

Emerson Alice B.

Ruth Fielding at Silver Ranch; Schoolgirls Among Cowboys



Alice Emerson

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Schoolgirls Among Cowboys**

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Emerson Alice B. Ruth Fielding at Silver Ranch / Schoolgirls Among Cowboys

CHAPTER I – “OLD TROUBLE-MAKER”

Where the Silver Ranch trail branches from the state road leading down into Bullhide, there stretch a rambling series of sheds, or “shacks,” given up to the uses of a general store and provision emporium; beside it is the schoolhouse. This place on the forked trails is called “The Crossing,” and it was the only place nearer than the town of Bullhide where the scattered population of this part of Montana could get any supplies.

One of Old Bill Hicks’ herds was being grazed on that piece of rolling country, lying in the foothills, right behind the Crossing, and two of his cow punchers had ridden in for tobacco. Being within sight of rows upon rows of tinned preserves (the greatest luxury extant to the cowboy mind), and their credit being good with Lem Dickson, who kept the store, the two cattle herders – while their cayuses stood with drooping heads, their bridle-reins on the road before them – each secured a can of peaches, and sitting cross-legged on the porch before the store, opened the cans with their knives and luxuriated in the contents.

“Old man’s nigh due, ain’t he?” asked Lem, the storekeeper, lowering himself into a comfortable armchair that he kept for his own particular use on the porch.

“Gittin’ to Bullhide this mawnin’,” drawled one of the cowboys. “An’ he’s got what he went for, too.”

“Bill Hicks most usually does git what he goes after, don’t he?” retorted the storekeeper.

The other puncher chuckled. “This time Old Bill come near goin’ out after *rabbit* an’ only bringin’ back the *hair*,” he said. “Jane Ann is just as much of a Hicks as Bill himself – you take it from me. She made her bargain b’fore Old Bill got her headed back to the ranch, I reckon. Thar’s goin’ to be more newfangled notions at Silver Ranch from now on than you kin shake a stick at. You hear me!”

“Old Bill can stand scattering a little money around as well as any man in this State,” Lem said, ruminatively. “He’s made it; he’s saved it; now he might’s well I’arn to spend some of it.”

“And he’s begun. Jane Ann’s begun for him, leastways,” said one of the cowboys. “D’ye know what Mulvey brought out on his wagon last Sat’day?”

“I knowed he looked like pitchers of ‘movin’ day’ in New York City, or Chicago, when he passed along yere,” grunted the storekeeper. “Eight head o’ mules he was drivin’.”

“He sure was,” agreed the cow puncher. “There was all sorts of trucks and gew-gaws. But the main thing was a pinanner.”

“A piano?”

“That’s what I said. And that half-Injun, Jib Pottoway, says he kin play on the thing. But it ain’t to be unboxed till the boss and Jane Ann comes.”

“And they’ll be gittin’ along yere some time to-day,” said the other cowboy, throwing his empty tin away. “And when they come, Lem, they’re sure goin’ to surprise yuh.”

“What with?”

“With what they sail by yere in,” drawled the puncher.

“Huh? what’s eatin’ on you, Bud? Old Bill ain’t bought an airship, has he?”

“Mighty nigh as bad,” chuckled the other. “He’s bought Doosenberry’s big automobile, I understand, and Jane Ann’s brought a bunch of folks with her that she met down East, and they’re just about goin’ to tear the vitals out o’ Silver Ranch – now you hear me!”

“A steam wagon over these trails!” grunted the storekeeper. “Waal!”

“And wait till Old Bill sees a bunch of his steers go up in the air when they sets eyes on the choo-choo wagon,” chuckled Bud. “That’ll about finish the automobile business, I bet yuh!”

“Come on, Bud!” shouted his mate, already astride his pony.

The two cowboys were off and lashing their ponies to a sharp run in half a minute. Scarcely had they disappeared behind a grove of scrub trees on the wind-swept ridge beyond the store when the honk of an automobile horn startled the slow-motoned storekeeper out of his chair.

A balloon of dust appeared far down the trail. Out of this there shot the long hood of a heavy touring car, which came chugging up the rise making almost as much noise as a steam roller. Lem Dickson shuffled to the door of the store and stuck his head within.

“Sally!” he bawled. “Sally!”

“Yes, Paw,” replied a sweet, if rather shrill, voice from the open stairway that led to the upper chamber of the store-building.

“Here comes somebody I reckon you’ll want see,” bawled the old man.

There was a light step on the stair; but it halted on the last tread and a lithe, red-haired, peachy complexioned girl looked into the big room.

“Well, now, Paw,” she said, sharply. “You ain’t got me down yere for that bashful Ike Stedman, have you? For if he’s come prognosticating around yere again I declare I’ll bounce a bucket off his head. He’s the biggest gump!”

“Come on yere, gal!” snapped her father. “I ain’t said nothin’ about Ike. This yere’s Bill Hicks an’ all his crowd comin’ up from Bullhide in a blamed ol’ steam waggin.”

Sally ran out through the store and reached the piazza just as the snorting automobile came near and slowed down. A lithe, handsome, dark girl was at the wheel; beside her was a very pretty, plump girl with rosy cheeks and the brightest eyes imaginable; the third person crowded into the front seat was a youth who looked so much like the girl who was running the machine that they might have changed clothes and nobody would have been the wiser – save that Tom Cameron’s hair was short and his twin sister, Helen’s, was long and curly. The girl between the twins was Ruth Fielding.

In the big tonneau of the car was a great, tall, bony man with an enormous “walrus” mustache and a very red face; beside him sat a rather freckled girl with snapping black eyes, who wore very splendid clothes as though she was not used to them. With this couple were a big, blond boy and three girls – one of them so stout that she crowded her companions on the seat into their individual corners, and packed them in there somewhat after the nature of sardines in a can.

“Hello, Sally!” cried the girl in the very fine garments, stretching her hand out to greet the storekeeper’s daughter as the automobile came to a stop.

“Hi, Lem!” bawled the man with the huge mustache. “Is Silver Ranch on the map yet, or have them punchers o’ mine torn the face of Nater all to shreds an’ only left me some o’ the pieces?”

“I dunno ‘bout that, Bill,” drawled the fat storekeeper, shuffling down the steps in his list slippers, and finally reached and shaking the hand of Mr. William Hicks, owner of Silver Ranch. “But when some of your cows set their eyes on this contraption they’re goin’ to kick holes in the air – an’ that’s sartain!”

“The cows will have to get used to seeing this automobile, Lem Dickson,” snapped the ranchman’s niece, who had been speaking with Sally. “For uncle’s bought it and it beats riding a cayuse, I tell you!”

“By gollies!” grunted Bill Hicks, “it bucks wuss’n any critter I ever was astride of.” But he spoke softly, and nobody but the storekeeper noticed what he said.

“Mean to say you’ve bought this old chuck-waggin from Doosenberry?” demanded the storekeeper.

“Uh-huh,” nodded Mr. Hicks.

“Wal, you’re gittin’ foolish-like in your old age, Bill,” declared his friend.

“No I ain’t; I’m gittin’ wise,” retorted the ranchman, with a wide grin.

“How’s that?”

“I’m l’arnin’ how to git along with Jane Ann,” declared Mr. Hicks, with a delighted chortle, and pinching the freckled girl beside him.

“Ouch!” exclaimed his niece. “What’s the matter, Uncle Bill?”

“He says he’s bought this contraption to please you, Jane Ann,” said the storekeeper. “But what’ll Old Trouble-Maker do when he sees it – heh?”

“Gee!” ejaculated the ranchman. “I never thought o’ that steer.”

“I reckon Old Trouble-Maker will have to stand for it,” scoffed the ranchman’s niece, tossing her head. “Now, Sally, you ride out and see us. These girls from down East are all right. And we’re going to have heaps of fun at Silver Ranch after this.”

Helen Cameron touched a lever and the big car shot ahead again.

“She’s a mighty white girl, that Sally Dickson,” declared Jane Ann Hicks (who hated her name and preferred to be called “Nita”). “She’s taught school here at the Crossing for one term, too. And she’s sweet in spite of her peppery temper – ”

“What could you expect?” demanded the stout girl, smiling all over her face as she looked back at the red-haired girl at the store. “She has a more crimson topknot than the Fox here – ”

There came a sudden scream from the front seat of the automobile. The car, under Helen Cameron’s skillful manipulation, had turned the bend in the trail and the chapparel instantly hid the store and the houses at the Crossing. Right ahead of them was a rolling prairie, several miles in extent. And up the rise toward the trail was coming, in much dust, a bunch of cattle, with two or three punchers riding behind and urging the herd to better pasture.

“Oh! see all those steers,” cried Ruth Fielding. “Do you own *all* of them, Mr. Hicks?”

“I reckon they got my brand on ’em, Miss,” replied the ranchman. “But that’s only a leetle bunch – can’t be more’n five hundred – coming up yere. I reckon, Miss Helen, that we’d better pull up some yere. If them cows sees us – ”

“See there! see there!” cried the stout girl in the back seat.

As she spoke in such excitement, Helen switched off the power and braked the car. Out of the chapparel burst, with a frantic bellow, a huge black and white steer – wide horned, ferocious of aspect – quite evidently “on the rampage.” The noise of the passing car had brought him out of concealment. He plunged into the trail not ten yards behind the slowing car.

“Goodness me!” shouted the big boy who sat beside Bill Hicks and his niece. “What kind of a beast is that? It’s almost as big as an elephant!”

“Oh!” cried the girl called “The Fox.” “That surely isn’t the kind of cattle you have here, is it? He looks more like a buffalo. See! he’s coming after us!”

The black and white steer *did* look as savage as any old buffalo bull and, emitting a bellow, shook his head at the automobile and began to cast the dust up along his flanks with his sharp hoofs. He was indeed of a terrifying appearance.

“It’s Old Trouble-Maker!” cried Jane Ann Hicks.

“He looks just as though his name fitted him,” said Tom Cameron, who had sprung up to look back at the steer.

At that moment the steer lowered his head and charged for the auto. The girls shrieked, and Tom cried:

“Go ahead, Nell! let’s leave that beast behind.”

Before his sister could put on speed again, however, the big boy, who was Bob Steele, sang out:

“If you go on you’ll stampede that herd of cattle – won’t she, Mr. Hicks? Why, we’re between two fires, that’s what we are!”

“And they’re both going to be hot,” groaned Tom. “Why, that Old Trouble-Maker will climb right into this car in half a minute!”

CHAPTER II – BASHFUL IKE

The situation in the big automobile was quite as serious as Tom and Bob believed, and there was very good reason for the girls to express their fright in a chorus of screams. But Ruth Fielding, and her chum, Helen, on the front seat, controlled themselves better than the other Eastern girls; Jane Ann Hicks never said a word, but her uncle looked quite as startled as his guests.

“I am sartainly graveled!” muttered the ranchman, staring all around for some means of saving the party from disaster. “Hi gollies! if I only had a leetle old rope now – ”

But he had no lariat, and roping a mad steer from an automobile would certainly have been a new experience for Bill Hicks. He had brought the party of young folk out to Montana just to give his niece pleasure, and having got Ruth Fielding and her friends here, he did not want to spoil their visit by any bad accident. These young folk had been what Bill Hicks called “mighty clever” to his Jane Ann when she had been castaway in the East, and he had promised their friends to look out for them all and send them home in time for school in the Fall with the proper complement of legs and arms, and otherwise whole as to their physical being.

Ruth Fielding, after the death of her parents when she was quite a young girl, had left Darrowtown and all her old friends and home associations, to live with her mother’s uncle, at the Red Mill, on the Lumano River, near Cheslow in York State. Her coming to Uncle Jabez Potter’s, and her early adventures about the mill, were related in the first volume of this series, entitled “Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; Or, Jasper Parloe’s Secret.”

Ruth had found Uncle Jabez very hard to get along with, for he was a miser and his kinder nature had been crusted over by years of hoarding and selfishness; but through a happy turn of circumstances Ruth was enabled to get at the heart of her crotchety old uncle, and when Ruth’s dearest friend, Helen Cameron, planned to go to boarding school, Uncle Jabez was won over to the scheme of sending the girl with her. The fun and work of that first term at school is related in the second volume of the series, entitled “Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall; Or, Solving the Campus Mystery.”

For the mid-winter vacation Ruth accompanied Helen and other school friends to Mr. Cameron’s hunting camp, up toward the Canadian line. In “Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp; Or, Lost in the Backwoods,” the girls and some of their boy friends experience many adventures and endure some hardship and peril while lost in the snow-shrouded forest.

One of Ruth’s chums, Jennie Stone, otherwise known as “Heavy,” invited her to Lighthouse Point, with a party of young people, for part of the summer vacation; and although Uncle Jabez was in much trouble over his investment in the Tintacker Mine, which appeared to be a swindle, the old miller had allowed Ruth to accompany her friends to the seashore because he had already promised her the outing. In “Ruth Fielding at Lighthouse Point; Or, Nita, the Girl Castaway,” is narrated all the fun and delightful experiences the girl of the Red Mill and her friends had at the seaside; including the saving of a girl from the wreck of a lumber schooner, a miss who afterward proved to be Jane Ann Hicks, the niece of a very wealthy Montana ranch owner. The girl had run away from the ranch and from her guardian and calls herself Nita, “because the girl in the paper-covered novel was called Nita.”

That was just the sort of a romantic, foolish girl Jane Ann Hicks was; but she learned a few things and was glad to see her old uncle, rough as he was, when he came hunting for her. And Mr. Bill Hicks had learned a few things, too. He had never seen people spend money before he came East, and he had not understood Jane Ann’s longing for the delicate and beautiful things in life. He saw, too, that a girl could not be properly brought up on a cattle ranch, with nothing but cow punchers and Indians and Mexican women about, and Mr. Hicks had determined to give his niece “a right-down good time,” as he expressed it.

It was to give Jane Ann pleasure, and because of the kindness of Ruth and her friends to his niece, that Mr. Bill Hicks had arranged this trip West for the entire party, on a visit to Silver Ranch.

But the old gentleman did not want their introduction to the ranch to be a tragedy. And with the herd of half-wild cattle ahead, and Old Trouble-Maker thundering along the trail behind the motor car, it did look as though the introduction of the visitors to the ranch was bound to be a strenuous one.

“Do go ahead, Helen!” cried Madge Steele, Bob’s elder sister, from the back seat of the tonneau. “Why, that beast may climb right in here!”

Helen started the car again; but at that her brother and Ruth cried out in chorus:

“Don’t run us into the herd, Helen!”

“What under the sun shall I *do*?” cried Miss Cameron. “I can’t please you all, that’s sure.”

“Oh, see that beast!” shrieked The Fox, who was likewise on the back seat. “I want to get out!”

“Then the brute will catch you, sure,” said Bob Steele.

“Sit still!” commanded Mr. Hicks. “And stop the car, Miss! Better to be bunted by Old Trouble-Maker than set that whole bunch off on a stampede.”

“Mercy me!” cried Mary Cox. “I should think it would be better to frighten those cows in front than to be horned to death by this big beast from the rear.”

“Sit still,” said Jane Ann, grimly. “We won’t likely be hurt by either.”

Old Trouble-Maker did look awfully savage. Bellowing with rage, he thundered along after the car. Helen had again brought the automobile to a stop, this time at Bill Hicks’ command. The next moment the girls screamed in chorus, for the car jarred all over.

Crash went a rear lamp. About half a yard of paint and varnish was scraped off, and the car itself was actually driven forward, despite the brake being set, by the sheer weight of the steer.

“If we could git the old cart turned around and headed the other way!” groaned the ranchman.

“I believe I can turn it, Mr. Hicks,” cried Helen, excitedly.

But just then the steer, that had fallen back a few yards, charged again. “Bang!” It sounded like the exploding of a small cannon. Old Trouble-Maker had punctured a rear tire, and the car slumped down on that side. Helen couldn’t start it now, for the trail was too rough to travel with a flattened tire.

The black and white steer, with another furious bellow, wheeled around the back of the car and then came full tilt for the side. Heavy screamed at the top of her voice:

“Oh, take me home! I never did want to go to a dairy farm. *I just abominate cows!*”

But the crowd could not laugh. Huddled together in the tonneau, it looked as though Old Trouble-Maker would certainly muss them up a whole lot! Jane Ann and her uncle hopped out on the other side and called the others to follow. At that moment, with a whoop and a drumming of hoofs, a calico cow pony came racing along the trail toward the stalled car. On the back of this flying pony was a lanky, dust-covered cowboy, swinging a lariat in approved fashion.

“Hold steady, boss!” yelled this apparition, and then let the coils of the rope whistle through the air. The hair line uncoiled like a writhing serpent and dropped over the wide-spread horns of Old Trouble-Maker. Then the calico pony came to an abrupt halt, sliding along the ground with all four feet braced.

“Zip!” the noose tightened and the steer brought up with a suddenness that threatened to dislocate his neck. Down the beast fell, roaring a different tune. Old Trouble-Maker almost turned a somersault, while Jane Ann, dancing in delight, caught off her very modern and high-priced hat and swung it in the air.

“Hurrah for Bashful Ike!” she shouted. “He’s the best little old boy with the rope that ever worked for the Silver outfit. Hurrah!”

CHAPTER III – IN WHICH THINGS HAPPEN

The cow puncher who had rescued them was a fine looking, bronzed fellow, with heavy sheepskin chaps on his legs, a shirt open at the throat, his sleeves rolled up displaying muscular arms, and twinkling eyes under the flapping brim of his great hat. While he “snubbed” the big steer to his knees again as the bellowing creature tried to rise, he looked down with a broad smile upon the sparkling face of the Western girl.

“Why, bless yo’ heart, honey,” he said, in a soft, Southern droll, “if you want me to, I’ll jest natwcher’ly cinch my saddle on Old Trouble-Maker an’ ride him home for yo’. It certainly is a cure for sore eyes to see you again.”

“And I’m glad to see you, Ike. And these are all my friends. I’ll introduce you and the boys to them proper at the ranch,” cried the Western girl.

“Git that bellowin’ critter away from yere, Ike,” commanded Mr. Hicks. “I ’low the next bunch that goes to the railroad will include that black and white abomination.”

“Jest so, Boss,” drawled his foreman. “I been figurin’ Old Trouble-Maker better be in the can than on the hoof. He’s made a plumb nuisance of himself. Yo’ goin’ on, Boss? Bud and Jimsey’s got that bunch out o’ the way of your smoke-waggin.”

“We’ve got to shift tires, Mr. Hicks,” said Tom Cameron, who, with his chum, Bob Steele, was already jacking up the rear axle. “That steer ripped a long hole in this tire something awful.”

Bashful Ike – who didn’t seem at all bashful when it came to handling the big black and white steer – suddenly let that bellowing beast get upon his four feet. Then he swooped down upon the steer, gathering up the coils of his rope as he rode, twitched the noose off the wide horns, and leaning quickly from his saddle grabbed the “brush” of the steer’s tail and gave that appendage a mighty twist.

Bellowing again, but for an entirely different reason, the steer started off after the bunch of cattle now disappearing in the dust-cloud, and the foreman spurred his calico pony after Old Trouble-Maker, yelling at the top of his voice at every jump of his pony:

“Ye-ow! ye-ow! ye-ow!”

“I declare I’m glad to see those cattle out of the way,” said Helen Cameron, with a sigh.

“I believe you,” returned Ruth, who was still beside her on the front seat. “I just didn’t realize before that cattle on the range are a whole lot different from a herd of cows in an eastern pasture.”

Tom and Bob got the new tire in place and pumped up, and then the automobile started again for the ranch house. Jane Ann was quite excited over her home-coming; anybody could see that with half an eye. She clung to her uncle’s hand and looked at him now and again as though to assure the old fellow that she really was glad to be home.

And Bill Hicks himself began to “fill into the picture” now that he was back in Montana. The young folks had seen many men like him since leaving Denver.

“Why, he’s just an old dear!” whispered Ruth to Helen, as the latter steered the car over the rough trail. “And just as kind and considerate as he can be. It’s natural chivalry these Western men show to women, isn’t it?”

“He’s nice,” agreed Helen. “But he never ought to have named his niece ‘Jane Ann.’ That was a mean trick to play on a defenseless baby.”

“He’s going to make it up to her now,” chuckled Tom, who heard this, being on the front seat with the two chums. “I know the ‘pinanner’ has gone on ahead, as he promised Nita. And carpets and curtains, too. I reckon this ranch we’re coming to is going to ‘blossom like the rose.’”

When they came in sight of Silver Ranch, just before evening, the guests from the East were bound to express their appreciation of the beauty of its surroundings. It was a low, broad verandahed house, covering a good deal of ground, with cookhouses and other outbuildings in the rear, and a big corral for the stock, and bunkhouses for the men. It lay in a beautiful little valley – a “coulie,” Jane

Ann, or Nita, called it – with green, sloping sides to the saucer-like depression, and a pretty, winding stream breaking out of the hollow at one side.

“I should think it would be damp down there,” said Madge Steele, to the ranchman. “Why didn’t you build your house on a knoll?”

“Them sidehills sort o’ break the winds, Miss,” explained Mr. Hicks. “We sometimes git some wind out yere – yes, ma’am! You’d be surprised.”

They rode down to the big house and found a wide-smiling Mexican woman waiting for them on the porch. Jane Ann greeted her as “Maria” and Hicks sent her back to the kitchen to hurry supper. But everybody about the place, even Maria’s husband, the “horse wrangler,” a sleek looking Mexican with rings in his ears and a broken nose, found a chance to welcome the returned runaway.

“My! it’s great to be a female prodigal, isn’t it?” demanded Heavy, poking Jane Ann with her forefinger. “Aren’t you glad you ran away East?”

The Western girl took it good-naturedly. “I’m glad I came back, anyway,” she acknowledged. “And I’m awfully glad Ruth and Helen and you-all could come with me.”

“Well, we’re here, and I’m delighted,” cried Helen Cameron. “But I didn’t really expect either Ruth or Mary Cox would come. Mary’s got such trouble at home; and Ruth’s uncle is just as cross as he can be.”

Ruth heard that and shook her head, for all the girls were sitting on the wide veranda of the ranch-house after removing the traces of travel and getting into the comfortable “hack-about” frocks that Jane Ann had advised them to bring with them.

“Uncle Jabez is in great trouble, sure,” Ruth said. “Losing money – and a whole lot of money, too, as he has – is a serious matter. Uncle Jabez could lose lots of things better than he can money, for he loves money so!”

“My gracious, Ruth,” exclaimed Helen, with a sniff, “you’d find an excuse for a dog’s running mad, I do believe! You are bound to see the best side of anybody.”

“What you say isn’t very clear,” laughed her chum, good-humoredly; “but I guess I know what you mean, and thank you for the compliment. I only hope that uncle’s investment in the Tintacker Mine will come out all right in the end.”

Mary Cox, “The Fox,” sat next to Ruth, and at this she turned to listen to the chums. Her sharp eyes sparkled and her face suddenly grew pale, as Ruth went on:

“I expect Uncle Jabez allowed me to come out here partly because that mine he invested in is supposed to be somewhere in this district.”

“Oh!” said Helen. “A real mine?”

“That is what is puzzling Uncle Jabez, as I understand it,” said Ruth soberly. “He isn’t sure whether it is a *real* mine, or not. You see, he is very close mouthed, as well as close in money matters. He never said much to me about it. But old Aunt Alvira told me all she knew.

“You see, that young man came to the mill as an agent for a vacuum cleaner, and he talked Uncle Jabez into buying one for Aunt Alvira. Now, you must know he was pretty smart to talk money right out of Uncle’s pocket for any such thing as that,” and Ruth laughed; but she became grave in a moment, and continued:

“Not that he isn’t as kind as he knows how to be to Aunt Alvira; but the fact that the young man made his sale so quickly gave Uncle Jabez a very good opinion of his ability. So they got to talking, and the young man told uncle about the Tintacker Mine.”

“Gold or silver?” asked Helen.

“Silver. The young fellow was very enthusiastic. He knew something about mines, and he had been out here to see this one. It had been the only legacy, so he said, that his father had left his family. He was the oldest, and the only boy, and his mother and the girls depended upon him. Their circumstances were cramped, and if he could not work this Tintacker Mine he did not know how he should support the family. There was money needed to develop the mine and – I am not sure – but I

believe there was some other man had a share in it and must be bought out. At least, uncle furnished a large sum of money.”

“And then?” demanded Helen Cameron.

“Why, then the young man came out this way. Aunt Alvira said that Uncle Jabez got one letter from Denver and another from a place called Butte, Montana. Then nothing more came. Uncle’s letters have been unanswered. That’s ever since some time last winter. You see, uncle hates to spend more money, I suppose. He maybe doesn’t know how to have the mine searched for. But he told me that the young man said something about going to Bullhide, and I am going to try to find out if anybody knows anything about the Tintacker Mine the first time we drive over to town.”

All this time Mary Cox had been deeply interested in what Ruth said. It was not often that The Fox paid much attention to Ruth Fielding, for she held a grudge against the girl of the Red Mill, and had, on several occasions, been very mean to Ruth. On the other hand, Ruth had twice aided in saving The Fox from drowning, and had the latter not been a very mean-spirited girl she would have been grateful to Ruth.

About the time that Ruth had completed her story of the Tintacker Mine and the utter disappearance of the young man who had interested her Uncle Jabez in that mysterious silver horde, Jane Ann called them all to supper. A long, low-ceiled, cool apartment was the dining-room at Silver Ranch. Through a long gallery the Mexican woman shuffled in with the hot viands from the kitchen. Two little dark-skinned boys helped her; they were Maria’s children.

At supper Mr. Hicks took the head of the long table and Jane Ann did the honors at the other end. There were the Cameron twins, and Madge and Bob, and Jennie Stone and Mary Cox, beside Ruth Fielding herself. It was a merry party and they sat long over the meal; before they arose from the table, indeed, much shuffling and low voices and laughter, together with tobacco smoke, announced the presence of some of the cowboys outside.

“The boys is up yere to hear that pinanner,” said Mr. Hicks. “Jib’s got it ready to slip out o’ the box and we’ll lift it into the other room – there’s enough of us huskies to do it – and then you young folks can start something.”

Jane Ann was delighted with the handsome upright instrument. She had picked it out herself in New York, and it had been shipped clear across the continent ahead of the private car that had brought the party to Bullhide. The jarring it had undergone had not improved its tone; but Helen sat down to it and played a pretty little medley that pleased the boys at the windows.

“Now, let Ruth sing,” urged Jane Ann. “The boys like singing; give ’em something they can join in on the chorus like – that’ll tickle ’em into fits!”

So Ruth sang such familiar songs as she could remember. And then Helen got her violin and Madge took her place at the piano, and they played for Ruth some of the more difficult pieces that the latter had learned at Briarwood – for Ruth Fielding possessed a very sweet and strong voice and had “made the Glee Club” during the first half of her attendance at Briarwood Hall.

The boys applauded from the veranda. There was at least a dozen of the ranchman’s employes at the home corral just then. Altogether Mr. Hicks paid wages to about sixty punchers and horse wranglers. They were coming and going between the home ranch and the ranges all the time.

The girls from the East gave the Silver Ranch cowboys a nice little concert, and then Jane Ann urged Jib Pottoway to come to the piano. The half-breed was on the veranda in the dusk, with the other fellows, but he needed urging.

“Here, you Jibbeway!” exclaimed Mr. Hicks. “You hike yourself in yere and tickle these ivories a whole lot. These young ladies ain’t snakes; an’ they won’t bite ye.”

The backward puncher was urged on by his mates, too, and finally he came in, stepping through the long window and sliding onto the piano bench that had been deserted by Madge. He was a tall, straight, big-boned young man, with dark, keen face, and the moment Tom Cameron saw him he seized Bob by the shoulder and whispered eagerly:

“I know that fellow! He played fullback with Carlisle when they met Cornell three years ago. Why, he’s an educated man – he must be! And punching cattle out on this ranch!”

“Guess you forget that Theodore Roosevelt punched cattle for a while,” chuckled Bob. “Listen to that fellow play, will you?”

And the Indian could – as Mr. Hicks remarked – “tickle the ivories.” He played by ear, but he played well. Most of the tunes he knew were popular ditties and by and by he warmed the punchers up so that they began to hum their favorite melodies as Jib played them.

“Come on, there, Ike!” said the Indian, suddenly. “Give us that ‘Prayer’ you’re so fond of. Come on, now, Ike!”

Bashful Ike evidently balked a little, but Jib played the accompaniment and the melody through, and finally the foreman of Silver Ranch broke in with a baritone roar and gave them “The Cowboy’s Prayer.” Ike possessed a mellow voice and the boys hummed in chorus in the dusk, and it all sounded fine until suddenly Jib Pottoway broke off with a sudden discordant crash on the piano keys.

“Hel-lo!” exclaimed Bill Hicks, who had lain back in his wicker lounging chair, with his big feet in wool socks on another chair, enjoying all the music. “What’s happened the pinanner, Jib? You busted it? By jings! that cost me six hundred dollars at the Bullhide station.”

But then his voice fell and there was silence both in the room and on the veranda. The sound of galloping hoofs had shut the ranchman up. A pony was approaching on a dead run, and the next moment a long, loud “Ye-ow! ye-ow!” announced the rider’s excitement as something extraordinary.

“Who’s that, Ike?” cried Hicks, leaping from his chair.

“Scrub Weston,” said the foreman as he clumped down the veranda steps.

Jib slipped through the window. Hicks followed him on the jump, and Jane Ann led the exodus of the visitors. There was plainly something of an exciting nature at hand. A pony flashed out of the darkness and slid to a perilous halt right at the steps.

“Hi, Boss!” yelled the cowboy who bestrode the pony. “Fire’s sweeping up from Tintacker way! I bet it’s that Bughouse Johnny the boys have chased two or three times. He’s plumb loco, that feller is – oughtn’t to be left at large. The whole chapparel down that a-way is blazin’ and, if the wind rises, more’n ha’f of your grazin’ll be swept away.”

CHAPTER IV – THE FIRE FIGHT

The guests had followed Mr. Hicks and Jib out of the long window and had heard the cow puncher's declaration. There was no light in the sky as far as the girls could see – no light of a fire, at least – but there seemed to be a tang of smoke; perhaps the smoke clung to the sweating horse and its rider.

“You got it straight, Scrub Weston?” demanded Bill Hicks. “This ain't no burn you're givin' us?”

“Great piping Peter!” yelled the cowboy on the trembling pony, “it'll be a burn all right if you fellows don't git busy. I left Number Three outfit fighting the fire the best they knew; we've had to let the cattle drift. I tell ye, Boss, there's more trouble brewin' than you kin shake a stick at.”

“Nuff said!” roared Hicks. “Get busy, Ike. You fellers saddle and light out with Scrub. Rope you another hawse out o' the corral, Scrub; you've blamed near killed that one.”

“Oh! is it really a prairie fire?” asked Ruth, of Jane Ann. “Can't we see it?”

“You bet we will,” declared the ranchman's niece. “Leave it to me. I'll get the horse-wrangler to hitch up a pair of ponies and we'll go over there. Wish you girls could ride.”

“Helen rides,” said Ruth, quickly.

“But not our kind of horses, I reckon,” returned Jane Ann, as she started after the cowboys. “But Tom and Bob can have mounts. Come on, boys!”

“We'll get into trouble, like enough, if we go to this fire,” objected Madge Steele.

“Come on!” said Heavy. “Don't let's show the white feather. These folks will think we haven't any pluck at all. Eastern girls can be just as courageous as Western girls, I believe.”

But all the time Ruth was puzzling over something that the cowboy, Scrub Weston, had said when he gave warning of the fire. He had mentioned Tintacker and suggested that the fire had been set by somebody whom Ruth supposed the cowboys must think was crazy – otherwise she could not explain that expression, “Bughouse Johnny.” These range riders were very rough of speech, but certainly their language was expressive!

This Tintacker Mine in which she was so deeply interested – for Uncle Jabez's sake – must be very near the ranch. Ruth desired to go to the mine and learn if it was being worked; and she proposed to learn the whole history of the claim and look up the recording of it, as well. Of course, the young man who had gotten Uncle Jabez to invest in the silver mine had shown him deeds and the like; but these papers might have been forged. Ruth was determined to clear up the mystery of the Tintacker Mine before she left Silver Ranch for the East again.

Just now, however, she as well as the other guests of Jane Ann Hicks was excited by the fire on the range. They got jackets, and by the time all the girls were ready Maria's husband had a pair of half-wild ponies hitched to the buckboard. Bob elected to drive the ponies, and he and the five girls got aboard the vehicle while the restive ponies were held by the Mexican.

Tom and Jane Ann had each saddled a pony. Jane Ann rode astride like a boy, and she was up on a horse that seemed to be just as crazy as he could be. Her friends from the East feared all the time that Jane Ann would be thrown.

“Let 'em go, Jose!” commanded the Silver Ranch girl. “You keep right behind me, Mr. Steele – follow me and Mr. Tom. The trail ain't good, but I reckon you won't tip over your crowd if you're careful.”

The girls on the buckboard screamed at that; But it was too late to expostulate – or back out from going on the trip. The half-wild ponies were off and Bob had all he could do to hold them. Old Bill Hicks and his punchers had swept away into the starlit night some minutes before and were now out of both sight and hearing. As the party of young folk got out of the coulie, riding over the ridge, they saw a dull glow far down on the western horizon.

“The fire!” cried Ruth, pointing.

“That’s what it is,” responded Jane Ann, excitedly. “Come on!”

She raced ahead and Tom spurred his mount after her. Directly in their wake lurched the buckboard, with the excited Bob snapping the long-lashed whip over the ponies’ backs. The vehicle pitched and jerked, and traveled sometimes on as few as two wheels; the girls were jounced about unmercifully, and The Fox and Helen squealed.

“I’m – be – ing – jolt – ed – to – a – jel – ly!” gasped Heavy. “I’ll be – one sol – id bruise.”

But Bob did not propose to be left behind by Jane Ann and Tom Cameron, and Madge showed her heartlessness by retorting on the stout girl:

“You’ll be solid, all right, Jennie, never mind whether you are bruised or not. You know that you’re no ‘airy, fairy Lillian.”

But the rate at which they were traveling was not conducive to conversation; and most of the time the girls clung on and secretly hoped that Bob would not overturn the buckboard. The ponies seemed desirous of running away all the time.

The rosy glow along the skyline increased; and now flames leaped – yellow and scarlet – rising and falling, while the width of the streak of fire increased at both ends. Luckily there was scarcely any wind. But the fire certainly was spreading.

The ponies tore along under Bob’s lash and Jane Ann and Tom did not leave them far behind. Over the rolling prairie they fled and so rapidly that Hicks and his aides from the ranch-house were not far in advance when the visitors came within unrestricted view of the flames.

Jane Ann halted and held up her hand to Bob to pull in the ponies when they topped a ridge which was the final barrier between them and the bottom where the fire burned. For several miles the dry grass, scrub, and groves of trees had been blackened by the fire. Light smoke clouds drifted away from the line of flame, which crackled sharply and advanced in a steady march toward the ridge on which the spectators were perched.

“My goodness me!” exclaimed Heavy. “You couldn’t put *that* fire out by spilling a bucket of water on it, could you?”

The fire line was several miles long. The flames advanced slowly; but here and there, where it caught in a bunch of scrub, the tongues of fire mounted swiftly into the air for twenty feet, or more; and in these pillars of fire lurked much danger, for when a blast of wind chanced to swoop down on them, the flames jumped!

Toiling up the ridge, snorting and bellowing, tails in air and horns tossing, drifted a herd of several thousand cattle, about ready to stampede although the fire was not really chasing them. The danger lay in the fact that the flames had gained such headway, and had spread so widely, that the entire range might be burned over, leaving nothing for the cattle to eat.

The rose-light of the flames showed the spectators all this – the black smooch of the fire-scathed land behind the barrier of flame, the flitting figures on horseback at the foot of the ridge, and the herd of steers going over the rise toward the north – and the higher foothills.

“But what can they do?” gasped Ruth.

“They’re back-firing,” Tom said, holding in his pony. Tom was a good horseman and it was evident that Jane Ann was astonished at his riding. “But over yonder where they tried it, the flames jumped ahead through the long grass and drove the men into their saddles again.”

“See what those fellows are doing!” gasped Madge, standing up. “They’re roping those cattle – isn’t that what you call it, *roping*?”

“And hog-tieing them,” responded Jane Ann, eagerly. “That’s Jib – and Bashful Ike. There! that’s an axe Ike’s got. He’s going to slice up that steer.”

“Oh, dear me! what for?” cried Helen.

“Why, the butchering act – right here and now?” demanded Heavy. “Aren’t thinking of having a barbecue, are they?”

“You watch,” returned the Western girl, greatly excited. “There! they’ve split that steer.”

“I hope it’s the big one that bunted the automobile,” cried The Fox.

“Well, you can bet it ain’t,” snapped Jane Ann. “Old Trouble-Maker is going to yield us some fun at brandin’ time – now you see.”

But they were all too much interested just then in what was going on near at hand – and down at the fire line – to pay much attention to what Jane Ann said about Old Trouble-Maker. Bashful Ike and Jib Pottoway had split two steers “from stem to stern.” Two other riders approached, and the girls recognized one of them as Old Bill himself.

“Tough luck, boys,” grumbled the ranchman. “Them critters is worth five cents right yere on the hoof; but that fire’s got to be smothered. Here, Jib! hitch my rope to t’other end of your half of that critter.”

In a minute the ranchman and the half-breed were racing down the slope, their ponies on the jump, the half of the steer jumping behind them. At the line of fire Hicks made his frightened horse leap the flames, they jerked the half of the steer over so that the cloven side came in contact with the flames, and then both men urged their ponies along the fire line, right in the midst of the smoke and heat, dragging the bleeding side of beef across the sputtering flames.

Ike and his mate started almost at once in the other direction, and both teams quenched the fire in good shape. Behind them other cowboys drew the halves of the second steer that had been divided, making sure of the quenching of the conflagration in the main; but there were still spots where the fire broke out again, and it was a couple of hours, and two more fat steers had been sacrificed, before it was safe to leave the fire line to the watchful care of only half a dozen, or so, of the range riders.

It had been a bitter fight while it lasted. Tom and Bob, and Jane Ann herself had joined in it – slapping out the immature fires where they had sprung up in the grass from sparks which flew from the greater fires. But the ridge had helped retard the blaze so that it could be controlled, and from the summit the girls from the East had enjoyed the spectacle.

Old Bill Hicks rode beside the buckboard when they started back for the ranch-house, and was very angry over the setting of the fire. Cow punchers are the most careful people in the world regarding fire-setting in the open. If a cattleman lights his cigarette, or pipe, he not only pinches out the match between his finger and thumb, but, if he is afoot, he stamps the burned match into the earth when he drops it.

“That yere half-crazy tenderfoot oughter be put away somewhars, whar he won’t do no more harm to nobody,” growled the ranchman.

“Do you expect he set it, Uncle?” demanded Jane Ann.

“So Scrub says. He seen him camping in the cottonwoods along Larruper Crick this mawnin’. I reckon nobody but a confounded tenderfoot would have set a fire when it’s dry like this, nowadays.”

Here Ruth put in a question that she had longed to ask ever since the fire scare began: “Who *is* this strange man you call the tenderfoot?”

“Dunno, Miss Ruth,” said the cattleman. “He’s been hanging ‘round yere a good bit since Spring. Or, he’s been seen by my men a good bit. When they’ve spoke to him he’s seemed sort of doped, or silly. They can’t make him out. And he hangs around closest to Tintacker.”

“You’re interested in *that*, Ruth!” exclaimed Helen.

“What d’you know about Tintacker, Miss?” asked Old Bill, curiously.

“Tintacker is a silver mine, isn’t it?” asked Ruth, in return.

“Tintacker used to be a right smart camp some years ago. Some likely silver claims was staked out ‘round there. But they petered out, and ain’t nobody raked over the old dumps, even, but some Chinamen, for ten year.”

“But was there a particular mine called ‘Tintacker?’” asked Ruth.

“Sure there was. First claim staked out. And it was a good one – for a while. But there ain’t nothin’ there now.”

“You say this stranger hangs about there?” queried Tom, likewise interested.

“He won’t for long if my boys find him arter this,” growled Hicks. “They’ll come purty close to running him out o’ this neck o’ woods – you hear me!”

This conversation made Ruth even more intent upon solving the mystery of the Tintacker Mine, and her desire to see this strange “tenderfoot” who hung about the old mining claims increased. But she said nothing more at that time regarding the matter.

CHAPTER V – “OLD TROUBLE- MAKER” TURNED LOOSE

After getting to bed at midnight it could not be expected that the young people at Silver Ranch would be astir early on the morning following the fire scare. But Ruth, who was used to being up with the sun at the Red Mill – and sometimes a little before the orb of day – slipped out of the big room in which the six girls were domiciled when she heard the first stir about the corrals.

When she came out upon the veranda that encircled the ranch-house, wreaths of mist hung knee-high in the coulee – mist which, as soon as the sun peeked over the hills, would be dissipated. The ponies were snorting and stamping at their breakfasts – great armfuls of alfalfa hay which the horse wranglers had pitched over the fence. Maria, the Mexican woman, came up from the cowshed with two brimming pails of milk, for the Silver Ranch boasted a few milch cows at the home place, and there had been sweet butter on the table at supper the night before – something which is usually very scarce on a cattle ranch.

Ruth ran down to the corral and saw, on the bench outside the bunkhouse door, the row of buckets in which the boys had their morning plunge. The sleeping arrangements at Silver Ranch being rather primitive, Tom and Bob had elected to join the cowboys in the big bunkhouse, and they had risen as early as the punchers and made their own toilet in the buckets, too. The sheet-iron chimney of the chuckhouse kitchen was smoking, and frying bacon and potatoes flavored the keen air for yards around.

Bashful Ike, the foreman, met the Eastern girl at the corner of the corral fence. He was a pleasant, smiling man; but the blood rose to the very roots of his hair and he got into an immediate perspiration if a girl looked at him. When Ruth bade him good-morning Ike's cheeks began to flame and he grew instantly tongue-tied! Beyond nodding a greeting and making a funny noise in his throat he gave no notice that he was like other human beings and could talk. But Ruth had an idea in her mind and Bashful Ike could help her carry it through better than anybody else.

“Mr. Ike,” she said, softly, “do you know about this man they say probably set the fire last night?”

Ike gulped down something that seemed to be choking him and mumbled that he supposed he had seen the fellow “about once.”

“Do you think he is crazy, Mr. Ike?” asked the Eastern girl.

“I – I swanny! I couldn't be sure as to that, Miss,” stammered the foreman of Silver Ranch. “The boys say he acts plumb locoed.”

“‘Locoed’ means crazy?” she persisted.

“Why, Miss, clear ‘way down south from us, ‘long about the Mexican border, thar's a weed grows called loco, and if critters eats it, they say it crazies 'em – for a while, anyway. So, Miss,” concluded Ike, stumbling less in his speech now, “if a man or a critter acts batty like, we say he's locoed.”

“I understand. But if this man they suspect of setting the fire is crazy he isn't responsible for what he does, is he?”

“Well, Miss, mebbe not. But we can't have no onresponsible feller hangin' around yere scatterin' fire – no, sir! – ma'am, I mean,” Ike hastily added, his face flaming up like an Italian sunset again.

“No; I suppose not. But I understand the man stays around that old camp at Tintacker, more than anywhere else?”

“That's so, I reckon,” agreed Ike. “The boys don't see him often.”

“Can't you make the boys just scare him into keeping off the range, instead of doing him real harm? They seemed very angry about the fire.”

“I dunno, Miss. Old Bill’s some hot under the collar himself – and he might well be. Last night’s circus cost him a pretty penny.”

“Did you ever see this man they say is crazy?” demanded Ruth.

“I told you I did oncet.”

“What sort of a looking man is he?”

“He ain’t no more’n a kid, Miss. That’s it; he’s jest a tenderfoot kid.”

“A boy, you mean?” queried Ruth, anxiously.

“Not much older than that yere whitehead ye brought with yuh,” said Ike, beginning to grin now that he had become a bit more familiar with the Eastern girl, and pointing at Bob Steele. “And he ain’t no bigger than him.”

“You wouldn’t let your boys injure a young fellow like that, would you?” cried Ruth. “It wouldn’t be right.”

“I dunno how I’m goin’ to stop ’em from mussin’ him up a whole lot if they chances acrost him,” said Ike, slowly. “He’d ought to be shut up, so he had.”

“Granted. But he ought not to be abused. Another thing, Ike – I’ll tell you a secret.”

“Uh-huh?” grunted the surprised foreman.

“I want to see that young man awfully!” said Ruth. “I want to talk with him – ”

“Sufferin’ snipes!” gasped Ike, becoming so greatly interested that he forgot it was a girl he was talking with. “What you want see that looney critter for?”

“Because I’m greatly interested in the Tintacker Mine, and they say this young fellow usually sticks to that locality,” replied Ruth, smiling on the big cow puncher. “Don’t you think I can learn to ride well enough to travel that far before we return to the East?”

“To ride to Tintacker, Miss?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why, suah, Miss!” cried Ike, cordially. “I’ll pick you-all out a nice pony what’s well broke, and I bet you’ll ride him lots farther than that. I’ll rope him now – I know jest the sort of a hawse you’d oughter ride – ”

“No; you go eat your breakfast with the other boys,” laughed Ruth, preparing to go back to the ranch-house. “Jane Ann says we’re all to have ponies to ride and she maybe will be disappointed if I don’t let her pick out mine for me,” added Ruth, with her usual regard for the feelings of her mates. “But I am going to depend on you, Mr. Ike, to teach me to ride.”

“And when you want to ride over to Tintacker tuh interview that yere maverick, yo’ let me know, Miss,” said Bashful Ike. “I’ll see that yuh git thar with proper escort, and all that,” and he grinned sheepishly.

Tom and Bob breakfasted with the punchers, but after the regular meal at the ranch-house the two boys hastened to join their girl friends. First they must all go to the corral and pick out their riding ponies. Helen, Madge and The Fox could ride fairly well; but Jane Ann had warned them that Eastern riding would not do on the ranch. Such a thing as a side-saddle was unknown, so the girls had all supplied themselves with divided skirts so that they could ride astride like the Western girl. Besides, a cow pony would not stand for the long skirt of a riding habit flapping along his flank.

Now, Ruth had ridden a few times on Helen’s pony, and away back when she was a little girl she had ridden bareback on an old horse belonging to the blacksmith at Darrowtown. So she was not afraid to try the nervous little flea-bitten gray that Ike Stedman roped and saddled and bridled for her. Jane Ann declared it to be a favorite pony of her own, and although the little fellow did not want to stand while his saddle was being cinched, and stamped his cunning little feet on the ground a good bit, Ike assured the girl of the Red Mill that “Freckles,” as they called him, was “one mighty gentle hawse!”

There was no use in the girls from the East showing fear; Ruth was too plucky to do that, anyway. She was not really afraid of the pony; but when she was in the saddle it did seem as though Freckles danced more than was necessary.

These cow ponies never walk – unless they are dead tired; about Freckles' easiest motion was a canter that carried Ruth over the prairie so swiftly that her loosened hair flowed behind her in the wind, and for a time she could not speak – until she became adjusted to the pony's motion. But she liked riding astride much better than on a side-saddle, and she soon lost her fear. Ike had given her some good advice about the holding of her reins so that a sharp pull on Freckles' curb would instantly bring the pony down to a dead stop. The bashful one had screwed tiny spurs into the heels of her high boots and given her a light quirt, or whip.

The other girls – all but Heavy – were, as we have seen, more used to riding than the girl of the Red Mill; but with the stout girl the whole party had a great deal of fun. Of course, Jennie Stone expected to cause hilarity among her friends; she “poked fun” at herself all the time, so could not object if the others laughed.

“I'll never in this world be able to get into a saddle without a kitchen chair to step upon,” Jennie groaned, as she saw the other girls choosing their ponies. “Mercy! if I got on that little Freckles, he'd squat right down – I know he would! You'll have to find something bigger than these rabbits for *me* to ride on.”

At that she heard the girls giggling behind her and turned to face a great, droop-headed, long-eared roan mule, with hip bones that you could hang your hat on – a most forlorn looking bundle of bones that had evidently never recovered the climatic change from the river bottoms of Missouri to the uplands of Montana. Tom Cameron held the mule with a trace-chain around his neck and he offered the end of the chain to Heavy with a perfectly serious face.

“I believe you'd better saddle this chap, Jennie,” said Tom. “You see how he's built – the framework is great. I know he can hold you up all right. Just look at how he's built.”

“Looks like the steel framework of a skyscraper,” declared Heavy, solemnly. “Don't you suppose I might fall in between the ribs if I climbed up on that thing? I thought you were a better friend to me than that, Tom Cameron. You'd deliberately let me risk my life by being tangled up in that moth-eaten bag o' bones if it collapsed under me. No! I'll risk one of these rabbits. I'll have less distance to fall if I roll.”

But the little cow ponies were tougher than the stout girl supposed. Ike weighed in the neighborhood of a hundred and eighty pounds – solid bone and muscle – and the cayuse that he bestrode when at work was no bigger than Ruth's Freckles. They hoisted Heavy into the saddle, and Tom offered to lash her there if she didn't feel perfectly secure.

“You needn't mind, Tommy,” returned the stout girl. “If, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for me to disembark from this saddle, I'll probably want to get down quick. There's no use in hampering me. I take my life in my hand – with these reins – and – ugh! ugh! ugh!” she finished as, on her picking up the lines, her restive pony instantly broke into the liveliest kind of a trot.

But after all, Heavy succeeded in riding pretty well; while Ruth, after an hour, was not afraid to let her pony take a pretty swift gait with her. Jane Ann, however, showed remarkable skill and made the Eastern girls fairly envious. She had ridden, of course, ever since she was big enough to hold bridle reins, and there were few of the punchers who could handle a horse better than the ranchman's niece.

But the visitors from the East did not understand this fact fully until a few days later, when the first bunch of Spring calves and yearlings were driven into a not far distant corral to be branded. Branding is one of the big shows on a cattle ranch, and Ruth and her chums did not intend to miss the sight; besides, some of the boys had corraled Old Trouble-Maker near by and promised some fancy work with the big black and white steer.

“We’ll show you some roping now,” said Jane Ann, with enthusiasm. “Just cutting a little old cow out of that band in the corral and throwing it ain’t nothing. Wait till we turn Old Trouble-Maker loose.”

The whole party rode over to the branding camp, and there was the black and white steer as wild as ever. While the branding was going on the big steer bellowed and stamped and tried to break the fence down. The smell of the burning flesh, and the bellowing of the calves and yearlings as their ears were slit, stirred the old fellow up.

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