman, slowly. “There’s a heap of valuables in that chest. Of course, they don’t all belong to me,” he added, hastily. “My partner, Lon, has equal rights in ’em—don’t ever forget that, Frances, if something should happen to me.”

“Why, Dad! how you talk!” she exclaimed.

“We can never tell,” sighed her father. “Treasure is tempting. And it looks to me as though this fellow who climbed over the roof expected to find somebody inside to help him. That’s the way it looks to me,” he repeated, shaking his head obstinately.

“Dear Dad! you don’t mean that you think Pratt Sanderson would do such a thing?” said Frances, in a horrified tone.

“We don’t know him.”

“But his coming here to the Bar-T was unexpected. I urged him to come. That lion really scratched him — ”

“Yes. It doesn’t look reasonable, I allow,” admitted her father; but she could see he was not convinced of the honesty of Pratt Sanderson.

There was a difference of opinion between Frances and Captain Rugley.

CHAPTER VII

THE STAMPEDE

The remainder of the night passed in quietness. That there really had been a marauder about the Bar-T ranch-house could not be doubted; for a slate was found upon the ground in the morning, and the place in the roof where it had been broken out was plainly visible.

Captain Rugley sent one of the men up with a ladder and new slates to repair the damage. He reported that the marks of the grappling-hook in the roof sheathing were unmistakable, too.

Although her father had expressed himself as doubtful of the good intentions of Pratt Sanderson, Frances was glad to see at breakfast that he treated the young man no differently than before. Pratt slept late and the meal was held back for him.

“The attentions of that old mountain lion bothered me so that I did not sleep much the fore part of the night,” Pratt explained.

“How about that bird you heard on the roof?” the Captain asked, calmly.

“I don’t know what it was. It sounded like big wings flapping,” the young fellow explained. “But I really didn’t see anything.”

Captain Rugley grunted, and said no more. He grunted a good deal this morning, in fact, for every movement gave him pain.

“The rheumatism has got its fangs set in me right, this time,” he told Frances.

“That’s for being out of your warm bed and chasing all over the house without a coat on in the night,” she said, admonishingly.

“Goodness!” said her father. “Must I be *that* particular? If so, I *am* getting old, I reckon.”

She made him promise to keep out of draughts when she mounted Molly to ride away on an errand to a distant part of the ranch. She rode off with Pratt Sanderson, for he was traveling in the same direction, toward Mr. Bill Edwards’ place.

Frances of the ranges was more silent than she had been when they rode together the night before. Pratt found it hard to get into conversation with her on any but the most ephemeral subjects.

For instance, when he hinted about Captain Rugley’s adventures on the Border:

“Your father is a very interesting talker. He has seen and done so much.”

“Yes,” said Frances.

“And how adventurous his life must have been! I’d love to get him in a story-telling mood some day.”

“He doesn’t talk much about old times.”

“But, of course, you know all about his adventures as a Ranger, and his trips into Mexico?”

“No,” said Frances.

“Why! he spoke last night as though he often talked about it. About the looting of – Who was the old Spanish grandee he mentioned?”

“I know very little about it, Pratt,” fluttered Frances. “That’s just dad’s talk.”

“But that gorgeous girdle and bracelet you wore!”

Frances secretly determined not to wear jewelry from the treasure chest again. She had never thought before about its causing comment and conjecture in the minds of people who did not know her father as well as she did.

Suppose people believed that Captain Dan Rugley had actually stolen those things in some raid into Mexico? Such a thought had never troubled her before. But she could see, now, that strangers might misjudge her father. He talked so recklessly about his old life on the Border that he might easily cause those who did not know him to believe that not alone the contents of that mysterious treasure chest but his other wealth was gained by questionable means.

Fortunately, a herd of steers, crossing from one of the extreme southern ranges of the Bar-T to the north where juicier grass grew, attracted the attention of the guest from Amarillo.

“Are those all yours, Frances?” he asked, when he saw the mass of dark bodies and tossing horns that appeared through rifts in the dust cloud that accompanies a driven herd even over sod-land.

“My father’s,” she corrected, smiling. “And only a small herd. Not more than two thousand head in that bunch.”

“I’d call two thousand cows a whole lot,” Pratt sighed.

“Not for us. Remember, the Bar-T has been in the past one of the great cattle ranches of the West. Daddy is getting old now and cannot attend to so much work.”

“But you seem to know all about it,” said Pratt, with enthusiasm. “Don’t you really do all the overseeing for him?”

“Oh, no!” laughed Frances. “Not at all. Silent Sam is the ranch manager. I just do what either dad or Sam tell me. I’m just errand girl for the whole ranch.”

But Pratt knew better than that. He saw now that she was watching the oncoming mass of steers with a frown of annoyance. Something was going wrong and Frances was troubled.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, curiously.

“I thought that was Ratty M’Gill with that bunch,” Frances answered, more as though thinking aloud than consciously answering Pratt’s question. “The rascal! He’d run all the fat off a bunch of cows between pastures.”

She pulled Molly around and headed the pinto for the herd. It was not in his way, but Pratt followed her example and rode his grey hard after the cowgirl.

Not a herdsman was in sight. The steers were coming on through the dust, sweating and steaming, evidently having been driven very hard since daybreak. Occasionally one bawled an angry protest; but those in front were being forced on by the rear ranks, which in turn were being harassed by the punchers in charge.

Suddenly, a bald-faced steer shot out of the ruck of the herd, darting at right angles to the course. For a little way a steer can run as fast as a race-horse. That’s why the creatures are so very hard to manage on occasion.

To Pratt, who was watching sharply, it was a question which got into action first—Frances or her wise little pinto. He did not see the girl speak to Molly; but the pony turned like a shot and whirled away after the careering steer. At the same moment, it seemed, Frances had her hair rope in her hand.

The coils began to whirl around her head. The pinto was running like the wind. The bald-faced, ugly-looking brute of a steer was soon running neck and neck with the well-mounted girl.

Pratt followed. He was more interested in the outcome of the chase than he was in where his grey was putting his feet.

There was an eerie yell behind them. Pratt saw a wild-looking, hatless cowboy racing a black pony toward them. The whole herd seemed to have been turned in some miraculous way, and was thundering after Old Baldface and the girl.

Pratt began to wonder if there was not danger. He had heard of a stampede, and it looked to him as though the bunch of steers was quite out of hand. Had he been alone, he would have pulled out and let the herd go by.

But either Frances did not see them coming, or she did not care. She was after that bald-faced steer, and in a moment she had him.

The whirling noose dropped and in some wonderful way settled over a horn and one of the steer’s forefeet. When Molly stopped and braced herself, the steer pitched forward, turned a complete somersault, and lay on the prairie at the mercy of his captor.

“Hurray!” yelled Pratt, swinging his hat.

He was riding recklessly himself. He had seen a half-tamed steer roped and tied at an Amarillo street fair; but *that* was nothing like this. It had all been so easy, so matter-of-fact! No display at all

about the girl's work; but just as though she could do it again, and yet again, as often as the emergency arose.

Frances cast a glowing smile over her shoulder at him, as she lay back in the saddle and let Molly hold Old Baldface in durance. But suddenly her face changed—a flash of amazed comprehension chased the triumphant smile away. She opened her lips to shout something to Pratt—some warning. And at that instant the grey put his foot into a ground-dog hole, and the young man from Amarillo left the saddle!

He described a perfect parabola and landed on his head and shoulders on the ground. The grey scrambled up and shot away at a tangent, out of the course of the herd of thundering steers. He was not really hurt.

But his rider lay still for a moment on the prairie. Pratt Sanderson was certainly “playing in hard luck” during his vacation on the ranges.

The mere losing of his mount was not so bad; but the steers had really stampeded, and he lay, half-stunned, directly in the path of the herd.

Old Baldface struggled to rise and seized upon the girl's attention. She used the rope in a most expert fashion, catching his other foreleg in a loop, and then catching one of his hind legs, too. He was secured as safely as a fly in a spider-web.

Frances was out of her saddle the next moment, and ran back to where Pratt lay. She knew Molly would remain fixed in the place she was left, and sagging back on the rope.

The girl seized the young man under his armpits and started to drag him toward the fallen steer. The bulk of Old Baldface would prove a protection for them. The herd would break and swerve to either side of the big steer.

But one thing went wrong in Frances' calculations. Her rope slipped at the saddle. For some reason it was not fastened securely.

The straining Molly went over backward, kicking and squealing as the rope gave way, and the big steer began to struggle to his feet.

CHAPTER VIII IN PERIL AND OUT

Pratt Sanderson had begun to realize the situation. As Frances' pony fell and squealed, he scrambled to his knees.

"Save yourself, Frances!" he cried. "I am all right."

She left him; but not because she believed his statement. The girl saw the bald-faced steer staggering to its feet, and she knew their salvation depended upon the holding of the bad-tempered brute.

The stampeded herd was fast coming down upon them; afoot, she nor Pratt could scarcely escape the hoofs and horns of the cattle.

She saw Ratty M'Gill on the black pony flying ahead of the steers; but what could one man do to turn two thousand head of wild cattle? Frances of the ranges had appreciated the peril which threatened to the full and at first glance.

The prostrate carcass of the huge steer would serve to break the wave of cattle due to pass over this spot within a very few moments. If Baldface got up, shook off the entangling rope and ran, Frances and Pratt would be utterly helpless.

Once under the hoofs of the herd, they would be pounded into the prairie like powder, before the tail of the stampede had passed.

Frances, seeing the attempts of the big steer to climb to its feet, ran forward and seized the rope that had slipped through the ring of her saddle. She drew in the slack at once; but her strength was not sufficient to drag the steer back to earth.

Snorting and bellowing, the huge beast was all but on his feet when Pratt Sanderson reached the girl's side.

Pratt was staggering, for the shock of his fall had been severe. He understood her, however, when she cried:

"Jump on it, Pratt! Jump on it!"

The young man leaped, landing with both feet on the taut rope. Frances, at the same instant, threw herself backward, digging her heels into the sod.

The shock of the tightening of the rope, therefore, fell upon the steer. Down he went bellowing angrily, for he had not cast off the noose that entangled him.

"Don't let him get loose, Pratt! Stand on the rope!" commanded Frances.

With the slack of the lariat she ran forward, caught a kicking hind foot, then entangled one of the beast's forefeet, and drew both together with all her strength. The bellowing steer was now doubly entangled; but he was not secure, and well did Frances know it.

She ran in closer, although Pratt cried out in warning, and looped the rope over the brute's other horn. Slipping the end of her rope through the loop that held his feet together, Frances got a purchase by which she could pull the great head of the beast aside and downward, thus holding him helpless. It was impossible for him to get up after he was thus secured.

"Got him! Quick, Pratt, this way!" Frances panted.

She beckoned to the Amarillo young man, and the latter instantly joined her. She had conquered the steer in a few seconds; the herd was now thundering down upon them. M'Gill, on the black pony, dashed by.

"Bully for you, Miss Frances," he yelled.

"You wait, Ratty!" Frances said; but, of course, only Pratt heard. "Father and Sam will jack you up for this, and no mistake!"

Then she whipped out her revolver and fired it into the air—emptying all the chambers as the herd came on.

The steers broke and passed on either side of their fallen brother. The tossing horns, fiery eyes and red, expanded nostrils made them look—to Pratt's mind—fully as savage as had the mountain lion the evening before.

Then he looked again at his comrade. She was only breathing quickly now; she gave no sign of fear. It was all in the day's work. Such adventures as this had been occasional occurrences with Frances of the ranges since childhood.

Pratt could scarcely connect this alert, vigorous young girl with her who had sat at the piano in the ranch-house the previous evening!

"You're a wonder!" murmured Pratt Sanderson, to himself. And then suddenly he broke out laughing.

"What's tickling you, Pratt?" asked Frances, in her most matter-of-fact tone.

"I was just wondering," the Amarillo young man replied, "what Sue Latrop will think of you when she comes out here."

"Who's she?" asked Frances, a little puzzled frown marring her smooth forehead. She was trying to remember any girl of that name with whom she had gone to school at the Amarillo High.

"Sue Latrop's a distant cousin of Mrs. Bill Edwards, and she's from Boston. She's Eastern to the tips of her fingers—and talk about 'culchaw'! She has it to burn," chuckled Pratt. "Bill Edwards says she is just 'putting on dog' to show us natives how awfully crude we are. But I guess she doesn't know any better."

The steers had swept by, and Pratt was just a little hysterical. He laughed too easily and his hand shook as he wiped the perspiration and dust from his face.

"I shouldn't think she would be a nice girl at all," Frances said, bluntly.

"Oh, she's not at all bad. Rather pretty and—my word—some dresser! No end of clothes she's brought with her. She's coming out to the Edwards ranch before long, and you'll probably see her."

Frances bit her lip and said nothing for a moment. The big steer struggled again and groaned. The girl and Pratt were afoot and the stampede of cattle had swept their mounts away. Even Molly, the pinto, was out of call.

The half dozen punchers who followed the maddened steers had no time for Frances and her companion. A great cloud of dust hung over the departing herd and that was the last the castaways on the prairie would see of either cattle or punchers that day.

"We've got to walk, I reckon," Frances said, slowly.

"How about this steer?" asked the young man, curiously.

"I think he's tamed enough for the time," said the girl, with a smile. "Anyway I want my rope. It's a good one."

She began to untangle the bald-faced steer. He struggled and grunted and tossed his wide, wicked horns free. To tell the truth Pratt was more than a little afraid of him. But he saw that Frances had reloaded the revolver she carried, and he merely stepped aside and waited. The girl knew so much better what to do that he could be of no assistance.

"Now, Pratt," she said, at last, "stand from under! Hoop-la!"

She swung the looped lariat and brought it down smartly upon the beast's back as it struggled to its shaking legs. The steer bellowed, shook himself like a dog coming out of the water, or a mule out of the harness, and trotted away briskly.

"He'll follow the herd, I reckon," Frances said, smiling again. "If he doesn't they'll pick him out at the next round-up. His brand is too plain to miss."

"And now we're afoot," said Pratt. "It's a long walk for you back to the house, Frances."

"And longer for you to the Edwards ranch," she laughed. "But perhaps you will fall in with some of Mr. Bill's herders. They'll have an extra mount or two. I'll maybe catch Molly. She's a good pinto."

“But oughtn’t I to go back with you?” questioned Pratt, doubtfully. “You see—you’re alone—and afoot – ”

“Why! it isn’t the first time, Pratt,” laughed the girl. “Don’t fret about me. This range to me is just like your backyard to you.”

“I suppose it sounds silly,” admitted Pratt. “But I haven’t been used to seeing girls quite as independent as you are, Frances Rugley.”

“No? The girls you know don’t live the sort of life I do,” said the range girl, rather wistfully.

“I don’t know that they have anything on you,” put in Pratt, stoutly. “I think you’re just wonderful!”

“Because I am doing something different from what you are used to seeing girls do,” she said, with gravity. “That is no compliment, Pratt.”

“Well! I meant it as such,” he said, earnestly. He offered his hand, knowing better than to urge his company upon her. “And I hope you know how much obliged to you I am. I feel as though you had saved my life twice. I would not have known what to do in the face of that stampede.”

“Every man to his trade,” quoted Frances, carelessly. “Good-bye, Pratt. Come over again to see us,” and she gave his hand a quick clasp and turned away briskly.

He stood and watched her for some moments; then, fearing she might look back and see him, he faced around himself and set forth on his long tramp to the Edwards ranch.

It was true Frances did not turn around; but she knew well enough Pratt gazed after her. He would have been amazed had he known her reason for showing no further interest in him—for not even turning to wave her hand at him in good-bye. There were tears on her cheeks, and she was afraid he would see them.

“I am foolish—wicked!” she told herself. “Of course he knows other—and nicer—girls than *me*. And it isn’t just that, either,” she added, rather enigmatically. “But to remember all those girls I knew in Amarillo! How different their lives are from mine!

“How different they must look and behave. Why, I’m a perfect *tomboy*. Pratt said I was wonderful—just as though I were a trick pony, or an educated goose!

“I do things he never saw a girl do before, and he thinks it strange and odd. But if that Sue Latrop should see me and say that I was not nice, he’d begin to see, too, that it is a fact.

“Riding with the boys here on the ranch, and officiating at the branding-pen, riding herd, cutting out beeves and playing the cowboy generally, has not added to my ‘culchaw,’ that is sure. I don’t know that I’d be able to ‘act up’ in decent society again.

“Pratt looked at me big-eyed last evening when I dressed for dinner. But he was only astonished and amused, I suppose. He didn’t expect me to look like that after seeing me in this old riding dress.

“Oh, dear!” sighed Frances of the ranges. “I wouldn’t leave daddy, or do anything to displease him, poor dear! But I wish he could be content to live nearer to civilization.

“We’ve got enough money. *I* don’t want any more, I’m sure. We could sell the cattle and turn our ranges into wheat and milo fields. Then we could live in town part of the year—in Amarillo, perhaps!”

The thought was a daring one. Indeed, she was not wholly confident that it was not a wicked thought.

Just then she reached the summit of a slight ridge from which she could behold the home corrals of the *hacienda* itself, still a long distance ahead, and glowing like jewels in the morning sunshine.

Such a beautiful place! After all, Frances Rugley loved it. It was home, and every tender tie of her life bound her to it and to the old man who she knew was sitting somewhere on the veranda, with his pipe and his memories.

There never was such another beautiful place as the old Bar-T! Frances was sure of that. She longed for Amarillo and what the old Captain called “the frills of society”; but could she give up the ranch for them?

“I reckon I want to keep my cake and eat it, too,” she sighed. “And that, daddy would say, ‘is plumb impossible!’”

CHAPTER IX

SURPRISING NEWS

Frances arrived at home about noon. The last few miles she bestrode Molly, for that intelligent creature had allowed herself to be caught. It was too late to go on the errand to Cottonwood Bottom before luncheon.

Silent Sam Harding met her at the corral gate. He was a lanky, saturnine man, with never a laugh in his whole make-up. But he was liked by the men, and Frances knew him to be faithful to the Bar-T interests.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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