

Vandercook Margaret

The Ranch Girls' Pot of Gold



Margaret Vandercook

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CHAPTER I

THE GYPSY CARAVAN

"A HUNDRED dollars a month – it's a fortune!" Jean Bruce exclaimed gayly, pirouetting about on her tip-toes in front of a huge Japanese umbrella fastened upright in the ground in the middle of the orchard at the Rainbow Ranch.

Jacqueline Ralston gazed half convinced at the sheet of paper she held in her hand. She was sitting in Turkish fashion on the grass just outside the umbrella and, as her Mexican hat had been flung aside, the spring sun shone directly down on the bright bronze of her hair and warmed to a richer rose the brilliant color in her cheeks. The past few months had wrought little change in her, save that the lifting of the clouds from about her home had left her more radiant and full of purpose than ever before.

"I don't know whether it is an opportunity or not," she answered dreamily. "What do you think, dears?" she inquired of a young woman who was watching the steam pour forth from a brass teakettle, and of a quiet, dark-haired girl who sat near by contentedly embroidering a square of linen.

Olive hesitated for a moment, looking toward their chaperon, but Ruth was too busy with the teakettle – which had chosen that moment to boil over – to have time to reply. "I know a hundred dollars a month does sound like a great deal of money," Olive agreed slowly, "but I wonder what the people are like who wish to rent our ranch. And where can we go if we give up our house to them?"

Jack shook her head uncertainly, but Jean flung out both arms in an imploring gesture, and a beseeching expression softened her merry brown eyes. "Where could we go? Why, haven't we the whole round world to choose from?" she demanded pleadingly. "And don't the very breezes call us to follow them in search of adventure? Oh, I can feel the spring *Wanderlust* in my blood this very minute. Cousin Ruth, Jack, Olive, please agree with me or I can't bear it. Surely you must see that this letter from Mrs. Post's friends, who want Rainbow Lodge for the summer, is just heaven sent. We were dying to take a trip and now we can go everywhere – or just somewhere, I don't care where, because we have never been anywhere in our lives." And Jean paused only because she was out of breath and not because of the laughter that greeted her peculiar form of eloquence.

The three ranch girls and their chaperon, Ruth Drew, were having an impromptu tea party all to themselves in their miniature orchard on a lovely May day. Their fruit trees were not yet large enough for shade. Indeed, at the present time they looked like glorified bouquets set on tall, slender stalks, their branches were so small, so fragrant and so covered with delicate fairylike blossoms. The cherry and plum trees were in full bloom and the pink buds on the apple trees were slowly uncurling, while on every side the level prairie fields were carpeted with new grass that rippled softly under the low winds like the surface of a quiet sea.

"Girls, I don't want to be a wet blanket and I am afraid you will think *I am* a discouraging person," Ruth interposed, passing around her teacups, "but I don't believe we could do much traveling on a hundred dollars a month. I am awfully sorry, Jean, to disappoint you, but you must remember that railroad journeys are terribly expensive and we would have to board somewhere when we were not on trains."

"All right, Ruth," Jack assented, looking half relieved and half disappointed, as she folded up her letter. "I'll write to Mr. and Mrs. Harmon to-night and refuse their offer for the 'Lodge.'"

Jean sighed as though she had no further joy in living and Ruth shook her head. "No, Jack, don't write your letter quite yet," she advised. "Let's talk things over again before we finally decide. But I do wish Frieda would come with the cookies; it seems so hateful to have tea without her. I can't imagine what has kept her so long."

Tearing across the yard that divided the Lodge from the ranch orchard came a round, chubby girl, with her blond pigtailed flying straight out behind her and her cheeks a bright red from excitement. She had a big dish of gingercakes in her hands, but as she ran she scattered them behind her like little "Hop o' My Thumb" did his poor crumbs of bread.

"Oh, do come to the house quick! The most loveliest thing has happened!" she cried fervently. "A band of gypsies was traveling across the plains and they have stopped right at our house, and say that if we will give them some food and water they will tell all our fortunes. There is a man and a girl and an old woman and the cunningest baby!"

Frieda flung her small self on Jean, and without another word the two girls rushed off toward the house, while Ruth and Jack and Olive gathered up the despised tea things and followed them more slowly, munching the long desired cookies.

Drawn up near the back porch at Rainbow Lodge was a rickety old canvas-top wagon pulled by two ancient and sadly dilapidated horses, and seated in state at a table not far away were Frieda's band of gypsies being generously fed by Aunt Ellen.

Ruth and Olive walked toward their unexpected visitors, but Jack in her usual impetuous fashion ran up to the horses and began to take off their harness. "Uncle Zack, please come here at once; these poor horses are nearly dead," she called quickly. "Some one will have to help me. I am afraid I can't look after them both, for they can scarcely stand up." But Uncle Zack, the old colored servant of the ranch house, was not within sound of Jack's voice and the girls were too much interested in the gypsies to heed her.

The old horses had great sagging places under their hips; the muscles beneath their worn coats quivered and jerked with fatigue; their eyes were bloodshot and their breath came in long, quivering sighs.

Jacqueline Ralston was a ranch girl who had been brought up to love horses since she was a tiny baby, and she cared for them so intensely that nothing stirred her like the sight of them ill used. Now, heedless of all else, she softly patted and talked to the two horses, lifting off a part of their ragged harness; then suddenly turning, discovered their gypsy driver calmly eating a comfortable dinner. Jack's eyes flashed and the hot blood surged to her cheeks.

"Come see to your horses," she ordered sharply. "What do you mean by resting and eating while your horses suffer? Even a tenderfoot knows better than to be so stupid and good for nothing. I thought a gypsy had more sense." The young girl turned away her flushed face as she finished speaking, for a lump was rising in her throat, and she had seen the gypsy man get up from the table and start over toward her with his guitar swung jauntily over his shoulder and a supercilious smile on his lips.

"Don't worry about my horses, young lady," he remarked indifferently. "If they were worth anything I would look after them better, but they are worn-out old brutes and won't be fit for use much longer." Without any excuse the man gave the nearer horse a brutal kick that made it stagger with pain, and struck the other with the palm of his hand.

"By the way," he remarked, "I'm not a gypsy, as you suppose, though I happen to be married to one and running this particular outfit."

Jack saw everything spin around for half a second – she was so angry with the man for his cruelty – but she managed to speak with dignity. "If you do another unkind thing to your horses I shall ask our overseer, Jim Colter, to make you leave our ranch," she declared firmly. "Of course I see, now you are nearer, that you are not a gypsy." Jack frowned, puzzled by the tramp's unusual appearance. His hair was light brown, his eyes blue and his features refined and delicate, although

his expression was crafty and his mouth weak and selfish. Oddly enough, in spite of his unkempt clothing, it was plain he had been born a gentleman.

Abruptly changing his careless manner the man took off his hat to Jack. "I am sorry to have offended you," he remarked politely. "I ought to know better. Is Jim Colter the overseer of your ranch? I have heard of him often, but in all the years I have spent in this country I have never met him. I came west to locate a gold mine, but instead of my finding one these gypsy women found me starving in the desert and took care of me. So I married the girl and we travel around in their wagon; it's easier than walking. I have been prospecting for gold in this region lately. Would you let me have a look over your ranch before I move on? You may be grazing your cattle above a gold mine this minute – it's what the old man did who once owned Cripple Creek."

The man's eyes glowed with the peculiar fanatical glow of the gold-seeker and Jack *felt* a thrill of excitement as she watched him, but she shook her head sensibly. And at this moment Jim Colter appeared strolling along the path toward them from the stables back of the Lodge. His hands were in his pockets and he was whistling cheerfully, with an inquiring expression in his friendly blue eyes. The newcomer did not see him.

"Want any help with your animals, stranger?" Jim inquired hospitably, as he came over to where Jack and her companion were standing.

The other man swung slowly around at the sound of a new voice.

Without replying he stared; stared at Jim so long that Jack wondered what had happened to keep him from answering. Then she glanced at Jim – he was behaving as strangely as their visitor; his jaw had dropped and his eyes darkened, and if it had been anybody but Jim Colter, Jack might have thought the overseer of the Rainbow Ranch frightened.

"Is your name Jim Colter?" the new man inquired curiously. "I think I have seen you before, yet I don't recollect your name. I'm Joe Dawson; 'Gypsy Joe' is what I'm called out here. Funny name for a man who once hailed from one of the first families in 'Ole Virginie.'"

Jim picked up a bucket of water from the ground, in order to gain time. "Suppose you join the other girls now, Jack," he suggested mildly. "It may be this stranger and I have met before and will have a few questions to ask one another. Anyhow, I think the girls need you with them."

Jack moved off obediently and discovered Olive having her fortune told. She was kneeling before the old gypsy with one hand resting in the woman's wrinkled palm.

"You are not one of these little missies. You are of another brood and another fortune," the old crone announced calmly. "I don't say I am able to place you, but you don't rightly belong here."

Olive's cheeks flushed indignantly and she dropped her lids quickly over her surprised eyes. "I don't see why you think I am different from the others. I *am* one of the ranch girls," she exclaimed earnestly.

The fortune teller smiled and lightly ran one aged finger around the line of Olive's delicately pointed chin and about her long, almond-shaped black eyes. "I don't *think* you are different, child; I *know* it," she replied sternly. "It ain't no use to try to deceive me. I can see, too, that life ain't going to be a bed of roses for you. Some one is standing near us right now who is going to exercise a strong influence over your fate. Many times she will help you to happiness, but once she will cause you great sorrow. She may never know it, for you will never tell her, but remember – I warn you – 'years alone will wipe away your tears.'"

The gypsy lifted her small, black, haunting eyes with as calm an assurance as though she had been one of the three ancient sisters of fate and stared long and imperiously at Jacqueline Ralston. Jack bit her lips and returned the woman's gaze steadfastly.

"If you mean that I shall ever bring sorrow upon my friend, you are very much mistaken," she protested defiantly, putting her arm lovingly about Olive. "If you intend to make up such hateful and untrue stories you shan't tell any more of her fortune."

But the gypsy gave not the slightest heed to Jack's remonstrance; making a weird sign across the palm of Olive's hand the old woman mumbled a verse of poetry, the girls straining forward to hear:

"Criss, cross, shadow and loss;
Shrouded in mystery,
The first of your history!
Here there is light, there dark once again.
Happiness comes, but after it pain —
Yet your name shall be found and a fortune untold
Shall make for your feet a rich pathway of gold."

Olive smiled tremulously, drawing away her hand. "I don't believe I care to have my future foretold in poetry," she protested. "Won't you tell Miss Ralston hers? Perhaps you may give her a better fate."

The fortune teller did not like the scornful curve to Jack's full red lips nor the doubting, half-amused expression of her eyes. The woman had recognized at once that this girl was not to be so easily influenced as gentle Olive, nor as merry Jean, nor as the littlest maiden with the two blond pigtailed. She was even more difficult than the oldest girl of them all, for Ruth had made no effort to conceal her surprise at the queer jumble of truth and fiction that had come forth in the account of Olive's history.

Obediently Jack put forth her strong, shapely hand, but the woman did not touch it, although her shrewd, half-closed eyes never wandered from the girl's face.

"Be on your guard. You don't wish other people to do anything for you," the gypsy spoke low and warningly. "I know you like to help them, but you are too proud to want to be helped. Some day something you little expect is going to happen to you that will make you have to depend on other people for a long, long time." All at once the woman's harsh manner changed and she gazed at her listener more kindly. "You are fond of this ranch and would like to spend your whole life on it, wouldn't you?" she questioned keenly.

Silently Jack bowed her head.

"You won't," the fortune teller went on solemnly; "you will travel over a great part of the world and you may settle in a strange land. Anyhow, I can see that you'll marry and have sons and —"

Jack blushed resentfully and the gypsy's beady eyes twinkled, for she was a good enough judge of character to guess the elder Miss Ralston's views on matrimony, merely by observing her pride and reserve. It was true that Jack had vowed to the other girls a hundred times that nothing and nobody could induce *her* to marry; *she* had more important things to do.

"Dear me, granny, haven't you something pleasant to tell somebody?" Jean interposed, coming forward for her turn in the game.

The gypsy frowned severely. "I can tell only the truth," she protested in an important tone. "But you need not worry yet about your future, young lady, for you don't take things so seriously as these other two girls. Life is more of a joke to you; only see that you don't carry your joking too far."

Jean pouted, jerking away her hand, and Ruth, who was particularly fond of Jean, interrupted the old crone. "Tell our smallest girl's future now, auntie; she is sure to have only good luck," she interceded.

The gammer smiled. Frieda had taken the gypsy girl's baby and was cuddling it like a wax doll, its tiny birdlike face contrasting oddly with her pretty plumpness.

"The youngest lady shall have a fortune like an apple pie, it shall be so trim and neat and nice and good to look at and to taste, with plenty of sugar and kisses in it," the old woman chuckled good naturedly, glancing kindly at happy Frieda.

Ruth turned quickly around and smiled. At this moment Jim Colter came stalking across the yard toward them, with the strange gypsy at his heels, and Ruth supposed he wished to hear the girls' fortunes. But Jim did not appear interested and looked at Ruth so queerly that she was afraid he was angry.

"Shall I tell you your future now, Miss?" the gypsy woman demanded slyly, talking to Ruth, but discerning all of Jim's six feet of shyness and troubled emotion at the same time. "I can see a great change coming in your life, Miss," the fortune teller went on quickly. "You can feel it stirring in you now, but you won't give up to it. You are going to take a long trip and you are going to – "

Whatever the gypsy meant to say Ruth did not wish to hear, so she remarked quickly: "Please don't tell me anything of my fate. I – I don't like to have my fortune told," she explained, blushing furiously. She felt angry with herself for her absurdity, as Jim was gazing directly at her across the circle of listening girls.

"I believe you have told us all quite enough of our futures, granny," Ruth announced. "We are going to leave you to rest," and she beckoned to the ranch girls to follow her indoors.

Jim watched them until the last fluttering petticoat disappeared. Then he and "Gypsy Joe" walked away from the house together. A few hours later, just before dusk, the ranch girls were in the big living room of the Lodge, waiting for Ruth to come in and for Aunt Ellen to bring in supper, when there was a sound of wagon wheels along the road that led away from the house to the trail across the ranch. Jean danced to the open window and signaled to Jack.

The gypsy caravan was rolling slowly toward the distant plains. A delicate purple mist hung over the world and the wagon seemed to float along in the soft evening air; a single star shone over the travelers.

Jean pinched Jack's arm until she gave a cry of pain. "What is it, Jean?" Jack inquired anxiously, for she could see that her cousin's expression was curiously grave and that her eyes were shining and her lips trembling with eagerness.

"Oh, Olive, Frieda, do come here and look," Jean called pleadingly.

Olive slipped her hand in Jack's and Frieda put her arm about Jean's waist while the four girls stood gazing wonderingly at the moving wagon, toward which Jean was pointing with a prophetic finger.

"Girls, there goes our way to see the world," Jean murmured quietly. "There is the kind of private car I would rather ride in than any other in the world, and we own one already."

"What is the matter, Jean; what are you talking about?" Jack queried quickly, for she could see that Jean was not joking, but was deeply in earnest.

"I mean that if we rent Rainbow Lodge this summer we can travel about in a caravan," Jean returned dreamily. "We can drive over miles and miles of our beautiful prairies and see the great canyons and forests; and may even be able to go as far as the Yellowstone Park. You know we have the wagon and plenty of horses already, and with a hundred dollars a month – why, we can feed on nectar and ambrosia! Wouldn't you just adore a caravan trip, girls?" She paused wistfully.

"O Jean!" the three other ranch girls gasped in happy chorus as the full rapture of her suggestion swept over them.

"Shsh!" That young lady put a warning finger to her lips. "Here comes Cousin Ruth; don't say anything to her yet. Goodness only knows how we will be able to make her and Jim agree to our beautiful plan!"

CHAPTER II

THE SPELL OF THE MOON

THE moon rose early and before dinner was over its pale crescent appeared overhead.

The ranch girls were unusually restless. Jean especially was like a will-o'-the-wisp, never still for an instant. "Do let's go out for a walk; I feel as if I should stifle indoors," she begged.

"Isn't it too cool?" Ruth objected faintly. "Remember how great a change always comes here at night, no matter how warm the days have been. I should think the sudden coolness in the evening would be awfully trying for travelers on the prairies."

Jean cast a tragic glance at their chaperon. "Oh, no, Cousin Ruth, I assure you the nights on the plains are simply glorious! You just can't imagine how wonderful it is in the summer time, after the hot days, to feel the delicious cool breezes spring up and blow softly over you, while you lie out in the darkness facing the stars," she ended breathlessly.

Ruth laughed and slipped on her coat. "You talk like a tramp, Jean, dear. When have you ever spent your days and nights out of doors?" she queried.

"Oh, lots of times. When Jack and I were little girls uncle used to take us camping with him," Jean answered indifferently, not daring to trust herself to glance at the other girls.

The night was delicious and Jean's and Frieda's violet beds near Rainbow Lodge were adding an unaccustomed fragrance to the desert air.

"Let's walk down to the rancho. I should like to ask Jim why he sent those gypsies away so soon this afternoon, even before their horses had time to rest," Jack proposed carelessly.

Jean and Jack each slipped a hand in Ruth's, as they set out for their stroll, for she was far more timid than any one of the ranch girls; and Olive and Frieda followed close behind. Near the rancho, where Jim and the cowboys lived, a sound of singing and the low scrape of a fiddle, greeted them.

Jack put her fingers to her lips and gave their familiar whistle, but Jim did not answer; then Jean joined in, and the four girls finally whistled in unison.

A man's figure appeared at the front door of the rancho. He was one of the cowboys, who explained that Jim had disappeared immediately after dinner without a word to anyone and no one knew where he had gone nor when he meant to return.

On their way back to the Lodge Ruth happened to glance idly across one of the near-by alfalfa fields and saw the figures of two men plainly silhouetted against the horizon. One of them she recognized as Jim Colter.

"There is Mr. Colter over there talking to some one, girls," Ruth declared.

"Then let's walk over in his direction. Jim will soon see us coming and join us," Jack suggested.

But Jim apparently did not see the girls approaching him, he was so deeply engaged in conversation. Once he raised his arm as though he meant to strike the man with him, but a moment later his arm dropped limply at his side. Frieda laughed aloud, for the two black shadows looked like huge dolls.

"I think we had better turn toward home, children," Ruth proposed hurriedly. "I don't believe Mr. Colter is going to look toward us and I don't think he will want to be interrupted if he does." But at this moment the man with Jim slipped quietly away in the darkness and Jim strode forward to Ruth and the ranch girls. It was impossible to see his face clearly, but it was evident there was something most unusual in his bearing – a subtle change that could be felt rather than seen.

"What are you doing, Miss Drew, wandering around at this hour of the night with the girls? I am surprised at you," Jim said harshly. "There is no telling what danger you may get into." Jim's voice was so hot with anger and impatience that his audience was silent from sheer amazement. It

was impossible to believe that he was speaking to Ruth in such a fashion, when always before he had treated her as a queen who could do no wrong.

Ruth was glad of the darkness, for her cheeks were flushing and her heart beat unevenly. For a moment the tears gathered in her eyes, but they were blinked back indignantly. Why should she care because the overseer of the ranch was rude to her? She had always believed that Jim Colter was not a gentleman and now felt sure of it. But why did not this conviction make her able to answer Jim as he deserved, and why should she feel so unhappy? Ruth knew in her heart of hearts that she was not being honest with herself. In her six months in the West she and Jim had become good friends. There were other standards of life than those of her school teaching days in Vermont. Pretend as she would, a man could be a gentleman and yet wear strange clothes and use queer English. But that Jim could fail in any other particular Ruth had not believed possible until now.

Jean and Jack were as bewildered as their chaperon. For some time they had suspected that Jim was more interested in Ruth than he would let them know. Certainly the poor fellow was doing his best to improve his English, for Jean had dived into his coat pocket one day in search of the mail and had brought forth instead a discarded English grammar which Jim had been studying surreptitiously.

"Why Jim, how silly you are!" Jack exclaimed at last to relieve the painful silence. "Why do you mind our taking a walk to-night? You know we often do, and we haven't been far. There is nothing that could happen to us."

Frieda slipped her soft little hand inside Jim's big, strong one, and he strode on ahead with her and Olive. "Don't you ever be too sure of not getting into mischief, Jack Ralston," he called back.

"We only went to the rancho to look for you, Jim," Jack replied lightly. "I wanted to ask you why you sent those gypsies away from the ranch so soon this afternoon. I didn't care about the people and I hated the man, but the poor horses were so tired I thought you would let them stay all night so the horses could rest."

"Miss Ralston, am I running this ranch, or are you?" Jim demanded angrily. "When I see a pack of tramps getting ready to take up their residence with us, have I the right to send them away, or must I ask your leave?" The overseer's tone was wrathful. He knew just how angry Ruth was with him and now Jack would be equally offended; but fate had played Jim Colter such a strange trick in the last few hours that he did not care what he said or did.

Frieda's surprised "Oh!" was the first word spoken. A few seconds later Jack faltered, "I am sure I beg your pardon, Jim; I didn't mean to question your right to do whatever you think best." Jack's voice trailed off brokenly and Ruth gave her an indignant and sympathetic squeeze. Jean slipped around on the other side of Jack, and if Jim could have been injured by burning glances he must have perished on the spot, for Jean's brown eyes and Ruth's darted flashes of lightning at his broad back.

At the Lodge door Jack slipped away from the others. Jim saw her start and made a step toward her, but before he could speak she had vanished, with Olive following her. Neither Ruth nor Jean would ask Jim to be seated, and Frieda was too sleepy to think, yet Jim lingered calmly on the porch. "Don't you think we had better go indoors? It's fairly cool," he said at length.

Ruth drew her coat closer about her and sank into a chair. "No, I don't care to go in," she replied coldly. Jean took Frieda's hand and faced Jim boldly. "Jim Colter, there is something the matter with you to-night," she said. "I don't know what it is, but you were rude to Cousin Ruth and horrid to Jack, and if I were in their places I wouldn't speak to you."

The light from the big porch lantern shone full on Jim's strong, sun-tanned face. Jean and Ruth were both surprised at the change in his expression, for suddenly he looked like a repentant boy. "I say, Jean, do tell Jack for me that I am awfully sorry I was such a beast to her to-night," he pleaded. "Tell her I really didn't think for a minute that she meant any interference by her question. I was a bit upset and I –"

Jean shook her head severely. "I shall not apologize to Jack for you, Jim Colter, so you just needn't ask me," she answered cruelly. "You were a wretch to her and you've hurt her feelings dreadfully. You can do your own apologizing."

"But I won't see Jack again to-night, Jean, and I can't have her go to bed thinking hardly of me," Jim expostulated.

Jean glanced up at him demurely. She was an artful young person and it had just occurred to her that it might be a good idea to get Mr. Colter under her thumb by doing him a favor. She had not been able to speak to Ruth and Jim of her plan for the summer that evening, but she was only awaiting an opportunity.

"If I make up with Jack for you, Jim, will you promise to listen to something we have to tell you in the morning and not say it is utterly impossible before you even *know* what it is?" Jean demanded.

Jim groaned, though his eyes twinkled. "Go to bed, Jean Bruce. I'll not make you any rash promise, for there is no telling what you mean to let me in for," he answered.

Jean gave her head a toss. "Oh, very well, Jim; just as you like," she agreed suavely. "Only I suppose you saw poor Jack was crying when she went indoors, and she doesn't cry once in a thousand years, so I am sure she will have a headache in the morning and not be able to speak to you."

"I surrender, Jean," Jim replied meekly, holding up both hands. "I will listen to anything you have to say in the morning if you will make my peace with Jack to-night. I must have hurt her feelings if she was crying, for I have seen her nearly kill herself a dozen times and never shed a tear."

The last of Mr. Colter's speech was addressed to Miss Drew alone, for Jean, having gotten her own way, had hurried Frieda off to bed.

Jim sank down comfortably on the porch steps and took off his big Stetson, as though he did not mean to leave just yet. Ruth yawned openly once or twice, but still her guest showed no intention of going. She frowned at him coldly, but he was not looking at her.

Jim had sent an emissary to make his peace with Jack; but he had made no pretense of apologizing to her, and every bit of Ruth's New England pride was up in arms. Yet there was no doubt that Jim did look very handsome as he lingered on the steps in the moonlight. Ruth tried to convince herself that it was only his western costume that was picturesque, the soft shirt with the loose handkerchief knotted at the throat.

"I don't want you to think, Miss Drew, that Jack and I have ever quarreled before about who was the boss of this ranch," Jim explained regretfully. "To tell you the truth, I am a good deal worried about something and it has turned me into a bear." Jim rose up, smiling gently at Ruth. "I expect I had better be going," he said. "I am sorry I was rude to you too to-night, but I will wear sackcloth and ashes with pleasure to-morrow if you will only forgive me, and I can find them anyways handy about the ranch." Jim laughed and bent over, suddenly taking Ruth's hand in his to say good night, and she could but wonder if it was because he was so big and strong that he held it in such a tight grip.

CHAPTER III

CAUGHT IN THE TRAP

JEAN and Jack and Olive were cantering slowly through the fields about an hour before breakfast the next morning. The spring air was so delicious that they had not been able to resist it. Jack had waked before dawn and had kept quite still to listen to the silvery song of the wood thrush outside her bedroom window; she had not wished to go to sleep again, for her mind was too busy with Jean's plan for their summer holiday. When daylight came Jean was aroused by the noise of Jack's movements in the room, and opened her eyes to find her cousin slipping into her riding clothes. She too was eager for a ride, and when they softly called to Olive to join them the three girls stole out together.

"Jack, you will have to broach the subject of our caravan trip to Jim to-day; I am sure you will be all powerful," Jean suggested, as soon as they were fairly on their way. "The more I am out of doors the more I think of how utterly rapturous it will be to spend our summer in traveling around and camping wherever we like. Tell Olive and me something about the people who want to rent our ranch, Jack," Jean ended curiously.

Jack shook her head slowly. "I am afraid I don't know very much about them, Jean," she answered. "Mr. and Mrs. Harmon are New York people; he is a stock broker and they are friends of Mrs. Post's and Laura's. Aunt Sallie does not know them personally, but she says they have one son and a daughter. The daughter is lame and an invalid; I believe they want to bring her out west to see what the climate will do for her." Jack gave an unconscious shudder of horror and sympathy and touched her pony lightly with her whip. The girls were galloping over a part of the ranch that was carpeted with wild prairie roses.

"Where are we going, Jack?" Olive queried, riding close beside her.

"If you and Jean don't mind, Olive, we are going over on the other side of Rainbow Creek," Jack replied apologetically. "Jim and one of the men set a trap over there yesterday to catch some animal that has been worrying our sheep. You know I don't mind when the poor thieves are killed outright for their bad behavior, but sometimes they catch their legs in the traps and nearly pull them off." Jack flushed, but neither Jean nor Olive smiled at her; they knew that she was like a boy in many ways and was too good a sportsman to want anything to suffer unnecessarily.

The girls crossed the creek at a spot where the water was lowest; the spring rains had fallen and it was quite deep in many places. They rode in silence along the familiar path that followed the creek bed, each, in her own way, yielding her senses to the influence of the enchantment that the rare summer morning had created.

Click! click! A curious noise came from somewhere farther down the bed of the creek; it seemed to sound from behind a huge rock that rose up alongside the stream and split into a small ravine. Click! click! The sound was repeated.

Jack reined in her pony so suddenly that Jean almost ran into her. "What was that?" Jack asked quickly, but Jean put her finger cautiously to her lips and signaled for silence.

Click! click! click! The echo was louder and more puzzling, and Jack slid softly off her horse, threw the reins to Olive and crept along the path until she came to the far side of the great rock. The noise was more distinct, but still she could see nothing; then she clambered up the rock and peered over. A man stood with a little hammer in his hand, chipping out small pieces of stone; a big pan filled with sand and gravel and water from Rainbow Creek was resting on the ground by his side.

A little murmur of surprise escaped Jack, and the intruder glanced up at her; he had been so intent on his work and so sure of not being discovered at that hour of the morning that he had not been disturbed by Jack's approach.

"So it is you, is it?" he said calmly. "I hope you don't mind my having a few pieces of these rocks as a souvenir of my visit to your ranch. I know you and your overseer objected to my prospecting for gold about here. That is the reason I pretended to drive away last night."

Jack at once recognized the speaker as the driver of the gypsy caravan of the day before. "I don't see how I am going to prevent your having the stones and pebbles now that you have already taken possession of them," she answered indifferently. "But please don't let our overseer find you lurking about, or he will be dreadfully angry."

The stranger laughed and shrugged his shoulders carelessly, and Jack noticed that he seemed very sure of himself. "Oh, don't you worry about John, Jim Colter I mean," he returned coolly. "I am not afraid of him, though I won't trouble you any more than I can help."

"Did you ask the man if he found any signs of gold in our creek, Jack?" Jean demanded eagerly, as the three girls rode off together again.

Jack shook her head. "No, silly, of course I didn't," she replied. "There are lots of people out west who are crazy about finding gold. Don't you suppose if there had been any gold on our ranch father would have made the discovery years ago?"

"I don't know," Jean returned quietly. "But you might have asked just the same."

Jim had set his animal trap in some thick underbrush and covered it with twigs and evergreens, but Jack remembered the exact spot, and the girls now rode directly toward it. Jack carried her rifle with her, for if they found an animal that had been caught and not killed she intended to put it out of its misery.

Within a short distance of the trap, but before the girls could see it, they heard a queer moaning that made them turn pale. The cry was not like a child's and not like an animal's; it was a queer combination of both.

Jean stopped her pony instantly. "I sha'n't go on any farther with you, Jack," she declared resolutely. "Jim has caught something in that wretched trap of his and it is suffering horribly. It won't do any good for me to see it. Olive, please you go on with Jack; I simply can't, I am such a wretched coward."

Olive and Jack both looked rather miserable at the prospect ahead of them, but Jack would not turn back and Olive would not desert her. By this time the strange sobbing had ceased and there was no further sound of movement or struggle in the neighborhood of the snare until the two girls rode up in plain sight of it.

"Good gracious, Olive, what is that?" Jack called quickly, almost falling from her horse in her amazement.

Instead of discovering a wild animal staring at them with ferocious, frightened eyes, the riders spied a small, brown figure crouched on the ground in front of the wicked steel cage, as mute and motionless as a hare when first startled by a hunter. The boy's back was turned to Olive and Jack and he would not condescend even to look around at his captors.

Jack guessed at once what had happened. The child must have been starving, for he had thrust his arm inside the opening of the trap for the bait that had been put inside, and the spring had closed on his arm. Both girls ran toward him, but Jack did not hear Olive's quick exclamation. Fortunately she knew the trick of opening the trap, for the moment the wires released their cruel hold on the boy, he fainted quietly in Olive's outstretched arms. He was about ten or twelve years old, incredibly thin, with coal-black hair that fell in straight lines to his shoulders, strange, dark eyes with the look of far places in them, and a skin the color of burnished copper.

"It is Carlos, little Carlos!" Olive exclaimed wonderingly. "Jack, don't you remember my telling you about the Indian boy who helped me to come home to you when I was stolen by old Laska? I wonder how in the world he has managed to find us."

Jack did not wait to answer Olive. Running at once to the creek for water, she signaled Jean to join them, and together the girls bathed the boy's face until he returned to consciousness.

Then Carlos calmly explained to Olive that he always had meant to find her some day. With her image ever before him and the names of the Ralston girls and the Rainbow Ranch ever sounding in his ears, the lad had remained quietly in the desert with his own people until the coming of spring. When the nomad tribe started south, Carlos had journeyed with them until they again struck camp, then he had traveled on alone, asking hundreds of questions and covering more miles than he was able to count. Unconscious of the fact he had come at length within the limits of Rainbow Ranch, and when he most needed her, Olive, like a good angel, had appeared to him. Yet Carlos took her coming calmly. Miracles are every-day occurrences to the Indian. Wiser than the wisest of us, he knows that, in spite of all the explanations of science, the rising and the setting of the sun, the life of a flower, most of the things he sees in his world, are nature's miracles. So the miracle of Olive's discovery seemed to Carlos only another mysterious gift from the unknown Father.

Scorning to have his wounded arm bandaged, the boy soon started homeward with the girls. Jim and Frieda were waiting in front of the Lodge for them to return to breakfast. Jim laughed and Frieda stared when they beheld four figures on horseback instead of three.

"Well, Jack, who is your latest find?" Jim called out cheerfully, waving his hand to Jack in token of peace and good fellowship.

The horses stopped, and the Indian boy slid off from behind Olive's saddle and stood erect, facing Jim squarely. "I am Carlos, of the tribe of the Blackfeet," he answered proudly. "Are you the Big Chief of this ranch?"

Jim Colter shook his head gravely, although his eyes were smiling. "No, I am Big Chief of nothing, sonnie," he replied kindly. "But you had better come into the house with me; that is an uncommonly ugly wound you have on your arm, and I've an idea you might be persuaded to eat a little something."

CHAPTER IV

THE WAY TO ARCADY

"IT can't be, Jim, that you think maybe we will be able to carry out our scheme," Jean murmured, her voice hushed almost into a whisper from sheer surprise. She held her fork in the air, hovering between her mouth and her plate, while the other three girls leaned back limply in their chairs at the breakfast table. To win a battle without a fight when all your forces are drawn up for action is unsettling.

"Oh, well, I didn't exactly say I would agree to this caravan trip," Jim hedged. "I don't know that it is a good plan for you to give up your home and take to the woods; but I did say that the idea was worth considering if Miss Ruth favors it. The thing that troubles me most is who is to be the leader of this female cavalcade?" Jim frowned and buttered his fourth hot biscuit. "Don't tell me, Jack Ralston, that you can go it alone, for you can't. It is a good thing you were born in Wyoming, the first state to declare for woman's suffrage, for if ever I met a real natural born female suffragette, it's you. There isn't a thing on this earth that a man does that you wouldn't try if you could. I don't know, Miss Drew, but that we are a little more advanced on the woman question out here than you are in Vermont," Jim drawled slowly. "Kind of seems like it ought to help reconcile you to living among us."

Ruth laughed girlishly. She had on a white piqué frock and looked as dainty as a Dresden china shepherdess; she had plenty of color now and her lips had lost their disapproving curve. "I don't need the vote to reconcile me to living with the ranch girls, Mr. Colter," she insisted sweetly. "And please understand I am just as anxious for the caravan trip as I can be."

Jim looked thoughtfully at his plate without answering, until Jack gave a little tug at his sleeve. "See here, Jim, dear," she argued quickly, "even I haven't suggested that we undertake our trip without a man for our guide. You know we want to follow one of the old, almost forgotten trails across the state to the Yellowstone Park, and of course we don't want to get lost; but Jean and Olive and I planned the whole thing out this morning just perfectly. We know some of the horses we want to take with us and we have chosen the very man for our escort."

Jim shook his head obstinately. "You know I am not talking against the boys on our ranch," he answered solemnly; "they are as good a set of fellows as can be found anywhere in the business. But there isn't one of them that's fit to trust with the finest girls in this country."

"Oh, our guide is all right; don't worry about him, Jim," Jean announced, with the calm assurance of a priestess of the Delphic oracle. "I know you will thoroughly approve of him as soon as you hear who he is." Jean tried her best to wink at Ruth, so that she might guess their meaning, but Ruth was completely in the dark.

"I am pretty sure *not* to approve of him, you mean," Jim interrupted gloomily. "I have thought of every man on the place, and there isn't one of them I would even consider."

"Oh, yes, there is one, Jim; just one, and you haven't thought of him yet," Jack argued unhesitatingly.

Frieda snickered, Olive smiled and Jean shrugged her shoulders, but Ruth looked as puzzled as Jim.

"Well, out with your man's name, children," Jim demanded firmly. "You must not set your heart on this excursion until I know who *he* is. I am sorry now that I ever listened to your scheme."

Jean, who was sitting next Ruth, leaned over and whispered something to her, and Ruth gave a happy laugh and then blushed furiously without rhyme or reason.

"Jim, there is but one person in the world we want to go with us, and you certainly ought to know who he is," Jack suggested at this moment. "Surely you know that it's you. Of course it couldn't be anyone else."

"Me – me!" Jim Colter exclaimed helplessly, the tired, thoughtful expression which his brown face had worn all morning changing suddenly to one of joy at Jack's proposition. "Why, you are mad as a March hare, Miss Ralston. I know you thought of renting Rainbow Lodge for the magnificent sum of one hundred dollars a month, but I took it that bargain did not include a thousand or more acres of good Wyoming land, and I would like to know who would look after the ranch while I was away."

"Oh, Jim, you are tiresome," Jean protested. "Do you think the ranch would go to rack and ruin if you left it for a little while? You know one of the other men could take charge of things for you. Why, you haven't taken a holiday from this place in *years*, and when you went away last time I suppose it was business, for you never said where you went nor what happened to you while you were away."

Jim's face turned so red that Jack was afraid Jean's idle speech had hurt his feelings, for he probably did not like the idea that they thought anyone as capable of running their ranch for them as he was. She slipped away from her place at the table and put her arm over Jim's shoulder as simply as though she were six instead of sixteen. Jim had always been a kind of big brother to the ranch girls. "Dear old Jim," Jack whispered affectionately, "don't be offended. Of course, Jean does not mean that anybody can really manage the ranch except you, but she does think, and indeed we all do – Cousin Ruth most of all, though she hasn't said anything yet – that you could come away with us for a while, even if you just take the trip with us to Yellowstone Park and then return to the ranch as you think best. O, Jim!" Jack's words tripped over each other in her eagerness, "you know you would love our caravan excursion better than anything in the world! It was just because you knew how much you would adore it yourself that you agreed so readily to our scheme when we proposed it to you. Don't you remember how we used to plot and plan just such a journey years and years ago, when Jean and Frieda and I were little girls? You used to tell us stories about your long ride all alone across the great desert when you had no one but your horse for company, no money, no friends, and no place to go until you found us." Jack paused for an instant.

Jim Colter was looking out the window, but his eyes were not on the landscape before him.

"Don't you recall, Jim, how you said that even then you learned to love the romance of the silent places, even the great loneliness that made you feel as though the world were created just for you?" Jack went on pleadingly. "And you said that some day you would take us for a trip across the prairies, and father promised that we might go when we grew up. Now everything is getting so civilized out west, do let us start on our pilgrimage while there is some of the wilderness left." Jack's next words to her friend were spoken in such a low tone that no one else could guess what she was saying: "I think father would like you to keep the promise to us, if you could, Jim, and it would be the most wonderful opportunity in the world for you with Ruth."

Jim gazed slowly about the group of girls without the least indication that he had understood Jack's suggestion. "Well, I will think things over for a few days and kind of see how the land lies," he announced aloud, "and if there is anybody around who can look after the ranch for me, I think maybe I had better see that you don't come to harm."

Jack gave Jim a little shake and Jean pulled him up from the breakfast table. "Don't talk in that tiresome, dutiful fashion, Jim Colter; we will not stand it," Jean protested; "for you know perfectly well that you are as crazy about our jaunt as the rest of us and you wouldn't miss it now for worlds!"

The entire breakfast party had gotten up from the table and were fluttering about the room. A little pine fire burned in the fireplace, but the windows and doors were wide open. Some one walked across the front porch and knocked, and when no one answered, followed the sound of the voices indoors. Frieda gave the first exclamation of surprise at their visitor, tripped over a rocking chair in running to him and landed in the arms of Frank Kent. "Oh, I am glad to see you!" she exclaimed happily. "Why, we thought you were at home in England. What can you be doing here?"

"I have come to see you, Frieda," Frank answered immediately, "but besides you, every single other person at the Rainbow Ranch." Frank must have had half a dozen arms to have shaken hands with all his friends in the room at the same time, yet somehow, in spite of their greetings, he managed

to give both his hands to Jack and to grasp hers in the warm friendliness to which she was accustomed from him.

"I declare, I feel like I hadn't seen you in a hundred years," he said simply; "and yet it has been only about six months."

"What are you doing in this part of the world again, Mr. Kent?" Jim Colter inquired rather coolly. He liked Frank Kent well enough, but the young man had gone home to England, when the affairs of the ranch girls were safely settled with his cousin Daniel Norton, who had tried to steal their home from them, and Jim had not expected nor desired to see the English fellow again. He didn't care much for foreigners, even Anglo-Saxon ones.

"I am only here for a little while, Mr. Colter," Frank Kent explained, answering the question in Jim's words and in Jack's eyes. "I came back to America on a short business trip. My father heard of some mines in Colorado, and as I was so enthusiastic about the West he sent me out to investigate them for him. As Colorado is a sister state to Wyoming, I had to slip across the border, you know," he ended shyly.

Olive had let every one else in the room finish their welcome to Frank Kent before she attempted to speak to him. Now she put out her slender hand and held his only for a moment while her face flushed and her dark eyes shone with a soft radiance. "I am truly glad to see you again," she declared with more real feeling than any one of the other girls had yet revealed. Jack, who adored Olive, and was a little jealous of any affection she might show for other people, stared at her curiously.

"O Frank, do let's all go out of doors," Jack suggested. "We have the most wonderful scheme we want to tell you about and we want to know everything about your people in England, your father and mother and two sisters and your wonderful estate in Surrey."

The entire party was just leaving the living room when Aunt Ellen's tall form blocked the door. Her face showed anger and she held the small Indian boy by his uninjured arm. Carlos' eyes were larger and more mournful than ever and his lips set in an obstinate curve.

"This boy says he won't eat with Zack and me," Aunt Ellen announced angrily. "He says he is the son of a chief and the grandson of one and that he should be fed first; and I won't put up with such nonsense."

"O Carlos!" Olive came across the room and dropped on the floor in front of the lad. "How can you be so silly and ungrateful?" she asked pleadingly. "Aunt Ellen, his people are all dead; they were killed in a fight on the plains, and I don't know whether Carlos is a chief's son or not. But of course we can't keep him at the ranch if he is troublesome."

Olive was such a lovely picture as she knelt on the floor gazing up into the Indian boy's face that Frank Kent looked at her closely for the first time since he entered Rainbow Lodge. She was more changed than any one of the ranch girls in the six months of his absence, and seemed older and somehow more graceful and elusive than ever.

Jim Colter took several great strides across the room toward small Carlos, without apparently heeding Ruth's little cry of remonstrance nor Olive's plea for patience; he seemed so big and fierce and strong and the Indian boy so little and weak and defiant, that it was like a great eagle pouncing down on an impudent sparrow. Jim swooped Carlos up in his arms, but instead of devouring him, put the lad down in a chair by the breakfast table, poured out a glass of milk for him and made him drink it, for he saw what no one else had, that the boy was almost dying of hunger.

"Leave us to ourselves, please," Jim demanded, smiling at Aunt Ellen apologetically. "I want to see after this boy myself for a few minutes. Who knows but we may need just such a little scout in our trip across the prairies."

Ruth smiled at Jim without a trace of the old-maid disapproval of him which she once felt, and Olive gave a sigh of relief, for she had been worrying all through breakfast about what they could do with Carlos when they went on their wonderful caravan trip. It had seemed so unkind to desert him after his long and faithful quest of her.

A quarter of an hour later Jim came out in the yard, and the Indian lad went to the kitchen to do as he was bid. Whatever Jim had told him served to keep him proudly obedient so long as he remained at the ranch house.

In front of the Lodge, Jean, Olive, Frieda and Ruth were still talking of their journey, while Frank and Jack had wandered off somewhere together. Jean was flitting about in the sunlight like a brown sparrow, twittering and singing and hopping from very joy at being alive. She suddenly seized Jim's hand and forced Ruth to take hold of his other one, then when Olive and Frieda joined the circle, she made them whirl around until they were completely out of breath. "I declare, I never was so happy in my life," Jean panted, when she finally released her victims. "I believe every good thing in the world comes true if you only want it hard enough. But don't you wish we were traveling across the plains right now? It is such a wonderful, wonderful day!"

Truly it might have been a spring morning in the Garden of Eden. The pale green leaves of the tall cottonwood trees were shimmering and quivering with each faintest breeze; the birds were rustling softly in their branches, and, beyond the trees, the alfalfa fields were now a delicate lavender and rose.

Jean pointed through an opening in the trees, where the landscape stretched almost unbroken to the line of hills on the western horizon and made a little curtsy to Ruth.

"Oh, what's the way to Arcady
Where all the leaves are merry?"

"Tell me, Ruth, dear," she quoted mischievously from a volume of poems she and her chaperon had just finished reading.

Ruth shook her head, but Jim stared at Jean thoughtfully. "Say that little verse again, Jean," he said slowly. "I don't know where Arcady is, but it is a pretty sounding place."

Jean laughed roguishly and blew him a kiss. "What has come over you, Jim, to make you willing to listen to poetry?" she inquired. "Arcady is just an ideal country that poets like to write about, but here's the way to find it if you like:

"What, know you not, old man (quoth he), —
Your hair is white, your face is wise, —
That *love* must kiss that Mortal's eyes
Who hopes to see fair Arcady?
No gold can buy you entrance there, —
But beggared love may go all bare —
No wisdom won with weariness,
But love goes in with Folly's dress —
No fame that wit could ever win,
But only love may lead love in
To Arcady, to Arcady."

At the end of her recitation Jean quickly put her hands in Olive's and Frieda's and ran off to see if any flowers had bloomed in their violet bed, leaving Ruth and Jim alone. Ruth was blushing, for she had a far-off idea of what Jean meant to suggest by her quotation, but Jim appeared so sublimely unconscious that she felt relieved. He was evidently thinking of something very different from love or Arcady, for Ruth had to touch him before he seemed to hear what she was saying. "When may Jack write the people to say they can have the Lodge?" she inquired, determined not to be entirely forgotten by her companion, no matter how glad she was that he had paid no attention to Jean.

"The Lodge? Oh, any time," he answered vaguely, looking at Ruth in a way that made her catch her breath. Jim was not thinking at the moment of anything connected with Rainbow Lodge. He was

wondering if a man, who had something in his past he wished to forget, could ever travel over into Arcady by the route Jean's poem suggested – Arcady, that country he knew nothing about except that the name had a pleasant sound.

CHAPTER V

MEETING WITH NEW PEOPLE

"JEAN BRUCE, if you add one more item to that everlasting old list of yours, we will have to give up our trip," Jack Ralston remarked crossly. "Even if Jim has given us a few precious dollars to invest in our going-away outfits, we can't buy the entire town of Laramie and cart it across the state to the Yellowstone Park." Jack was standing in front of her mirror trying to fasten down her shirtwaist in the back, and as a pin had just pricked her finger, she was irritable.

"What was that funny thing you advised our buying last night, Olive?" Jean called into the next room, ignoring her cousin's protest in the serenest possible manner. Miss Bruce was dressed for a journey of some sort in a pretty, dark blue suit and a cream straw hat with a pair of jaunty blue wings atop of it. Her expression was one of demure readiness for any great event, yet she was seated quietly at a table with a half-filled memorandum book before her and a much-used pencil in her hand.

Olive flitted in from the adjoining chamber with her new frock half buttoned. "Oh, never mind, if we can't afford the thing I suggested," she said soothingly. "I am afraid it will cost an awful lot, but I read that every traveler across a desert ought to have a sleeping bag to take along. We can wrap up in our old blankets and comforts, but I thought it would be fine to get a bag for Ruth if we could, for you know she is such a chilly person, and if she isn't comfortable at night she will lie awake and listen to the strange sounds of the desert that we love and she fears."

Jack looked instantly penitent. She was never impatient with Olive, as she sometimes was with Jean; and, besides, she had about finished dressing and the reflection in the glass was gratifying. The ranch girls had new spring suits sent from the East. Jack's was brown, and her little straw toque had in it a curling feather that matched the bronze tones in her hair.

"We will have the sleeping bag if we have to go without shoes," she answered amiably. "But, Jean, dear, why do you have to have a bottle of violet perfume to take with you across the plains when you have lived for some sixteen years without one?"

"That's just the reason, Jack Ralston," Jean returned uncompromisingly. "I wonder when you'll learn that we are not tomboys any longer and ought to have the things other girls have. You know you are as vain of your appearance in that suit Cousin Ruth made you get, as you can be. I must say you do look rather well in it."

Jack kissed Jean quickly. "I am an interfering old thing," she confessed meekly. "But please don't talk about our being nearly grown up, for it frightens me; I am not going to be grown for years and years. Promise me you won't say a word about my remembering that I am a girl and a fairly elderly one the whole time we are on our caravan trip and I'll agree to do whatever *you* wish while we are in Laramie."

"All right. Here comes Frieda and Cousin Ruth, so it must be almost time for us to start," Jean consented, stuffing her paper and pencil into her shiny new traveling bag.

Jean, Jack and Olive were about to leave for the city of Laramie to purchase the supplies for their caravan trip to the Yellowstone Park.

Several weeks had passed since Jean originated her wonderful idea, and most of the arrangements for the journey had been completed. The Harmons had signed the contract to rent Rainbow Lodge for the summer, and Frank Kent had gone to Colorado, after a short visit at the ranch, threatening to meet the girls again in some out-of-the-way place before their holiday was over.

The girls were trying not to appear perturbed, though they were really in a great state of excitement. For the first time in their lives they were to spend two nights alone in a hotel. Jim could not leave the ranch, on account of some special business; Ruth could not accompany them, because she would not leave Frieda, who had a bad cold and was not well enough to go. However, Mrs. Peterson,

the proprietress of a boarding place where the girls were to stay, was an acquaintance of Jim's and had promised to act as their chaperon.

Frieda tumbled into the room at this instant, with her big blue eyes more aggrieved than usual and her small nose distinctly pink around the edges. It was her first experience in being left at home and she was not happy over it. She flung her arms about her sister, and Jack leaned over to whisper pleadingly, "Promise you won't cry when we go, baby, and we'll bring you and Ruth the funniest surprise presents in town."

While Ruth was rearranging Jean's hat, which had slipped to one side in the flurry of departure, and straightening Olive's long coat, the rattling of the horses' harness and Jim's voice telling the girls to hurry could be distinctly heard.

"Don't forget my list of medicines, Jean, and don't forget the new toothbrushes," Ruth advised hastily. "And, Jack, please, for goodness' sake, don't fail to keep your appointment with the Harmons at their hotel to-morrow afternoon. As they have been good enough to wait in town an extra week for us to give up the Lodge to them after their long trip from New York, you ought to be willing to meet them if they wish it."

"Well, I'm not willing, Ruth," Jack demurred; "though we promise to keep our words like ladies. I confess I am horribly embarrassed at having to call on entire strangers with no one even to introduce us. I do devoutly hope the men of the family won't think they have to appear, because I am afraid enough of the mother and daughter. I suppose it is this poor Elizabeth Harmon who is curious to see what we are like, so I presume we will have to give her the pleasure. Imagine us, Ruth, at five to-morrow afternoon making our bows to the rich New Yorkers. It is silly of me, but I have taken a dislike to the entire Harmon family simply because they are going to live in our home for a while, I suppose, though I am anxious enough for their money for our holiday."

During Jack's monologue the girls had gone into the yard, and a few minutes later Ruth and Frieda were almost overpowered by the fervor of their farewell embraces. The last glimpse they had of the travelers, Jack was standing up in their wagon, with Jean and Olive clutching at her skirts and entirely unmindful of the grandeur of her new attire, waving both hands and giving the familiar, long-drawn-out call of the cowboys of the Rainbow Ranch.

The trip to Laramie was uneventful, and though the ranch girls slept three in a bed, and talked till almost morning that they might enjoy to the full the novelty of the experience, their first night at Mrs. Peterson's boarding house was equally without excitement.

By eight o'clock the following morning the girls set out on their first regular shopping expedition, and by four in the afternoon Jean sank dejectedly down on a stool in a grocery store. "Girls," she declared wearily, "we have shopped all day and shopped all night and shopped again until broad daylight. At least, I feel as if we had, and if you don't take me somewhere to rest I shall surely die." But the girls had scrimped and saved pennies all day in order to buy the sleeping bags for Ruth and Freida, and would not give up until they were purchased.

Poor Jean was forcibly dragged from her resting place by Olive and Jack, and the three girls set out down the street again, gazing in all the shop windows. "For mercy's sake, what kind of a store would keep a sleeping bag, Olive?" Jean inquired mournfully, leaning heavily upon Jack, who walked next her. "I have seen a punching bag in Jim's room at the rancho, and I have heard somewhere of carpet-bags, but I have no more idea of what a sleeping bag is like than the old man in the moon."

"Well, I don't know exactly either, Jean," Olive confessed, walking a little in advance of her friends, with her eyes on the ground. Her frightened "Oh!" and stumble against Jack brought the entire party to a standstill. A young man had been marching along the street toward them in an entirely abstracted state of mind and had run into Olive.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered apologetically. "I am not a native of this place and –"

Jack's eyes flashed with indignation and Olive flushed, with the soft color that was peculiar to her rising in delicate waves from her throat to her forehead, but mischievous Jean giggled. "Is it

the custom to bump into people in the place you do come from?" she inquired innocently. "Because, crude as we are, it isn't the custom here."

Jack frowned at Jean's frivolity, indicating very plainly that Miss Bruce was not to enter into a conversation with a stranger, but she need not have worried, because the young man was not paying the least attention either to her or Jean. He was staring at Olive, not rudely, but with a curious, questioning gaze that made her drop her dark eyes until her long, straight lashes touched her cheeks.

"I hope I didn't hurt you," the young fellow protested awkwardly. Olive shook her head without glancing up, but the other two girls got a good look at him. He was almost as dark as Olive herself, although he had none of her foreign appearance, and was big and broad-shouldered, and seemed to be an eastern college fellow, twenty or twenty-one years old.

Jack engineered her party into a near-by department store, leaving the young man still staring after them with his hat in his hand.

"Great Scott, what a boor I was!" he exclaimed to himself a second later. "But I never had anything strike me so all of a heap as that girl's face in my life." And he strode away looking tremendously puzzled.

Fortunately the brown woolen sleeping bag for Ruth was discovered in this first shop, but by the time a smaller one was bought for Frieda, it occurred to Jack to ask the time, as no one of them possessed a watch, and Jean and Olive had wandered off to make new investments in motor veils. "Ten minutes to five o'clock," the shopkeeper announced, and Jack's heart sank to zero. All day she had been wishing that she had not promised Ruth to keep the appointment with the Harmons, but what would Jean and Olive do when they found they had no time to dress before their engagement?

"Girls," a sepulchral voice whispered suddenly in Jean's ear, "we have just ten minutes to get to the hotel to call on those dreadful Harmons, if we rush off this minute."

Jean caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror which happened to be just before her on the counter. Her stylish appearance of the morning had disappeared; her hat was on one side and a smudge decorated the tip of her piquant nose. Then she gazed disapprovingly at Jack, who was almost as much wilted and whose hair was anything but neat. Olive's appearance was the best, but she was unusually pale, with violet shadows under her eyes and a soft droop to her whole body.

"Behold the Three Graces!" Jean remarked disdainfully. "Jack Ralston, I'll not go a step to call on those people until we have had a chance to fix ourselves up. I know they will talk all summer about how dreadful we are if they see us first looking such frights."

"But, Jean," Jack argued, as much depressed as her cousin, "if we go back to our boarding place and dress before we make our call we shall be so horribly late that Mrs. Harmon probably won't see us and she may be so offended that she will refuse to come to the Lodge this summer. Then good-bye to our caravan trip."

Jean's rebellious attitude slowly altered. "But what shall I do about the smut on my nose, Jack?" she objected faintly.

"Rub it off with your handkerchief," Jack replied cruelly, as the three girls made a hurried rush for a car.

"But we may meet the son of the family, and I think Donald Harmon is a dream of a name," Jean continued mournfully, "and I did hope that one of us would be able to make an impression on him."

Olive laughed and gave Jack's hand a conciliatory squeeze, for Jack's face had flushed as it usually did when Jean made any such teasing suggestion. The truth of the matter was that Jack hated to think there was any real difference between friendship with a boy or a girl, and Jean, though she only joked about the subject at present, cherished a very different idea.

"It is much more important that we make ourselves agreeable to Mrs. Harmon and her daughter," Jack answered, with her nose in the air, as she sat down in the car, but Jean merely lifted her pretty shoulders and gave a sly glance at Olive. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Ralston," she apologized.

"I forgot you were a man-hater, unless one leaves Frank Kent out of the question." This was a hateful speech of Jean's and she deserved the speedy punishment she received.

The three ranch girls found the hotel they sought and were given the number of Mrs. Harmon's sitting room. They hesitated for a minute outside her door. "I don't know why I feel so nervous about going in, just as though something dreadful was going to happen," Jack whispered softly. "I don't even like to knock."

"I know what is troubling you, Jack," Olive murmured gently. "None of us has confessed it to the other, but I believe we are nervous about meeting Elizabeth Harmon. We don't know how ill she is or whether she is even able to walk, and we are afraid we may do or say the wrong thing."

"I am sure you won't, Olive," Jack returned, as she summoned courage to knock at the closed door. The girls thought they heard a faint response from the inside, and walked slowly into the room, hesitating for a moment because of the sudden change from daylight to almost complete darkness. The blinds at the windows were drawn closely down, and there was no light except that which shone from two rose-colored candles that burned on the tall mantel-piece. No one seemed to be in the room as Jean started blindly forward. Olive put out her hand to stop her, but she was not in time, for at the same instant Jean plunged blindly into a small table loaded with teacups, and the quiet room echoed with the noise of crashing china and embarrassed exclamations from poor Jean.

The next moment Jack and Olive saw a fragile figure rise up from an immense leather chair and swing herself toward them on a single crutch. She was so thin and delicate and dressed in such an exquisite clinging white gown that she looked like the ghost of a girl, the only color about whom was the mass of shining red-gold hair that hung in a loose cloud over her shoulders.

"Oh, I am so sorry and ashamed!" Jean murmured miserably, her brown eyes filling with tears, as she surveyed the havoc she had wrought.

"Please don't mind; it was all my fault." Elizabeth Harmon put out a small, hot hand and touched Jean's fingers shyly. "I know I ought not to have had the room so dark when you came in, but I have a fancy for meeting people for the first time in the soft candle light."

Elizabeth spoke the last words gently and Jack tried to conceal it, but her hostess knew that the girl with the sympathetic warm gray eyes understood why she preferred to meet strangers in a semi-darkness.

Elizabeth was not a pretty girl. Her eyes were too pale a blue and she looked too ill for beauty; besides, her face had a wilful and unhappy expression, and yet, in spite of these defects, she had a curious kind of grace and charm.

Jean and Olive were trying vainly to pick up the shattered teacups, so it was Jack who first saw Elizabeth Harmon's dilemma. She had walked across the room toward them, but she was not strong enough to get back to her chair alone and she was too sensitive to ask for help. Jack put her arm about her hostess, without waiting for her permission, and led her to a chair, then she sat down on a little spindle-legged stool near her, feeling shy and confused.

"You shouldn't have helped me; I hate to have people do things for me," Elizabeth remarked rudely. "I could have walked back to my chair perfectly well by myself. Please do sit down, everybody; you make me feel dreadfully nervous. Mother would join us if she knew you were here."

The ranch girls were embarrassed by their hostess' ungracious manner, but they could not be really angry with her. Jean and Olive wondered why she didn't let her mother know of their arrival. Again Jack guessed the truth. Elizabeth could not get across the room to the bell and would not ask one of them to ring it for her. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Elizabeth bent over toward Jack, whispering softly: "Forgive my being so hateful, and thank you for helping me. I have wanted dreadfully to know you girls, but I'm afraid you'll think I am so spoiled you won't have anything to do with me. Will you please ring the bell?"

Jack moved quietly across the room, but before she reached the bell the door flew open, admitting a big fellow with flashing white teeth. He stopped in amazement at the sight of the three

visitors. Jean and Jack recognized him at once as the young man who had stared at Olive so curiously after running into her on the street.

CHAPTER VI

A CURIOUS RESEMBLANCE

"I'll be – I beg your pardon," Donald Harmon apologized hurriedly. "Sister, I didn't know your visitors had come." He held out his hand to Jack, who was nearest him. "I ought to have known who you were when I met you an hour ago, but I was a little confused over something," he said.

Elizabeth Harmon introduced her brother to the girls, whose names she had now learned. When Donald spoke to Olive he tried in vain to hide his puzzled expression, and again she dropped her gaze before his as though she did not wish him to see her face. Olive was always shy, but to-day she seemed more so than usual, and she had a peculiar fashion, like some flowers, of folding herself about with little leaves and tendrils of reserve to hide her real self from the outside world.

Donald Harmon sat down next Jack and immediately across from Olive, but Jack made no effort to open a conversation with him, for she did not like him and did object to the odd way in which he gazed at Olive.

"What is your friend's name?" Donald inquired immediately.

"Olive," Jack returned in a non-committal fashion.

"But Olive what? I have a special reason for wishing to know," the young fellow protested impatiently. Olive and Jean were talking with Elizabeth and were not observing Jack and her companion.

For the fleeting part of a moment Jack hesitated, "Olive – why, Olive Ralston," she replied quietly. "I thought you knew our name was Ralston."

"I did," Donald answered. "Please don't think I am mad, but I thought for a second she might have another name. Have you ever heard the theory that we all have a double somewhere in the world? I want you to look closely at my mother when she comes in. Your sister is enough like her to be her own child, though of course there is a difference in their coloring and expressions and perhaps other details that I have not noticed, but when I saw your sister on the street to-day I was overcome by their likeness." At this moment Donald Harmon, hearing his mother's voice in the hall, quickly turned on the electric lights.

Jacqueline Ralston caught her breath before the strange vista of possibilities that Donald Harmon's suggestion opened to her imagination. Never had she ceased to wonder at the mystery of Olive's birth. "Has your mother ever been out west before?" Jack asked hastily. And Donald only had time to answer, "Never in her life," when Mrs. Harmon entered the sitting room.

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