

Vandercook Margaret

The Ranch Girls and Their Heart's Desire



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CHAPTER I

THE BRANCH OF THE TREE

Across a wide prairie a man and woman were riding side by side at an hour approaching twilight on a September afternoon. Moving slowly they appeared to be studying the landscape.

Toward the west the sky was banked with gold and rose and purple clouds, while the earth revealed the same colors in the yellow sand of the desert spaces, the wide fields of purple clover, and the second blooming of the prairie roses.

"Strange to have you living at the old Rainbow ranch again, Jack, and yet under the circumstances perhaps the most natural thing in the world! Long ago when I was a young fellow I learned that when human beings are hurt they follow the instincts of the homing birds who seek the nest. You have always loved the old ranch better than any place in the world, more than the other girls ever loved it, so with the news of your husband's death I knew you would return from England and bring your son with you, Lady Kent, once Jacqueline Ralston of the Rainbow ranch. Somehow I never have learned to think of you, Jack, by your title of Lady Kent."

"No, Jim, and why should you?" the girl answered. "I never learned to think of myself in that fashion. I am going to confide something to you, Jim Colter. I always have confided my secrets to you since I was a little girl. I never learned during the years of my married life in England to feel that I was anything but a stranger there. Yet for my husband's sake I did my best to like England and try to make English people like me. I was never specially successful. I presume I am hopelessly an American and, what may be worse, hopelessly western. At present I feel that I wish to spend all the rest of my life in Wyoming. But one is not often allowed to do what one wishes. This morning I received letters from England, all of them asking when I intended to return and settle down as Dowager Lady Kent at Kent House, to bring up little Jimmie in a manner becoming a future British Lord. The worst of it is I don't want to go back and I don't want to bring up my son as an aristocrat. My husband was an Englishman, but I am an American and have never believed in titles. Frank had no title when I married him. I want little Jimmie to be half an American anyhow and wholly a democrat. What must I do, Jim Colter, stay here on the ranch with my own people and lead the life I love, or go to England and spend half my time amid the conventional society existence I loathe, and the other half playing Lady Bountiful to the poor people of a small village?"

Jacqueline Ralston, who *was* Lady Kent, regardless of her own protest, now reined in her horse, and rising in her saddle let her glance sweep the wide horizon.

In the wide, gray eyes, in the low, level brow, in the full, generous lips and abundant vitality one might have recognized the pioneer spirit, infrequent in human beings, but more infrequent in women than in men. Yet this Jacqueline Ralston Kent, one of the original four "Ranch Girls of the Rainbow Lodge," possessed. All her life she had loved personal freedom, wide spaces, a simple, every-day, outdoor existence without formality. She felt a natural intimacy with the people who attracted her without consideration for their social position. Yet in so contrary a fashion does fate deal with us that Jack had spent the greater part of her married life under exactly opposite conditions.

"For my part I don't dare advise you, Jack, I so want you to stay on at the Rainbow lodge, more than I wish anything else in the world at present. With Ruth gone, I don't see how I shall ever get on with my four new little Rainbow ranch girls without you to help mother them. Yet I had pretty much the same experience once before! Odd how circumstances repeat themselves! You must first do what

you think best for Jimmie. What does the boy himself wish to do, stay here at the ranch and learn to be a ranchman under my training, or go back to Kent House?"

Laughing Jack shook her head, crowned with gold brown hair; she was without a hat, after her old custom.

"You know the answer to that question as well as I do, Jim. Jimmie adores the ranch. He is named for you, and you have done everything in your power to make him love it. Then I must have implanted my own affection for the freedom of our western life in my little son. Jimmie insists that he wants nothing better in the future than to stay on here and run the ranch and the mine when you and I have grown too old to be troubled with such responsibilities. He is only eight years old at present and so we need not feel laid on the shelf at once."

"No, but I am not young as I was, Jack, hair is turning pretty gray these days," Jim Colter answered. "I have never mentioned this to the boy, but I have wanted the same thing he does. I would like Jimmie to live here and perhaps marry one of my four girls and keep the old ranch in the family through another generation or so. Sentiment of course, yet so far Jimmie is the only son on the horizon! Here I am with four daughters, Jean and Ralph Merritt with two, Olive and Captain MacDonnell with no children, and Frieda's and Professor Russell's little girl so frail that it is hard to count on any future for her."

At this Jack's expression clouded. A moment later she again arose in her saddle, this time pointing toward the eastern portion of the Rainbow ranch. To the west and north lay the gold mine discovered years before, though no longer yielding a supply of gold as in its early days.

The mine had never interested either Jacqueline Ralston or Jim Colter as it had the other members of the family. They had been horse and cattle raisers before a mine was ever dreamed of, and it was the rearing of the livestock for which Jim and Jack cared intensely to this day.

Riding through the ranch, every half hour or so they had passed a herd of cattle browsing amid the purple alfalfa grass, seen the sleek brown cows standing with their young calves close beside them. Less often they had run across a small drove of horses and young colts, as horses were no longer so good an investment as in the old days. Yet the present Rainbow ranch owners would prefer to have lost money than be without them, the horses having always received Jack's especial affection and attention as a girl and upon her occasional visits home to the ranch after her English marriage.

"Can that be a herd of horses or cattle stampeding there toward the east, Jim? We are too far off to see distinctly; suppose we ride in that direction," Jack said unexpectedly.

Wasting no time in words Jim Colter nodded. The following moment both horses, their noses pointing eastward, were galloping across the open prairie fields and away from the road.

Experienced ranchmen, he and his companion appreciated that the cloud of dust and the grouping of dark bodies advancing toward them with unusual rapidity represented trouble of some kind. At this time of the year it seemed scarcely possible that a wolf had stolen from the pack and frightened one of the herds. Yet there was no accounting for the tricks of nature. Moreover, frequently a number of horses or cattle suffered from group fear, the one transmitting the fright to the other without apparent reason.

Half a mile away the drove of young horses, which Jim Colter had finally located with his field glasses, turned and swerved south.

Almost as swiftly the two riders moved off in the same direction, hoping they might be able to divide the frightened animals and drive them apart.

A quarter of a mile farther along, riding at no great distance from each other, Jim Colter heard an exclamation from his companion, so sudden, so terrified and so unexpected that he reined his own horse sharply until for an instant it stood trembling on its hind legs, its slender nose snuffing the soft air.

"Tell me, Jim, is that Jimmie's pony ahead of us? The saddle is on the pony, but no one is riding. Jimmie can't have ridden over here alone? He can't be anywhere near-by?"

Yet even as the question was being asked, the man and woman saw and, seeing, understood.

The pony which Jack had spied with the bridle dangling over its head was moving from place to place nibbling at the most luxurious patches of clover. Beyond, and closer to the trampling herd of panic-stricken animals, lay a small figure, outstretched on the ground and probably until this moment asleep.

Whether he now heard the oncoming horses or the cries of his mother and guardian, in any case, awakening, he jumped to his feet and the same instant turned, beheld, and understood his own danger. In a few moments, seconds perhaps, the frightened animals would be upon him, trampling, snorting, unconscious of his presence in their frenzy.

As the boy ran across the field toward his pony, he had the consciousness that the two persons for whom he cared most in the world were coming toward him to save him from harm. Yet he also appreciated this would not be possible, as they could not reach him in time.

But Jimmie Kent was not to make the whole effort alone. As he ran he called his pony's name.

"Whitestar! Whitestar!" The boy's tones remained firm and commanding.

Whitestar had observed her own danger. The pony's head went up, showing the mark upon her pretty nose which had given her the name. A single time she pawed the earth in front of her, appearing about to rush *away* without her master, and then she cantered toward the boy.

The oncoming drove of terrified animals was now only a few yards away.

"Don't lose courage, Jack, he is your son, remember! He will win out," Jim Colter shouted, his own horse scarcely appearing to touch the earth as it ran.

"Drive straight toward them, Jimmie, don't try to cross their path," Jim called, his voice sounding unfamiliar to his own ears.

Yet either the boy heard or recognized his one chance.

Without hesitation the little figure lying close to his saddle was riding straight toward the center of the drove of twenty or thirty frightened animals. The leader, a few feet in advance of the others, apparently ran in a direct line with the boy.

Her eyes never turning for an instant from the little figure, now not thirty yards away, Jack understood what must take place. Should the leader come on without swerving Jimmie would be unseated, his pony struck down and the other horses would pass over them both. But, should Jimmie possess the courage or, greater than courage, the strength of will to force the horse in advance of the drove to swerve either toward the right or left, the others would follow.

A moment later and Jack's arms were about her son.

"You've turned the trick, Jimmie," Jim Colter was saying roughly. "But it is the front yard of the Rainbow lodge for you for the next week. How dared you ride over the ranch alone when I have told you it was forbidden? Now you and your mother get home as soon as you can and send whatever men you come across in this direction. I suppose the horses will have tired themselves out after a few more miles of running, but it is just as well to see they are quieted down."

So Jim Colter rode away in one direction and Jimmie and his mother in the other toward the Rainbow lodge.

CHAPTER II

THE YOUNGER SET

The front yard of the Rainbow lodge appeared an extremely small playground for a boy accustomed to covering many miles of the broad ranch and the adjoining country in the course of each day. Yet as Jim Colter's word was law on the Rainbow ranch Jimmie Kent had no thought of breaking parole.

He glanced up at the double rows of tall cottonwood trees which led from the lodge to the gate. Almost impossibly difficult trees to climb because of their tall, smooth trunks and the branches so high overhead! A warm September day and Rainbow creek not half a mile away! Jimmie taxed his imagination until he could well-nigh feel himself swimming about in the cool freshness of the little stream, deeper than usual at the present time because of the abundant September rains. When one's swim ended, not far away were his mother, his Aunt Jean and her husband Ralph Merritt, a clever mining engineer. The family was to meet this afternoon to discuss the possibility of sinking a new shaft into the old Rainbow mine with the hope of striking a new lode.

Moreover, Jim Colter (and Jimmie and the big man were so intimate as to use each other's first names) was attending to the branding of a herd of calves at one of the ranch houses. Any one, or all, of these entertainments might have been his, except for an unfortunate impulse to investigate the Rainbow ranch alone a few afternoons before.

A week of the front yard of the lodge appeared an interminable time to Jimmie Kent, yet even a week would pass in time. And one had better be half a prisoner at the old ranch than free in any other part of the world.

Six weeks before having arrived at the ranch after a long journey from England, at present this was Jimmie Kent's earnest conviction. Was there anywhere else in the world such a wide sweep of country, such plains and prairies and desert sands covered with sage brush and cacti? In the prairies there were wolves and deer and bear. Since his arrival at the ranch Jimmie believed he had heard one night the call of a wolf, the leader of the pack, and coyotes he had seen with his own eyes, sniffing about the edge of the woods not far from Rainbow creek. Jim Colter had suggested that the buffalo were not all destroyed, but might be found roaming in certain western portions of the state, now inhabited only by wandering Indian tribes. He had hinted at mountain lions as not wholly a figment of a boy's dreams, but as realities, creatures Jim Colter had beheld with his own eyes long years before, when the west was the west indeed.

Yet here he was, Jimmie Kent, late of Kent House, Kent county, England, suddenly transformed into an American boy, but shut up within an acre of ground for a week and, moreover, face to face with the tragic possibility that within a month or more he might be forced to return to England. He had nothing against England except that it was too small for a boy's energies and hopelessly devoid of wild animals outside the London Zoo.

India of course was a possession of the British Empire, and South Africa, but Jimmie felt that probably for a number of years he might not be permitted to explore these regions. So why the present discussion? If he and his mother both desired to remain at the Rainbow ranch at least for a number of years, they ought to be able to decide for themselves. Nevertheless his mother had explained that she must continue to think the situation over and to ask the advice of her family. To-night the grown-up members of the family were even to dine together for this purpose.

Discovering a cottonwood tree not far from the gate, Jimmie now climbed up and seated himself upon one of the lower branches. Here he was enabled to have a wide outlook.

Behind him was the Rainbow lodge where he and his mother were living at the present time. So often Jimmie Kent had been told its history! Here his mother with her sister, Frieda Ralston, and her

cousin Jean Bruce, had lived when the three of them were little girls and under the guardianship of Jim Colter, the manager of their father's ranch after his death. Later the fourth ranch girl had found refuge with them, escaping from an Indian woman in whose charge she had been for so many years that her early childhood was enshrouded in mystery.

From his present viewpoint Jimmie Kent was able to observe two figures not at a great distance away. They were Captain MacDonnell and his wife, who had been Olive to the other ranch girls until the discovery of her parentage.

Captain MacDonnell, injured in the great war, later had developed his talent as an artist. Jimmie possessed the ordinary small boy's attitude toward pictures, nevertheless he had something to say in favor of Captain MacDonnell's, since *his* reputation had been acquired through his painting of western scenes.

At the present moment he was sketching a mustang pony, which one of the ranch boys was leading back and forth in an effort to persuade the pony to remain within the range of the artist's vision. Jimmie would have enjoyed changing places with the other boy. In spite of Captain Bryan MacDonnell's lameness he had an especial understanding and love of the outdoors, to such an extent that he and his wife were spending a year or more at the Rainbow ranch, living in a tent, regardless of the fact that at the great house built after the discovery of the Rainbow mine there was room for any number of guests.

Jimmie now glanced over toward the splendid mansion which had been christened "Rainbow Castle" by Frieda Ralston years before. His Aunt Frieda and her distinguished if eccentric husband, Professor Henry Tilford Russell and their one little girl were at present visitors at Rainbow Castle, having arrived only a day or so before.

Jimmie was no more interested in relatives as relatives than most small boys. Yet had his preference been asked he would have said freely that he liked best his Aunt Jean and his uncle Ralph Merritt, possibly because a famous engineer who had been not only the engineer of the Rainbow mine but of several other mines would appeal to any masculine imagination. Then possessing no sons of her own and greatly desiring one, his Aunt Jean was particularly kind to him.

At this moment Jimmie became especially grateful to fate for his exalted position in the tree top. Advancing toward him he beheld his seven girl cousins.

"Eight cousins!" Some one was always muttering this tiresome exclamation, as if there was any special point in it. Personally Jimmie considered the one drawback to his residence in the United States was the possession of such an affliction. Not that he disliked the seven girls; two or three of them were fairly agreeable. One could not dislike the little girl, who was scarcely more than a baby, and whose name was Peace, she was so pretty and so gentle. She had been called Peace though named for her mother, because no one wished to repeat the name Frieda during the war.

The seven cousins and two nurses were now entering the yard of the Rainbow lodge and Jimmie Kent wondered if he preferred not to be discovered. He guessed their errand: they intended gathering violets from the violet beds on either side of the house, planted years before by Frieda Ralston in an effort to increase the family fortunes, and now famous throughout the neighborhood.

In advance were the four daughters of Jim Colter, whom he described as the four new Rainbow Ranch girls and whose names were also Jacqueline, Jean, Olive, and Frieda, although called Lina, Jeannette, Olivia, and Eda, to distinguish them from the original "Ranch Girls of the Rainbow Lodge." The three visitors with the maids were following.

An instant Jimmie considered whether it might not be a good idea to allow Jeannette Colter to observe his present elevation. She was the one of the seven girls he most disliked. A few months his elder, she boasted that she could ride and run and climb equally well with the new English boy visitor. She could learn to shoot equally well if her father offered her an equal opportunity.

The truth was that if Jimmie considered he disliked Jeannette, she cordially hated him. Before Jimmie's coming she had been her father's constant companion, riding with him about the ranch

as Jacqueline Ralston had done in the years past. But three times of late had her father left her at home with her sisters, saying that he wanted to ride alone with Jimmie in order better to make his acquaintance.

Now Jimmie felt a reasonable pride in the fact that Jeannette would not be able to occupy such a position as his present one without assistance.

"Hello," he called down. The other girls waved and returned his greeting, but Jeannette Colter laughed.

"Up a tree, aren't you, in more ways than one, Jimmie Kent! I am sorry you cannot leave the front yard for a week," which was not kind or truthful in Jeannette, who was especially pleased by Jimmie's captivity since it restored her to her father's uninterrupted companionship.

At the close of the day, having finished his solitary dinner – his mother was dining at the big house – Jimmie came out on the veranda of the lodge and went to bed in the big porch hammock where he often spent the night.

Several hours later, half awakened by the return of his mother and Jim Colter from the family dinner party, but too drowsy to speak, nevertheless Jimmie overheard his mother announce in a tone of relief:

"Well, Jim, thank goodness I have been able to make up my mind at last! Indecision, you know, always has annoyed me more than anything else in the world. So it is to be the Rainbow ranch and my own country for as many years as I can arrange it. And may they be as many years as you need me, Jim."

His friend's reply made Jimmie Kent smile and settle himself more comfortably in his hammock bed. The reply gave one a pleasant sense of permanency.

"Then if you never leave the United States until I cease to need you, Jack, you won't go away until I am removed to broader fields than the Rainbow ranch. But do you think you will be happy, that is the main thing? What will you do with yourself? These are restless days for most women and you have more energy than any woman I have ever known. Want a career, Jacqueline Ralston Kent? Are you staying in your own country because you wish to be a famous woman some day and the United States offers the best opportunity?"

"Suppose we sit down a while, Jim," Jack answered. "You are not sleepy, are you? It is too lovely a night!"

Walking over to the hammock, Jack pulled up a warm covering over her son and as he smiled up at her, whispered,

"We won't disturb you, will we, Jimmie?" and Jimmie only shook his head, not wishing to speak, yet enjoying the distant sound of the two voices he loved best.

A moment later Jim Colter and Jack were sitting together upon one of the front steps of the Rainbow lodge as they had sat together so many times in years past, always preferring to be in some spot where there were no walls closed about them but where there was a wide view of sky and land.

"Don't laugh, Jim, but I don't know, yet laugh a little if you like, as it may be good for me. Yes, I have sometimes thought since Frank's death that I should like a career of my own, besides just being Jimmie's mother, proud as I am of that honor. Inside the secret corners of my mind the thought has influenced me a little in my desire to remain at home."

"But what is the great career to be?" Jim Colter answered smiling, and yet with a sufficient interest in his tone to take away any lack of sympathy that might have been conveyed by his amusement. "You aren't going to turn poet, or painter, or actress, Jack, after displaying no fondness for the arts in all these years?"

"No, Jim Colter, and no talents either," Jack returned. "I appreciate your veiled sarcasm. No, the good fairies who bestow the artistic gifts were not present at my birthday. What do you think I might be able to do, Jim? Tell me."

There was a short silence and then the man answered:

"Help me manage the Rainbow ranch, Jack, or a larger ranch if you like."

Jack shook her head.

"No, Jim, you have managed the ranch successfully without me and though I may bore you by interfering now and then, to help you when you do not need help will not be the thing I am after. Would you hate it if I should take an interest in politics? It is an exciting world these days and after all Wyoming was the first state to give the vote to women! I wonder if I am still an American citizen. In marrying an Englishman I know I became a British subject while my husband was alive, but now he is dead and I have returned to my own country, the point is, what am I, Jim? A woman without a country?"

"Jack, I don't know. However, I should dislike your entering political life, but suppose you are old enough to decide for yourself." Jim Colter laughed. "You always did decide for yourself in the end, Jack, even when you were pretty young. But you will marry again some day! Suppose we ask an old friend of yours, Peter Stevens, whether at present you are an American citizen or a British subject? Stevens has become one of the distinguished young lawyers in the state, or in the west for that matter. But look out for him, Jack, he is an old bachelor and a woman hater. Now it must be nearly midnight. Good-night."

CHAPTER III

OLD PASTIMES

One Saturday afternoon several days later Jacqueline Kent, escaping from her family, rode alone down to the great ranch house a mile or more from the Rainbow lodge. She had not had an opportunity to visit the ranch house since her arrival at her former home. Yet as a young girl she always had enjoyed slipping off to the big ranch house unaccompanied by the other Ranch Girls and usually without Jim Colter's knowledge or consent. In the ranch house lived the ranchmen, or the cowboys who looked after the livestock on the great place.

To-day as Jack rode up to the house only three or four of the ranchmen were visible and they were standing on the rough log porch smoking and talking to one another.

But the four sombreros were immediately lifted, and one of the men came forward.

"Glad to see you, Lady Kent. Is there any order you wish to give, or any message? Sorry the greater number of the fellows are not here at present. This is Saturday afternoon, you see, and a half holiday. They are off entertaining themselves, but we'll have the laugh on them when we tell them that we have had a visit from you."

The Wyoming cowboy spoke with a courtesy and self-possession Jack had often seen lacking among more distinguished persons. However, perhaps "distinguished" is not the proper adjective, since her present companion possessed, stored inside his kit, among the personal treasures in his rough, pine-wood chamber a Distinguished Service Medal presented him by the United States Government and a Croix de Guerre, the gift of a grateful France.

Jack shook her head.

"No, I haven't a message or an order. I merely wanted to see the old ranch house and be introduced to the men. But don't call me Lady Kent. I am Mrs. Kent; now that I have returned to my own country a title strikes me as an absurdity. It is hard enough to remember, these days, that I am not Jacqueline Ralston; the ranch is so like it used to be when I was a young girl. I am sorry not to find the other men, as I rode over this afternoon knowing it was Saturday and hoping I might meet them. May I be introduced to the three men who are here, if they don't mind?"

Jack spoke with a mixture of shyness and friendliness entirely natural to her, but in the present circumstances, perhaps unusual.

The man to whom she was speaking was John Simmons, one of the assistant managers of the Rainbow ranch to whom Jim Colter had introduced her shortly after her arrival at her old home.

At a summons from him, the three other men rushed forward as if only awaiting the opportunity, and leaning from her horse, holding the bridle in her left hand, Jack shook hands cordially with her new acquaintances.

"More sport this, ma'am, than lassoing a wild colt!" one of the cowboys drawled, as Jack smiled upon him. His three companions, after first shouting with laughter, proceeded to frown upon the young fellow. He was only a boy not yet twenty-one, from the Kentucky mountains, who nevertheless had served with the American Expeditionary Forces in France for eighteen months.

"But are the men practicing lassoing this afternoon? If they are, please do take me to see what is going on. Is there to be a contest?" Jack inquired. "I used to know something about the business myself, long ago when I was a girl. I have even tried using the lasso, although I was never a great success according to Jim Colter, who did his best to teach me."

"If you'll wait until we get our horses," John Simmons replied.

A few moments later Jack and her four masculine companions were galloping toward one of the farther boundaries of the Rainbow ranch.

After half an hour's steady riding they came upon from twenty to thirty young ranchmen gathered about an open stretch of country. A third of the men were employees of the Rainbow ranch, the others were from neighboring places.

The men were grouped together, some of them on horseback, others at present afoot. Not far away were a dozen western ponies still unbroken either for riding or driving, but captured and brought to this particular spot. Firmly tethered to stakes, they were now pawing the earth, tossing their pretty heads in the air and kicking and bucking if any one approached.

If the men were astonished by the appearance of Jacqueline Kent upon the scene, they were sufficiently polite to make no mention of the fact. If they exchanged glances of surprise or whispered comments, Jack was too little self-conscious and too interested in the spectacle before her and what was about to take place to consider her own position.

Apart from the group, facing a broad, flat prairie field were two of the ranchmen, a few yards separating them. Over their right arms hung their long lariats, coils of rope with a slip noose at the end.

A pony unloosed at a given signal would make a plunge for liberty. Then the two men with the lassos would be after him. The pony has a fair start in open field, and the race for freedom lies before him.

In her eager interest, scarcely realizing what she was doing, Jack made her way to the front line of the group of spectators, the men giving way to her partly from amusement and partly from courtesy. The larger number of them had no personal acquaintance with her, yet she was well enough known by reputation. One of the owners of the famous Rainbow ranch, herself a Ranch girl until her marriage to an Englishman, the fact that since her husband's death Jacqueline Ralston Kent had returned home with the avowed intention of resuming her American citizenship was already become a subject for gossip, for approval or disapproval among her neighbors.

Staring at her secretly when the chance offered, there was in all probability the usual difference of opinion concerning her among the onlookers. But with one fact they would all have agreed: Lady Kent, or Mrs. Kent, as she was said to prefer being called, looked younger than any one who had heard her history could have thought possible.

In truth, this afternoon, in her usual informal fashion, Jack was wearing an old corduroy riding habit which she had left behind her at the Rainbow lodge several years before upon the occasion of her previous visit home. It was of dust color, plainly made with a long, close fitting coat and divided skirt. Her riding boots and gloves, however, were of the softest and most beautiful English manufacture; her hat of brown felt, with a broad brim.

This afternoon Jack's cheeks were a deep rose color, her eyes were glowing, her full red lips were parted from excitement and pleasure as she watched.

Away toward the outermost bounds rushed the little untamed colt, his pursuers close on his track. Then a long rope swung through the air, coil on coil unloosed, rose beautiful as bubbles afloat, with the noose ready to capture and bring the pony to a standstill.

The first man is unsuccessful and the bystanders raise a shout of derision. This changes to applause when the second man slips his noose easily over the pony and gently draws it until the four protesting feet are held fast.

Then the pony is brought back, again tied to its stake and a second contest begins anew.

There was no cruelty in this sport, only a test of courage and skill, since sooner or later the wild ponies must be captured and tamed and taught to do their portion of the world's work.

Had she forgotten how exhilarating, how thrilling the lassoing was? Jack felt her heart pounding, her blood coursing more swiftly in her veins as she half stood in her saddle waving her applause at each victory.

"I suppose I should not dare attempt to find if I have altogether lost my skill?" she asked of her companion, the assistant manager of the Rainbow ranch, who had managed to keep near her all

afternoon. "Would it bore the men dreadfully to have me take part, do you think? Of course I ought not to be willing to disgrace myself before so many people."

As a matter of fact, Jack was talking to herself, arguing with her own desire, as well as asking the advice of her companion.

"I don't know. Do you realize that if one is out of practice roping is a fairly dangerous sport, Mrs. Kent? I don't think I would undertake it," John Simmons protested.

But Jack found an unexpected ally.

Without her being aware of it, the young Kentuckian whom she had met for the first time at the ranch house a short while before, had remained as faithful an escort as the assistant manager of the ranch, and a more devoted one, since John Simmons regarded the protection of Mrs. Kent under the present circumstances as his duty, while with Billy Preston there was no question of duty but of pleasure.

"You don't mean you've got the nerve to git into the present game, Mrs. Kent?" he queried, his manner perfectly respectful, in spite of the oddity of his speech. "I've been ridin' all my days, was pretty nigh born on a horse, anyhow used to hang on when I couldn't 'a' been more'n two or three years old, 'cause there wasn't no other way of gittin' up or down our hills in them days. But this here lassoing game, I'm not on to *it* yet. Seems like it would be kind of worth while to see you go after one of them colts and rope her and lead her in same as one of the men. I can't come to believe a woman could ever manage it."

"Maybe I could not," Jack answered, but both her interest and vanity were stimulated. It was a curious fact that she had so little personal vanity in most things, and yet like a boy had a boy's ambition if not a boy's vanity with regard to outdoor pastimes.

Disappearing a moment, Billy Preston rode up again soon after with one of the other ranchmen, who happened to be in charge of the afternoon's contest.

"If you would like to try your hand, Mrs. Kent, and are not afraid of getting into trouble, why of course there is no objection. Any one of the fellows will be glad of the chance to ride beside you and give you the first throw."

Jack laughed, hesitated and weakened. As a matter of fact, she should have known better than to make an exhibition of herself before a group of strange young men; her instinct, her experience, her judgment, should have taught her better. They did whisper their protest, it was Jack's fault that she did not heed them, this being her particular failure in life that she could not see that things which were not intrinsically wrong in themselves were oftentimes wrong when done at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

"You don't think I would be too great a bore? Then may I borrow some one's horse? My own is not accustomed to the lassoing."

A short time after, actually unconscious of the unconventionality of her behavior, Jacqueline Kent with the lariat swung over her arm, before an audience of perhaps thirty or more amused and absorbed spectators, was awaiting the moment to ride forward.

The soft prairie winds blew against her face, bringing their familiar fragrances, the circle of mountains far away on the dim horizons had their summits crowned with snow. About her, whinnying and neighing, their slender nostrils quivering with interest in the sport, were the western horses she had loved almost as she loved people from the time she was little more than a baby. As for her audience, Jack really gave it scarcely any thought so keyed was she to the business in hand. Had she altogether forgotten her past prowess? A moment before she had not been entirely truthful, for she had possessed an unusual skill in every phase of western riding as a young girl, and especially skilful in what she was about to undertake.

Yet at present the rope hung slack on her arm with an odd feeling of unfamiliarity. An instant later Jack flung it in the air, saw it coil and uncoil, heard the singing noise it made, and then drew it back into place, feeling an added confidence.

The following instant she was after the pony, her companion riding a few feet behind her, but making no effort with his own lasso.

Jack had asked for no quarter, yet was to be afforded every chance. Once her rope rose, sailed forward and then dropped slack to the ground, the pony cantering on ahead undisturbed, and uncaptured.

In her accustomed fashion laughing at her own failure, Jack settled more firmly to her task, spurring her horse ahead.

A second time her rope shot forward and now the pony crumpled and went down upon its forelegs, Jack drawing the lasso and holding it until her companion took the rope from her hand.

Then she turned to ride back to her former place.

Now Jack felt herself blushing warmly and for the first time became aware of her conspicuous position.

Her audience was laughing and shouting their surprised applause, hats were being waved in the air. There in front of the others and on foot, Jack beheld Jim Colter, and only a few times in her life could she recall having seen his face reveal such an expression of disapproval.

"Making an exhibition of yourself, Jack?" he asked after she had dismounted and stood beside him. Then he turned to one of his own ranchmen. "Will you bring Mrs. Kent's horse back to the Rainbow lodge? She will drive home with me."

Led away as if she were a disgraced school-girl, Jack suffered a number of conflicting emotions – anger, rebellion, embarrassment, and repentance and some amusement. Surely the time had arrived when her former guardian should recognize that she was a woman and not a child. Then Jack appreciated that she should have recognized the fact herself and not made an exhibition of herself as Jim had just said.

"You won't tell the family what I have done, will you, please, Jim?" Jack asked when they were a safe distance away. "I know I have behaved badly and I suppose it does no good to say that I never appreciated the fact until I had the first look at your face. I hate to have you angry, Jim."

"You will be the talk of the countryside, Jacqueline Kent, and who knows where else?" Jim Colter answered. "It's incredible that you did not realize this. In less than an hour it will be on every tongue that Lady Kent has returned to Wyoming to seek the society of the cowboys and ranchmen and to engage in their rough sports, and please remember it also will be reported that she seeks their companionship with no other women present. Fine beginning, Jack."

"You are pretty hateful, Jim. I thought you used to tell me not to mind idle gossip."

"I did, Jack, but not when the gossip was justified by your behavior. As for my keeping your recent act a secret from the rest of the family, it is not possible. Frieda and Professor Russell, Olive and Captain MacDonnell, and your former acquaintance, Peter Stevens, are in the motor car waiting for you, unfortunately so near as to be aware of your proceedings. We motored over to Laramie this afternoon and asked Stevens if he knew what steps you should take in order to resume your American citizenship. He was not altogether sure and explained he thought it would be wiser to look the question up. As he was free for the evening Frieda invited him to motor to the ranch with us and meet you again. Finding you had gone down to the ranch house, we went in search of you. Ching Lee, who is the present cook at the ranch house, informed me you had ridden over here with Simmons, which was in itself sufficiently unconventional, Jack, without the unexpected addition I saw when I left the motor and came to look for you."

"Good gracious, Frieda will never let me hear the last of this!" Jack exclaimed. "It is rather too much to have an old acquaintance like Peter Stevens, who never liked or approved of me even in my youth, as another witness to my discomfiture. Perhaps you would prefer I return to England after all, Jim! Can't you forgive me before I join the others; I'll have sufficient disapproval to endure then without yours. I wonder if I dare face Frieda. I'll never make a mistake like this again."

But for once Jim Colter refused to yield to Jack's pleading, being more deeply disturbed by her action because of its consequent reaction upon her than he had been in some time past. Beautiful, young and daring, with unusual wealth, perhaps it might be wiser if Jack should marry again, hard as it would be for him to give her up a second time.

CHAPTER IV

A FORMER ACQUAINTANCE

"I was never so ashamed of any one in my life."

Jack flushed, but, ignoring her sister's speech, extended her hand to the young man who was seated in the motor car beside her.

"I am afraid you don't remember me," she began, "it has been a long time, and we never knew each other intimately in the past. But it is kind of you to have driven over to the ranch."

Then getting into the car, Jack sat down in the vacant place which had been saved for her between her sister and their visitor.

"Just the same, I believe I should have known you," Peter Stevens returned, looking at her with what Jack considered was certainly not an expression of admiration. "Do you think, Mrs. Kent, a fellow is apt to forget a girl who could ride and hunt and shoot better than nearly any young man in Wyoming? I was a bookworm in those days and have remained one, but that did not prevent my jealousy of you."

"Please don't refer to my dreadful outdoor accomplishments," Jack murmured, "not after I have gotten myself into such disfavor with my family." The little glance, half of appeal, half of humor which she at this instant bestowed upon her companion made the muscles of his face suddenly relax and his blue eyes less cold, so that Jack caught at least a fleeting likeness to the boy she had once known.

As a matter of fact, Peter Stevens, who was still in the early twenties, had appeared so much older than she had dreamed possible that Jack would not have recognized him without first having been told his name.

Then his face hardened again.

"Well, most of us grow up, Mrs. Kent, but perhaps you are one of the persons who do not. I am told you prefer not to use your title in the United States."

To Jack's mind, as there was plainly no answer to this speech with its scarcely courteous reference to her recent impulsive action, she turned toward her sister.

Frieda Ralston had developed into the type of matron one might have expected from her spoiled girlhood and – more important – her childish and self-satisfied temperament. She dearly loved her older sister; except for her husband and baby, she loved no one so well; but she also loved the opportunity to assume an attitude of offended dignity which usually had succeeded in making the members of her family do as she wished.

Moreover her sister's recent escapade had seriously shocked and annoyed her, not for her own sake, but for her sister's. She had wished Jack to make a charming impression among their neighbors and old friends. No one, as she believed, could be handsomer or more delightful than her sister, Lady Kent, and Frieda declined to lay aside the title. Yet here was Jack, after having probably disgraced herself by her latest performance, meeting one of the most prominent of the younger men in Wyoming, dressed in an old, discarded riding habit, dusty, her hair blown about her face, looking at least ten years younger than she actually was; in fact, as if she had never left the ranch, never been married or seen anything of the outside world.

As a matter of fact, Frieda now and then felt slightly resentful of the suggestion, occasionally made by strangers, that she was the older of the two sisters. But this Frieda thought must be because she was getting just the tiniest bit stouter than she would have preferred to be. However, she did not care seriously. This afternoon, as Jack tried to catch her sister's eye, she thought that Frieda looked prettier than usual, in her beautifully made blue cloth tailor suit and the little blue feather hat which made her eyes appear even bluer and the fairness of her skin more conspicuous.

She also considered that Frieda was partly justified in her anger, but that she must not be allowed to display her temper or to lecture her older sister before a stranger.

The next instant, leaning over, Jack whispered a few words to Olive MacDonnell, who with her husband, Captain MacDonnell, was occupying the seat in front of her own. Professor Henry Tilford Russell, Frieda's husband, was next to Jim Colter, who was driving the car.

What Jack whispered was:

"You'll stand by me, Olive, you and Bryan; as usual, I seem to have gotten into more troubled waters than I realized."

And Olive had nodded with the sympathy and understanding which Jack had always been able to count upon from the days of their earliest acquaintance when Olive had taken refuge at the Rainbow lodge and Jacqueline Ralston had sheltered and protected her.

The following moment Jack stretched out her arms toward Frieda's little girl, who was sitting in her mother's lap.

"Let me hold the baby, please, Frieda dear, you must both be tired."

Then as Peace climbed over into her aunt's lap, Jack pressed her cheek for an instant against the little girl's head.

She and Peace had a deep affection and understanding of each other. But then the child was captivating to everybody. Inheriting Frieda's exquisite blonde coloring, Peace had a spirituality her mother never possessed. She was several years old, but so frail that she seemed younger in spite of her wise, old-fashioned conversation.

"Tired?" she murmured.

Jack shook her head.

"There is nothing the matter." It often troubled her and Frieda, the little girl's curious knowledge of what was going on in the minds of the people about her without an exchange of words.

Frieda now glanced at her sister and her own little girl and her expression altered. She loved seeing them together and had no feeling of jealousy. Indeed she used to hope that some of Jack's vigor, the extraordinary and beautiful vitality which made her different from other persons might be transferred to her own little girl.

"We will leave you at the lodge, Jack, to dress for dinner, if you will come up to the big house later;" Frieda remarked with a change of tone. "Mr. Stevens has been kind enough to say he will remain all night and motor back to Laramie in the morning."

Was it natural vanity on Jacqueline Ralston's part or an effort to reinstate herself in the good graces of her family that she bathed and dressed with unusual care, brushing every particle of dust from her long, heavy, gold brown hair which waved from her temples to the low coil which she wore at the back of her neck?

Jack's evening dress was black chiffon without an ornament or jewel and was the first change she had made from her mourning. To any one less physically perfect than Jacqueline Kent, the severity of the dress might have been trying. But her skin was clear, her color, without being vivid, gave a sufficient flush to her cheeks, her lips were a deep red, her eyes gray and wide and with a singular sincerity. Moreover, Jack's outdoor tastes, into whatever indiscretions they might lead her, had kept her figure erect, beautifully modeled and well poised, and a beautiful figure is far more rare than a beautiful face.

Walking up with Jimmie as her escort to the big house, Jack confessed to herself that she felt slightly bored. Unexpectedly she had grown a little tired, or if not tired, not in the mood to endure any more family criticism at the present time, and would much have preferred spending the evening alone with her son.

She had confessed her offence to Jimmie, wishing him to hear from her what she had done. But Jimmie, not appreciating the social error she had committed, had appeared immensely proud,

even jealous of her prowess, insisting that she should begin to give him lessons in the art of lassoing early the following morning.

Personally Jack wondered just to what extent her family had been unnecessarily critical in their attitude. Would her neighbors judge her action so harshly that it would interfere with their friendliness toward her? It was always hard for Jack to live in an atmosphere of unfriendliness.

So far as her former acquaintance was concerned she had no vestige of doubt. Peter Stevens had been absurdly shocked and offended by her exhibition of what had seemed to him unwomanliness. But personally Jack did not care a great deal for his opinion, she had not liked him particularly, and it had occurred to her that it might be just as well if he were shocked occasionally. He looked prim and too much an old bachelor for so comparatively young a man.

However, what really startled Peter Stevens was Jacqueline Kent's appearance, when he came into the drawing room a few moments before dinner and found her standing alone before a small fire.

He controlled with difficulty an exclamation of surprise, having not thought her even handsome earlier in the afternoon. And he had disapproved of her action more keenly than he believed himself to have revealed. Now as Jack began talking to him he appreciated not only her beauty, but the fact that she had become a charming woman of the world and probably had seen more of life than he had seen in spite of his success in his profession and his political ambitions.

"You are a Republican, aren't you?" Jack asked, and then added: "I believe you have been elected a member of the State Legislature in Wyoming and the people are talking about you for one of our United States Congressmen. Politics seem to me a great career, perhaps the greatest of all careers, these days, so may I congratulate you?"

Peter Stevens smiled, pleased of course, as any one might have been.

"Perhaps it is a bit premature to talk of my running for Congress, Mrs. Kent, but if I do may I count on your support?"

Laughing, Jack shook her head.

"No, at least I can make no promises. You see, I don't know whether I am a Republican or a Democrat, or what my politics may be until I have been in my own country sufficiently long to study conditions. Maybe my vote will go to a woman candidate, if there happens to be one in my district."

"You don't intend by any chance to be my opponent?"

Smiling over the impossible aspect of his suggestion but in an unusually pleasant frame of mind, Peter Stevens pushed a large chair over toward the fire so that Jack might sit down. An instant later he drew his own chair up beside her.

"Oh, perhaps I may be your opponent some day, who knows?" Jack returned, accepting the challenge good-naturedly. "But first it might be as well for me to learn whether I am an American citizen. May an American woman who has married a foreigner after the death of her husband assume her former nationality if she so desires?"

"You do desire it, wish to give up your title and all it means in England, and even in the United States for that matter? You will be much admired in any case, I am sure, Mrs. Kent, but after all, Lady Kent has a more romantic sound! You feel sure you will not regret your decision? I have not yet had an opportunity to look up the question you have just asked me and I don't want to answer you without being positive as to the exact law in the matter. My impression is, however, that the choice lies with you; that a woman may resume her former citizenship in the United States if she so wishes and returns to her own country to live."

At this instant Frieda and Professor Russell entered the drawing-room, and a little later, when the rest of the family had joined them, dinner was announced.

Afterwards, although sitting beside each other at dinner, as the conversation was general Peter Stevens had no opportunity for any further personal conversation with Jacqueline Kent.

He was by no means convinced that he liked her. He found most girls and women tiresome after a short acquaintance. However, the girl he had formerly known had at least developed into what appeared to be two conflicting personalities.

CHAPTER V

JEAN, OLIVE AND FRIEDA

One afternoon about ten days later Jean Bruce, who was Mrs. Ralph Merritt; Olive, who was Mrs. Bryan MacDonnell; and Frieda Ralston, the wife of the eminent scientist, Professor Henry Tilford Russell, were sitting with their sewing under one of the big trees not far from the big house, built after the discovery of the gold mine on the Rainbow ranch and christened the "Rainbow Castle."

Jack, as was often the case when they were thus quietly engaged, was not with them, but was riding somewhere over the ranch with her son, Jimmie, and Jeannette, one of the four new Ranch girls, to some spot where Jim Colter was apt to be found, in order that he might ride back home with them.

The other little girls were playing at no great distance away, except little Peace, who was sitting in a small chair watching them.

"I do think Jack might have remained at home with us," Frieda remarked petulantly. "Here I have traveled all the way from Chicago, closed my home for a year, partly of course because the doctors thought it best for Peace to be in the west and outdoors as much as possible, and because Henry needed a change, but also because Jack was to be with us at the old ranch and I had not seen her since Frank's death. And yet nearly every afternoon off she goes riding like a whirlwind and deserting the rest of us as if she cared nothing for our society. Jack has changed a great deal I think, or else is more like she was as a girl than as a married woman, now her husband's influence is removed. I particularly wished her at home this afternoon because, as it is such a perfect afternoon, some of the neighbors are sure to call. After Jack's unfortunate performance the other afternoon I am convinced people are talking about her, so I would like her to make a pleasant personal impression upon some of the best people."

Leaning back in a big wicker chair, Jean Merritt put down her embroidery for a moment.

"Oh, Jack will make a pleasant impression upon some people and not upon others, as she used to do as a girl and has probably done all her life. Of whatever else one may accuse Jack, no one can say that she has not a forceful personality, so that people either like or dislike her. I often think of the contrast between Jack and me, now we are women, although I presume it was just as conspicuous when we were girls. I create no such affection and no such antagonism as Jack does, but a kind of mild liking or mild admiration as the case may be." Jean laughed, adding:

"I don't know whether I am glad or sorry, whether I envy Jack or feel she should envy me. One thing I am sure of, I should never have turned my back upon the title and position Jack could have continued to hold in England for the simplicity of the old life here at the Rainbow ranch, at least not for any great length of time. I believe I was always a little envious of Jack's opportunities, the very things for which she cared so little. I would like to have been Lady Kent, to have entertained in Kent House, to have been a leader in English society. People talk of Ralph as a successful engineer, but I wonder if they realize this means we have never had a home, and I have simply dragged myself and the children after him wherever he has been employed. Then, Ralph never has made the money most persons believe he has; as a matter of fact, he is a much more successful engineer than he is a business man. Not that I am intending to complain," Jean said, hastily resuming her work, "but of course one cannot help thinking of how strange life is and how often it gives things to the people who don't wish for them and withholds from those who do. I have wanted to be a prominent society woman all my life and Jack has always had an aversion to such an existence, therefore the opportunity has been hers, not mine."

"Jean, please do not speak in such a pessimistic fashion," Olive interrupted. "The truth is that you have the social gift and Jack, charming and brilliant as she is, has not. Of course I think this is because she does not care to possess it. Jack loved her husband more than the character of life

she was obliged to live on his account," Olive continued in the tone which always created a calmer atmosphere in any family discussion. "As for Jack's riding off and leaving us at home, you must try and understand, Frieda dear, that Jack is possessed of infinitely greater energy than the rest of us, and that all her days when she has been troubled she has not kept still and brooded as most girls and women do. At present, in spite of what she has been through, she remains cheerful and agreeable whenever she is with us, and when she is unhappy tries to wear herself out with physical exercise. I wonder if any one of us would be as courageous in her present circumstances? As for what Jack did the other afternoon, Frieda, of course you know I agree with you that it was indiscreet of her, but suppose we do not mention the fact any more."

Frieda's red lips closed in a finer line than one might have expected of her dimpled countenance.

"One is obliged to continue to mention one's attitude on such matters to Jack, else she forgets and does again exactly what she likes regardless of consequences," Frieda replied with primness. "But of course, Olive, I appreciate that you have never found any fault in Jack for as long as you have known each other. I wonder sometimes how your husband feels, except that he has pretty much the same point of view. But I have not been disagreeable to Jack over her latest escapade except because of its possible effect upon her. I am sure you understand this, Jean, if Olive does not. Jack is planning to live in this neighborhood for a number of years, until Jimmie should be taken home to England, therefore it is most important that she should have a good reputation among our neighbors and friends. I am sure I love Jack better than either of you can, as she is my own sister. Even she realizes that it is for her sake that I have been so annoyed."

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