

Wheeler Ruthe S.

Janet Hardy in Radio City



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Chapter One

JANET GETS THE LEAD

Janet Hardy stirred sleepily as the alarm clock sounded its lusty summons and it was only after a real effort that she managed to reach out and shut off the insistent clock.

It was so early that shadows of the night still lurked in the corners and Janet squinted at the clock through sleep-clogged eyes. It was four-forty a.m.

Sitting up in bed she looked across the room where Helen Thorne was deep in sleep, oblivious to the strident summons of the alarm which had echoed through their bedroom.

Janet, now thoroughly awake, tossed her pillow at the slumbering Helen. She scored a perfect hit and Helen, sputtering and wondering what it was all about, popped up in bed.

"Come on, sleepy head. It's time to be up and dressing if we're going to get to the studio in time for that six o'clock call," warned Janet.

"I'll beat you to the shower," promised Helen. She jumped out of bed and grabbed the dressing gown on a nearby chair. There was a rush of feet padding down the hall and Helen made good her promise, reaching the shower room two jumps ahead of Janet.

Fifteen minutes later, after brisk showers and thorough towelings, they were dressed. From the kitchen had come waftings of delicious bacon and eggs and they knew that George, the colored cook, was getting breakfast.

When they reached the dining room they were surprised to find Helen's father there, a morning paper propped in front of him.

Henry Thorne, world famous as the star director of motion pictures for the Ace Motion Picture Corp., looked up.

"An early call?" he asked.

"Billy Fenstow is starting to shoot his new western, 'Water Hole,' and we don't want to be late the first morning," explained Helen, slipping into her chair while Janet sat down opposite her. George, smiling a greeting, brought in a large platter of bacon and eggs. Then there were tall glasses of cold milk and thin, deliciously buttered toast.

"I didn't think you'd be up so early, Dad," said Helen, between mouthfuls of bacon.

"Guess I went to bed too early," smiled her father. "I've been awake an hour."

"You were all tired out after finishing 'Kings of the Air,'" went on Helen and her father nodded his agreement.

Janet, on the other side of the table, said nothing, but thought a great deal. She had never quite gotten over the thrill of coming to Hollywood and the manner in which it had been accomplished. It seemed too much like a dream and at times she went around pinching herself to make sure she wasn't asleep.

Classmates back in the medium-sized city of Clarion in the middle west, Janet and Helen had been fast friends and their families had been neighbors for years. Then Henry Thorne had made a success as a director of motion pictures, but Helen and Mrs. Thorne had remained in the family home in Clarion. Back for Helen's graduation, he had been impressed by the acting ability of Janet and Helen, as well as their charm, and their graduation presents had been round trip airplane tickets from Clarion to Hollywood. Mrs. Thorne had come along to chaperon the party and they had taken a comfortable, rambling bungalow on a side street in Hollywood where they could be assured of privacy.

Janet could recall so vividly their first day. Pictures, interviews, attendance at a premiere in gowns designed by the famous designer who created all of the gowns for the stars of the Ace company. Then a chance to work in a western in the production unit headed by rotund little Billy Fenstow and after that small parts in “Kings of the Air,” which Henry Thorne had directed as one of the outstanding pictures on his company’s production program.

“What are you mooning about?” asked Helen, for Janet, her mind running back over the events of the last crowded weeks, had ceased eating.

Janet flushed. “Just thinking of all the wonderful things that have happened since we graduated.”

“I hope you won’t remember the unpleasant ones you experienced while we were making ‘Kings of the Air,’” said Helen’s father. He was well-built, with a touch of grey hair at his temples and a smile that inspired confidence and an almost instant feeling of friendliness.

“I was pretty scared at the time,” confessed Janet, “but now that the picture’s safely completed, it’s all over.”

“What do you think about ‘Kings’?” Helen asked her father.

He leaned back in his chair and Janet thought she saw a touch of weariness in his face.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “It should be a good picture, but whether it will be a great picture is something else again. We can only wait until it’s out of the cutting room.”

Janet, although in a comparatively minor rôle, had been a key figure in the making of “Kings of the Air,” for a rival company, attempting to hinder the progress of the picture, had hired an actress in the company, blonde Bertie Jackson, and two renegade airmen, to make every effort to slow up production. Janet had been kidnaped and held prisoner overnight while the ghost town, where the company was located, was burned and a big set on the desert bombed. But the resourcefulness of Curt Newsom, cowboy star who had a rôle in the picture, had helped expose the sabotage and Janet had been speedily released. As a result she had been promoted to Bertie Jackson’s rôle and had handled it like a veteran trouser.

Just then George, the cook, looked in to see if more bacon and eggs were needed, and Helen’s mother, in a dressing gown, joined them.

“Someone should have called me,” she said.

“But you don’t have to report on the lot and we do,” Helen reminded her mother.

It was 5:30 o’clock when they finished breakfast.

“I’ll drive you over to the lot,” said Henry Thorne. “Mother, you dress while I’m away and we’ll take a long drive into the mountains and stop someplace for lunch. We’ll sort of have a day’s vacation for ourselves.”

Then they were away, speeding toward the studio in an open car. It was a glorious morning and the cool air was invigorating. Later in the day it would be uncomfortably hot.

Billy Fenstow, director of western pictures, was on stage nine, well to the back of the Ace lot.

There were few around the rambling studio at that hour, for production was past its peak and only two or three of the huge sound stages would be in use that day.

The director, who had only a fringe of hair around his shining pate, greeted them cordially.

“Have you read over the script of ‘Water Hole’?” he asked.

Janet nodded. “I like it better than ‘Broad Valley,’” she smiled.

Billy Fenstow fairly beamed. “Good. I wrote it myself. The other was only partly mine.”

Helen laughed and turned to Janet. “What are you trying to do, compliment Mr. Fenstow so he’ll give you the leading rôle?”

It was the director’s turn to chuckle. “She doesn’t have to,” he said. “Janet is playing opposite Curt Newsom in the lead right now.”

Chapter Two

SHOOTING ON LOCATION

Janet stared hard at the chubby director. It was hard to believe that Billy Fenstow would joke with her now. That would be too cruel.

“Don’t you believe me, Janet?” he asked.

“It can’t be possible,” she murmured. “Why, I’m an unknown. You wouldn’t put me into the leading rôle.”

Just then Curt Newsom, the western star arrived.

“How’s the new leading lady?” he asked.

“I – I don’t know,” gasped Janet. “I’m not sure. Everything seems to be in kind of a whirl. I guess I’ll sit down.”

Janet dropped into a nearby chair, oblivious of the fact that it was the cherished property of the director.

“It’s grand, Janet, simply grand,” exclaimed Helen. “My, but I’m proud of you.”

Billy Fenstow came over to Janet.

“You needn’t be so surprised,” he said.

“Only don’t let this go to your head. It doesn’t take a whole lot of acting ability to be a leading lady in a western. All you’ve got to have is a fair amount of beauty, some brains, and the ability to keep on top of a horse.”

Janet, recalling her experiences in “Broad Valley,” the first picture they had appeared in, smiled a little ruefully.

“I don’t know whether I’ll even be able to stay on a horse,” she admitted.

“Then we’ll glue you into the saddle,” smiled the director.

Others in the company came up. Most of them had been in the earlier picture and without exception they congratulated Janet on winning the leading rôle.

The weather was ideal and Billy Fenstow intended to make the most of it by shooting all of the exteriors possible.

Promptly at seven o’clock a large bus rolled onto the lot and the entire company, numbering some thirty-three, including the technicians, boarded the big vehicle.

Their destination was a ranch well into the foothills and it was after noon before they arrived. This particular outfit had never before been used for film purposes for it was well away from the usual run of traffic and harder to reach than some of the layouts nearer the studio.

The ranchhouse was large and comfortable and arrangements were made for all of the girls in the company to stay there while the men would be quartered in the bunkhouse with the exception of the director, who planned to drive back and forth from the nearest town.

A truck loaded with camera and sound equipment had preceded the bus and the technicians went to work to assemble their materials. The pole corral was crowded with horses and the assistant director, “Skeets” Irwin, took over the task of assigning horses to the various members of the company.

Curt Newsom had his own string, which had been brought by truck, but the others were to ride ranch horses. Janet drew a beautiful sorrel while Helen was mounted on a black with only one white foot.

There was a gorgeous sunset and Billy Fenstow, always on the alert for a good background shot, had his cameras catch some typical ranch scenes. They might not fit in with the present picture but he knew some day the footage would come in handy.

After dinner in the ranchhouse that night, Janet and Helen retired to the room they shared and studied the scripts which had been handed out.

“Water Hole” was a typical Billy Fenstow western with lots of hard riding and plenty of scenery. It was the story of Curt Newsom’s defense of his small ranch with its valuable water hole against a larger cattle outfit.

Janet played the rôle of a school teacher while Helen was a waitress in the one restaurant in the little cow town to which the cowboys migrated every Saturday night. The girls were to have an important part in solving the plot to get Curt’s ranch and all in all they were greatly pleased with their parts.

Janet sat down and wrote a long letter home, telling of their good fortune and of her own in particular. She paused a moment and closed her eyes. Perhaps her mother would show the letter to Pete Benda, the city editor of the *Clarion Times*. And Pete, of course, would make a story. Perhaps he would put it in the front page under a heading, “Clarion Girl Gets Leading Rôle in Western Picture.” She smiled a little. That would be rather nice.

Then she awoke from her reverie and finished the letter. After that it was bedtime for there was an early call.

They were out the next morning shortly after dawn for Billy Fenstow worked his companies long and hard.

Janet was in several shots that day riding to and from the ranch to the schoolhouse and in the afternoon they went to the schoolhouse where a dozen youngsters had been gathered. Most of them were actual pupils of the little school and the cameras ground away as Janet dismissed them from a make-believe class and watched them hurry away from school toward their homes, some of them afoot and others on sturdy little cow ponies.

Helen had little to do that day, but followed every action of the company with interest.

“What do you think of it?” she asked Janet that night as they lounged on the broad verandah of the ranchhouse.

“I like it a lot,” said Janet whole-heartedly. “Of course I realize I’m no actress, but the picture’s good and clean and it’s a consolation to be in something like that.”

Helen was silent for a time.

“What do you think about our future in the movies?” she asked.

Janet pondered the question before answering, for she, too, had been wondering that very thing.

“If you want to know the truth, I think we’re just about where we belong. I know I’m not a real actress. I can get by in a picture like this or in some minor rôle, but I’d never make a really top-notch actress and it would be rather heart-breaking to stay here and do this year in and year out.”

“Then that means you’ll go back to Clarion when summer’s over?” Helen asked the question with a touch of desperate anxiety in her voice.

“I suppose so,” replied Janet slowly, “for I know that I won’t be especially happy here. It’s been glorious fun and it still is, but it can’t last forever and I’m not fooling myself about that for a minute.”

They were silent for a time, wondering if the coming fall would bring an end to their close companionship. If Janet went back to Clarion, it would be only logical that Helen would stay on in Hollywood with her father and mother. The thought of parting was not a pleasant prospect to either girl.

They went to bed later without discussing the matter further, but as the shooting of “Water Hole” progressed and August drew to a close, it was constantly in their minds.

Helen’s father and mother came out to visit them on location several times, but neither one of them mentioned any plans for Helen.

“Two more days of work and we’ll have the picture in the can,” Billy Fenstow told the company one morning. “We’re right on schedule and I want to finish that way, but we’ve got some hard riding scenes to get out of the way.”

The director turned to Janet.

“We’ve got to shoot that scene of your ride from town to the ranch to warn Curt that his enemies are riding to wipe out his ranch,” he said. “Are you ready?”

Janet nodded and swung into the saddle of the rangy sorrel.

Billy Fenstow climbed onto the light truck which carried the cameras and Janet’s horse trotted along behind as the vehicle rolled away across the valley in which the ranch was located. They went for perhaps two miles through the hills to a hamlet along a branch line railroad which had served as the cow town for the picture’s locale. It was here that Janet began her ride, but before she started she looked to the cinches.

She remounted and sat easily in the saddle, waiting for the signal to start.

Billy Fenstow waved his hand and the truck started swiftly away, Janet riding hard after it. She rode with a natural lithesomeness of her body. The light felt hat which had been crushed over her brown hair came off. She clutched at it instinctively, but missed, and kept on riding, her golden hair streaming away from her shoulders. Janet smiled to herself. At least that would give a realistic effect.

She watched the director covertly and when he motioned again she sent the sorrel racing away from the camera truck at an angle so the cameras could get a side shot. Then the truck moved ahead of her.

It was hot and dry, and anything but an easy task to ride a horse pounding along as hard as the big sorrel. Finally they topped the last hill and swept down into the valley and Janet braced herself for the last bit of action.

Curt, near the water hole, looked up when he heard the pounding hoofs and Janet hurled herself from the saddle and ran to him.

“Quick, Curt, they’re riding hard behind me. You’ve got to get out of here. I’ll stay and watch the ranch.”

But Curt refused and the action was cut there.

Janet was dusty and sweaty and she walked to the pump and drank deeply of the cool, sweet water.

“I can imagine there might have been a fight over this ranch in the early days,” she said.

“There was,” grinned Curt, “but it wasn’t nearly as big a one as we’re putting into the picture.”

Janet’s hardest scene for the day was over and Helen was in only one or two minor shots so they passed part of the afternoon packing up their things in preparation for the departure the next afternoon.

It was nearly dinner time when a dust covered car rolled into the valley and approached the ranchhouse.

Janet and Helen, sitting on the front steps, watched it with interest which deepened as they saw an Iowa license plate on the front of the car.

“That almost looks like home,” said Helen. “Why, the number’s from our home county. Maybe it’s someone we know.”

But the sun was flashing off the windshield, effectively shielding the passengers in the car.

The machine swung to a stop a few feet away and Janet and Helen, when they saw the passengers, recognized them with mixed emotions.

Chapter Three

SURPRISE CALLERS

The newcomers were Cora Dean and Margie Blake, classmates from Clarion, who had been Janet and Helen's chief rivals for almost every honor during their last four years in school.

"What under the sun do you suppose they want here?" asked Helen under her breath.

"We'll soon find out," retorted Janet, rising and advancing to greet Cora and Margie.

Cora was dark like Helen, while Margie's hair was almost as golden blonde as Janet's, the difference being that Margie used drug store coloring, and Janet depended on the natural shade.

"Hello Cora, hello Margie. This is a surprise," said Janet as she greeted them and Helen echoed the sentiment a minute later.

"We've been touring through the west. When we learned a company was shooting a picture out here we came on over. We didn't know until we stopped in the village that it was the company you're with." It was Cora, her tongue as sharp as ever, making the explanation.

Margie was taking in everything and fairly gaping at the cowboys who in their picturesque garb, were lounging nearby waiting for the gong to call them to supper.

Billy Fenstow came by and Janet called to him, introducing Cora and Margie.

"Have them stay for dinner and meet the company," said the director, who, with the film on schedule, felt particularly hospitable.

"Oh, we'd love that," gurgled Cora. "We've always wanted to see a picture being taken."

Billy Fenstow scratched his head.

"Well, we're all through for today, but if Janet and Helen could bunk double and give you one of the beds in their room, you could stay over and see the final shooting tomorrow."

"Why, that would be grand," put in Margie, "and I'm sure Janet and Helen won't mind doubling up."

There was little Janet or Helen could say, except to agree, and they helped Cora and Margie get their bags out of the car and escorted them up to the room which they occupied.

At dinner that night they introduced the girls to all of the members of the company who ate at the ranchhouse and Janet noted that Cora could hardly keep her eyes off tall, handsome Curt Newsom. Curt was nice to them, as he was to everybody, explaining carefully all of the questions they asked.

That night Cora asked a question that had kept her on edge all evening.

"Do you suppose we could get in one of the scenes tomorrow?" she asked Janet. "Surely you or Helen could get the director to use us just a little bit."

Janet was dubious. It was the last day at the ranch and there would be much to be done. Billy Fenstow would be in no mood for trifles such as working friends into scenes.

"If it wasn't the last day I think it could be arranged," put in Helen, "but I'd hate to ask Mr. Fenstow to do it under the circumstances."

Margie pouted visibly and Cora, always arrogant, flared up.

"Oh, of course you won't. Just because your father's a director and they have to put you in pictures you won't say a good word for anyone else. How do we know you're even in this company?"

"You'll have to take our word for it until you see the picture on the screen," retorted Helen.

Janet could understand the tremendous desire of Cora and Margie to appear in a scene. It was the most natural thing in the world and she felt just a little sorry for them.

"I'll speak to Mr. Fenstow in the morning," she promised. "If he's in a good mood he may find a spot for you, but if he's grouchy he'll probably order you away from the place."

"How do you know when he's grouchy?" asked Margie.

"You don't until after you've asked him," replied Janet, with a thin smile.

Cora and Margie exhibited a tremendous curiosity, asking questions about everything and from almost everyone, Cora especially plaguing Curt Newsom, until the tall cowboy star finally found an excuse to escape from her constant barrage.

It was late when they went to bed and Janet and Helen, sleeping in a narrow, single bed, did not rest well. They were awake at dawn, both of them feeling tired and worn.

Cora and Margie, imbued with the excitement of actually being with a movie company, appeared as vivacious as ever.

At breakfast Billy Fenstow outlined plans for the final day's shooting.

"We've got one more scene to take in the village," he explained. "It's a shot of a group of townspeople watching the arrival of Curt and the rustlers he has captured."

Impetuous Cora Dean broke in.

"May Margie and I get in the crowd scene?" she asked eagerly.

A frown appeared on Billy Fenstow's usually bland face, for he disliked greatly being interrupted when he was outlining his plans to his company.

"We'll see about it later," he said curtly, and continued with his explanation.

After breakfast Cora faced Janet.

"Too bad you couldn't have said a good word for us with your director," she flared.

"There wasn't a real good chance," replied Janet. "I warned you last night not to bother him if he wasn't in a good mood."

"But how was I to know?" complained Cora.

"Well, you do now," said Janet, and it was hard to keep from smiling. But she could realize how much it would mean to Cora and Margie and it would be mean of her not to help them just a little so later she spoke to "Skeets" Irwin, the assistant director, and "Skeets" promised to get Cora and Margie into the crowd scene.

Janet and Helen were in the same scene and they changed into their costumes, Janet into a dusty riding habit and Helen into a gingham dress and the apron that was her badge as a waitress in the village's one restaurant.

The girls rode down to the village, Cora and Margie following in their own car. "Skeets" had provided them with appropriate costumes and they were so excited they could hardly talk.

Billy Fenstow was back giving instructions to the riders who were to sweep down into the village while "Skeets" handled the scene at the village.

"Don't stand around like a bunch of wooden Indians," said the assistant director. "Show some interest when those horsemen come over the hills. I want plenty of action in this scene."

"Keep close to us," Janet advised Cora and Margie. "All you have to do is look excited."

"That's going to be easy," smiled Margie. "I'm so nervous now I can't stay still a minute."

Final instructions were given and the cameras started grinding as a massed body of riders swept over the crest of the hills and galloped madly toward the village.

The girls, who had been in the restaurant, rushed into the street and joined the other members of the company and the villagers who had been pressed into service as extras.

It was action and good action. Janet thrilled at the magnificent riding of Curt Newsom, who rode with consummate skill and grace. He was a part of the horse he was astride and it was no effort to Janet to register extreme excitement.

The mounted men, a band of captives in the center of the group, reined in before the astonished villagers and Curt, dismounting, pulled one of the captives from his saddle and strode toward the door which was marked sheriff's office. Curt pulled the protesting rider after him, disappearing into the sheriff's office. That finished the sequence and the cameras stopped clicking.

It was the last of the big scenes and the rest of the day was to be spent in picking up shots to fill out the story.

“Do you suppose we looked all right?” asked Cora, who had been fitted out in a housedress and sunbonnet. Margie was similarly attired.

“I’m sure you looked your parts,” Janet assured them, “but don’t be too disappointed when you see the picture. There’ll only be a flash of this action on the screen and the ‘mob’ scene won’t last more than a few seconds.”

“We’ll see that one of the theaters at home books it,” declared Margie firmly, “and maybe Pete Benda will run a story about us.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he did,” agreed Janet.

They went back to the ranchhouse for lunch and Billy Fenstow beamed.

“We’re ahead of schedule now. Another two hours and we’ll be ready to start for the studio where we can finish up the interiors in a couple more days.”

The bus which had brought them from Hollywood rolled into the valley and several of the cowboys started loading baggage and equipment aboard it.

Janet and Helen went upstairs, followed by Cora and Margie. Both of the latter had been hinting that they would like an invitation to stay for a time in Hollywood, but they had been so mean and small during their high school days that neither Janet nor Helen could bear the thought of entertaining them.

“Coming back to Clarion this fall?” asked Cora, her dark eyes fairly snapping as she waited eagerly for the answer to her question.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” replied Janet, quite truthfully.

“How about you, Helen?” It was Margie asking this time.

Helen shook her head. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Can’t you stay on in pictures?” asked Cora, a tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

That nettled Janet. “If we want to,” she retorted, “but neither one of us can see much of a future in being actresses in western films.”

“With all of the influence your father has, you ought to be able to get into better pictures,” Margie told Helen, and it was her turn to feel a mounting flood of color in her cheeks.

“You can leave Dad out of this. He gave us an introduction, but we’ve won our parts,” snapped Helen.

The girls finished packing in silence and were ready to go down stairs when “Skeets” stuck his head in the door.

“Bus is all ready to start back for the city,” he said, picking up Janet’s and Helen’s bags.

Cora and Margie took their own luggage and followed them down stairs.

“Do you think we ought to invite them to Hollywood with us?” whispered Helen.

“That’s up to you,” replied Janet, “for they would have to be entertained in your home.”

“Well, what do you honestly think?”

Janet didn’t answer at once, but as they reached the bus, she said, “I think I’ve had about all of the insinuations I can stand from either one of them.”

Helen smiled. “That’s a help, for I feel the same way.” She turned toward the other girls, who were putting their baggage in their car.

“We may see you in Clarion before college starts this fall,” she said.

“Thanks for all your help,” flipped Cora, seating herself behind the wheel. “I’m sure we’ll enjoy ourselves in Hollywood. We may run into you someplace.”

She threw in the gears and the car lurched away along the dusty road that wound through the hills to the main highway some miles away.

“Wasn’t she nice and cordial?” smiled Helen as she turned back to Janet.

“Cora hasn’t changed a bit and I don’t suppose she will. What fun she could have if she’d only be a little less selfish,” said Janet.

Chapter Four

HIGH PRAISE

By the time everything was loaded into the bus, the sun was well down toward the western hills and the ranch was bathed in the soft, warm light of the late afternoon.

Curt Newsom, who had finished superintending the loading of his own horses into his private truck, walked over to join the girls, his spurs jingling as he walked.

“Glad it’s all over?” he asked.

Janet shook her head.

“Hardly. I’ve enjoyed it so much I really didn’t want it to end, but I guess that all good things come to an end.”

“You did a splendid job as leading woman,” smiled Curt. “I wish all of them were like you. Every once in a while the girls they assign to this unit get it into their heads that they are real actresses and they go temperamental on us. But you two worked like real troupers and took all of the bumps as they came.”

“And they came, too,” grinned Helen, rubbing her right leg, for she had slipped and fallen from a horse two days before and her leg was black and blue.

Curt was silent for a few moments, smiling at the efforts of “Skeets” to round up the last members of the company and get them aboard the big bus.

“Are you going to stay with us?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” replied Helen. “Fall’s almost here and that means college time. We’re both awfully young to stay on in pictures.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I’ve known girls younger than either one of you to make a success.”

“But they didn’t last long,” countered Janet.

“Perhaps you’re right on that,” agreed Curt. “Are you going to school?”

“I expect we’ll decide that when we get back to Hollywood and have a long talk with mother and dad,” replied Helen.

Just then Billy Fenstow hurried up, puffing and exceedingly warm.

“Everybody accounted for?” he asked his harried assistant.

“All here,” replied the red-faced “Skeets.”

“Sit down in the back seat with me,” the director told the girls. “I want to talk with you on the way back to the city.”

The last members of the company were herded aboard the bus and the girls, Curt Newsom and the director were the last to get aboard.

They sat down on the broad back seat which had been reserved for the director. The bus lurched into motion and rolled away from the ranchhouse.

Billy Fenstow mopped his perspiring brow and leaned back to enjoy the ride.

The dusty road wound through the hills, golden clouds of dust marking the passing of the bus.

They were halfway to the main highway when the motor started to cough and the big vehicle slowed to a stop.

The driver buried himself under the hood and tinkered with the engine for a few minutes. Then he climbed back into his seat and started the motor again.

They progressed for several hundred yards and finally groaned to a stop.

“Looks like we may be late in getting to dinner,” said Curt. “Sounded like serious trouble under the hood that time.”

The lanky cowboy uncoiled his legs and went out to see if he could be of any assistance to the bus driver.

Billy Fenstow, taking advantage of the stop, spoke to Janet and Helen, his voice so low that it was doubtful if he could be overheard by any other member of the company.

“What about staying in the company for my next picture?” he asked.

“When will it start?” Janet countered.

The director mopped his brow again and grinned.

“Just as soon as I can hash together a good enough story. Two weeks, maybe three, or it might even be a month. Why?”

“We’re not certain what we want to do,” explained Helen. “You see, college starts next month.”

“My heavens,” exclaimed the director. “What under the sun do you want to go to college for? You’re smart enough right now.”

“That’s just it; we aren’t,” replied Janet. “And we’re terribly young, if the truth were known.”

Billy Fenstow looked at them critically.

“Yep, you’re young enough,” he conceded, “but what’s that got to do with it?”

“Well, we’re nothing sensational as actresses,” replied Janet, “and neither one of us would want to go along playing minor rôles for years. If we ever hope to do more than that we’ve got to have more of a background in education and college seems to be the easiest and surest way to attain that.”

Billy Fenstow nodded in agreement.

“Maybe you’re right,” he admitted, “but you could stay on with me at one hundred or one hundred and fifty dollars a week for a long time.”

“But how many weeks a year would we work at that rate? There wouldn’t be more than twenty-five or thirty at the most and our expenses of staying on in Hollywood would become heavier.”

“Now that you put it that way, you’re probably right. But when you do get through college, don’t forget to come back and we’ll see how things go then.”

The director started to get up, then sank back on the cushions.

“You helped doctor the script of ‘Kings of the Air,’ didn’t you?” he asked Janet.

“I made a suggestion or two,” she admitted.

“I heard it was a little more than that,” smiled the director. “Why don’t you see what you could do with a western script for me. I haven’t got an idea and if I turn it over to the studio writers, I’ll probably get another stereotyped plot.”

“Are you serious?” demanded Janet.

“Very much so. You might be able to put together something with a new angle. Mind you, it must be simple in action, for I’ve got to operate on a slim budget, but we must have a satisfactory love angle and a plausible plot. Think you can do anything with it?”

“I’ll try; I’ll do my best,” promised Janet.

“Then I guess I’ll take a little vacation when we get back to Hollywood. I’ll need the story in about ten days, or at least a complete outline by that time.”

The tubby little director lifted himself off the seat and ambled down the aisle to learn how much longer they would be detained and Janet watched him go with a strange elation in her heart.

Chapter Five

DEADLY FANGS

Helen looked at her companion through smiling, quizzical eyes.

“Well, what do you make of that?” she asked.

“I’m a little bit dizzy, but I guess Mr. Fenstow meant what he said. Do you suppose I can really turn out an acceptable story for a western picture?” Janet turned and shot the question squarely at Helen.

“I’m sure you can. That is,” she amended, “if you don’t let the thought of it scare you.”

“I’ll give it a lot of time and thought before I start writing the story.”

“There isn’t much time,” warned Helen, and Janet knew that her companion was right.

Ten days – sometimes it seemed like an endless length of time; then again it vanished like magic and she had a feeling that this might be the case.

Some members of the company left the bus and walked around to stretch their legs; the others remained quietly in their seats, only a few of them talking for they were glad the strain of making the picture was at an end.

Janet sniffed the late afternoon air. There seemed to be a faint odor of smoke, but she decided some of the men in the company must be smoking nearby.

The heat abated somewhat as they waited for the driver to repair the engine and a sharp breeze swept down out of the hills sending little swirls of dust dancing along the winding road ahead of them.

Helen leaned close to her companion.

“Smell smoke?” she asked.

“Not now, but I thought I did a few minutes ago,” replied Janet.

“I’m sure I can now,” went on Helen, sniffing intently.

Janet thought she caught another whiff of smoke, but she couldn’t be sure.

Curt Newsom, who had been trying to help repair the engine, came back along the bus. His face was smudged with grime and dirt and his hands were covered with grease. He raised one of them and motioned for Janet and Helen to join him. The girls left their seats and walked down the bus, Curt meeting them at the doorway.

“Come on,” he said sharply and in a manner that was little like his own.

He strode away through the dry grass, which crackled like tinder under his boots. He was a good fifty yards away from the bus and far beyond earshot when he stopped and faced the girls.

“It will be hours before that bus can be repaired,” he told them. “Someone will have to go back to the ranch or the nearest village and phone for another vehicle to come out from the city.”

The freshening breeze stirred up a cloud of dust which enveloped them for a moment. Curt sneezed heavily and then sniffed.

“Smell anything?” There was desperate intentness in his question.

Janet and Helen wrinkled their noses and sniffed eagerly.

Helen shook her head.

“Not now, but a while ago I thought I smelled smoke.”

“So did I,” added Janet. “It was kind of like tobacco smoke and then it wasn’t.”

Curt shook his head. “I’m afraid it isn’t tobacco smoke. I’ve been getting whiffs of it right along. Smells like a brush fire to me, but I can’t locate any sign of smoke.”

“What do you mean by brush fire?” asked Janet.

Curt looked at her sharply and then his eyes swept the rugged countryside where the sparse grass was brown and the brush as brittle as glass.

“It’s like a prairie fire – only worse. It’s even worse than a forest fire. It spreads more rapidly. Once a fire gets started in this dry, combustible stuff, it’s almost impossible to stop it. Either a good rain comes along or the blamed thing just burns itself out.”

“But I should think you could dodge a brush fire,” put in Helen.

“Maybe you could if you knew which way it was going to jump. But it moves almost like lightning and it’s on you before you know it.”

The cowboy star cast an anxious eye over the rolling hills, but there was no sign of smoke, no spear of flame to flash a warning of impending trouble.

“Keep your nose busy and your eyes and ears on the job. You might even stir around in the hills a bit. If you see anything that looks like it might spell trouble, let me know. I’m going back to try and help the driver. We’ll give you plenty of time to get back before we start on if we just happen to find the trouble.”

Curt, his spurs jingling musically, strode away, and Janet and Helen watched him go with mingled feelings. His words had aroused a very definite sense of alarm in their minds and they were a little white as they faced each other.

“I’m sure I smell smoke now,” said Helen, sniffing intently. Janet did likewise, but she couldn’t be sure, and the breeze was getting sharper.

“We’ll scout around these hills. Let’s try that one,” Janet pointed to a ragged outcropping of rock that towered above the rest.

“It’s going to be hard to climb,” cautioned Helen.

“I know, but once we’re on top we’ll be able to see all over this country. If there’s any sign of a brush fire, we’ll be able to see it from there.”

“I suppose you’re right. Wish I had left my heavy boots on. These shoes aren’t made for this kind of walking,” and Helen looked down at the low-heeled, comfortable oxfords she wore. They were all right for street wear, but when it came to climbing about over thin, rocky soil, they provided only a minimum of protection.

The outcropping Janet had selected was even steeper than they had anticipated and as they climbed, the outline of the bus in the valley became smaller. They stopped several times to rest and on the last occasion Janet sat down on a flat, sun-baked rock. There was a certain fetid odor about it but she thought nothing of it until Helen, who was about to sit down beside her, screamed.

Without thinking and so swiftly it must have been a reflex action, she hurled herself away from the rock.

She dropped in a twisting, rolling fall and as she turned she glimpsed a venomous head with lashing fangs which flashed out once from the rock and then disappeared.

Chapter Six

THE SMOKY MENACE

Janet fell heavily, turning over several times before she finally came to rest against a clump of dry brush.

Helen was at her side almost instantly, her face drawn and tense.

“Did it strike you?” she asked, deep anxiety marking her words.

Janet, still dazed by the shock of hurling herself to the ground, looked up and managed a wan smile. She shook her head and with Helen giving her a hand, got to her feet.

“No, I’m all right. Just scared a little. It was so sudden.”

“The snake was coiled up on the back of the rock. I saw it just as you sat down. For a second I was speechless; then I seemed to explode into a scream,” explained Helen.

“It’s a good thing for me that you did,” said Janet. “I don’t think the snake missed it more than inches. We’d better get some stout clubs if we’re going to do any more climbing around these rocks.”

“One thing, we’re not going to sit down on any of them,” declared Helen, who was watching the pile of rocks with open suspicion. There was still that fetid smell in the air, but no sign of any snakes.

They looked about for sticks which could be used for clubs and Helen found several sizeable sticks which would serve that purpose.

The incident had unnerved them more than they cared to confess and they sat down to rest on the sandy soil, taking care that nothing was near them which would conceal a snake.

The afternoon deepened and the sun was about to sink over the western hills when they roused themselves and started on toward the summit of the promontory they had been climbing.

Janet stopped and sniffed the air. The odor of smoke seemed stronger now, yet there was no visible sign of it.

Helen also smelled it, for the wind, if anything, was sharper now.

“If there’s a fire burning somewhere near here, it might be bad for us,” she said. “This dry grass and underbrush would burn like tinder.”

“That’s what Curt fears,” added Janet.

They stopped to rest once more before they started the final ascent to the rocky outcropping from which they hoped to be able to survey the entire surrounding country.

As they started up the final slope, the smell of the smoke became stronger. Looking back into the valley where the bus was stalled, Janet could see the men in the company all grouped around the front end. It was evident that the trouble had not been repaired. Some distance from the bus a lone figure was striding along the trail, evidently bound for the nearest ranch or village where he could telephone for another bus and a repair crew.

They toiled up the last few yards to the summit of the promontory and reached it only to drop down in an open space, gasping for breath, for the last part of the climb had been arduous.

A sharp cry from Helen drew Janet’s attention away from the bus, which now seemed far down in the valley.

“There’s fire burning in that further valley,” cried Helen, an involuntary note of alarm in her voice.

Janet turned quickly and gazed in the direction Helen was pointing. Her companion was right. There was fire in one of the distant valleys. From their elevation they could see a low, creeping wave of smoke shot through with an occasional tongue of flame.

The wind, riffling past them now, was sweeping the fire in their direction at a steady pace, but it was at least two miles away, perhaps even further, estimated Janet.

“Does it look serious?” asked Helen.

“I should say it does,” replied Janet quickly. “One of us must get back to the bus at once and warn Curt. This is what he’s feared.”

“I’ll stay,” said Helen, but Janet noted that her companion’s face paled at the thought of staying on top of the ridge and watching the fire sweep toward her.

“No you won’t. If there’s any staying to be done up here, I’ll be the one,” decided Janet. “Besides, I can run faster than you and your shoes are in no condition to go racing over this rough ground. You start down now and tell Curt exactly what’s happening. Tell him the fire is moving steadily in our direction and I can’t see that anyone is in front of it attempting to beat it out or to build barriers to halt it.”

“But I hate to leave you here alone,” protested Helen.

“Never mind that. You get back to the bus. Hurry!” There was an anxious note of appeal in Janet’s last words and Helen flung down the stick she had been carrying and started back down the slope.

Janet watched her for a time as she darted around outcroppings of rock. Then she turned and gazed at the low wall of smoke which was being whipped along by the wind.

From that distance it was hard to imagine that the advancing smoke and fire could be such a deadly thing – that it could lay waste to everything in its path, leaving, where it had passed, only a sear and desolate landscape.

The wind seemed to be strengthening with the passing of each minute. The crest of the advancing fire topped the ridge of another valley and started down the near slope, but it was still better than a mile and a half away. Occasionally a jet of flame rose higher than the others, as though some madman had tossed a torch high into the air at his exhilaration over the destruction the flames were causing.

The afternoon was waning rapidly and in the valleys between Janet and the flames the light was fading. She turned and gazed back down the long slope. Helen was almost at the bus, making every effort at speed and Janet felt sorry for her for she knew Helen must be suffering intense pain from her too-thin shoes for the rocks would bruise her feet badly.

Janet saw Helen reach the bus and the men turned their attention from the stalled motor to the newcomer. Janet thought she could distinguish Curt Newsom looming above the others but she couldn’t be sure.

In less than a minute a solitary figure detached itself from the group around the bus and started up the slope toward Janet. From the long stride and the graceful carriage of the body she knew it was the cowboy star, coming up to get a first-hand glimpse of the advancing fire.

Someone down at the bus turned on the headlights, and twin beams of light flashed through the gathering purple of the evening.

Janet heard a scurrying up the other slope and a jack rabbit, scenting the danger of the approaching wall of smoke and fire, dashed past her. She knew that later there would be an onrush of the smaller animals seeking to evade the danger. But for some reason Janet felt strangely calm.

The fire was still more than a mile away. True, it was advancing steadily, but the thought of being trapped by flames had never really entered her mind and she refused to be stampeded now.

She turned back to watch the progress of Curt Newsom as he raced up the slope. It was almost dusk now where she was standing but she could see him coming steadily toward her. He would be beside her in another minute.

The cowboy star, puffing heavily from the race up the rocky slope, reached Janet’s side.

The smell of smoke was stronger now and the flames were brighter as though they were eating their way through heavier underbrush.

Curt’s features were plainly visible in the half light of the early evening and Janet could see the lines of worry on his face.

“It’s worse than I thought from what Helen told us,” he said, shielding his eyes and looking across the intervening valleys to the ridge down which the fire was now racing.

“Is it serious?” asked Janet. “Are we in danger?”

Curt stared at her hard, wondering just how much he dared to tell her. Then he decided she might as well know the truth and he spoke frankly.

“The wind’s rising all the time and this fire’s spreading rapidly. We’ve got to get out of here within the next few minutes or we may never leave these valleys alive.”

Chapter Seven

RACING FLAMES

Janet felt an inward surge of terror sweep over her, chilling her mind and body. But it lasted for only an instant. She was too calm, too sensible to become panic stricken now. They might be in a tight spot but she had confidence that the angular, capable cowboy would be able to pull them through.

“We’ve got to get back to the bus and warn them of the danger. Maybe the boys will have the engine fixed by the time we’re back.”

Curt turned for a final look at the advancing wall of smoke and flame.

A steady procession of small animals, driven from their homes, was racing through the underbrush and an occasional frightened rabbit would almost bump into them in its blind haste to find safety.

“Come on!” said Curt. He held out his hand and Janet grasped it. With the cowboy leading the way, they plunged down the slope. It was risky business, going at that speed, but speed was essential and they dared a twisted ankle to reach the bus with the least possible delay.

Janet dropped the stick she had been carrying and grasped Curt’s strong wrist with both of her own hands. They were fairly flying down the incline, Janet’s legs working mechanically as she followed the lead of the cowboy star.

They crashed through a low fringe of underbrush and reached the twisting roadway. Half a hundred feet away was the bus, its lights glowing, but no other sign of animation coming from the mechanical monster.

The smoke was not yet thick in this valley and for this Janet was thankful for the other members of the company obviously had not become panicky.

Billy Fenstow saw them first.

“What about the fire?” he asked.

“It’s bad. We’ve got to get out of here and without losing any time. How about the bus?”

“It won’t even cough,” moaned the director.

“Any word from the man you sent for help?”

“Not yet. What’ll we do?” There was an anxious note in Billy Fenstow’s voice.

“I don’t know yet, but we’ll do something.”

Curt strode forward to the front end of the bus where the male members of the company were grouped.

“Any chance of getting going within the next five or ten minutes?” he asked the director, who was almost buried under the hood.

“Afraid not,” came the smothered reply. “I’ve found the trouble but it’s going to take about half an hour to get it fixed.”

Curt turned and faced Bill Fenstow.

“That’s too long,” he warned the director. “The wind’s getting worse and that fire’s coming fast now. In another half hour this valley will be an inferno. It will be impossible for anyone to live in it.”

“Then we’d better start back for the ranch afoot,” said the director.

Curt’s laugh was hard and thin and Janet, hearing it, thought it was a desperate laugh.

“The fire would overtake us before we could get near the ranch,” said Curt. “We’ve got to make a stand and we might as well make it here.”

“What can we do?” It was the director asking the question.

“We can start a backfire and burn off as much ground around here as possible. While some of us are doing that the others can see what they can do in getting the bus fixed. If it’s done in time, we’ll run for it; if it isn’t this is as good a place as any.”

Helen came close to Janet.

“Is it that bad?” she whispered.

“I’m afraid it is,” admitted Janet. “Scared?”

“Scared to death,” confessed Helen.

“So am I,” admitted Janet. “But maybe there is something we can do to help the men.”

Every member of the company was anxious and willing to do whatever they could and Curt Newsom snapped directions at them. Most of the men raced out into the brush and almost instantly small fires sprang up. They ate their way rapidly through the undergrowth and as they neared the bus itself were beaten out, the men using coats, blankets or whatever article they could find in the bus. In less than ten minutes there was a growing blackened area around the stalled vehicle. Their object was to create a large enough burned over area so that the main wall of the advancing fire would move around them.

Curt told them frankly that the heat would be bad, almost unbearable, but they could live through it.

The ridge from which Janet and Helen had discovered the fire was outlined against a sky shot with crimson for it was quite dark now. Small animals, scurrying before the red menace, were racing past almost constantly.

The fires which had been started around the bus were spreading out in a great circle, eating their way hungrily along the parched ground. In the light from them Janet could see Curt stalking here and there, directing one group and then another, and pausing now to beat down some flame with his blanket.

Both girls felt particularly helpless, for there seemed to be nothing they could do, and Helen, her light shoes torn and thin, was particularly wretched, for her feet were sore and bruised.

A sharp cry came from one of the men who had remained with the driver in an effort to get the bus repaired. Someone leaped into the seat, there was the whirl of the starter and the heavy vehicle shook as its powerful motor thundered into motion.

The driver slid out from under the hood. His face was a smear of grease and his shirt was badly torn, for he had been working in close quarters. He stumbled, reeling from fatigue, but someone caught him and lifted him into the bus. Another man sounded the horn and the fire-builders, led by Curt and Billy Fenstow, returned to the bus.

“Think the motor will hold up?” Curt snapped at the driver.

“It ought to, but I can’t be sure,” was the tired reply.

“What do you want to do?” The cowboy fired the question at the director.

“Get out of here and get out quick!” cried the director.

“Where’ll you go?” Curt snapped the question back.

Billy Fenstow stared at him for just a moment.

“Hollywood, of course. Everybody in!”

But Curt laid a restraining hand on the director.

“The road ahead curves back directly into the path of the flame. If we swing around this promontory, we’ll be cut off ahead and before we can get back the flames will be over this section of the road. We can only go back.”

“Then back to the ranch we go,” decided the director, and again he called, “Everybody in!”

Members of the company jammed their way into the bus and Curt took the wheel for the driver was too exhausted to handle the heavy vehicle.

The smoke was thick now and the first flames were licking their way over the crest of the ridge far above them.

With the motor roaring heavily, Curt threw in the gears and swung the big vehicle about in a sharp circle. Then, with the headlights vainly trying to bore through the almost stifling smoke, they raced back down the road.

It was dangerous going, for Curt's vision was cut down to less than three rods, but speed was essential now and they plunged through the smoky night at a reckless pace.

Chapter Eight

THE LINE GOES DEAD

Lights in the interior of the bus were out now for Curt didn't dare run the risk that they might interfere with his vision. The heavy vehicle swayed from side to side as they bounced over the winding road and Janet and Helen clung to each other for protection.

Smoke was swirling across the road and the acrid fumes swept through the open windows of the bus, but there was no time now to close them.

They raced out of the valley they had been in, shot up over a slight rise, and descended into another valley, the glare of the flames being lost to view for the time.

"Think we'll make it?" gasped Helen, clinging tightly to Janet's right arm.

"We've got to," replied Janet. "The last shots for the picture are in the bus."

"I'm not worrying about the picture; it's us," retorted Helen. "My eyes hurt; so do my feet."

Janet couldn't help smiling for Helen was very much matter of fact.

There was a sharp report under the bus, like a gunshot or the backfire of the exhaust. But it was neither and the girls were thrown heavily against the side of the bus as the left rear tire let go.

The heavy machine swayed dangerously with Curt fighting for control. The brakes screamed as they ground to a stop and Curt leaped out to survey the damage. The driver followed him and then Billy Fenstow followed.

The driver turned on his flashlight and Janet could hear Curt's muttered exclamation of disgust.

"We can change; we've got a spare," the driver said.

"We've got to and we'll have to work fast," snapped Curt.

Under the lashing directions of the cowboy star, other members of the company turned to and lent a hand. Tools were taken out, a big jack was placed under the rear axle, and the work started.

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