

Vandercook Margaret

The Ranch Girls at Rainbow Lodge



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The Ranch Girls at Rainbow Lodge / The Ranch Girls Series

CHAPTER I

THE LOST TRAIL

OVER the brown plain a shaggy broncho trotted slowly, with its head drooping.

A girl stood up in her saddle with one hand to her lips. "Halloo! Halloo!" she cried. "I wonder where on earth I am? I thought I knew every inch of this country, yet here I am lost and I can't be but a few miles from our ranch. I must have missed the trail somewhere. Jim! Jim Colter! If there is anybody near, please answer me."

Jacqueline Ralston rode astride. Her eyes and cheeks were glowing and her gold brown hair, deep grey eyes and brilliant color, formed an unusually attractive picture.

She leaned over and gave her pony a penitent hug. "Poor little Hotspur, you shall have a rest pretty soon, even if I have to spend the night out of doors. But won't Jean and Frieda be frightened? Jim will scour the prairies for me."

The pony was treading through a vast field of purple clover fading to brown in the autumn sun. It was just before sunset. Away to the right, Jacqueline could see a group of slow moving objects, which she knew to be cattle. Half a mile on the opposite side was a sparse group of evergreen trees and low bushes. But there was nothing else that broke the vision of a long line of level country, until the snow-capped peaks of the distant mountains shone like gold in the rays of the setting sun.

"We will try the trees, Hotspur," Jacqueline urged coaxingly. "Perhaps we may find a trail over there. Anyhow I believe I would rather be a solitary babe in the woods, than to wander around here in the alfalfa fields until to-morrow morning."

The girl wore a short, brown corduroy jacket and skirt, leather leggings and riding boots. Over the pommel of her saddle hung a bunch of silver grouse and a smart little rifle was suspended at her side.

"I am desperately hungry," she announced aloud. "I do wish I had a match so I could light a fire. Jolly good advice that of Jim's for a ranch girl, 'never try to find your match, always carry it with you.'"

Jacqueline laughed. She was not willing to confess that she was tired, although she had been riding since eight o'clock that morning. Against the wishes of her sister Frieda, her cousin Jean, and the overseer of their ranch, Jim Colter, she had gone off alone to inspect the corral which had been recently built to protect their sheep for the winter.

Inside the woods the way was darker and there was no sign of a road. Jacqueline let the reins slacken on her pony's neck. Really Hotspur would have to find the right trail home, if they were to reach the ranch house that night. She could hear the rabbits and squirrels scurrying back into their retreats. They were not accustomed to being disturbed at their supper time and at first there was no other sound.

"Who goes there?" suddenly a rough voice demanded, and a horse came plunging through an opening in the trees.

Jacqueline's color paled. She recognized the rider, a boy of about sixteen, nearly her own age. "I am Jacqueline Ralston," she answered quietly. "I have lost the trail. Will you please show me the way to the Rainbow Ranch?"

The young fellow laughed rudely. "Miss Ralston, is it?" he sneered. "Don't tell me you are lost on our ranch. You have been over here spying at our cattle. Just you trot along home as fast as you can. I shall report to my father what I caught you doing." The boy's light blue eyes blazed angrily.

Jacqueline had reined in her pony and waited. Her temper was not her strong point, but she replied politely: "I am not spying, Dan Norton; I wonder why you should think it necessary. I will leave your ranch as soon as I can get away from it. Will you please show me the trail?"

Jacqueline held her head very high. "Won't you tell me?" she asked again. "Because we happen to be enemies is no reason why you shouldn't believe my word." The young girl's tones were gentle, but her face was white with anger in the gathering dusk. Her firm red lips were pressed tight together to keep her from saying the things she really felt.

Dan Norton rode closer toward her and for reply struck her pony sharply with his short riding whip. Tired little Hotspur quivered with pain, but stood still under his mistress' gentle words.

"Don't do that again, Dan," Jacqueline protested, feeling the hot blood rush to her face and then leave her cold and still with anger. "There is not another person in Wyoming who would be so rude to me. But there has been trouble enough between you and us. I shall not speak of this, but I shall never be able to forgive you to the longest day I live;" and Jacqueline's grey eyes looked so proudly and so scornfully into the boy's that his own dropped.

"Your way's to the left," he muttered. "If you ride quick, you will soon be on the boundary of your own ranch. Hurry, there is some one else coming this way."

Jacqueline did not stir. A few minutes before, she would have trotted off gladly. Now nothing would have induced her to go. She would not run away from her enemy. Indeed she preferred to explain her presence on his ranch to Mr. Norton.

In the silence between the two young people another voice entered, but it was not Mr. Norton's. Some one was singing.

Dan Norton rode hurriedly out of sight and Jacqueline lifted her rifle, letting it rest in her arm.

"If a body meet a body,
Comin' through the rye;
If a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry?
Every lassie has her laddie,
Nane they say have —

"Oh!" the song stopped abruptly. The singer threw up both hands and burst into a merry boyish laugh. "I surrender in the name of — in the name of most anything, if you will only put down that gun," he declared. "Who would have thought of meeting a girl in these woods? Whatever are you doing here? Poaching? No, I believe you don't have game preserves in this country, so poaching isn't against your law." The stranger laughed, though he had taken off his hat and bowed courteously to his fellow traveler. "Please tell me, are you Rosalind in the forest of Arden? You look like her, although I never heard of her on horseback," he ended merrily.

Jacqueline bit her lips. The young man was evidently a newcomer in the neighborhood and at any other time Jacqueline would have liked him. He must have been about seventeen and was tall and slender, with light brown hair and clever brown eyes. His dress was that of a cowboy, but Jacqueline saw with a feeling of instant disdain that his clothes were too new and his face too white for him to have lived long in her country. Besides he did not ride or talk like a Westerner.

"I am Frank Kent, at your service," he explained, puzzled by Jacqueline's haughty silence. "I am an Englishman and I don't quite know what I ought to do or say out in Wyoming. But may I be of any service to you?"

Jacqueline's feeling of hurt and anger began to subside and she smiled in a more friendly fashion. Frank Kent decided that he had never seen such a pretty girl before in his life. Had she been a city girl, her skin would have been fair, but from her outdoor life it had become exquisitely darkened by the wind and sun of the prairies. Her hair was like bronze and her color a deep rose.

"I ought not to be asking favors of you," Jacqueline replied in her usual manner. "You are a stranger in a strange land, while I have lived out West since I was a baby. But can you show me the trail to the Rainbow Ranch? Anyhow tell me how to get off of this place. I have never been on it before, and – " To save her life Jacqueline could not keep her voice from trembling.

"Surely I can show you," Frank answered. He spoke with such a funny English accent, that Jacqueline would have liked to have made fun of him, if she had known him better.

"I have heard a lot about the girls who run Rainbow Ranch," he went on quickly. "They sound like such an awfully good sort that I have made Dan Norton tell me a lot about them. I am visiting him, surely you must know him," the young fellow concluded eagerly.

What in the world had he said? Frank Kent was startled. The girl he had just met seemed quite friendly a moment before. Now she stiffened up on her pony, her cheeks turned scarlet and her eyes flashed.

"I won't trouble you any further," she announced. "I will find my own way home from here." Without another word or a backward glance, Jacqueline gave her pony a gentle cut and Hotspur galloped quickly away.

"Whew," Frank Kent whistled, "methinks some one told me that the people one met out West were awfully friendly and informal. That girl was as touchy as you find them. But I wonder who she is? I think I will ride after her and show her the trail, even if she is so high and mighty."

Jacqueline pretended not to hear the young man trotting along behind her, and did not turn her head. She rode faster and faster until a sound like a stifled moan arrested her. Jacqueline paused and saw that the young fellow who had been so polite to her a few minutes before was ghastly white. He was swaying so in his saddle that he had not the strength to stop his horse.

Jacqueline caught his bridle. "Rest a minute," she urged gently. "You will soon be all right. You have ridden too far and you are not used to it. People always do too much, when they first come to Wyoming. My name is Jacqueline Ralston and I am one of the girls at the Rainbow Ranch. I am sorry I was rude to you a little while ago, but the Nortons are not our friends." Jacqueline was talking so that the young man could get his breath. She could not help admiring the brave fight he made. He seemed to be dreadfully ashamed of his own weakness.

"You will let me show you the right trail, won't you?" he asked. "I am sorry you are not friendly with my hosts. I thought I heard you talking to Dan, when I rode up to you, but that won't matter about me, will it? I don't know anything about your quarrel and if we were properly introduced, don't you think we could be friends? I can't tell you how plucky I think it is for you three girls to be managing your own ranch. Don't you think you might tell me a thing or two about it? It is pretty lonely out here for a stranger."

The young fellow looked so nice, and so ill, in spite of his efforts to hide it, that Jacqueline almost relented. Then the thought of Dan Norton's rudeness and the long feud between them swept over her, and Jacqueline shook her head firmly.

"I am sorry," she returned. "With any one else it would not matter, but we can't be friendly with any guest of the Norton's." Jacqueline hesitated, "I can't explain it to you, there isn't time. Good-bye. I know the way home from here."

Frank Kent watched Jacqueline ride out of sight, sitting on her pony as though she had been made on it, like a figure cut from bronze, all in soft tones of gold and brown.

It was quite dark when Jacqueline at last spied the lights of her own ranch house twinkling at her warmly through the open windows and doors.

The broncho hurried faster, forgetting his hard day and Jacqueline talked low in his ear.

"Home and supper, Hotspur! See the lights of home ahead. Soon they will hear us coming. Suppose I give our call and relieve the suspense." Three times in rapid succession, Jacqueline touched her red lips with her slender fingers and gave a shrill, clear whistle like an Indian's call.

Instantly figures moved about in the ranch house. A dark lantern was swung off its place over the front door and a man and two girls hurried down the drive. Jacqueline was lifted off her horse. Her sister, Frieda, seized her by one arm, her cousin, Jean, by the other.

"What has kept you so long?" Frieda demanded anxiously.

"If you have had an adventure and wouldn't let me go with you to-day, I shall never get over it," Jean insisted. "Come into the house this minute. Do tell us where you have been. Jim telephoned over to the other side of the ranch three hours back, but the sheep herders said you started for home long ago. We have been frightened to death ever since."

Frieda pulled at her sister's jacket. Jean, although she kept up her scolding, got a pair of soft, red felt slippers and placed them invitingly in front of the big, living-room fire.

Rainbow Lodge was built of pine logs. The great sitting-room was forty feet long and two-thirds as wide and it looked like a man's room, but the three ranch girls did not know it. The floor was covered with buffalo robes and beautiful bright Navajo blankets made by the Indians in the nearby villages, and the head of an elk thrusting forth giant antlers dominated the scene from above the stone fireplace. An Andrew Jackson table made of hewn logs, with a smooth polished top, occupied one side of the fireplace, holding a reading lamp and some half-opened books.

In another corner the home-made book shelves were filled with much-read novels and books of travel. There were low, comfortable chairs about everywhere. It was an odd room to be occupied by three young girls, but a very noble one. The ranch girls had kept it just as their father had left it when he died, six months before.

Jacqueline gave a comfy sigh. "I *am* glad to be at home," she murmured. "I haven't had any special adventure. Jean, I know you will be disgusted with me, but I got lost and wandered over on the Norton ranch. I met Dan Norton and he was horrid to me. Oh, Frieda darling, hasn't Aunt Ellen saved me anything to eat? I am simply starving," Jacqueline ended, anxious to change the subject.

Aunt Ellen came in at this moment bearing a waiter. She was nearly six feet tall, part Indian and part colored, and she had lived with the Ralstons ever since Mr. and Mrs. Ralston came to Wyoming from the East, bringing Jack, who was then only two years old.

The old woman was frowning and shaking her head, as she put down Jack's supper. "Ought never to have ridden off across the ranch alone, ought not to be coming back home way after dark. I am sure the master never would have liked you chilluns living here and trying to run things for yourself," she muttered.

Jack flushed, although she patted the old woman's hand affectionately and said nothing. Jack knew she deserved the scolding and that she would have another from Jim Colter, the manager of their ranch, in the morning. To-night he had led Hotspur away without a word and retired to his own quarters.

No one, excepting strangers, ever called Jacqueline Ralston anything but Jack. She never thought of herself by her pretty French name, except when she wished to appear very grown up and impressive. As for little Frieda, she had been born at Rainbow Ranch house thirteen years before on Christmas eve. She was such a fair little German-looking baby, with her blue eyes and flaxen hair, that her mother gave her the pretty German name of Frieda, which means peace. Mrs. Ralston died when Frieda was only a few months old, but the little girl had fairly earned her name all her life. Peace and War, Jean used to call the two sisters, when she wanted to tease Jack, for Jacqueline was as high-tempered and determined as Frieda was gentle and serene.

Jean was a slender, graceful maiden, with hair and eyes of the same nut brown color. She had come to live at the ranch ten years before, when her mother, Mr. Ralston's sister, died, and Mr. Ralston decided it would be better to bring up three motherless girls than two. Jean had a gentle,

far-away expression, though Jack always asserted that Jean was present when she wanted to be. She only dreamed dreams and wore her aloof expression when people bored her, or when she felt sad and thought she needed sympathy. Jack and Frieda knew no difference in their feeling for Jean and for each other.

When Jacqueline finished supper, she curled herself in a big armchair in front of the fire. Frieda sat on a low stool at her feet while Jean, with an open book, was not far away. Jean was the reader of the three girls, but to-night her book was neglected.

"Out with it, Jack," Jean insisted calmly. "You know perfectly well that you haven't told us all that happened to you this afternoon. Fire away and get it over with, I want to finish my book to-night."

After much urging, Jack told her story in full and Jean flung her book down and danced about the room on her tip-toes, she was so angry, when she heard how Dan Norton had treated her. But she had a different feeling about the young English fellow.

"I really think you were rather horrid, Jacqueline Ralston," she announced coolly. "Of course we can't be having visitors or making friends with any one visiting those hateful Nortons, but I think you might have told that young fellow we would be nice to him when we met him other places. He is a far-off cousin of the Nortons, whose health broke down while he was at college in England and his people sent him over here to recover. His father is a Lord, or a Sir or something, I can't remember which. But Mrs. Simpson says he is awfully nice and –"

Jack put both fingers in her ears. "For goodness sake, hush, Jean Bruce," she protested. "You are such a snob. What difference can it make to us, whether this Frank Kent is a lord or a prizefighter? We certainly can't have anything to do with him. I shan't even speak to him again if I can help it. For the life of me, Jean, I don't see how you happen to find out the gossip in Wyoming with our ranches five miles apart."

Jean's brown eyes sparkled. She and Jack had many differences of opinion, but to-night Jack was tired and her cousin decided not to answer back.

"Have you gotten your lessons, Frieda?" Jack asked gently a moment later, kissing her hand apologetically to Jean.

Frieda shook her head. She had two long blonde plaits, like a little German girl, with a curl at the end of each one of them. Her cheeks were a faint pink, and her nose tilted just enough to curl her lips up into a smile.

"No," she replied calmly. "Jean offered to hear me recite, but I didn't feel like it. You and Jean haven't studied your French for three evenings. I don't see why I have to do all the studying, because I am the youngest. When we planned to live by ourselves this winter, you and Jean declared that you were going to study three or four hours every day."

Jack pulled Frieda's hair and Jean had just picked up her French grammar with a sigh when there came the noise of some one riding up to the ranch house.

The three girls flew to the window. It was too dark to recognize the figure on horseback. But a few moments later, Aunt Ellen brought in an envelope addressed to "Miss Jacqueline Ralston."

It was a surly note of apology from Dan Norton for his rudeness to her in the afternoon. The girls wondered what in the world had induced him to write it.

Long after Jean and Frieda were asleep, Jacqueline lay awake. She was the oldest and most responsible member of the ranch girl family of three. Frieda was right, she and Jean had been neglecting their studies shamefully. Now and then Jack could not help thinking that perhaps it was not wise for them to live without a teacher or a chaperon. They did not want to grow up perfect greenhorns, yet how they hated the idea of introducing a stranger into their home at Rainbow Ranch. Jack was still puzzling, when she fell asleep, with the familiar sound in her ears of the far-off lowing of the wild cattle across the prairie and the distant bark of the faithful sheep dogs.

CHAPTER II

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GIANT'S FACE

FRIEDA walked ankle deep in purple violets. Her hands were full of them and she carried a brimful basket on her arm.

"What a picture you are, Frieda," Jack called, as she came out on the broad veranda of the ranch house at about eight o'clock the next morning.

"I don't care if we don't make our everlasting fortunes with our violet beds, they are just too sweet for anything! Jean is coming out to help you pick the flowers in a minute; I have got to go down to the rancho to make my peace with Jim."

Jack walked briskly along. It was a gentle October day with a bright sun and warm wind. You seemed to be able to see half way across the world, the horizon line stretched so far beyond you.

One of the ways in which Jean and Frieda had been trying to help to make the ranch pay was by starting a violet farm. Nearly an acre of land near the house had been irrigated and glistened with the dark green leaves and purple stars of the young plants. The flowers were to be covered with glass later on. Now the fresh morning air was fragrant with their perfume. Of course the flowers had not yet had time to pay for the expense of planting them, but Frieda was eagerly calculating how many bunches she would have to send to the nearest town, when Jean joined her.

"Don't you wish we could spend this whole day out of doors, Jean?" Frieda suggested. "I forgot to say anything about it to Jack, but you know how we have talked about riding over to the Giant's Cañon to have our lunch. Aunt Ellen can pack our saddle bags, and we can join Jack at the rancho."

After a ten minutes' walk, Jacqueline Ralston touched the brim of her broad sombrero hat with a military salute and brought her heels sharply together, when a tall figure came down the path toward her from the rancho with his hands deep in his old leather trousers. She was near the mess-house, where the men who worked the ranch had their quarters. The girls called it "Jim's rancho," to distinguish it from their own home half a mile away.

Jim Colter returned Jack's salute gravely. He was a handsome man of about thirty, with black hair and skin almost as swarthy as a Mexican's. The queer thing about his appearance was that his eyes were as blue and as gentle as a baby's, except when he was angry and then there was no harder man in Wyoming to deal with than the overseer of Rainbow Ranch. Jack would not have dared to let him know how rude Dan Norton had been to her.

Jim was a man of mystery. He came from goodness knows where; no one knew anything of his past. One day, many years before, he rode up to the ranch house nearly dead from fatigue and hunger. Mr. Ralston took him in and he never went away again. But he would not say one word about himself and no one dared to ask him many questions, because his blue eyes would suddenly grow black and angry and he would look as though he were recalling something he wanted to forget.

Jim was devoted to Jack and Jean, but Frieda was his special favorite. She was only two years old when he came to live at Rainbow Ranch, but he taught her to ride and to swim, when other babies were only just learning to walk. He and Mr. Ralston used to ride all over the great ranch, with Frieda tucked up in front of Jim's saddle and Jack perched behind her father's when both little girls were almost babies. By the time she was fourteen, Jacqueline Ralston, who was her father's shadow, knew the trick of lassoing. There was not a cowboy on the ranch who could ride faster, shoot straighter, or understood more about the business of caring for the cattle and the sheep than she did, and since Mr. Ralston's death, Jim had always consulted Jack about each new business venture.

Jack made her report of yesterday's expedition, but without a word of her meeting with Dan. Jim said nothing about the fright Jack had given them, but Jack found herself blushing and feeling like a little girl, instead of the head of a thousand acre ranch as he looked at her.

"It really wasn't my fault I was out late, yesterday, Jim," Jack apologized. "But we girls have decided to turn over a new leaf. We have made up our minds to stay at home and study, until we are regular blue stockings."

Jim laughed and at this moment glanced up the road. Jean and Frieda were riding calmly toward them. Jean was leading Hotspur and the three girls' saddle bags were packed as though they were pioneers traveling across the Deadwood trail to the gold regions of California.

Jim chuckled. "Looks like a party of bluestockings from Boston, Jack, coming this way, 'specially that there fishing tackle Jean's carrying. Where was you expecting to spend to-day?" he drawled in a funny Western fashion.

Frieda tucked a small bunch of violets in the buttonhole of Jim's khaki shirt. She wore a blue riding suit and a big Mexican hat like Jack's and her face looked very young and babyish under it. "We are going to the Giant's Cañon, Jim," she said apologetically. "It's such a dream of a day, but Jack doesn't know. We have brought her sketch book and Jean's along and I have my history, so we can get our lessons outdoors and then we can make a fire and have lunch in my own little cave in the rocks."

"We will be back early, Jim," Jean added.

"All right," Jim agreed. His eyes twinkled at the vision of Jean and Jack sketching under the shadow of the great stone peaks whose broken outline looked like the profile of a giant's face. The Giant's Cañon was five miles across the plains, but the ranch girls were in the habit of riding over to it. Between the ridges of rock, nestling in the deep gorge, were little lakes filled with shimmering trout. One of the rocky caverns in the cañon, Frieda had adopted as her very own. The girls always spoke of it as Frieda's cave.

Frieda's stone castle was really two stories high. A large flat rock jutted out over a second one about eight feet below it while a flight of natural stairs ran from the ground to the floor of the cave.

Frieda unpacked the saddle bags, while Jean and Jack tethered the ponies to a great cottonwood tree not far from the edge of the gorge. The place was entirely deserted, except for an eagle that swooped out of her eyrie and floated above the newcomers' heads. Frieda slipped down the stairs into her cave, spread out her pony's blanket and set to housekeeping, humming as cheerfully as though she had been in her own private room at the ranch. She was not in the least awed by the grandeur and loneliness of the scenery about her. Indeed Frieda was so much at home in her cavern that she kept an old frying pan hung from one of the sharp points of the rock and some broken dishes stored away in a crevice which formed a kind of natural pantry.

Jean and Jack made a fire, because no camper is really happy without one. Then they religiously got out their sketch books and set to work to make pictures of their three sturdy bronchos munching the buffalo grass in their neighborhood.

Both girls worked patiently for about ten minutes and then Jean sighed once or twice. She had used her eraser oftener than her drawing pencil. Holding her drawing out, she gazed at it critically. Finally she tore it into small bits and strolled over to Jack, to gaze over her shoulder.

"And what be those critturs you are picturing, Friend Ralston?" Jean demanded, in a familiar, Western tone. "If they are native to this here state of Wyoming, I ain't never seen 'em before. Be they mules or buffaloes?"

Jack frowned and bit her pencil. "Don't be a goose, Jean," she answered, "and please don't interrupt." Jack surveyed her masterpiece critically. "The ponies do look a bit queer," she confessed. "One of them has three legs and the other five, but then I haven't worked very long. Do go away and see if you can do any better yourself. You know we solemnly vowed that we were going to sketch an hour each day."

Jean departed to another ten minutes of labor. But the sun was shining gloriously; the day was one long, sunlit delight. She could hear the water trickling over the rocks in the gorge below, and Frieda moving about at her housekeeping. Jean picked up her fishing rod, selected a choice fly and slipped her sketch book into her knapsack.

"Au revoir, Jack dear," she announced cheerfully. "Stay here and look after Frieda. I am going down to the pool to get some trout for lunch." Jean flung some pine knots on their fire, kissed her hand to Frieda and marched off, smiling wickedly at Jack, who was drawing as though her life depended on it. She wished to be an object lesson of industry to slothful Jean.

When Jean had entirely disappeared down the side of the ravine, Jack stopped to gaze sadly at her morning's work. "I am afraid I am not a natural-born artist," she declared aloud. "It may be all right for geniuses to work from life, but I can't make any headway without a teacher. I wish Cousin Ruth had not put French and drawing into her list of what a young woman should know. They may be easy enough for girls to learn in her beloved old Vermont, but they are pretty hard work out here. I am afraid the ranch girls don't know any of the things they should." Jack's red lips parted. "But it's lots of fun to know the unnecessary things like fishing and riding. Gee whiz, I can't stand working any longer."

Jack leaned over the ledge of rock. Her drawing fluttered down to her sister. "Here Frieda, decorate your cave with that work of art. It looks like a drawing made by the Indians in pre-historic days. You won't mind, will you, if I go away for a while? I won't be out of calling distance and I won't stay long. If you need me, just sing out."

Frieda smiled. Her blue eyes looked like a reflection of the clear sky above them. She had so little idea of feeling any fear, that she did not even trouble to answer Jack's question. There were no more wild animals in the gorge. Besides, the ranch girls knew that few animals would attack them, except in self-defense.

Frieda climbed down the rocky cliff to fill an old teakettle with water from a spring not far below and then hung it over the fire on a crooked stick. If the water boiled long before Jean and Jack returned, the pleasant, sizzly sound would keep her company. Frieda's house was in order, so she set out her luncheon dishes, arranging them around in a circle on the floor of her cave. In the center, in a broken teacup, she placed the bunch of violets she had worn in her trip across the plain. Still the girls had not returned; Frieda might have studied, but she decided that it would be more fun to enlarge the crevice in the rocks, which formed the storehouse for her kitchen and dining-room utensils.

She struck the rock sharply with a large stone. A piece chipped off, then another. It was red sandstone and not very hard and Frieda was banging away with all her might, when she gave a quick exclamation of surprise. A great crack appeared along one side of the stone wall, and a big boulder crashed down at Frieda's feet. Before her, she beheld another cavern in the rock, almost as large as the one in which she played.

The little girl jumped back. At any moment she expected to see a pair of wild eyes glaring at her from the rocky retreat, believing that she had accidentally broken into the cave of some animal. But nothing happened; there was no stir, no sound from the darkness inside.

Frieda's heart beat rapidly. Her face was pale from excitement. She looked cautiously into the opening, thrust one small hand into it and drew out a round dish of hard, baked clay, engraved with queer, Indian characters. Frieda gave a shriek of delight, although she did not realize that she had accidentally discovered an important collection of Indian relics. But she was fascinated with the arrow heads and queer Indian dolls that she dug out a second later.

In the midst of her search, Frieda heard a sound that made her heart stand still. At the head of the gorge, about a quarter of a mile away, there was a dense thicket of evergreens. From this direction came a cry of pain and terror. Frieda flew up to the ground above.

"Jean, Jack!" she called. "What has happened? Is one of you hurt? Please come to me." Frieda gave the call, that was always the signal between the three ranch girls. "Oh-oo, Oh-ooo, Oh-oooo," ending in a shrill, drawn-out note, as she touched her lips with her fingers, three times in quick succession.

Then she listened, but neither Jean nor Jack answered her. The ranch girls could hear sounds from afar off, as they had spent their lives in the open country. As Frieda ran forward a few steps, she

caught the echo of light feet, flying along the ground. A girl came out of the woods, rushing toward her blindly. But Frieda could not tell who it was or guess what had happened. Was it Jean or Jack?

CHAPTER III

FRIEDA AND THE OTHER GIRL

THE apparition drew near enough for Frieda to see that it was a stranger with straight black hair. She was barefoot and wore a short, ragged skirt, a bright red jacket, and a red scarf twisted around her throat. In her startled glance at the girl, Frieda beheld a pair of immense black eyes, set in a thin, pointed face, with cheeks flushed crimson, perhaps from the swiftness of her flight. Her breath came in short gasps. Frieda thought of a fawn she had once seen pursued by some hunters, with its great soft eyes transformed into staring pools of terror and its soft sides quivering as though its heart were breaking in its final effort to evade its pursuers.

"Oh, what is it?" Frieda cried, with quick sympathy.

The girl looked at her hopelessly and ran on. But Frieda now understood. An old Indian woman armed with a stick, trotted out of the screen of the trees. She was running more slowly but her face was terrifying. Her small black eyes were red with anger and she waved a long arm at the girl.

Frieda wanted to help, but what could she do? "Jean! Jack!" she called again. She could see that the hunted girl had no chance of escaping. She was nearly dropping with exhaustion. There was no place for her to hide, for the plain stretched on, covered only with grass and low sage brush.

Frieda flung herself valiantly in the path of the Indian woman. She was used to the Indians. Ever since she could remember she had been making trips to their villages, and a number of half-breed Indian boys had worked on their ranch. But the girl had never seen one of them so furiously angry as this old squaw. She was frightened and at the same time wanted to laugh. The woman was so fat and in such a temper, "that she shook when she ran, like a bowlful of jelly," Frieda thought to herself.

The squaw did not lift her beady, black eyes until she was within a few feet of Frieda.

"Ugh," she grunted. "Git out."

She tried to push Frieda away with her stick, but Frieda stretched out both arms and danced up and down in front of the old woman, until she did not know which way to turn.

Old Laska had not run all this distance and gotten out of breath to be stopped by a pale-face chit of a child. She struck Frieda with her staff. Frieda gave a sudden, sharp cry and looked quickly around. She saw that the Indian girl had fallen only a short distance beyond them and was vainly struggling to get on her feet again. Frieda shut her eyes; in another moment she knew that she would hear cruel blows being rained down on the defenseless girl by the furious old woman.

At this moment, a golden brown head, wearing a soft, round Mexican hat, appeared above an opening in the gorge. "Frieda, what's the matter? Didn't we hear you call?" Jack's voice rang out unexpectedly. She jumped lightly from the rocks to the ground and ran toward her sister, guessing at once that the Indian woman had frightened Frieda.

"Stop," Jack ordered imperiously.

The woman hesitated. Something in Jack's commanding tone impressed her and at the same instant Jean crawled slowly into sight above the ravine, swinging a string of trout over her shoulder.

The Giant's Cañon seemed suddenly alive with girls.

Jean gazed at the scene in bewilderment. Jack's hands were clasped behind her and her head was thrown back in a fashion she had when she was angry. Frieda was in tears and between the two sisters stood a fat squaw.

Jack and Jean looked so ready to do battle at a moment's notice, that the Indian's manner changed.

"I want not to hurt the little Missie," she mumbled. "I try to catch my own girl. She run away from her good home. She ver' bad." The old woman's head with its straight black hair, plaited in small braids, bobbed fiercely up and down and she shook her stick threateningly ahead of her.

During the whole scene Jack and Jean had had their backs turned to the hunted girl. Jack was blocking the way of the Indian woman. Only Frieda had been able to see and through her tears she had discovered that the girl, who had been lying helpless on the level ground only a few seconds before, had now vanished completely.

Frieda smiled at Jack's and Jean's puzzled expressions. "Indian girl! What did the old woman mean?" The two girls looked about. There was no one in sight. Evidently the squaw had not intended to hurt Frieda and Jack and Jean were anxious to get rid of her. The next instant the Indian waddled on, though she, too, had lost sight of the fragile figure she was pursuing.

Frieda walked over to the fire and stirred it into a blaze without a word. She winked mysteriously at Jean and Jack, but neither of them had the faintest idea of what she meant.

"Let's fry the fish, before we go down into the cave," Frieda whispered. "I don't want the Indian to come along this way and find out where it is."

Jean and Jack knew that Frieda wished to keep her playhouse a secret from all the world, so they thought nothing of her odd manner.

Frieda was bending over the glowing ashes, humming softly, with her cheeks rosy and her two long blonde plaits fairly trembling with excitement when she noticed the Indian woman coming back toward them. She was alone. Evidently she had gone on for half a mile or more before she decided it was useless to hunt any longer.

Frieda never looked up. The woman sidled up to Jean and Jack with a wheedling expression on her broad, stupid face.

Jack and Jean paid no attention to her. They were making a pile of shiny fish scales into a silver hill at their feet, as it was their part to clean the trout, while Frieda did the cooking.

The Indian eyed the two girls doubtfully. She firmly believed that one of them had helped the truant to escape, yet they had not stirred from before her eyes, in the time when the runaway girl threw her off the scent.

"You know where my girl is, you hide her from me," the woman said accusingly.

Jean glanced at her in a bored fashion. "Will you please go away?" she demanded. "We are busy. We do not want to talk to you. I told you that we had never seen any Indian girl."

Frieda did not move, but her rosy cheeks burned a deeper red from the heat of the flames.

The squaw waddled slowly out of sight. What did it matter if she had not caught Olilie? The girl would soon have to return to the hut. She could not live long alone out on the plains and when she came back she should be taught her place. Olilie was only a squaw in spite of the nonsense she had learned at the white people's school. She should do the work and be the slave of the man chief, like all Indian girls had from the beginning.

"Jean, Jack," Frieda hissed softly. She came over toward her cousin and sister with the fish still sizzling and popping in her frying pan.

"Oh, do be careful, Frieda," Jean begged. Some of the hot fat spluttered out of the pan into Jean's lap and she slid backwards off the rock where she was seated.

But Jack saw that something unusual was the matter with Frieda.

"What in the world has happened to you, child? Your eyes are as big as saucers!" she exclaimed.

Frieda set down her pan and though the Indian woman was now well out of sight, she whispered a few words that made both girls jump to their feet.

"Then there was an Indian girl all the time?" Jean murmured.

Frieda nodded. "We must find her," she argued quietly. "She slipped over the side of the gorge not far from here, when no one was looking at her except me. She can't be very far away for she was too tired to have gone much further."

"All right, Frieda," Jack agreed. "We will look for the Indian princess as soon as we have had our lunch. We must eat the fish first, it is so brown and delicious. Really we will have more strength to search if we have some food," Jack pleaded, seeing Frieda's injured expression.

"She will get away, Jack," Frieda answered. "Then she may be lost on the plains and starve and nobody will ever find her. She was so pretty and so frightened that I am sure you would have been interested if you had only seen her."

Jack heaved a deep sigh. "Come along, Jean," she insisted. "Frieda wants us to look for the will-o-the-wisp, so look we must."

Frieda was not tempestuous like Jack and Jean, but, just the same, like a great many other gentle people, she always had her way. "Little Chinook," Jim used to call her, because "Chinook" is the Indian name for a soft, west wind, that blows so quietly, so persistently, that it carries everything before it. It even wafts all one's troubles away.

Jack, Jean and Frieda crawled down into the great cañon, among the giant rocks, poking their noses into every opening, where they thought it possible that anybody could be concealed. There was no sign of any one, though Frieda called and called, assuring the runaway that the Indian woman had gone back home.

"I am afraid she must have fallen and gotten hurt somehow, Jack," Frieda suggested, when the three girls had explored for half an hour.

Jean turned resolutely upon the two sisters. "I am very sorry, Frieda Ralston," she announced firmly, "but I decline to look for that tiresome girl another minute. I will be fed. I don't see for the life of me, why you are so worried over the fate of an unknown Indian maiden, when your own devoted cousin is perishing before your eyes."

Frieda's cave was soon spread with the luncheon dishes and the girls sat down Turkish fashion, with their long-delayed feast in front of them.

Frieda's face was half buried in a ham sandwich when Jean gave a sudden exclamation of surprise. "Look, girls, there must have been an earthquake or something around here. There is a hole in the rocks back of Frieda's cave, nearly as large as this one. Funny we never noticed it this morning!"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Frieda remarked indifferently. "I was banging away there, trying to make my pantry larger, when a huge stone fell out and rolled into the gorge. Lo and behold, there was another cavern! I found some queer Indian relics in it. Come see."

Frieda led the way over to the new pit and dropped down on her knees in front of it, with Jack and Jean on either side of her. "I was afraid to go inside until you came," she said, "but it is quite empty, – look!"

Frieda's breath gave out. She stared and stared, clutching at her cousin and her sister. The three girls were spellbound!

Gazing at them from out the black darkness, was what Frieda had feared at the first moment of her discovery of the mysterious cavity, a pair of burning, glowing eyes. They might belong to some wild animal, though they were not fierce, only timid and pleading.

The ranch girls were not cowards, but not one of them wished to enter the obscurity of that strange hiding place.

The figure stirred. The girls were now more used to the darkness.

"Why it's the Indian girl!" Frieda cried. "Do come out, please. We won't hurt you and the Indian woman has been gone a long time."

But the girl seemed to be afraid to move. Frieda crawled fearlessly into the hole and gave her little, white hand into the girl's thin, dark one.

As the Indian maid came out into the bright, invigorating air, she tried to stand up, but she swayed in the wind, like a scarlet poppy that is trying to oppose its frail strength to the blast of a storm.

Before Jack and Jean could get to her and in spite of Frieda's efforts, the girl took a step forward, staggered and fell at their feet.

As they picked her up, they discovered that she was flushed with fever. But while Jean washed her face with cool water and Jack held her in her arms, she opened her mournful black eyes. "I am sorry to have troubled you," she said, without a trace of an Indian accent. "I have run away and I

am tired. If you will please give me some water and let me stay here for a few minutes I am sure I will be all right."

But she was not all right, even though the ranch girls persuaded her to eat something, as well as to drink a cup of hot tea. She did not seem to be able to move, but sat perfectly still with her lovely dark head resting between her slender hands. She did not try to explain to them why she had run away from home or when she expected to return.

Jack glanced anxiously upward. They had solemnly promised Jim to be back at the ranch house before dark and the ranch girls could tell the time of day from the position of the sun in the sky. This was one of the things they knew instead of French or drawing. Unless they left the cañon pretty soon, Jack knew they would never get home in time; yet what could they do with Frieda's Indian girl? They could not leave her in the gorge alone, and yet she did not seem to have the strength or the desire to go.

Jack once had seen a copy of a wonderful picture of Ishmael in the desert, whom Abraham had cast out with his mother, Hagar. Hagar had gone to find some fuel and the child is alone. Around him is a great, grey plain, with nothing else alive on it. There was something in this Indian girl's position, her fragile grace, and dreadful loneliness, that recalled this picture to Jacqueline Ralston's mind. She put her arm gently over the other girl's shoulder.

The Indian maid looked up. Perhaps it was the difference in her appearance and in Jacqueline's that made her eyes fill with tears. Jack's proud, high-bred face was softened to pity. Her grey eyes were tender and the usual proud curve to her lips was changed to an expression that she seldom showed to any one but Frieda or Jean since her father's death.

"We must go back to our home now," Jack explained kindly, "but we can't leave you here alone. Tell us why you ran away? Don't you think you could return; or is there anything we could do for you?"

The girl shook her head. She was as tall as Jean, but so thin that she might be only an overgrown child. She seemed very young to Jacqueline; almost as young as Frieda and as much in need of some one to take care of her.

The three ranch girls were gazing intently at the stranger.

She flung her hands up over her face again. "I can't go back, I can't," she insisted. "You are to go away. I am not afraid. Only let me stay in this ravine, until I can find some place that is further away, where no one can find me. I shall not be hungry, I can hunt and fish. Only to-day I am tired." She shook, as though she were having a chill.

Jacqueline dropped down on the ground by her side. Frieda and Jean were trying not to cry.

"You poor little thing, you know we can't leave you here," Jack declared. "Won't you? Can't you?" Jack looked appealingly at Jean and Frieda. She was the oldest of the ranch girls, but she never decided anything without their advice. Both of them nodded. "Don't you think you could come home to the ranch with us, until you feel better and can tell us what troubles you? You are ill now and worn out. Why you might even die if you stayed here alone."

Jack did not wait for an answer. She almost lifted the Indian girl to her feet and brought her out of Frieda's cave. She helped her upon her own pony, and getting up behind Frieda, she led Hotspur and his new rider to the beloved Rainbow Ranch house, whose doors opened to admit not three girls, but four.

CHAPTER IV

THE RESCUE

WHEN Olilie, the Indian girl, came back to consciousness, after being put to bed at the ranch house, three days had passed. She lay between broad sheets smelling of violets and whiter than anything she had ever seen, except the new snow on the prairies.

Over in the corner of a big empty room sat a strange little girl. She was sewing on some small doll clothes and humming softly to herself. Two braids like plaited silk of the corn hung over her face. Olilie did not recall ever having seen her before and had not the faintest idea how she happened to be in this wonderful place, instead of the dirty hut of Laska the Indian woman and her son Josef.

Some one else tiptoed softly into the chamber. Olilie half closed her eyes. She remembered this other face faintly, but where and when had she seen it?

"Hasn't she spoken yet?" a voice asked in a disappointed tone. "I am so sorry, but I simply have to ride over the range with Jim this morning. Some of the cattle keep disappearing. If our patient wants to talk, please don't let her tell you everything before I get back. She must be kept pretty quiet."

Just for a second, Olilie felt that a face bent over hers. But she gave no sign of being awake, although she now knew where she was and how she happened to be there. It had flashed across her memory – her flight, her hiding and the meeting with the ranch girls. She understood that she had been ill but was going to get well again. The hot, uncomfortable feeling had left her head, she had no pain, only she was very weak and she did not think that she could bear to go away from this beautiful place. If only she could have been ill a little longer!

Olilie's wistful, black eyes were wide open, when the bedroom door unclosed the second time. She caught a glimpse of a tall, dark figure and a wave of terror swept over her. Already had Laska come to take her home?

But the woman walked quietly up to the bed, took one of Olilie's thin hands and gazed at it earnestly, turning it over in her own brown palm. She shook her head, smoothed up the covers and nodded to Olilie not to try to talk.

"This girl has been brought up among white people, hasn't she, Frieda?" Aunt Ellen inquired softly.

The blonde plaits moved slightly.

"I am sure I don't know," came a faint voice from between them. "We know nothing about her, except what Jack told you. She did not talk like an Indian, so I suppose she has been to school. Her mother, from whom she was running away, was a full-blooded Indian but she don't look a bit like her." Frieda lowered her voice still further. "Has the Indian woman been here to inquire for her daughter? Jack was afraid she would find out who we were and come over here."

Aunt Ellen gave her head a warning shake and said something to Frieda that the sick girl on the bed could not hear. But Frieda jumped up and her bits of doll dresses scattered about on the floor. "When will Jack and Jim come back?" she demanded quickly. "If we had only known before they went away!"

"Known what?" Olilie asked, as naturally as though she had been taking part in the conversation all the time. "I am quite well now, thank you. If you don't mind, I should like to get out of bed."

Frieda's face turned quite red and her blue eyes were round with surprise. She ran to Olilie and threw her arms around her. "You are well now, aren't you?" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad. Just wait until I run and find Jean. She won't like it unless I tell her at once."

"Child," Aunt Ellen queried, as soon as Frieda went away, "is the Arapaho woman who makes baskets and strings beads at the end of the Wind Creek valley your mother and is the lad Josef her son?"

Olilie nodded. "I think so," she replied. "At least I know of no other woman who is my mother. I have lived with her always."

"But you are not a full-blooded Indian girl," Aunt Ellen argued, "although your hair is so black and straight and your skin is dark. Look," Aunt Ellen picked up the girl's hand again. "See, your finger nails are pink and that is not the case with the red or brown-skinned people." Aunt Ellen opened the girl's gown, and where her skin was untouched by the sun and wind, it was a beautiful olive color.

Aunt Ellen lifted her up, wrapped her in a blue dressing gown and sat her in Frieda's vacant chair. "It's a hard time ahead of you, child," she murmured to herself. "Mixed blood don't never bring happiness, when one of 'em runs dark."

Jean's and Frieda's faces both wore strange expressions when they came back to their guest. But Olilie did not know them well enough to guess that anything unusual was the matter.

She stretched out both hands humbly and took one of Jean's and one of Frieda's in her own. "Won't you let me thank you for keeping me here and let me tell you why I ran away?" she asked gratefully.

Jean shook her head nervously, her brown eyes fastened on the tight-closed door, against which Aunt Ellen stood like a body-guard. "No, please don't try to tell us anything now," Jean begged. "I am sure you are not strong enough. And Jack, she is the oldest of us, she would like you to wait until she comes back this afternoon."

The ranch house was built on one floor. A long hall led straight through the centre of it. There were four bedrooms beside the living-room and Aunt Ellen's room, which opened off the kitchen. Aunt Ellen and her husband, Zack, slept on the place and the old man helped Frieda and Jean with their violet beds. To-day he had ridden over to the nearest village to see about the building of the new greenhouses.

A tramp of heavy feet echoed out in the passageway. Jean kept on talking, as though she wished to drown the sound. The Indian girl did not seem to be disturbed. She was too happy and too weak to care much what was going on outside her room.

"Don't you think I might tell you my name at least?" she begged. "It is Olilie, an Indian name. I don't know just what it means. I – "

There were no locks on the doors inside the big hospitable ranch house. What need was there of locking people either out or in, in this great open western land?

Yet Aunt Ellen kept her hand on the doorknob. "You are not to come in here," she insisted fiercely. "I told you to leave our ranch."

The door burst rudely open. The squat ugly figure of Laska appeared inside the room, followed by a young Indian boy, who looked sheepish and ashamed.

"Ugh," grunted the old squaw. "Did you think we no find you? Come, git up. You go with me." She pushed aside Frieda and Jean, who were trying to guard the sick girl.

Olilie's face was so white that no one could have thought her an Indian. She could not speak, she only clutched at the arms of her chair as though nothing could part her from it.

Jean stamped her foot angrily. "Go out of this house at once," she ordered angrily. "How dare you thrust your way in here? Your daughter is too ill for you to move her. Besides, we are going to keep her here until we find out whether you were cruel to her and why she won't live with you."

"No, no, I shall not live with her again," Olilie burst out passionately. "I do not mind the work or the blows, but I will not be a squaw woman. I will not light the pipe, clean the gun, hew the wood and fetch the water for her son. At the school they have taught me that a girl is a boy's equal. I will not, because I am a girl, be a slave. Please, please go." The Indian girl looked not at her mother, but at Josef, the Indian boy. He kept his head down and mumbled something that only Laska and Olilie could understand.

Laska pointed toward the girl. Then her eyes held her son. "Take her to the tepee of her own people," she commanded. "I know the laws of the white race are many and strange, but they take not the child from her mother, while she is yet young."

Josef went toward Olilie, but Jean's body covered her and he did not dare to thrust the white girl aside.

Frieda flung herself half way out the open window. In front of the ranch was a grove of cottonwood trees, to one side ran a long, winding creek. There was no one in sight, even their watch dog had followed Jack and Jim across the range.

Jean was trying bribery and corruption. She had slipped her hand in her pocket and brought out two bright silver dollars. She held one up before the boy, the other before old Laska. "I will give you these if you will leave the girl with us for a few days longer," she suggested.

The Indian boy did not lift his hand. He was gazing at the figure of his sister in the chair. "I no take her, she sick," he said. "I no want her to work for me. It is Laska who make her. She not like other Indian girl. She different somehow. She read books. She talk like teachers at school."

Laska seized the boy by the arm and shook him roughly. "You no talk foolish," she declared. "You bring girl home. We take not white money. Always you try to make the Indian sell big things for little."

"Oh, if somebody would only come to help us," Frieda thought despairingly. She saw that Josef had picked Olilie up in his arms. She felt like Sister Anne in the dreadful story of Bluebeard. If she could see a little cloud of dust arising somewhere down the long road that led through the trees from the far trail of the plains, she knew that help would come to them! If only she could catch sight of one of the cowboys returning to the ranch!

Frieda did spy a little dust along the trail on the upper side of the creek. She seized a white scarf from the table near by and waved it frantically out the window. "Help! Help! Jim! Jack! Somebody come quick! We need you!" she cried.

The Indian boy and woman waited, puzzled and alarmed by the noise that Frieda was making.

Frieda saw a rider catch sight of her signal, plunge down the trail and through the muddy creek, straight to the ranch house door. She knew that it was some one whom she had never seen before in her life, but it did not make the least difference to her.

"Won't you come in here?" she begged. "The door is open. There are some Indians trying to steal a girl away – " Frieda drew her blonde head back inside the window, just in time to see the stranger stalk into their room.

"Put the girl down," he commanded Josef in a tone of authority. Nothing loath, the Indian boy returned Olilie to her chair. The newcomer then spoke to the surly Indian woman. "You and your son leave this ranch at once. It was fortunate that I learned that you were coming here this morning. I rode over just in time."

The young man had brown hair and eyes. His face was quite pale. He did not look in the least strong, but there was something in his quiet manner that showed he was accustomed to being obeyed.

"We come back to get my girl, when she well," the Indian woman threatened, as the door closed behind her.

There was an awkward silence when the Indians had gone. The young fellow immediately lost his grown-up manner and seemed very uncertain and shy. He colored and held his new cowboy hat in his hands.

"I am awfully glad I turned up in time to help you drive those people out of the house," he declared. "I happened to hear that they were coming over to your ranch to take the Indian girl away from you to-day. If there had been anybody to send over to tell you, I wouldn't have come myself," he ended. "Will you please tell the older Miss Ralston this. I won't intrude on you any longer. Good-bye."

Jean laughed and held out her hand. "Please don't go quite yet," she said. "At least stay until we thank you. I know who you are and Jack will be just as grateful to you as Frieda and I are. You must

not think she is always so unfriendly. Aren't you Frank Kent, the English fellow who is the guest of the Nortons? Jack told us about you But you see the Nortons are – "

"Yes, I understand," Frank Kent answered quickly. "At least I have been told what the trouble is between you, but I hope it may be a mistake. I can't believe Mr. Norton and Dan – " Frank stopped. Jean's and Frieda's cheeks were crimson. He realized that he had no right to talk about their private affairs. Aunt Ellen was looking at him suspiciously.

Frank Kent bowed. "I think I had better go," he announced. Just as he started out of the room, Jacqueline Ralston marched into it. Every bit of color left her face and she stared at him in blank astonishment.

CHAPTER V

SEEKING ADVICE

JEAN giggled. Frank Kent and Jack were so funny. They both turned and glared at her with reproachful eyes.

"I hope you don't think I have intruded," Frank protested hotly.

"Oh, no, certainly not," Jack answered with frozen politeness. "That is, at least, – I don't understand."

The scene was enough to have bewildered almost anybody. The quiet room where Jack had left the Indian girl half unconscious and guarded only by tranquil Frieda, was now in a state of suppressed excitement.

Olilie lay back in her chair with the same expression on her face that she had worn on the day she was discovered. Aunt Ellen had her eyes rolled back so that only the whites were showing. Frieda was bouncing up and down, she was so agitated, and Jean looked as though she had been through the war. And in the midst of the family group stood the strange young fellow whom Jacqueline had met on the Norton ranch and most cordially requested not to make their acquaintance.

Frieda rushed into the breach. "Oh, Jack, the most awfulest thing almost happened!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands and forgetting her grammar in her hurry. "That dreadful old Indian woman and a boy came here and tried to drag Olilie away. I hollered and hollered out the window for Jim or you or anybody to come drive them off, and he came," Frieda bobbed her head at their visitor.

She was so excited that Jean and Jack laughed. But Frank Kent did not smile the least bit. You see he was English and English people don't see jokes quickly. Besides, he was angry at Jack's first suspicion of him. He guessed by her high and mighty manner that she thought he had come to the ranch against her wishes.

He looked so stiff and unfriendly that Jacqueline did not know what to say first.

"Your cousin will tell you how I happened to be near," he said icily, backing out the door.

Jack rushed after him, nearly tripping over the spurs on her riding boots. "Please don't go quite yet," she begged. "At least let me thank you for whatever you did." Jack had a way of smiling suddenly that changed her whole expression, and made people forgive her almost anything. "Won't you please come into the living-room and one of you tell me calmly exactly what has happened, or I shall simply die of curiosity."

Jack led the way into the big, sunlit room, followed by Jean and more slowly by Frank Kent.

"O! dear here's a kettle of fish," Jack sighed, when Jean finished her story. She didn't think of her slang till she saw Frank's puzzled expression, then she blushed. "I am afraid we can't keep this little Indian girl at the ranch, Jean, if her own people will have her," Jack went on. "You see I had a long talk with Jim this morning. He says we must not make the Indians in the neighborhood angry with us. They will say we kidnapped the girl, or something horrid. And we have troubles enough without that." A second after Jack was ashamed of having spoken of their difficulties before a perfect stranger.

To tell the truth affairs were not going very well at Rainbow Ranch. The big creek which ran along through Rainbow Valley for nearly a mile and supplied their ranch with water was almost dry in the middle of October. There might soon be nothing for the cattle and horses to drink until the winter snows fell. Jim had confided to Jack that he suspected some one was draining their creek by digging a channel for the water lower down the valley. He could not find out, but if it were true, it meant ruin for the ranch girls! There was another, even more serious difficulty, that might be in store for them, but of this the girls would not speak.

"Has anything happened, Jack?" Jean asked hurriedly.

Jack shook her head. "Nothing unusual," she replied. "Only I shall feel dreadfully sorry if we have to send the Indian girl back to her people. You and Frieda must not think I am hateful if we find we have to."

Frank Kent forgot his English shyness.

"You girls are just bully to be fighting this strange girl's battles," he broke in. "I wonder if you wouldn't let me help you! I believe there is something queer about her parentage anyhow. Even an English duffer like I am, can tell by looking at her that she isn't a full-blooded Indian."

Frank's face turned red as a beet and he stammered hurriedly. "Of course if you let me help you in this, we need not know each other afterwards."

Jacqueline was as fiery red as her guest and Jean giggled again.

"We couldn't be as horrid as all that," Jack declared in a straightforward fashion, exactly like another boy would have done. "We would not make use of you and then cut you afterwards. And please don't be angry with us, if I tell you again, that we simply can't be anything but just acquaintances with the Nortons' relatives or friends. You understand, don't you?" Jack held out her hand as though she did not know just what to do or say. Jean wouldn't utter a word to help her.

Frank Kent shook Jack's hand warmly and this time he did not seem offended.

"All right," he answered sadly. "But if there is ever anything I can do to help you, I am going to do it, whether we are friends or not."

And though Jack and Jean did not see how this strange fellow could ever be mixed up in their affairs, they were comforted somehow by what he promised.

"I am going over to Mrs. Simpson's this afternoon, Jean," Jack announced a few minutes after their guest's departure. "I know people say that we ranch girls never take anybody's advice, but just the same I am going to ask Mrs. Simpson what we had better do about this Indian child. Will you come along?"

Mrs. Simpson, the ranch girls' most intimate friend, and her husband were the wealthiest ranch owners in that part of Wyoming. She was a typical Western woman, with a big heart and a sharp tongue. She used to lecture the girls and at the same time was awfully proud of their courage and independence.

"I'm game, Jack," Jean agreed, "but I haven't any proper riding habit. I wouldn't mind a bit if that wretched niece of Mrs. Simpson's wasn't there. I wish you had seen how she stared at me the other day when I called Mrs. Simpson, Aunt Sallie, as though we hadn't called her Aunt all the days of our youth. Do you think Aunt Ellen could mend this for me before we go?" Jean held up a green broadcloth riding habit very much the worse for wear, with a long ugly rent in it.

"You need a new habit dreadfully, Jean," Jack declared. "I am afraid we haven't any really proper clothes. The worst of it is, I don't know just what we ought to have or where to get them. I wonder if we are too much like boys?"

"What's the odds, Jack, so long as we are happy," Jean sang out cheerfully. "Besides, Jim says that money hasn't been flowing in to Rainbow Ranch any too plentifully lately. It takes pretty much all he can get hold of to run things, so I thought I wouldn't trouble about another habit. But the idea of that fashionable Miss Laura Post, from Miss Beatty's school, New York City, staring at me with her china-blue eyes does rattle me. She and her mother treat us exactly as though we were a Wild West show. Besides it is my unpleasant impression that I had this same tear in my skirt when I rode over to Aunt Sallie's the last time."

"Jean, you are lazy; why didn't you mend it yourself?" Jack scolded. "You know Aunt Ellen can't sew a bit. Isn't it dreadful that little Frieda is the only one of us who ever touches a needle and she has no one to show her how to sew, poor baby. Come along, I'll see what I can do with your old skirt. Let's go in the Indian girl's room while I do my worst, best, I mean."

Olilie had very little to tell her rescuers of her history. She could not explain why Laska wanted her to live with her, because she had always hated her and been unkind to her. Olilie had but one

friend, a teacher in the Indian school in the Indian village in Wind Creek valley. The sick girl did not talk so freely before Jack, as she seemed a little afraid of her, but she begged the girls to find her a home at one of the ranch houses where she might earn her living, for she declared that she would never go back to the "Crow's nest," as old Laska's hut was called.

Jack and Jean galloped swiftly over the ten miles that lay between their ranch and the Simpson's. No one could grow tired, no matter how long the ride, in this glorious October air in Wyoming, as clear and sparkling as crystal. The girls forgot their difficulties, also they quite failed to remember the languid young lady from the East who was Mrs. Simpson's adored niece.

A mile from the Simpson ranch house, Jean stood up in her saddle and waved a challenge to Jack. "Beat you to the veranda!" she called back, loosening the reins on her pony's neck and giving him a light cut with her quirt.

Jean was off like a shot before Jack could get a start. She reached the porch several yards ahead of her cousin. But Jack was determined not to be outclassed as a rider. Just in front of the house was a row of hitching posts about five feet high. "Clear the track," Jack shouted.

She thrust her feet forward in their long, loose Western stirrups, threw her body back and her pony rose in the air like a bird, straight over the posts, and she landed at Jean's side with a small Indian war-whoop of triumph.

A languid clap of hands from the front porch and a horrified exclamation, made Jean's cheeks burn and Jack's grey eyes kindle.

"Buffalo Bill at his best! I congratulate you," a soft voice exclaimed. "I wish you had more of an audience."

Jack laughed lightly. "Oh, we can do ever so much better than that, when we try, Miss Post; perhaps if you stay out West for a while we may show you how to ride. We would be glad to do anything for Aunt Sallie's guest." Jack's tones were sweetly innocent, but Jean snickered.

Laura Post bit her lips angrily. "Teach Laura to ride?" her mother protested indignantly. "Why my daughter has been trained in the best New York riding academies. I am afraid they would not care for your Western riding in Central Park."

Jean did not see how in the world Jacqueline could appear so undisturbed by the vision of elegance which confronted them. Laura was dressed in a soft cream flannel skirt and coat with a pale blue blouse and wore a big felt hat with a blue pompon on it, to shade her delicate peaches-and-cream skin. Jean felt Laura's eyes fasten on the long rent in her riding skirt, which Jack had mended, with such an expression of superior amusement that she wanted to pull her hair or to scratch her, or to do something else that was violent.

Laura Post was a very pretty girl, all daintiness and fluffiness. She had very light curly hair and blue eyes, and she looked as though she had never done anything for herself in her life. Her mother was just like her, only a more faded and dressed-up edition. Jean did not know why they both made her feel so awkward, as though it were dreadfully inelegant to have one's skin tanned and hair blown by a long, glorious ride across the open country.

Mrs. Post and Laura would not go when Mrs. Simpson came out and sat down by the ranch girls, holding Jean's hand in one of hers and Jack's in the other, and wondering why Jean, who was her favorite of the three ranch girls, looked so hot and uncomfortable.

"The first thing for you to do, Jacqueline Ralston, is to bring this Indian girl over here for me to take a look at her," Mrs. Simpson announced at the end of Jack's story. "I was going to send a note over to you this very afternoon. I want you children to come over to spend a few days with us. I would like Laura to have some real Western parties and good times, and I think the best way is to have you stay right here with us. There isn't any other way to manage with you young people so far from one another, so bring your Indian girl to our house party. I confess I am curious to see her."

"You are awfully good, Mrs. Simpson, but I am afraid we can't come," Jack answered gratefully. In spite of the fact that Laura and her mother were both staring at her, Jack went on: "You see we

have not the right clothes to stay on a house party. I am afraid we don't even understand just what we ought to have. Father did not know much about girls' things and we have never had any one else to tell us, and besides I don't think your niece would like to have an Indian girl for her guest. Olilie is awfully shy, and I don't expect she would know how to behave."

Mrs. Simpson gave Jack a little shake.

"Nonsense, Jacqueline Ralston, what perfect foolishness you are talking! When did you begin to worry about clothes? You know that you and Jean are belles wherever you are. As for Laura, I am sure she will be glad enough to have the Indian girl and I'll look after the child. I want to study her. If she is a regular Indian, she would probably be hard to manage."

Laura shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Oh yes, please do bring the Indian maiden with you," she remarked with an innocent, babyish expression that fooled her Aunt but not her visitors. "I am sure the Indian can't be any queerer than the other people one meets out West."

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