

# VIRGINIA OF V. M. FRANCE



GRACE HAY NORTH



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He removed his gayly adorned peaked hat and took from it a letter, which he handed to Virginia.  
(Page 98) *(Virginia of V. M. Ranch)*

# VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH

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By GRACE MAY NORTH

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AUTHOR OF

"Virginia at Vine Haven," "Virginia's Adventure  
Club," "Virginia's Ranch Neighbors,"  
"Virginia's Romance."



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THE  
VIRGINIA DAVIS SERIES

A SERIES OF STORIES FOR GIRLS OF TWELVE  
TO SIXTEEN YEARS OF AGE

By GRACE MAY NORTH

- VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH
- VIRGINIA AT VINE HAVEN
- VIRGINIA'S ADVENTURE CLUB
- VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS
- VIRGINIA'S ROMANCE

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VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH

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no 1



DEDICATED TO

VIRGINIA DAVIS

MARGARET SELOVER

BARBARA BLAIR WENTE

And to all other girls in their teens  
who like adventure and the desert.



# VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH

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## CHAPTER I

### VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH.

DOWN a winding mountain trail, a girl of sixteen was riding on Comrade, her wiry red-brown pony.

It was a glorious morning. The sky above was a gleaming cloudless blue, the desert, below, stretching to the far horizon, shimmered white in the sunlight, while some bird in a canon near was caroling a tipsy song of joy, but these things Virginia Davis did not see or hear, for her eyes were gazing at the rugged trail and her thoughts were puzzling over the contents of a letter which her brother Malcolm had brought to her that morning when he had returned from the town of Douglas which was twenty miles away.

Her father's best friend had died the year before, and had left a motherless girl all alone in the world. When Mr. Selover realized that he had not long to

live he had written Mr. Davis asking him to become the guardian of his daughter, Margaret, who was then in a select boarding-school in the East.

In some unaccountable manner, the letter had been delayed for many months, and during that time, Mr. Davis had also died, leaving Virginia and Malcolm as sole owners of the vast cattle ranch which was known as "The V. M."

This morning Virginia had ridden to the top of the trail where she often went when she wanted to be alone with her thoughts, for the long delayed letter had indeed brought a new problem to these two young people.

This unknown Margaret Selover, it seemed, was their father's ward. Ought they not to assume the responsibility which he would so gladly have taken had he lived? And yet, what if the girl should prove to be very unlike themselves? She might not care to make her home on their wonderful desert, and, if she did not, would it be right for them to take her from an environment in which she was happy and content? But how could they tell, since they did not know her?

Comrade had carefully wended his way down the mountain trail and had carried his young mistress, who was deeply absorbed in thought, across the dry creek, under a clump of cottonwood trees and up the steep farther bank before the girl looked about her with eyes that saw.

Her brother was galloping toward her. "Ho,

Virginia!" he hailed as he waved his wide sombrero. "Did your Inspiration Peak help you to solve our problem? What are we to do with our ward?"

The girl flashed a smile at the lad, whose frank, bronzed face resembled her own, for, though he was two years her senior, twins could not have been more alike or dearer to each other.

"If only we knew what type of a girl this Margaret is," his sister replied as he wheeled his horse about and rode by her side, "we could so much more easily decide upon a plan. I did indeed receive an inspiration, but one hard to carry out I fear. I have been wishing that in some way we might become acquainted with our ward without having her know who we are."

"You are right, sister." Malcolm said seriously. "I do not wish to invite this unknown girl to share our home unless I am convinced that your life will be made happier by the companionship. Our father would not wish it otherwise. Now tell me your plan."

Virginia looked at her brother with unexpected laughter in her violet-blue eyes. "It is one by which we could become acquainted with our ward without revealing to her our true identity. Harken and you shall hear."

Malcolm's hearty laughter rang out when the half serious, half merry plan had been told.

"If only we can persuade Uncle Tex to play the role of elderly guardian," he exclaimed. "I am sure

that your little drama, when staged, will bring about the desired results, but, knowing our faithful old overseer as well as I do, I fear that we may have a tragedy, or a comedy, which perhaps would be equally disastrous."

Virginia's amused expression had changed to one of serious concern. "Brother," she said, "if we do carry out my plan, will it be quite honest to Margaret?"

"Not right in the beginning I must confess," Malcolm replied, "but, of course, we will at once tell her the truth, if, after meeting her, we decided to invite her to become one of our household, but, on the contrary, if we find that she would not wish to share our home, she would, of course, return to the school where she has been for so many years. We will at least have tried to do our duty as we see it."

"Then shall I write the letter?" the violet eyes turned questioningly.

"Yes, that will be the prologue to the little drama. Rusty Pete is going to Silver Creek Junction this afternoon and he will start the message on its eastward journey."

Again Malcolm's amused laughter rang out. "It will be better not to let Uncle Tex know that we have designs upon him," he said, "for, if he has an inkling, even, that we are going to request him to do a bit of 'play actin' as he would call it, he will

start at once for the mountain cabin, the location of which we have never been able to discover.”

Their low rambling ranch house having been reached, Virginia leaped to the ground, tossing the reins to her brother, who, still chuckling to himself, rode on down to the corral where an old, white-haired man could be seen repairing a fence.

## CHAPTER II.

## MARGARET.

BARBARA BLAIR WENTE in the Vine Haven Seminary looked up from the cosy window seat where she was comfortably curled, studying French verbs, when she heard the door open. It was Margaret Selover, her room-mate, who entered.

"Megsy," Babs exclaimed with real concern as she sprang to her feet and approached her friend with hands outstretched, "what has happened, dear? Are the algebra reports in and didn't you pass, or, is it something else?"

The new-comer looked at Barbara with eyes tear-brimmed. She tried to speak but her lips quivered; then, flinging herself down upon the couch, she sobbed as though her heart would break.

Babs, deeply concerned, knelt by the side of her room-mate, and tenderly smoothing the gold-brown curls, she pleaded. "Tell me, Megsy darling, can't I help?"

Impulsively Margaret sat up, and, putting her arms about her friend she sobbed. "Oh Babs, I can't do it! I won't do it! I did think that my dad loved me too much to punish me so."



“Can’t, won’t do what?” Barbara sat on the couch and drew her room-mate comfortingly close. “Megsy, please begin at the beginning.”

Margaret put her hand in a pocket of her rose-colored sweater-coat and drew out a crumpled letter.

“It’s from some-one way out on that terrible Arizona desert,” she said, “and it informs me that my father appointed a Mr. Davis as my guardian and that the elderly gentleman, having given the matter due thought, believes that it is time for me to come to his home and take the place that my father wished me to occupy, that of a rancher’s adopted daughter.”

Barbara gazed at her friend, almost unable to comprehend. “Megsy, does this mean that you and I are to be parted? That you are to leave Vine Haven Seminary forever?”

For a brief moment Margaret sat as though stunned, but her room-mate’s words roused her to action. Springing up in a sudden tempest of anger, she tore across the room, threw open the desk and began to write rapidly.

“There!” she exclaimed a few moments later. “I have written my answer.”

“Read it,” Barbara begged, and in a hard cold voice, very unlike her own, that was merry and musical, Margaret read:

“My Dear Mr. Davis:—

“You undoubtedly have written with the kindest

of motives, but the picture you present is not in the least attractive to me. A ranch house on a desolate desert twenty miles from town is not a home which I wish to enter.

“It is better for me to be honest and tell you at once that I do not care to be your adopted daughter. I have a sufficient income on which to live and I shall remain at Vine Haven Seminary until I have graduated. Soon after that I will be eighteen and you will no longer be responsible for my actions.”

Barbara listened and watched, puzzled indeed at this new Margaret. “Dear,” she said when her friend paused, evidently expecting comment, “it is very unlike you to hurt anyone. Couldn’t you add a little something that would soften the sting?”

With a shrug Margaret turned back to the desk and after a thoughtful moment, she again wrote a few lines. Then in a voice more like her own, she read:—“Since you were a close friend of my father, I regret that I must make a decision that may seem defiant, but surely you would not wish to have in your home a rebellious daughter and that is what I would be.

“Sincerely yours,

“MARGARET SELOVER.”

Without waiting for further comment, the letter was sealed and stamped.

“I hope you are doing right, dear, Barbara said; then, almost tearfully: “If you do go so far away,

Vine Haven will be more desolate to me than the desert."

"I'm not going!" Margaret remarked conclusively, then, springing up, she added. "Three bells! Time for French class and I haven't even looked at those verbs."

Together they left their room and descended the wide flight of stairs. "I'll skip ahead and put this letter in the mail pouch," Margaret declared; then, somewhat repentantly: "Really, Babs, I am sorry to hurt the feelings of the old man. Father often told me how much he admired Mr. Davis who was many years his senior. They owned some mining property together near Bisbee. In fact, I believe that my income is derived from that same copper mine even now. Well, someday soon I'll send him another and a kindlier letter, but there isn't time today, and he will, of course, be watching for an answer."

But before the other letter was written, something very unexpected happened.

## CHAPTER III.

## MARGARET'S REPLY.

VIRGINIA was right in believing that she would receive a reply from their unknown ward as soon as one could possibly reach them. She had counted the days that her own letter would require for its journey east, and then had allowed one in between, and so, at last, the day had dawned when she might reasonably expect to hear from the unknown Margaret.

Luckily Rusty Pete was in town and would bring the mail if there was any. Virginia, as she went about her household tasks that morning, skipped often to the wide front veranda and looked up the mesa. A huge cactus growing at the top of the trail stood like a silent sentinel and around this a horse and rider soon appeared.

As the girl hoped, it was one of their two faithful cow-boys. "Good morning, Rusty Pete," she called, as he rode alongside of the wide, shady porch. "Have you letters for me?"

"I reckon I have, Miss Virginia. 'Pears to me a couple is stowed away somewhar's." As he spoke, the cow-boy thrust a lean, brown hand into his deep

leather pocket, then, with a sudden smile that wonderfully illumined his rugged wind and sun bronzed face, he removed his wide sombrero and drew forth two letters that were very unlike each other in appearance.

"Didn't pack the pouch 'long this time," he explained, "so put 'em thar for safe keepin'."

The girl laughed. "Thank you, Rusty Pete," she said, and then the long, lank cow-boy rode on toward the corral.

After glancing at the name in the upper left hand corner of the lilac scented and tinted envelope, Virginia uttered a little excited ejaculation, and, catching her wide hat from the top step, she raced down the trail to the fenced-in enclosure where Malcolm was busy filling the trough near the windmill for the yearlings were soon to be driven in from the range.

"What ho?" he called when he saw the figure flying toward him. The girl waved the two unopened letters and Malcolm, equally interested, vaulted the bars and stood at her side.

"Has our ward written?" he inquired merrily. "Is she eager to be the adopted daughter of an elderly rancher?"

There was a shade of anxiety in the violet eyes that were lifted to him. "Brother," she said, "I wonder if we did wrong to deceive Margaret. Of course it was merely to be a temporary arrangement. If she comes, Uncle Tex is to play the role

of elderly guardian, that is, if he can be persuaded to do so, then you, as cow-boy, and I, as house-keeper, will have a splendid opportunity to become acquainted with our ward and find out what manner of girl she really is."

While Virginia had been talking, she had opened the tinted envelope. One glance at the very short note and her merry laughter pealed forth.

"Brother, Margaret actually refuses to come. Well, we surely may thank what-ever kindly fate has delivered us from having this young tornado in our home." Virginia handed the letter to Malcolm as she spoke.

The other long white envelope she glanced at casually, and, believing it to be the usual monthly report from their lawyer's office, she did not open it, but waving farewell to her brother, who had again vaulted the bars, Virginia returned to the house and to her morning tasks.

It was half an hour later before she recalled the long legal looking envelope.

"I might as well skim it over," she thought, "and then I can tell Malcolm about it and he will not need to take the time to read it."

Dropping down into a comfortable cushioned wicker chair out on the veranda, Virginia leisurely opened it. Her thoughts were wandering when she began to read, but suddenly she sat erect and stared at the typed page. Then she re-read it slowly from

the beginning to be sure that she had really understood its purport.

Shags, the big collie dog, lying nearby, half dozing in the sun was startled to see his mistress leap to her feet and tear madly down the trail toward the corral. Believing that he might miss something of unusual interest if he did not follow, he raced after, barking and bounding.

Malcolm looked up in surprise. "Ho Sis," he called, "had you overlooked a postscript in our ward's letter? Is she coming after all?"

Then noting how pale was his sister's face, he hastened to her side. "It's a letter from Mr. Benton, our father's lawyer. I don't understand business matters as you do, and perhaps I do not rightly comprehend the meaning of this. I sincerely hope I do not."

But Virginia had rightly understood. Mr. Denton, their lawyer in Douglas had written:

"Dear young friends:—

"This morning a letter was received by me that you may be able to interpret better than I can. I did not know that your father had been appointed guardian of a girl named Margaret Selover, but the letter which I have this day received from an eastern law firm informs me that the income which has been sent, since her father's death, to this young girl, has been abruptly discontinued as the mines from which it is derived are no longer paying.

"Since Miss Selover is referred to as your father's ward, I presume that she is residing with you, and so I thought best to communicate with you at once.

"Trusting that the deprivation will be but temporary,

"I remain,

"Your faithful friend and adviser,

"HARRY L. BENTON."

"Which means?" Virginia's tone was one of inquiry.

"Which means that we will have to lasso that young tornado and bring her here, whether or not she wishes to come," was the dismal reply, "for surely, you and I, Virg, cannot afford to pay Miss Selover's tuition at a fashionable seminary."

"No, we cannot," his sister agreed, "then—  
"Shall I write to poor Margaret and tell her the sad news?"

"I think the ones to be pitied are Virginia and Malcolm," the lad spoke vehemently, "but, there is no alternative. Write the letter and I'll take it to Silver Creek Junction. I'm going that far right after lunch to help drive in the yearlings."

A week later another letter bearing the Vine Haven postmark arrived on the desert. With a heavy heart Virginia opened it, and after a hurried perusal, she decided that "lassoing the young tor-



nado" as her brother had called their ward, was not to be a pleasant pastime.

"My dear Mr. Davis," she read:

"Your letter came this morning informing me that my income has ceased. I believe that to be an absolute untruth, a ruse to try to force my obedience to your will. Of course you have accomplished your end for I am too proud to remain at this seminary unless I can pay my tuition, but I warn you, my stay with you will be no longer than absolute necessity requires and it will in no way add to your happiness to have a rebellious girl in your home.

"I hope that you will reconsider and send my allowance which is already one week over due.

"MARGARET SELOVER."

"Whew-oo!" Malcolm's whistle was one of mingled astonishment and amusement.

"I feel about as I did when I broke in Wild Fire, Virg," he said, his grey eyes twinkling at the recollection. "I had never before met a spirit so untamed."

Virginia laughed. "This defiant young lady would not feel complimented to have her temper compared to a bucking broncho," she said, "but I suppose that come she must, until she is old enough to be self-supporting, but my heart aches for her. I am almost inclined to tell her the whole truth. Shall I?" The violet eyes were moist and imploring, but the lad shook his head.

“Let’s carry out our original plan first. We may even yet find a loop hole of escape.”

Slowly and thoughtfully, Virginia walked back over the well worn trail to the ranch house. She was planning the letter which later was written and mailed.

## CHAPTER IV.

## PLOTTING AND PLANNING.

THAT evening before the wide fireplace on which a mesquite root was cheerfully burning, three people sat plotting and planning.

Virginia had at last decided to take Uncle Tex into their confidence. He it was who had first taught five-year-old Malcolm to ride and shoot and Virginia he loved as dearly as he could have loved an own daughter if he had had one.

"It's powerful unpleasant business, 'pears like to me," the old man said as he shook his shaggy grey head, "but I reckon if you uns cal-late its yer dooty, we all will have to put it through, but yer ol' Uncle Tex is common poor at the play actin'."

He looked so truly distressed that Virginia drew her chair closer and placed her slim, strong hand on his arm. "Don't be troubled about it yet, Uncle Tex, we'll make it as easy for you as we can." Then, looking to her brother, she added with thoughtful seriousness. "I wonder if we ought to permit our ward to journey across the continent alone. I am confident that she has always been pro-

tected by her father's loving care, just as I have been, although I feel sure that I could make the journey alone and in safety, and yet, since Margaret is our ward, we are responsible, as I am sure that our father would wish us to be, for her well being."

"You are right, Virg," the lad replied. "I wish we knew some one who might be coming west at the same time, who would consent to keep an eye on our young tornado."

There was a twinkle in the eyes of the lad, and his sister, noticing it, exclaimed: "Malcolm Davis, I actually believe that you like our ward all the better because she is high spirited."

"Well," the lad confessed, "I do like spirit, I'll agree. I'd like to see the girl."

"Ah reckon we-all will see plenty of her before we're finished with her." Uncle Tex drawled in so doleful a tone that Malcolm laughed heartily.

"Or until she finishes us," he exclaimed merrily as he rose and wound the clock.

"We must retire early tonight, Sis," he added, "for I want to be in the saddle before day-break as I am due at Slater's to help round up the young steers that are to be shipped to Chicago next week."

The girl sprang up and looked down at the old man who sat staring dismally into the fire.

"Uncle Tex," she exclaimed gaily as she stooped and caught one of his work hardened hands, "you look as though you had just received an invitation to your own funeral. Don't you enjoy the prospect

of being guardian, pro tem, to a young lady tornado?"

"Don' know nothin' 'bout protems, Miss Virginia, dearie, but I do kinda dread bein' gardeen to a gal that don' want to be gardeened nohow, but if you'n Malcolm need my help, sech as it is, yer welcome to it."

The old man had risen and impulsively the girl threw her arms about him and pressing her fresh young cheek against the wrinkled and leathery one, she said consolingly: "Now, Uncle Tex, dear, don't lie awake worrying about your new responsibility for if Margaret proves tractable, which means nice and pleasant, we will tell her the whole truth, but if she continues disagreeable and rebellious, we will soon pack her off somewhere else."

Then she bade good-night to the old man who had been her father's first overseer and he departed for his room which adjoined the kitchen, for the girl would not permit him to sleep in the less comfortable bunk house with the younger cow-boys. Then she too retired, but she lay awake until late wondering what the future held for them.

## CHAPTER V.

## MALCOLM'S GREAT NEWS.

THE next day was a busy one at the V. M. Ranch, for a crate of fruit arrived for Virginia and she preserved and canned until at last the grandfather clock in the living-room chimed the hour of five. Then she stood back and proudly surveyed row after row of jars, some golden and others glowingly ruddy.

Then, taking off her all-over apron, and donning her wide felt hat, she thought that to get a breath of the cool evening air, she would ride toward the Slater Ranch and meet her brother who would soon be returning.

Uncle Tex saddled Comrade for her, and then stood watching as his beloved "gal" cantered away toward the mesa. She turned to wave to him when she reached the sentinel cactus which stood with two branches outstretched like defending arms that were covered with long prickly thorns.

She drew rein when she reached the highest point and sat on her red-brown pony watching the glory of the setting sun. At last when the golden light had left all but the highest mountain peaks, and deep

shadows were purpling the canons, she beheld silhouetted against the after glow, a horseman approaching at a gallop.

Believing it to be her brother, she rode down the trail to meet him. Malcolm, she realized, was hilariously excited about something, for every now and then he snatched off his sombrero and waved it to the waiting girl.

"News! Great news!" he shouted as he drew near.

"What is it?" Virginia asked as she wheeled her pony about and side by side they rode toward home through the deepening dusk.

"I'll give you three guesses." This had been their way of telling news items to each other from their earliest childhood.

"Oh brother, don't make me guess it this time. I just know that it is something of unusual interest," the girl implored.

"It is." This in Malcolm's most tantalizing manner. "Well, I'll give you a hint. It's something about the coming of our young tornado."

"Oh." Virginia's expression brightened. "Have you heard of someone who will escort her from the East?"

"Righto, Sis, you're doing splendidly, but who?"

They were descending the narrow trail from the mesa, and, since Virginia was in the lead, she could not see the elated expression on the face of her brother.

"Um-m, let me see," she replied thoughtfully. "May I have five minutes to think?"

"I'll give you until the Dry Creek is crossed," was the merry reply.

They rode on in silence while Virginia's thoughts were busy trying to solve the mystery. Of course Malcolm must have heard of this possible escort during his day at the Slater Ranch while rounding up the steers that were to be sent to Chicago.

"Oh, I have it!" she whirled about in her saddle to exclaim exultingly. "Some one, of course, is to accompany the car-load of steers to the big city and that some-one will meet Margaret there and escort her back to Douglas."

"Congratulations sister! Now, since you are so clever at guessing tonight, suppose you tell me *who* is to go with the cattle."

"Malcolm Davis, I do believe that you are," the girl instantly declared. "There's a ring in your voice which convinces me that you are at last to have the opportunity for which you have so longed. Are you now old enough to be trusted on so important a mission?"

"Mr. Slater thinks so. He asked me to go," the lad replied jubilantly, as he swung from his saddle, "but wait until after supper and then I will tell you my plan."



## CHAPTER VI.

## FAREWELL TO BOARDING SCHOOL.

A WEEK passed and Margaret Selover had received a letter, supposedly from the elderly Mr. Davis, bidding her start on her westward journey Friday, the 25th.

Barbara Blair Wente, fluffy, golden and petite, sat curled up on the window seat of the room they had shared together for the past year looking the picture of misery.

"I hate him! Hate him!" Margaret was saying as she thumped a small pillow preparatory to packing it in her trunk. Then she added, rising and looking her defiance, "but he won't keep me long, Babs. You may be sure of that. I'll make life so unpleasant for my hoary guardian that he will soon be glad to release me. Oh dear, how I do wish that I were older so that I might begin earning my own living, but just wait until I'm eighteen. Then I will do something. Other girls do and I believe I am normally clever."

"Who do you suppose is to meet you in Chicago?" Barbara inquired.

"Don't know and don't care," was the somewhat

muffled reply from the trunk, the cover of which was closed a moment later with a snap. Then Margaret sat upon it as she remarked:—"My guardian kindly informed me that I need have nothing whatever to say to my escort if I did not wish to be friendly, but that, at least, I must allow him to look out for my welfare."

Babs sat up and looked interested. "Margaret, what if it should be a real cow-boy like the ones we have seen in the moving pictures. Those handsome young giants who are always helping damsels in distress. Wouldn't that be romantic? I'm just wild to see a live cow-boy myself. They are fascinating on the screen."

"Well, they don't appeal to me," Margaret replied, "I prefer boys who are dressed in civilized clothes and who know how to talk. All of the cow-boys in fiction use the queerest kind of a language."

Four bells pealed through the corridors and Barbara rose reluctantly.

"Even if my heart is nearly broken over your departure, Megsy, I suppose I'll have to go down to this old recitation," she said.

Margaret also rose and going to the window, she looked out at the bleak orchard. "I'm not going. What's the use of working out problems in geometry today when tomorrow I will be gone?"

Just at that moment there were skipping footsteps

outside in the corridor followed by an imperative knocking at the door.

Barbara opened it to admit a pretty, eager-eyed child, who held up a yellow envelope. "It's for you, Miss Margaret," she said. "Mrs. Martin said to bring it right up."

The girl, as she opened the telegram, sincerely hoped that in it she would find a message bidding her to remain at the school, but she did not.

"Leave, if possible, on the 8.30 train tonight which reaches Chicago at six tomorrow morning. Wear a red ribbon bow that you may easily be recognized."

It was signed: "Peter Wallace."

Margaret's eyes flashed and she tore the telegram to bits. "Peter Wallace, indeed! I'm not going to take orders from a wild west cow-boy. He may meet the six o'clock train tomorrow morning, but I won't be on it."

However, when Barbara had reluctantly departed for her class, Margaret found that the prospect of arriving in Chicago alone and unprotected was not a pleasant one to contemplate. With her father she had spent one day in the big city and she remembered how she had clung to his hand when they had crossed the streets and how terrorized she had been by the rush and roar of the traffic.

An hour later, when Babs returned, she was surprised to find that the trunk had been taken to the

station. That evening Mrs. Martin and Barbara accompanied the young traveler to the train, as the principal of the school wished to be sure that her young charge was started safely on this, her first journey alone, and in the care of the kindly conductor.

It was not until the next morning, when the train was slowly entering Chicago, that Margaret, weary from an excited and sleepless night, placed a small red ribbon bow on the lapel of her warm, gold-brown coat, wondering, as she did so, what manner of person her escort would be.

## CHAPTER VII.

## MARGARET'S ESCORT.

MEANWHILE Malcolm in a nearby hotel was preparing to play the role upon which he and Virginia had decided.

A grey wig and mustache changed his appearance so completely, that even one well acquainted with him would not, at first glance, have recognized him.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Peter Wallace," he said to his beaming reflection. Then, donning his sombrero, he started out as he thought, "Now I know what I will look like twenty years hence. I do wish Virg was here. How she would laugh to see me in this disguise."

Ten minutes later, when the train drew to a stand still, Mr. Peter Wallace watched each passenger alight with the aid of a colored porter.

At last he saw an unusually pretty young girl in a gold-brown suit and trim traveling hat who stood for a moment looking around helplessly.

Malcolm's heart pounded queerly. He hadn't supposed that their rebellious ward would be good-

looking. In fact he hadn't thought anything about it.

He went closer, almost believing that this maiden could not be the one he expected, but there was a small red ribbon bow on the lapel of her coat.

For a moment Malcolm almost forgot that he was a middle-aged rancher and was about to advance in his usual buoyant fashion, when a warning thought recalled to him: "You are Mr. Peter Wallace, not Malcolm Davis who is to greet this young girl." And so, when Margaret's almost frightened gaze, wandering over the heedless, hurrying throng, turned toward the approaching stranger, she saw a tall, broad-shouldered man, whose stride might have suggested that he was younger than his grey hair indicated.

"Are you Miss Selover?" he inquired in a matter-of-fact a tone as he could assume.

"I am," the girl replied, rather frigidly, now that she was no longer frightened. "Are you Mr. Peter Wallace?"

Malcolm did not voice his reply, but she took it for granted, as he had at once reached for her satchels. She was secretly glad that her escort was middle-aged. Somehow that fact made her feel more at ease.

When they had crossed the city in the jolting, rattling omnibus, and the girl, at last, was comfortably seated in the luxurious chair car, Malcolm said, "I will leave you now, Miss Selover, but at

noon I will come for you and we will lunch together."

When he was gone Margaret watched the flying landscape without seeing it.

This man, she thought, was evidently a middle-aged rancher, and yet he spoke English as correctly as any of the boys she knew. She had not supposed such a thing possible.

How she wished that he were her guardian, instead of that illiterate Mr. Davis who had written such unkind letters to her, and who had unjustly deprived her of her rightful allowance. She just hated him and she always would.

Two hours later her reverie was interrupted by the decidedly pleasant voice of her escort who was telling her that he would accompany her to the diner.

Malcolm was thoroughly enjoying this strange new experience and yet there were moments when he wished that he might snatch off his disguise and tell the whole truth to the girl, who, now and then turned toward him such wistful brown eyes, but he would wait and let Virginia decide when to make the revelation.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE ARRIVAL OF MARGARET.

VIRGINIA was up before the sun on the day that she was expecting the arrival of her brother and his rebellious ward.

"I'm so interested and excited," she confided to Shags who trotted along at her side when she went down to what Rusty Pete called "the hen corral" to feed the plump biddies that resided there.

Promptly at nine o'clock they were to depart for Silver Creek Junction, at which lonely station the trains would stop, when flagged, or when passengers had so requested.

Poor Uncle Tex, dressed in a linen suit and wearing a wide panama hat, was miserably uncomfortable, and, as he stood at the window in the big living-room, he looked longingly toward the distant mountains. Even yet he could escape, but if his "gal" needed his help at this play acting, he'd try to do his best, but how he did wish that he might change places with Slim, the lithe young cow-boy who at that moment was within the range of the old man's vision endeavoring to break the wild spirits of a bucking broncho.





Skipping to the side of the elderly man, in a manner much too frivolous for the wearer of such sombre attire.

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(Virginia of V. M. Ranch)



Hearing an inner door open, he turned and beheld what might have been an elderly housekeeper in bonnet and shawl, a black bombazine dress the girl had borrowed from dear old Grandmother Slater.

Skipping to the side of the elderly man, in a manner much too frivolous for the wearer of such sombre attire, the girl caught his hand as she exclaimed merrily: "Why Uncle Tex, I mean Mr. Davis, how stylish you do look! If you have observed yourself in the mirror, I 'spect you will want to dress up like this every day in the year."

The old man looked very miserable as he slowly shook his head. "No, ah won't, Miss Virginia dearie," he said. "Ah was jest thinkin' as how ah'd rather rope the contrariest steer thar ever was than be play-actin' this-a-way." Then wheedlingly he added, "Don't you spose as how you could get along jest as well without me? Couldn't you be sayin' as how her gardeen had gone away for a spell?"

The old man's pleading was interrupted by a merry honking from without and Virginia caught his work-hardened hand and led him out to the waiting car.

The weather-bronzed features of Rusty Pete widened into a smile and he found it hard to keep his mirth within bounds. He wanted to shout. It was as good as a circus, he thought, to see Uncle Tex rigged up like a gentleman, but, when he saw

how red and uncomfortable the old man looked, the kind hearted cow-boy refrained from uttering the bantering remark which the old overseer's appearance had suggested. However, when he was alone on the front seat of the big touring car, his grin resembled that of the Cheshire cat, nor did it cease until the railway station was reached.

Several ponies were tied to the hitching posts and a spirited young mustang belonging to Slick Cy, a cow-boy from the Slater Ranch, reared as the car came to a stop nearby.

Uncle Tex and the supposed housekeeper alighted. Virginia, glancing at the poor old man, realized that he would probably be tongue-tied when the moment to speak arrived and so she said impulsively: "Uncle Tex, you needn't say those lines of welcome that I taught you, if you'd rather not. I'll play the part of a garrulous housekeeper and talk so much and so fast that you won't have a chance to get a word in edgeways."

There was a deep sigh of relief from the old man who said gratefully: "Thanks, Miss Virginia dearie. I wan't cut out for play-actin', seems like."

"Here comes the train!" Rusty Pete sang out from the auto. Virginia and the old man turned toward the mountain tunnel through which appeared two great black engines puffing noisily. Then the long train slowly came into sight and to a standstill.

Virginia's heart was pounding like a trip ham-

mer. She was wondering what their ward would look like, cross and homely and disagreeable, one might judge from her letters.

There were only two people to alight and at first the western girl thought them to be a father and daughter and believed that her brother had not come. When she did recognize his walk and bearing, she could hardly keep from laughing at his disguise. Surely, he made a most good-looking middle-aged rancher, but the trim, really pretty young girl, who was walking toward them at his side, surely *she* could not be the ward who had written such defiant letters. There must be a mistake somewhere.

For a moment, Virginia herself almost forgot the role that she was to play, but recalling it, just in time, she hurried forward with hands outstretched. "Good day, Mr. Wallace," she said; then to Margaret, "Are you Miss Selover?" Without waiting for a reply she hurried on.

"I am your guardian's housekeeper. We hope that'll you'll be happy here. I assure you that Mr. Davis deeply regretted the circumstances which compelled him to send for you and he hopes to be able to permit you to return to school next year if you are not happy here." Then, the introductory remarks having been finished, as planned, Virginia concluded, "Come with me, Miss Margaret, and I will introduce you to your guardian."

They advanced a few steps toward the station

house, where Uncle Tex had been standing when Virginia had hurried forward to greet the newcomers, but the old man was not to be seen.

"Excuse me one moment," the astonished Virginia exclaimed. Then she went over to the waiting auto. Rusty Pete's grin was wider than ever, if such a feat were possible. "Rusty, where is Uncle Tex?" the girl asked him.

The cow-boy pointed to a cloud of dust which was rapidly disappearing in the direction of V. M. Ranch. "He got panicky, I guess, for all of a sudden he ran over here like a mad man, jumped up on Slick Cy's horse and away he went. He didn't stop to explanate anything, but rode as though the wild wolves were arter him."

"Poor Uncle Tex!" Virginia laughed, and then she returned to explain to Margaret that her guardian had suddenly remembered that he had a very important engagement, but that in all probability they would find him awaiting them at the ranch house.

But Virginia was wrong in her surmise. When the ranch house was reached she went at once to the small bed room near the kitchen. The door was open and the room was empty, but a neatly folded linen suit lay over a chair while the Panama hat reposed on the bed. Uncle Tex was gone to his cabin somewhere over in the mountains.

Sinking down on another chair, Virginia laughed merrily, but hearing someone tap upon the

door, she sat up with suddenly resumed dignity, for she was still playing a part, but it was only her brother who entered.

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE REVELATION.

"VIRG," Malcolm blurted out, "I feel that we are not doing right to treat a lonely orphan girl in this fashion. I am positive that I heard her crying in her room just now. I know it is premature, and not at all according to our plans, but I do wish you would go in and comfort her. Tell her the whole truth, Sis, and if she doesn't want to stay with us, I'll write back to that eastern seminary and see what can be done."

Virginia looked at her brother with laughing eyes, but they quickly sobered as she said, "I agree with you, Malcolm. I believe that we have made a mistake. The truth is always best after all. Suppose you go to your room now and reappear just yourself."

The lad went away whistling. Somehow, he felt happier than he had in many a day.

Virginia tapped lightly on the closed door of the big sunny southwest room to which she had taken their ward immediately upon their arrival at V. M. A half sob accompanied the words, barely heard by the listener. "Come in."



On the bed Margaret had thrown herself in an abandon of grief. Virginia knelt by her side and said compassionately, "Margaret dear, don't cry this way. Was it so very hard for you to come to us?"

"Ye-es. Next to losing father it was the hardest thing I ever had to face," was the broken reply that came from the depths of a pillow. "But forgive me, if I seem ungrateful. Mr. Wallace has been telling me that Mr. Davis did not send for me from unkind motives, and so I have changed my mind. Tell him, please, that I am not going to be rebellious and that I'll try to be cheerful and bring a little sunshine into his home. He must be a very lonely old man and he was kind to my father."

Tears were brimming Virginia's eyes. "Dearie," she said, "lie here and rest for an hour, but when you hear the Chinese gong, come out to dinner. A pleasant surprise will be awaiting you. At least I hope that you will like it."

"Thank you," Margaret said without lifting her head from her pillow. She felt too dead inside to care about surprises. Nothing mattered if she had to remain on this desolate desert. The only surprise that could interest her would be the news that she might return to Vine Haven and to Babs.

However, the words of the housekeeper had soothed her more than she realized. Her sobbing soon ceased and she actually fell into a light slumber from which she awakened refreshed.

Rising, she washed away the tear stains and brushing her short gold-brown curls, she fastened them back with a wide barette.

Then she went out into the big, pleasant, homey living-room, but no one was there. Suddenly recalling the promised surprise, she was wondering what it would be, when a door, leading out upon a wide veranda, opened and a young girl entered followed by a tall, good-looking lad.

They approached the astonished ward and, Virginia, holding out both hands, said impulsively, "Margaret, can you ever forgive us for play actin', as Uncle Tex called it. Your guardian isn't an old man. He is my brother, Malcolm. I just don't know how to go about explaining it," she looked rather helplessly at the lad.

"I'll do it, Sis," he said. "Margaret, the truth is that you wrote such—such—" even Malcolm was at a loss how to tell the tale.

"Such horrid, disagreeable letters," his ward put in, a dimple appearing as she smiled, "that you were sure you wouldn't want to keep me. I don't blame you a bit!" she declared vehemently. Then she surprised them both by impulsively kissing Virginia and saying:

"I just *know* that I'm going to be happy with *you*. It will be like having a sister, a really and truly one, won't it?"

"Hum-m!" said Malcolm with mock seriousness,

"You aren't so pleased to have a really, truly brother it would seem."

Then, when the girl flashed a smile at him, he added, "However I refuse to be your brother. I shall remain your stern guardian. Aren't you skeered of me, as Uncle Tex says."

"The lad's tanned face was so good-looking and pleasant, his grey eyes so frank and merry that his ward laughingly shook her head as she happily replied:

"I'm not skeered the least bit. I just know that I'm going to love you both."

That evening the three young people sat around the fireplace and had a most delightful get-acquainted visit. Virginia told Margaret about the stage-fright which had caused Uncle Tex to depart with speed to the mountains.

"He won't be back for a week, I'll wager," Malcolm laughingly declared.

Then Margaret asked: "Virginia, what did you expect me to look like?"

The other girl smiled but shook her head. "Don't ask me," she pleaded. "The picture in my imagination was so different from the real you, it would be a sacrilege to tell it."

The dimple again appeared, but it was a somber Margaret who replied. "I don't blame you for thinking me just horrid, but I did so want to remain at boarding school with Babs." Then turning to Virginia she asked:

"Haven't you ever had a yearning to go east to school?" Malcolm glanced quickly at his sister, who was gazing almost wistfully into the fire. It was a long moment before she replied, then she said:

"Yes, Margaret, I did want to go. In fact I had my trunk packed and was to have started the next day for a seminary in the East, just out of New York, when father was taken ill. How glad I am that I had not already departed, for no one thought dad's illness would be serious and they would not have sent for me. He left us one week from that day." Then placing a loving hand on the arm of her brother who sat near, she added, "Malcolm was planning to attend a military academy that winter, but when dad was gone, brother's presence was needed here on the ranch and I just couldn't go and leave him alone."

Tears sprang to the eyes of Margaret. All her life she had been petted and pampered, as she had been an only child and so she had not learned the joy of that self-sacrifice which she now saw shining in the violet-blue eyes of her new friend.

Not wishing to sadden their ward, Virginia sprang up and poked at the fire. "Dance, little flames," she said merrily, "and show our guest how prettily a mesquite root can burn."

"Please don't call me a guest," Margaret begged impulsively. "I want to be home folks. It's so long since I had a real home." She had risen and had

placed an arm about the western girl who still stood looking down at the fire. As Malcolm watched them, he thought that nowhere could two more lovely girls be found although they were very unlike each other.

The grandfather clock was soon telling the hour of nine, which was bed-time for the dwellers of V. M. Ranch. The lad rose and placed a wire screen in front of the fire as he said gaily: "Girls, don't despair of getting an 'iddication,' as Uncle Tex calls it. Most anytime we may find a paying mine. I am convinced that there is one in these mountains, and when it is found, three trunks will be packed and we will all depart for the centers of learning." Then, to Virginia, he added, "Margaret will want to sleep late, for I am sure that she is unusually tired after that long hard journey, and, just for the luxury of it, suppose you sleep too. I'll get my own breakfast. I want to reach the Slater Ranch soon after sunrise to hand in my report about the cattle that I delivered in Chicago."

Long after Margaret was in her comfortable bed, she lay awake wondering what life on the desert was to hold for her, but it was to be more interesting and exciting than even her wildest dreams could picture.

## CHAPTER X.

## THE LOST BROTHER.

THE next day was a happy one for Margaret and Virginia.

“Please give me some tasks to do that shall be my very own,” the newcomer pleaded when breakfast was over. Malcolm, true to his word, had long since departed.

“Oh, let’s just do everything together,” Virginia replied. “That’s more sociable. First, we will make the beds. I’ll spread one side and you the other, and while we’re doing them, let’s chatter like magpies. There are dozens of things I want to know about you. First, is this Babs about whom you tell, your very best friend?”

“Yes indeed. Her full name is Barbara Blair Wente, and, Virg, I do believe that you could put her in a thimble, most, and not have a single one of her sunny hairs show over the top, she’s that tiny. She has a brother, but she seldom mentions him. There is something very sad about him, but I don’t understand what exactly. Once, when I went to our room unexpectedly (that is, Babs thought I was in class, and I was, only I went back for a book), I

found her crying as though her heart would break. In one hand she held a crumpled letter and in the other a picture of such a good-looking boy. Of course I begged her to tell me, that is, if I could help, but she said she just couldn't tell the whole story. However, I gathered from fragments that her brother, Peyton, who is three years older than she, had displeased their rather stern father and had disappeared, no one knew where. 'I love him so, Megsy,' Babs sobbed, 'much more than I do anyone on the whole earth now that mother is gone.'

"Just then a maid came to straighten our room, and never again could I get Babs to talk about her brother. 'It hurts too much,' she would tell me.

"The next day before I came away I asked: 'Babsy, have you heard from Peyton yet?' Tears rushed to her eyes and she shook her head. 'No,' she replied, 'he thinks he has disgraced us all and he will never write, even to me.'"

"Poor girl," Virginia said, with true sympathy as she led the way to Malcolm's room. "I know how I would feel if my brother suddenly disappeared and I didn't know where he was. I don't believe I could stand it. In fact, I am sure I couldn't. Did you ever see Peyton?"

"No, I didn't," Margaret replied, "but I am pretty sure that I have a snapshot of Babs that was taken years ago with her brother. When I unpack my trunk, I'll look for it."

"I wonder if Peyton came west. So many boys

do when they run away," Virginia said as she smoothed the top spread on Malcolm's bed and placed the pillows at just the right angle.

"Babs thinks he went to sea," Margaret told her. "Not that she has any reason for so thinking, but he was always wild about water, ever since the days when he sailed chip-vessels on a brook, Babs said."

"Then that's probably where he has gone. Poor, poor girl, my heart aches for her."

Then, catching Margaret's hand, Virginia added: "Megsy, you would just love to have our friend visit you out here some time, wouldn't you? Please tell her, when you write, that she will be most welcome whenever she wishes to come."

"Oh, Virginia, thank you!" Margaret hugged the taller girl. "I believe Babs would come some day. She has an income of her own. You would just love her, I know."

Then, when the older girl departed kitchenward, leaving her new friend to dust the living-room, Margaret fell to happily dreaming of the day, which she hoped would soon materialize, when her beloved Babs would be a visitor on the V. M. Ranch.



## CHAPTER XI.

## A LETTER TO BABS.

MARGARET'S very own room in the ranch house was delightfully homey. Glass doors opened upon a wide veranda where a vine, which Virginia watered daily, was growing luxuriantly. Each spring it was covered with gay colored trumpet flowers.

A flood of sunshine was pouring in at the open window facing the southwest and fell upon a small desk at which Margaret was writing a long letter to Babs. When it was finished the girl sat looking out across the desert that was a shining sandy waste as far as she could see, with here and there a scraggly mesquite bush or towering above it, a thorny cactus. Lonely, desolate, those were the words that Margaret had repeatedly used in describing her dread of the desert before she had really seen it, but now in her soul there was slowly awakening an appreciation of the peace, the bigness and the grandeur of it all. How Babs would love it.

Margaret's dreaming was suddenly interrupted by a most unearthly noise close to the house. Hurrying to the glass doors, the girl looked out and be-

held three ungainly little creatures that resembled donkeys. Smilingly, she put her fingers in her ears when she saw that once again, all three had opened their mouths to bray in chorus. Margaret wondered why they seemed to be calling, and she was soon to learn, for she heard the living room door open and saw Virginia skip out on the veranda and feed a lump of sugar to each of the small mouse-colored creatures.

Margaret stepped out. "What queer pets you have, Virginia," she said merrily.

"They are little wild burros," the western girl told her. "They come often to beg for a lump of sugar, but their manner of serenading is not very musical. Have you finished your letter to Babs?" she added. "I have stayed away from your room for a long hour that you might not be interrupted."

"Yes, I have finished it. Shall I read it to you?"

The two girls sat on the top step while Margaret read: "Dearest Babs, I'm so happy, so happy, you just can't guess." Then pausing, she glanced up brightly.

"Won't that be a pleasant surprise to Babs, for, of course, she will expect my first letter to tell that I am melting away in tears."

Then followed a description of the journey west, of the "play actin'," as Uncle Tex called it, and of her joyous surprise when the middle-aged rancher and the housekeeper removed their disguises and were really a girl and a boy of about her own age.

“And Oh, Babs,” Margaret continued reading. “I know that you won’t be the least bit jealous when I tell you that I am going to put Virginia Davis in the same corner of my heart that you occupy. You will love her, too, when you meet her, and now, just listen to this wonderful bit of news. Virginia has told me to invite you to visit us whenever you can, and I am hoping that you will want to come for your summer vacation. Of course that is months away, but it’s such fun to plan. I’m going to write a volume of a letter to you every week and I shall expect one from you. Remember me to all of the girls at Vine Haven, and tell them that they need not pity me, after all, for I am having just a glorious time.”

Virginia moved closer and slipped an arm about her friend. “I am glad that you are able to write such a happy letter,” she said.

Margaret laughed. “Babs will be disappointed in one way, because as yet I have not had an exciting adventure to tell her. She thinks the West is full of them, just like moving pictures, you know.”

Virginia smiled. “Perhaps you will have an adventure to tell about in your next letter,” she said, little dreaming that she was speaking the truth.

## CHAPTER XII.

## CHOOSING A PONY.

THE next morning Virginia breakfasted at sunrise with her brother. Margaret, who was not accustomed to awakening at so early an hour, slept until she heard voices outside her window. Upon seeing Virginia and Malcolm walking toward the corral, she sprang up and dressed hastily.

The brother and sister were on the way to a fenced-in hollow, where a wiry desert grass grew abundantly, and where several ponies were quietly feeding.

"Which of the horses shall we give to Margaret for her very own?" Virginia asked as she leaned on a top rail and looked about.

"Can Margaret ride well?" Malcolm inquired.

"Oh, I am sure that she can," Virginia replied, "because she belonged to an equestrian class at the fashionable boarding school that she attended and they went every Saturday for an afternoon canter."

Malcolm looked a bit doubtful.

"Those Eastern horses are not like our little wild ponies," he said. "Perhaps we ought to start Margaret with Tags."

Virginia laughingly protested.

“Oh, brother, I wouldn’t ask Megsy to ride that stupid old horse. I am sure that Margaret could ride well, say Star. I have ridden him several times, and next to my Comrade I think he is the prettiest pony that we have on the ranch.”

Just at that moment the brother and sister heard a merry hallooing, and, turning, they saw Margaret skipping toward them.

“Virginia,” she exclaimed reproachfully as she came up, quite out of breath, “why didn’t you waken me? I want always to get up when you do.”

“But it was before sunrise, and I know that you are not used to being up so early,” the other girl replied as she slipped an arm about the newcomer, who said enthusiastically:

“Oh Virg, what a pretty horse that red-brown one is. It looked up and neighed just as though it were trying to say ‘Good morning!’ ”

Virginia was about to explain that the graceful, alert little horse to which Margaret referred was her own dear Comrade that had been given her by her father when it was a colt, but, before she could speak, she heard Malcolm saying: “Sister and I were looking over the mounts just now trying to decide which one we would give to you for your very own.”

His ward turned toward him with eyes that glowed. “Oh, how kind you both are,” she exclaimed, appreciatively. “I would just love to have

a pony all for my very own. May I choose any one that I wish?"

The eager glance was questioning Virginia, and unhesitatingly that maiden smiling replied, "Yes, indeed, you may Megsy."

For a minute Margaret's glance swept the pasture.

"I just love that red-brown pony," she said at last, "It reminds me of the one I had when I was a little girl." Then as a sudden thought came to her, she added, "but which is the one that you ride, Virg?"

The Western girl unhesitatingly replied: "I ride Star sometimes, the black and white wiry little fellow with the dark star on his forehead. You may have Comrade, if you like him best, to be your very own."

Malcolm, knowing how dearly his sister loved the pony that their father had given to her, was about to protest, but Virginia motioned him to be silent, then aloud she added, "Brother, will you ask Slim to bring the two ponies to the ranch house at nine? I want to return Grandmother Slater's bombazine dress, and I am sure that Margaret will enjoy a ride across the desert."

Then arm in arm the two girls returned to the ranch house while the lad saddled his lively young bronoho and rode away, waving his sombrero when they turned at the porch steps to watch him.

"Now shall I unpack my trunk?" Margaret smiled up happily. "I must find my riding habit."

As she unpacked, Megsy kept watching for the kodack picture of Babs and her brother, Peyton, which she believed that she had tucked in somewhere but it was not discovered. "Well, it really doesn't matter in the least," the girl declared, as she smiled up at Virginia who sat on the ledge of the bed watching her. "I have a darling picture of Babs and we do not care what Peyton looks like."

Then diving into the depths of her trunk, she brought out a book filled with kodak pictures, and sitting beside her friend, Margaret turned the pages and told the story of each one. They were so interested that they had quite forgotten the hour until Virginia heard the galloping of horses' feet, and springing up, she exclaimed, "Why, Megsy, it is 9 o'clock and we aren't ready for our ride." Then she called out of the open window, "Thank you, Slim, for bringing up the horses. You may leave them there. We'll be out in short order." Then turning to Margaret, she added. "What are you going to wear, Megsy?"

The Eastern girl laughingly held up a black broadcloth riding habit with a long tailored coat and a stiff black derby. "This doesn't look much like a cowgirl costume," she said gaily. "How I do wish I had a khaki suit like yours."

"So you shall have as soon as we can get to town,

but today you may wear my extra one. I always keep two in readiness least a mishap befall one of them. I'll get it in a twinkling."

Half an hour later the girls were starting on their ride across the desert and toward the Slater Ranch. Margaret, in her cowgirl costume, made a very pretty picture. "How I wish Babs could see me now!" she said as the two girls, after a canter side by side, drew rein to go single file down the steep trail leading across Silver Creek which at that time of the year was dry and pebbly.

Virginia glanced anxiously at Comrade for that pony seemed restive and ill content. "Was it because of the strangeness of the rider?" the girl wondered. She was about to suggest that Margaret hold the rein loosely when the level desert was again reached, but at that moment a sudden whirlwind swept toward them and they were engulfed in blinding sand.

Margaret, terrorized by this new and unexpected experience, dragged frantically on the rein. Instantly Comrade reared, and then, dropping again to all fours, he galloped madly ahead at a pace so rapid that Virginia, though she urged Star to his topmost speed, could not overtake him.

Margaret knew that her only safety lay in clinging to the horse's neck and this she did, dropping the rein which flapping in Comrade's face greatly increased his fright. Although Virginia's pony strained every muscle, he could not overtake the



fright-maddened Comrade. Now and then pausing to snort and rear, again plunging blindly ahead, the red-brown pony suddenly veered and made straight for the mountains. There was a new terror in the heart of Virginia and she greatly feared for the safety of her friend, for the mountain trail was rough and the Eastern girl would surely be thrown against the jagged rocks.

Then, to add to Virginia's dismay, a second whirlwind swept across the desert. She saw it coming and just in time, she wheeled Star about that the sand might not be hurled in their faces. When the air was again clear Comrade and his rider were nowhere to be seen.

What had happened, Virginia wondered, sad at heart. Surely they could not have reached the mountain trail as yet. Of course the rider might have been thrown, but the horse, too, had disappeared.

Again urging Star to his top speed, Virginia soon neared the spot where she had last seen Comrade. There she drew rein and looked about.

"Margaret! Margaret!" she called. "Where are you?" But there was no reply.

With a half sob Virginia turned her horse's head, planning to ride to the Slater Ranch for help, when she heard a faint moan. It seemed to come from a thorny tangle of bushes that surrounded a deep waterhole. For one terrorized moment Virginia thought that her friend might have been hurled into this stagnant well of the desert. Dismounting she

ran to the spot, but, to her great relief, Margaret, although she was lying on the sand, had not been thrown into the pit.

Kneeling by the side of her friend, who was pale and motionless, Virginia pleaded: "Megsy, Megsy, darling. Open your eyes and speak to me. Are you hurt?" But there was no response.

"Oh, why did I permit her to ride Comrade?" Virginia rebuked herself, as she held the limp girl in her arms and tried to revive her by rubbing her hands and forehead, but still there was no sign of life. Rising, she went to the edge of the well, but the little water that was in it was covered with a green scum. What could she do? If only she could send to Slater's for help, but she must not go herself and leave Margaret alone. She would have to send Star. It was their one hope. Going to the waiting pony, Virginia tied her bright red hair ribbon on the saddle horn and started him in the direction of the nearest ranch, but to her despair, she saw the pony wander toward a clump of wiry grass and stop to graze.

At that moment, although Virginia had no way of knowing it, help was not far away.

It seemed hours to Virginia, but in reality not many minutes had passed when she heard a galloping of what seemed like the feet of many horses. Leaping from the sand where she had been kneeling beside Margaret the girl stood waiting for she knew not what. The sound came from beyond a small

sand hill. It might be a stampede of little wild burros, she thought, but how she did hope that this surmise was wrong, as indeed it was, for in another moment three horses appeared and the one in the lead was ridden by the Slater cow-boy known as "Slick Cy." Meekly following were the now quieted Comrade and Star.

Virginia scarcely knowing what she did in her great joy and relief, ran to meet the cow-boy with arms outstretched. "Oh, Cy! Cy!" she half sobbed, "I'm so glad you have come. Margaret has been thrown and she lies as still as though she were dead, and yet I know that she isn't, for her heart is beating, but I can't revive her. I'll never go anywhere again without my canteen. Cy, what shall we do?"

The bronzed, broad-shouldered cow-boy dismounted, and, looking kindly at the almost hysterical girl, he said comfortingly, "Ah reckon ah wouldn't worry yet, Miss Virginia. If her heart's agoin' ah reckon she'll be all right."

Taking a canteen from his saddle the cow-boy forced water between the lips of the girl while Virginia bathed her face, and soon to the joy of the watchers, Margaret opened her eyes. Then she reached out her hand to her friend as she said faintly, "It was all my fault, Virginia, dear. I should have told you that I did not know how to ride, really. I had never been on a horse, except one that nothing could frighten, but you are such a fine horsewoman

I thought you might think me a coward if I told you that I was really afraid to ride Comrade, but I'll never ride him again, never, never, never."

Virginia's heart leaped with joy, for after all she would not have to give up the horse she so loved, the one her dear father had given her for her very, very own.

"Star is far more gentle," she said, as she and Cy assisted Margaret to her feet, then remembering her manners, she added, "Margaret, permit me to introduce Slick Cy. He is one of Mr. Slater's cowboys."

Impulsively Margaret held out her hand as she said graciously, "Thank you, Mr. Slick Cy, for coming to my rescue."

The young giant of a cow-boy, being unused to girls, was very shy and he shifted from one foot to another as he said, "Miss Margaret, ah reckon as you'd better ride home with me on my horse."

"Yes, do, Megsy," Virginia urged. "It won't be safe for you to even ride Star until you have had a few lessons."

Margaret smiled at her friend as she remarked: "Now I have an adventure about which I can tell Babs in my very next letter."

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE DESERT HUT.

IT was the nineteenth of December and the morning was bright and sparkling. Margaret Selover stood on the wide veranda of the ranch house, her eyes glowing with appreciation as she gazed across the shimmering white desert and toward the mountains over which hung a baze of blue and gold.

"Ho, Virginia," she called to the girl, who, hatless, came up from the chicken yard, where she had been to scatter a breakfast to her feathered pets, "it is hard for me to realize that it is nearly Christmas and not a snow flake to be seen."

"When we go up in the mountains after our Christmas tree, you will see plenty of snow," Virginia assured her. "Slim tells me that when he rode over the Seven Peak range yesterday, it was snowing and blowing a regular blizzard."

"Oh, Virg, how nice! Are we going to have a truly Christmas tree? I haven't had one since mother and dad and I were all together."

The other girl nodded. "Yes, indeed. We have a big tree every Christmas for our own family and

for the Slaters. One year we have it here and the next to the Bar S Ranch. That makes quite a party, for they have four cow-boys and we have two." Then after a thoughtful moment, Virginia added, "How I do wish that some kiddies lived nearby. It would be heaps more fun to have children to skip around a Christmas tree wouldn't it, but there isn't a chick or child for ten miles around."

At that moment Malcolm appeared. "Sis," he said, "I have an important letter to send. Would you and Margaret be willing to ride over to the junction and mail it for me? I had planned going myself, but Mr. Slater just phoned that he saw several of our prize yearlings headed for the Mexican border, and so Rusty and I are going at once to search for them and turn them back, for, if they cross the line, we will never see them again. If we aren't home tonight, don't worry, girls, for we will camp down that way until we find them all."

"Goodbye and good luck!" Margaret and Virginia called, as arm in arm they stood watching the good looking boy as he swung into his saddle and galloped away. Near the corral he was joined by Rusty Pete and the two boys turned and waved their wide sombreros while Malcolm's horse reared and then plunged ahead, to the delight of the eastern girl. "How I do hope Babs will see Malcolm ride some day," she said as they turned into the house.

Several weeks had passed since Margaret had at-

tempted to ride Comrade, and Malcolm had taken every opportunity that presented since then to teach his ward to ride, and at last both gracefully and fearlessly she rode every day with Virginia.

Half an hour after Malcolm had departed, the two girls in their khaki riding habits (Margaret with a red handkerchief knotted about her neck and Virginia with a blue) started riding along the trail which led over the mesa, down into the dry creek and over toward the mountains. They were about a quarter of a mile away from the Seven Peak range when Virginia suddenly drew rein and gazed intently ahead. Margaret looked wonderingly in the same direction but saw nothing unusual.

"What is it, Virginia?" the eastern girl asked anxiously as she drew rein by the side of her friend and gazed across the shimmering desert.

"Has something startled you? What do you see?"

Margaret knew that Virginia's desert trained eyes could perceive things that were invisible to her. "It may be nothing at all to be startled about," Virginia replied, "but I overheard two cow-boys talking yesterday. One of them had just ridden in from Douglas and he said that an outlaw from Texas is hiding in the mountains. I did not mention this to brother, for, had I done so, he would not permit me to ride far from the house, and I am very sure that we can protect ourselves. However, I do not wish to run into trouble needlessly."

"But what did you see that made you think this outlaw might be near?" Margaret inquired.

Virginia turned toward her. "You, too, must train your eyes," she said. "Now look intently just to the left of the giant cactus, and close to the foot of the mountains; then tell me what you see."

Margaret shaded her eyes and gazed for a long time before she spoke. "I think that I can see an old adobe hut," she said softly. Then she asked, "Is that what you wished me to see?"

Virginia nodded. "Yes, but what do you notice about it?"

"There might be smoke coming from the chimney," Margaret replied, "but it is so faint that at first I did not notice it."

"When I tell you that the old crumbling adobe has been vacant for many years and that it is absolutely unsafe as a habitation for human beings of any kind, you will understand why I was so puzzled to see signs of an occupant. The last family to live there was a mountain lioness and her young, but I am sure that some human being must be there now, for a lion could not start a fire."

Virginia, fearing that she might have frightened the eastern girl, said this merrily as she whirled her horse's head away from the mountains.

"We will take the sand hill trail," she announced. "It is a mile farther to the junction, but perhaps we



would be unwise to ride alone too close to the old adobe."

"You really think that the outlaw might be hiding there?" Margaret asked anxiously.

Virginia nodded. "It is a very lonely spot," she said, "and so it is quite possible."

"What is an outlaw?" the eastern girl inquired as they rode side by side toward the sand-hills.

"An outlaw is a man who has done something displeasing to his fellow citizens. He is driven from his home state and it would not be safe for him to return. Sometimes an outlaw is innocent of the charges against him and is just a victim of unfortunate circumstances, but one never knows, of course."

Virginia, as she spoke, glanced back toward the old adobe which was hardly visible from that distance; then, to Margaret's surprise, she drew rein, whirled about and once more gazed intently in that direction.

"Virg, what do you see now?" Margaret inquired, for she herself could see nothing.

For answer Virginia beckoned the eastern girl to follow, and then, urging Comrade to top speed, she again galloped toward the mountains and the old adobe hut.

Much puzzled, Margaret followed on Star.

What had Virginia seen, she wondered.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE HUT OCCUPIED.

VIRGINIA did not pause in her mad gallop over the hard, sandy trail toward the mountains until they were near enough for Margaret's untrained eyes to see clearly the old adobe. Then, turning in her saddle, the western girl asked: "What do you see now?"

"Something white waving on the roof," the eastern girl replied.

"Yes, and the something is being waved by a small boy, and so the occupant is not an outlaw as we feared at first. I believe that the little fellow is trying to call for help." Then gazing intently at her comrade, Virginia said: "Margaret, I will ride on alone, and you remain here. It may be a trap laid for us, but still it may be someone in trouble. I cannot pass without knowing which it is."

"But, Virginia," the Eastern girl pleaded, "I wouldn't want to remain here and let you go alone into possible danger."

"Margaret," the other said earnestly, "you would be a far greater help to me if you would wait here.

If it is a trap, and if I do not quickly reappear, gallop as fast as you can back to the ranch and bring Slim to my rescue, but if all is well I will wave to you and then you may come to the hut in safety."

Margaret felt that Virginia was planning this to protect her, and her heart was filled with conflicting emotions as she sat on Star watching as the western girl rode alone toward the crumbling adobe hut. The boy was no longer on the roof, nor was there smoke coming from the chimney. A vulture, sweeping in great circles overhead, was the only sign of life.

Margaret fairly held her breath when she saw Virginia dismount and enter the open door. Would she come out again? What would she find in there? Margaret shuddered at these thoughts.

One minute passed, then two, and Virginia did not appear. Ought Margaret to race to the ranch for help? Another minute, which seemed an hour long to the waiting girl, and then, to her great relief, Virginia appeared in the open door and beckoned to her. By her side was the small boy who had been on the roof.

As Margaret rode up, Virginia hastened out to meet her and there were tears in the eyes that were lifted to her friend.

"What is it, Virginia? Is someone in trouble?" Margaret asked anxiously.

"Yes, dear, in great trouble," was the reply. "A

little mother is lying in there, unconscious, and the three babies, the oldest but nine, are almost starved. Oh, how thankful I am that we did not pass them by." Then, brushing away her tears, she added: "Margaret, dear, please ride home as fast as you can and ask Slim to come at once with the car. I will take this little family back to the ranch."

Margaret did as she was told, and was soon riding as she had never ridden before. Suddenly she saw a horseman appear on the sand hill trail. He was riding slowly when she first noticed him, but upon seeing her, he urged his horse to a gallop. Margaret was terrorized! What if it should be that dreaded outlaw? She tried to urge Star to greater speed, but although she did not turn, she could tell that the horseman was overtaking her.

A few moments later, when the galloping tread of the pursuing horse was close behind her, the eastern girl, drew rein and whirled about that she might know the worst or the best, and it sure was the latter for the supposed "outlaw" was no other than Slick Cy, the kindly cow-boy from the Slater Ranch.

"Miss Margaret," he exclaimed as he rode alongside, "yo' all look scared like. Didn't yo' all know who ah was?"

"No, I didn't ever think that it might be you, Cy, but Oh, how glad I am that you have come, for



She tried to urge Star to greater speed for the  
horseman was overtaking her.  
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*(Virginia of V. M. Ranch.)*



something terrible has happened." And then the girl hurriedly told of the sick woman and the nearly starved children whom Virginia had found in the crumbling old adobe.

"They all must be strangers hereabouts," the cowboy said, then he added: "It's well I met up with yo', Miss Margaret, for Slim is riding north to the Dartly Ranch. Ah passed him this hour back."

"Oh, what shall we do, then?" Margaret dolefully exclaimed. "Virginia told me to send Slim to her at once with the car. How I wish now that I had learned to drive, but all I can do is start a car and stop it."

"Wall," said the cow-boy hopefully, "if yo' all can start it, like as not ah can steer it, and then Miss Virginia can be drivin' it back."

Five minutes later they were down by the corral and the big automobile was taken from its shelter. Then, with many misgivings, Margaret told Slick Cy what to do and they started so suddenly that the girl feared that they would plunge down into the dry creek before the machine could be controlled, but, although Slick Cy knew much more about the management of wild horses, by following Margaret's directions, he was soon driving slowly and the danger of a wreck was passed, for the present, at least.

Virginia saw them coming and hurried out to meet them. "Why, Slick Cy," she exclaimed, when the car stopped, "I didn't know that you could drive."

The cow-boy drew out a big, red bandana and wiped his flushed face.

"He did splendidly," Margaret put in before the cow-boy could reply. "I am so thankful he happened along, for Slim has ridden over to the Dartley Ranch."

They were walking toward the old adobe as they talked and when they entered the dark, damp room Margaret glanced at the hard board bench and saw a frail little woman lying there so white and still that the girl feared she had died while she had been gone. Nearby stood a hollow-eyed boy of 9, and, on the floor, clinging to each other were two small girls of about 3 and 5.

The younger one was crying softly, but the older girl looked as though she had suffered and starved so much that she could cry no more.

Slick Cy took off his hat. "How came the pore things here, Miss Virginia?" he asked.

"The little lad has told me the whole sad story," that girl replied, "and I will tell it to you when the brave little mother is cared for. Cy, can you carry her to the car?"

For answer the young giant of a cow-boy stooped



and lifted the frail woman, who moaned but did not open her eyes.

Soon they were all in the car, which Virginia drove slowly and skillfully toward the V. M. Ranch.

## CHAPTER XV.

## THE STRANDED FAMILY.

BACK of the big, rambling V. M. ranch house there was a comfortable small adobe which had been occupied at one time by the foreman and family, but now that Malcolm was his own foreman, the house was vacant, and it was into this that Virginia bade Cy carry the little woman.

Then Virginia held out her hand as she said sincerely: "Thank you Cy, for having helped us again. Isn't it strange that twice, when we have needed someone, you have just happened to pass by."

The cow-boy flushed as he replied, shuffling from one foot to the other. "Yo' all have done mo' for me than ah can be doin' fo' you-all. Ah'm glad ah meet up wi'-you-all." Then he turned and bolted. No other word would adequately describe his manner of disappearance.

"That boy is a diamond in the rough, isn't he?" Margaret said as she stood in the open-door and watched the tall lank cow-boy swing into his saddle and ride away toward the Slater Ranch.

Virginia, having for years helped care for an in-

valid mother, soon had the little woman roused from her stupor and taking warm broth for nourishment. Margaret, in the meantime, fed the three solemn eyed children who ate ravenously, like little wild creatures that were nearly starved.

At last when the mother had fallen into a more natural sleep and the three children had been tucked into one large bed, the two girls seated themselves near the kitchen stove in which Virg had made a fire and Megsy said: "Now may I hear what happened to bring this little brood to the desert?"

"It is not a long story," Virginia began, "nor an unusual one. The father of the small family is a prospector who, until recently, was working in a copper mine near Bisbee. They had a good home and plenty to eat, little Pat said, until the strike came and then their money had to be taken from the savings bank where the mother had been so glad each month to place it and had been used for absolute necessities until, at last, it was nearly gone.

Then, one day, the father, who had tried in vain to get work of any kind, came home much excited because he had heard that the mountains of the Seven Peak Range were supposed to be rich and as yet they had been unmined. He wanted to start out that very day. His wife, Mrs. Mahoy, begged him not to go, but Margaret, when a miner thinks that he has heard of a possible location that might be rich, his gambling spirit seems to be stronger than

all else, and so just one month ago today Mr. Mahoy left Bisbee and came, as his wife supposed, to Seven Peak Range.

“She had not heard from him since, and so she started out in search of him, spending the few remaining dollars for food. Carrying the baby and leading the two older children, the brave little woman walked for days across the desert.

“Pat said that she ate almost nothing herself, so eager was she to make the food last for her little ones, but for two days even they had not eaten. Last night they reached the old adobe hut and there the mother, faint from hunger and the long walk, crept in and fell unconscious.

“You know the rest; how the brave little fellow tried to think of some way that he might call help and how, just by chance, we saw and responded.”

Margaret, by the window, looked out across the desert. Night had settled down and the stars were shining brilliantly.

“One week from tonight it will be Christmas eve,” she said softly, “How I wish we might find the poor father and restore him to his family. What happiness it would bring, for no other Christmas gift would be more welcome to the little mother and her three babies.”

“Such things only happen in story books, not in real life, Megsy dear,” Virginia said, quietly.

“And yet truth is stranger than fiction,” Mar-

garet replied as she prepared the bed that she and Virginia were to occupy in the little house that they might be near the sick mother.

And Margaret was right. Truth is stranger than fiction.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## CAUGHT IN A BLIZZARD.

THREE days had passed and the little mother had responded to the loving care of the two girls. Nourishing food taken each hour had revived her and slowly she was regaining her strength. She was able to walk about the little house and care for her babies. Virginia assured her that she need worry about nothing; that she and her children would be well cared for as long as she wished to remain there.

The frail woman took the girl's hand and with tears in her eyes she said: "You are one of God's angels sent to save my babies and now may He guide my husband back to me."

"He will! I know He will, Mrs. Mahoy," Virginia said earnestly. Then hearing the telephone ringing in the big ranch house, she ran to answer it. Margaret had also heard the summons and the two girls met on the veranda. Together they raced to the living-room, but it was Virginia who first reached the phone. "Oh, Brother Malcolm," she exclaimed, "Where have you been all these three

days? I feared that you had been dragged over the border by Mexican bandits. Have you found all of the straying cattle?"

Then after listening with shining eyes for a moment, Virginia exclaimed: "Oh, goodie. We'll come at once. I have a very exciting something to tell you, but it will keep till we get there. Good-bye, Buddie."

"Guess what Malcolm wants us to do?" she then exclaimed as she looked beamingly up at Margaret.

"Well, dear, I judge that he wants us to ride somewhere and meet him for some reason which seems pleasing to his sister."

Virginia laughed. "You ought to know what we are to do if you will put on your thinking cap. Do you remember what I said brother and I do every year just before Christmas?"

Margaret looked blank and shook her head. "Why, we were talking about it only last week when you said you wished that you could see snow and—"

"Oho! I know now. We are to meet Malcolm somewhere and go up into the mountains after a Christmas tree." Then she added blithely: "Virginia, do you remember that on that very same day you wished that we might have a child to dance around the Christmas tree and now we have three children, and so it will be heaps more fun, won't it?"

As the girls chattered, they entered their bed-

rooms to exchange their house dresses for their khaki riding habits.

"There's little Pat on the cow-pony that you told him he might ride," Margaret said, looking out of the window.

"I will ask him if he would like to go with us," Virginia remarked. The little lad was delighted to accompany the two girls, and half an hour later the three were riding along the desert trail toward the Slater Ranch, where they were to meet Malcolm.

"I just love Christmas, don't you, Virg?" Margaret exclaimed, when, the deep dry creek having been crossed, the girls were cantering along on the hard sand side by side. "It's such fun to get packages by mail and then put them away to keep until Christmas. Of course I know just where they are, and every now and then I peek at them and try to guess from the shape what is in them, but I am strong-minded about it. I never do really open them until Christmas morning, do you?"

Virginia laughed. "I'll have to confess that last year I opened a long, mysterious box the moment it arrived. I was so eager to see if it was the something that I wanted most, and it was."

"What was it?" the other asked with interest.

"A set of grey fox furs," Virginia replied. "Brother shot the fox in the early winter and I had said what an adorable set of furs could be made



from the skin. Well, I noticed that it disappeared from Buddie's room, but I wasn't real sure what had become of it until that box arrived from the town furrier."

Suddenly the girls noticed that the little Irish boy riding near was listening with wide-eyed interest.

"Well, Little Pat," Margaret said gaily, "a penny for your thoughts."

"But Miss Virginia," was the reply, "Christmas presents don't come on the train. Weren't you after knowin' that it's the good St. Nick as brings them?"

"Of course, dearie," Virginia hastened to say, "I know it is the good St. Nick who brings presents to children, but we grown folks sometimes give gifts to each other. Ho! look ahead! Megsy," she added. "There's Brother Malcolm waiting for us at the Big Boulder, and good! Slick Cy is with him."

The latter cow-boy had told Malcolm all about the poor family that Virginia had rescued, and he was eager to assure his sister that she had done just as he would have wished her to do had he been there.

After the merry greetings had been exchanged, Virginia exclaimed "Where are we to go for a Christmas tree, Slick Cy?"

"Ah saw a beauty tree last week, high on Second Peak trail," that cow-boy drawled. Then he looked anxiously at the sky. "Looks sort of to me like thar might be a blizzard. If so, 'twouldn't be safe nohow fo' you gurls to ride up that trail."

"Oh, please, let us go," Margaret begged. "I'm wild to see a pine tree growing up in the mountains. I don't believe a storm is coming, do you, Malcolm?"

That boy looked toward the north where threatening clouds were rapidly gathering.

"I'm afraid Slick Cy is right," he said. "Perhaps we ought to give up the idea of getting the tree today."

"But, brother, there is only one day more before Christmas and we need that to trim the tree and get ready for the party," Virginia protested.

"Well, like as not it may blow over," Slick Cy said, really against his better judgment. "If we are a-goin', we'd better get started."

And so with the Slater cow-boy in the lead and Malcolm in the rear, the little procession started up the steep trail. But they had not gone far when Slick Cy whirled in his saddle and held up a warning hand. Malcolm had also heard the low ominous sound which seemed to be gathering in volume as though whatever caused it, with each second, was drawing nearer.

"What is it?" the eastern girl inquired, looking from one startled face to another.

"It's the blizzard I dreaded," Malcolm replied. "Cy, what shall we do? Just ahead of us the trail is exposed. How I do wish that we had insisted upon the girls returning."

"Oh, brother," Virginia exclaimed "we will return at once if you think best."

"It's too late now," the lad replied. "Quick, jump from your horses and follow me. There is a small cave near here and in it you will be protected from the storm."

A moment later the two girls and small boy were huddled in the cave, and none too soon, for a blinding hurricane of snow and hail surged past. The two cow-boys had succeeded in leading the ponies into a shelter of brush and rock. Luckily the storm was of short duration and it was followed by a gleaming blue sky. But Malcolm would not permit the girls to ride higher up a trail which he knew might be dangerous at that time of the year, and so, reluctantly, they agreed to return to V. M. Ranch after having received the promise from the cow-boys that they would surely bring a tree by night-fall that the girls would have time to trim it and have it in readiness for the joyful Christmas day.

Little Pat was very proud indeed when Malcolm placed a hand on his shoulder and said in his kind, comradly manner: "Laddie, you will take good care of the young ladies won't you?"

"Shure, sir, I'll be doin' me best," the Irish boy declared, and the girls laughed to themselves as they rode down the trail, for often the little fellow looked back anxiously to be sure that all was well with them.

"I'm disappointed not to see our Christmas tree growing in its mountain home," Margaret said when they were cantering across the level desert trail toward V. M., "but I was so frightened when the storm surged by that I would not care to be caught in another."

"Such storms high on the mountains are very frequent at this time of the year," Virginia told her friend, then she added: "How I do hope the boys will be able to find the big tree that Cy saw last week."

Even as Virg spoke, high up in the mountains, the two boys had found something, but it was not a Christmas tree.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## CHRISTMAS EVE.

It was Christmas Eve. Slick Cy and Malcolm had returned toward nightfall with a fine tree, to the delight of the girls, who had it erected in the big living-room, where they spent a merry hour covering its branches with shining ornaments.

Virginia and Margaret were happily excited. "Virg," Megsy exclaimed, "don't you think that Malcolm and Slick Cy act as though they have a secret that they don't wish us to know?"

"Yes, I have noticed it," Virginia said as she stood on a chair to place a tiny doll on the topmost bough. "What do you suppose it can be?"

"Perhaps they have a present for us," Margaret replied. Then she added: "I keep thinking of poor Babs and wishing that she was with us."

"Why poor? I thought you said that Babs has a good income." Virginia held a toy horse as she glanced inquiringly at her friend.

"Babs is always so sad at the holiday time," Margaret explained. "She tries to seem cheerful but there is such a lonely, wistful expression in her eyes and then once she told me that Christmas had never

been a happy season for her since her brother Peyton left home."

"I, too, say 'poor Babs,' " Virginia said earnestly. "I do indeed wish that she were here. Now, dear, if you will give me that taper I will light the candles."

Margaret did this and then stepped back. "How pretty the tree looks with all those sparkling ornaments," she said.

"Doesn't it?" Virginia had joined her friend. Then as she blew out the light of the taper she added: "One of the boys is to play Santa Claus—I don't know which one—but brother told me to have Mrs. Mahoy and the kiddies over here promptly at seven o'clock. Since it is ten minutes to that hour I'll skip over to their house and call them."

A moment later the three shining-eyed Irish children burst into the room and the older girls could not have found little ones more willing to skip and dance about their tree, for how those small Mahoys did squeal and clap their hands and hop for joy!

"See 'ittle dollies way up top!" Baby Cola lisped as she tried to drag her pale, sad-eyed mother over toward the tree. The older girls looked at the little woman and their hearts ached for her, for well they knew that there could be no real happiness for her unless she could find her lost husband.

"Everybody be seated, quick!" Margaret called

as the clock struck 7. "Santa will be coming now."

Such a scramble as there was for chairs, and then, "Oh! Oh! See Santa!" Baby Cola and 5-year-old Dora cried in excited chorus. The dining-room had opened to admit someone dressed to represent the good old saint. Margaret and Virginia stared for a moment, uncomprehending, for this apparition was not of the build of either Slick Cy or Malcolm, both of whom were broad-shouldered young giants. The Santa Claus, however, evidently had been told what to do, for, after making a fine bow he straight-way reached to the highest branch, and taking down the dollies, he called: "For Baby Cola."

Right at that moment something surprising happened. A glad light brightened the face of the little woman, and, springing up, she ran with outstretched arms toward the supposed Santa Claus, who caught her in an embrace that told the tenderness of his love for her.

"It's me Pat!", the little woman sobbed. "Me Pat that I've wanted so." Snatching off his disguise the happy Irishman gathered his little ones in his arms. A moment later Malcolm and Slick Cy appeared, and going to the amazed girls, the former said:

"Our Santa Claus is not much better at play-actin' than is dear old Uncle Tex."

"Of course not," Virginia exclaimed, with tears in her eyes. "He couldn't disguise his voice so that

his loving little wife wouldn't recognize it, but how did he come here? Where did you find him?"

The boys then told how they had found the prospector living alone in a cabin high on Second Peak, close to the Christmas tree.

"And think of it, sister," Malcolm exclaimed excitedly. "He has truly found a paying mine, and if you and I will grubstake him, he'll let us go shares and there's no telling but that we may all be rich some day."

It was a long time before the excitement had subsided so that they could proceed with the merry program as it had been planned, and never before had that old roof covered so many happy hearts.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

## THE MYSTERIOUS CHRISTMAS BOX

THE week following Christmas was filled with many events on the V. M. Ranch.

Malcolm, who was greatly interested in the finding of the mine on Second Peak conferred for several hours with his sister, and finally decided that together they would grubstake Pat Mahoy in the venture.

The next day the three men rode away, leaving the girls to wait anxiously Malcolm's decision when he himself had examined the prospective mine.

Mrs. Mahoy and her small brood were to remain in the adobe house indefinitely if they wished. The little woman was no longer sad, and the three children added much to the joyfulness of the Christmas season.

"Oh, Virginia!" Margaret exclaimed when they turned into the ranch house after having waved farewell to Malcolm, Slick Cy and Mr. Mahoy. "I am so eager to receive our Christmas mail, but no one has been to town in ever so long. I just know that there will be a box for me from Babs. We

have exchanged presents every year and I am sure that she has sent me something. How are we going to get the mail?"

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Slim rode in today or tomorrow," Virginia said. "You know he has been for a week at a round-up just beyond the Junction. If he does come, he will stop for the mail."

Half an hour later when Margaret went to the veranda to shake a duster, she called excitedly:

"Virg, come quick. Look way up on the mesa trail. Is that a horseman I see or is it the giant cactus?"

Virginia appeared with the field glasses and after gazing through them for a moment, she exclaimed: "It surely is a horseman but he can't be our Slim for he is much too stout."

But when the horseman drew near, they saw that it really was their cow-boy. Virginia ran out to greet him as she laughingly called, "Slim, it is no wonder that we didn't recognize you. Why you bulge like a Santa Claus with all of those packages. Megsy, do see that big box tied on back. Who is it for, Slim?"

The young cow-boy looked as pleased as the jolly old saint himself as he replied, "I cal'late its fo' the two of yo', Miss Virginie. Sort o' pears to me like both yo' names is writ on it."

He had dismounted as he talked, and, at Vir-

ginia's suggestion, had carried the box into the living-room and placed it on the big table which Megsy had hastily cleared. The girls then filled his pockets with goodies, for Slim had been obliged to be away from V. M. for Christmas. "That's our thank you for bringing us so many presents," Virginia told him.

Then, when the cow-boy had departed for the bunk house, the girls turned their attention to the big mysterious looking box.

"What can be in it?" Margaret wondered. "Wait till I get a hammer and chisel and we will soon find out." Virg skipped to the tool house but soon returned.

"Of course I am sure it is from Babs," Margaret said as she watched with interest as her friend pried off the cover.

"I think so too," Virg affirmed. "But why my name is also on the wrapping I cannot imagine."

"I suppose that Babs put a present in for you, too," Margaret declared. "I have written so much about you to my beloved roommate that she feels well acquainted with you, and then, moreover, she was so pleased because you invited her to visit on the V. M. Ranch next summer."

Beneath the cover there lay a dozen Christmasy looking packages of all shapes and sizes. On each one was a sprig of holly and mistletoe and a tag.

On some of these Virginia's name was written and on the others Margaret's.

Megsy clapped her hands in little girl fashion as she exclaimed merrily, "Oh, aren't we having fun? I only wish that Babs might see the pleasure her surprise box is giving up. Now you choose one of the packages and open it and then I'll do the same. That will make the surprise last longer."

So Virginia chose a queer-shaped package and began to untie the narrow red ribbon, but she found whatever it was it had many wrappings. On one of these was written, "Pause and guess what I may be. I begin with a letter P."

"If that isn't just like Babs!" Margaret exclaimed. "Do you suppose it is a penwiper?"

"No," Virginia said as she continued to unwrap the gift. "It feels like cardboard. Oho! Just look! It's the dearest photograph of Babs herself."

"It's a new one taken in her first party dress," Margaret exclaimed admiringly as the two heads bent over the picture of a merry-eyed girl with bobbed curls. "It's the sweetest dress. She had it made just before I left. It's pink and all fluffy ruffles. I'll just be green with jealousy if Babs hasn't sent me one, too."

"I'm sure that you will find one," Virginia declared as they both peered into the surprise box wondering which of the unopened packages contained the wished-for photograph.

"Well, let's open them as they come," Megsy said

at last. "Babs has purposely wrapped them in queer shapes."

It took the girls a long happy hour to untie the gifts. There were two pretty handkerchiefs, two books, "Just Patty" and "When Patty Went to College." Two line-a-day diaries and two boxes of chocolate fudge so full of nut meats that they bulged.

"It's the kind Babs makes every Saturday night at boarding school," Margaret said, then she added: "Oh good! Here are two letters from my darling room-mate, one for you and one for me. Now we will know all the jolly news items about Vine Haven."

"You read your letter first," Virginia said as she piled the soft pillows back of them on the window seat and settled down for comfortable enjoyment of a visit with the far-away Babs.

"All right," Margaret agreed as she tore open the pale blue envelope out of which wafted to them a faint scent of violets.

Then she began to read:

Vine Haven Seminary:

Dearest Megsy: Christmas without you isn't nearly as festive as it used to be. The girls all came to our room just as they did last year to plan our mid-winter party, and though it wasn't very complimentary to me I heartily agreed with Belle Terry when she said that our room seemed like an empty

cage, out of which the song bird had flown. When the girls had gone, Megsy, I just threw myself down on your bed (no one has slept in it since you left) and I started to cry my eyes out, when I happened to remember what old Mrs. Tompkins, down at the candy shop, said once, "The best way to get over the miseries is to try to make somebody happy." So I sprang right up and tried to think what I could do to add a mite of merriness to Christmas for you and Virginia. I decided to send you a jolly surprise box. I worked at it until long after midnight, but please don't tell Miss Pickle, for of course I put the light out at 9 o'clock and waited until I was sure that she was asleep before I lighted it again.

There isn't a single gift in the box that has any value, but I am just sure that you two girls will enjoy opening the packages.

I'm so excited about something and what that something is I will tell in my letter to Virginia.

Oh, Megsy, darling room-mate, no words of mine can tell how I'm yearning to see you. Merry Christmas and happy New Year from BABS.

"Oh, Virginia, quick, open your letter and read the exciting news that Babs has to tell. I know what I do hope it is," Margaret exclaimed eagerly.

Virg had already opened her letter and so she began at once to read:

Dear Virginia: Please let me call you that. I am so glad that you sent me a kodak picture of

you on horseback. I just adore it! I had it enlarged so that I could see you better, and now in a pretty frame it hangs in my room over my writing desk, and every time one of the girls come in she immediately asks. "Oh Babs, who is that stunning cowgirl?" And when I tell them who you are and that you have invited me to visit at your ranch home, they all just look green with envy. Of course I don't know yet that I may accept, but I have written dad about it twice, and I held my breath when a return letter came from him, but, for some reason, he didn't mention the subject. However, I can't give up hope that he will let me go. Oh, you'll have to excuse me a minute, Martha just came to my door and said I am wanted in the library.

Half an hour later. It was dad at the long distance telephone. He said he had expected to run down to Vine Haven to wish me a Merry Christmas, but business prevented, so he had called up instead to give me a Christmas surprise, and girls, what do you think it was? I'm so happy and excited I can hardly keep my pen from dancing. Dad says I may come next summer, as he will have to go west on a business trip and can escort me as far as Arizona.

"Whoopla!" Margaret shouted as she tossed a pillow into the air. "Oh, I'm so glad, so glad!"

"I am glad, too," Virginia said, and then the two girls snuggled close and planned the many de-

lightful things that they would do when Babs came. When at last, the chiming of the clock announced that it was noon, they sprang up and a small folded paper fell to the floor. Virginia picked it up. "Here is a postscript to your letter, Megsy, that you didn't read," she said, "What can be in it?"

"Oh, I do hope Babs isn't saying that she can't come after all," Margaret declared as she opened the note. She glanced at its message, then read aloud:

"Dearest Megsy: I am writing this on a separate piece of paper, for you may not have told Virginia about my lost brother. It is all right, dear, if you have, for I know that she is like a sister to you and will be to me when we become acquainted.

"Having my dear brother Peyton away this Christmas has made me even more lonely for you, for you two are the ones in all the world for whom I most care. Of course I do love my father, but he seems always to be mentally preoccupied somehow. I am never real sure but that he may be troubled with my chatter. Sometimes I wonder if his abstraction means that he is thinking of his business, or, if he, too, may be grieving about his lost son, for, though Peyton may be wayward (I never knew what he did to anger father), I do know that he was one of the most lovable of boys and that he would do just anything for a person for whom he really cared. You cannot think how tender and



kind he was to our dear mother during her long last illness. Whatever my brother did to displease our father, I know that it was nothing really wrong. It was the day before last New Years that they had words. For the very first time, I believe, Peyton defied our father, declaring that he was old enough to decide some things for himself.

“The next morning, dad and I waited breakfast for my brother, but, when he did not join us, father sent me to call him. When I reached his room, I saw at once that his bed had not been slept in and that all of his clothes were gone. I shall never forget the desolate feeling that was in my heart when I saw that dark empty closet and knew that my dear brother had run away. When I went back, I was afraid to tell father, but of course I had to. His anger was terrible.

“‘Barbara,’ he said sternly, ‘your brother is dead to us from this day forever more. Do not again mention his name in my presence.’

“I never have, but Megsy, my brother is not dead to me, and if only I could learn his whereabouts, I would make any sacrifice.

“Now this is what I wanted to tell you. I always suspected that he ran away to sea, for he began wanting to be a sailor when he was a very little boy. Yesterday I received a picture postcard from China. There was no message on it and the address was blurred, but it might have been his handwriting. Oh, Megsy, I would be the happiest girl in the

world if I could be sure that Peyton sent it, for, at least, it would mean that he is well. I wanted to tell someone, and you are the only friend to whom I ever mention my brother's name. What do you think about it? Your, BABS."

"Poor girl," Virginia said, "I, too, have a dear brother and so I know just how lonely and sad Babs is. We must try to cheer her up, Megsy, when she visits us."

## CHAPTER XIX.

## THE SECRET CODE.

THE next morning the two girls were up with the sun. "I feel as though something unusual is going to happen today," Virginia said as she poured the coffee and smiled over at Margaret.

"So do I," that maiden replied as she turned the toast when it was just the right crispy brown. "I keep thinking and thinking of poor Babs. Here it is only the first of January and she can't come to visit us until the middle of June."

"You will be surprised, Megsy, how quickly the time will pass," Virginia declared and then they talked of Peyton, wondering what had become of him.

"If he is a happy-go-lucky, tender-hearted, easily led sort of a boy," Virg said, "I am afraid that, being angered by his father, he may do many things that he might regret, perhaps when it is too late."

"It is the not really knowing that makes it so hard for Babs," Margaret said. "If she knew even the worst, she could face it more bravely."

There was a sudden exclamation from the western girl who had chanced to glance out of the wide window and over the sandy stretch of desert that was glistening in the early sunshine.

"A horse and rider are coming at top speed," she said. "How I do hope that Malcolm is returning."

The girls went out on the veranda and stood arm in arm awaiting the coming of, they knew not whom. As the rider neared, Virginia, looking through her glasses exclaimed: "Oh, it is only Pasqual, a small Mexican boy whose father is one of the Slater Range riders. Perhaps he is on his way to the Junction. If so, he will turn at Dry Creek and ride up the mesa trail."

They watched a moment in silence and then Virginia remarked: "He didn't turn and so he must be coming here. How I hope that he has a message from Malcolm. Brother has been away for three days now and I haven't heard a word. I cannot help feeling troubled if I do not hear at least that often. So many dangers lurk on a desert, and now, added to them, is that outlaw who is supposed to be hiding in our mountains."

The girls went out on the veranda as the small boy approached. He removed his gayly adorned peaked hat and took from it a letter, which he handed to Virginia. That girl had a box of Christmas candy which she had caught up from the table as she passed and this she gave the dark eyed little boy whose white teeth gleamed as he smiled his pleasure.

Then thanking Virginia in his own musical language, his pony galloped away. Virginia glanced at the folded paper. "Why, this isn't Malcolm's

handwriting after all," she exclaimed in dismay. "Oh Megsy, I do hope that nothing has happened to my darling brother."

They went indoors, but Virginia's anxiety was quickly changed to mirth, and her merry laughter rang out.

"Virg, what is it that amuses you?" Megsy asked, truly puzzled. I thought a moment ago that you were troubled."

Without answering, Virginia led her friend toward a big desk in a sunny corner and sat down in the swinging chair that had been her father's. "Sit near me," she then said. "I have a task ahead of me." Then, seeing that Margaret looked even more mystified than before, she added, by way of explanation: "Years ago, Buddie and I made up a code. We didn't have any other children to play with and so we read many books of thrilling adventure. In one of them we found the inspiration for our code and we used to write letters to each other, pretending to tell secrets of a very serious nature. Honestly, Megsy, I have spent hours trying to decipher some message that Malcolm had sent me, to find, of course, that it was all make believe. We each had a key to the code, and evidently Malcolm still has his, but I am not real sure where mine is, but I think it is somewhere in this old desk. Of course I know that the message he has sent today is of a serious nature, and I simply must find the key to the code and decipher it as soon as possible."

While Virginia talked she opened one drawer in the old desk after another, removed papers yellowing with age and felt in the far corners, but the key to the code was not found.

“What do you suppose can be in that message?” Margaret queried.

“I believe it has something to do with his mining enterprise,” Virg said, then continued: “The facts, so far, are that this Irish prospector, Pat Mahoy, found what he believed to be paying ore on Second peak and said that if brother and I would grubstake him, we three would be partners. Malcolm decided to return with Mr. Mahoy and look at the property, and as you know, he has been gone three days. Now I conclude that my brother believes the mine to be a great find and wishes to tell me so in a way that no one else can read. Perhaps he wants me to do something that may be very important and that must be kept a secret, hence he has used the code of our childhood.” Then, rising, she left the desk as she said: “I have searched there thoroughly but not a sign of the key did I find.”

“Isn’t there a secret drawer to the old desk?” Margaret asked, hopefully. If there was one thing more than another that Margaret liked, it was mystery, and the idea of a secret drawer or a panel that slid back, had always delighted her. Virginia laughingly shook her head. “Nary a secret drawer,” she declared.

Just then the chimes of the old clock tolled the hour of 10.

"Dear me; here it is mid-morning and we are no nearer deciphering this message than we were when it arrived," Virginia declared, dolefully.

"Hark! Somebody is coming," Margaret exclaimed. "Who do you suppose it can be?"

She opened the door as she spoke. The cow-boy Slim stood on the porch, sombrero in hand. "Miss Virginia," he said in his shy manner, "did Malcolm leave word what he wanted me to do when I returned from the Junction?"

"No he didn't, Slim," Virginia said. "I think you would better use your own judgment. You know my brother always wishes you to do that when he is not at home. Just now he is away, and I do not know when he will return. Is everything all right here at the ranch?"

"Yes, Miss Virginia, and if it's what you think Malcolm would be wishin' me to do I'll join Rusty up the north way, and help him drive in the yearlings. Dick Dartly told me as there'd be a stampede up that way and that Rusty is havin' a hard time roundin' up the scattered yearlings. He'd be glad of my help if you think as it would be right for me to go."

"I'm sure it's all right, Slim. Goodbye and good luck." The two girls waved to the departing cow-boy and then turned back into the big, cheerful living-room as the clock chimed the quarter hour.

"Oh, dear, how time flies!" Virginia declared. Then she pressed both hands upon her forehead saying that she was going to think and think until she could recall where she had put the key to the code.

"And while you are thinking, I will make my bed." Margaret said as she skipped to the adjoining room, into which the sun was flooding. She began to hum a little tune, but, in the middle of it she stopped suddenly, for she had heard a squeal of delight.

"What is it?" she asked peering out of the door.

"Inspiration!" Virginia laughingly responded. "Come along with me. I do believe I recall where I put the key to the code when I supposed Buddie and I were through with it forever. Are you a climber?"

"I don't know. What will I have to climb?" asked the mystified Margaret. "I did climb a tree once and a ladder also. Which do you wish me to ascend now?"

Virginia was leading the way to the kitchen which was deserted at that hour. There she opened a door into a long, dark storeroom at one end of which was a straight up and down ladder made by the nailing of boards across uncovered uprights. Margaret looked up and saw a trap door in the ceiling. "Does that lead to your attic?" she inquired. Virginia was half way up the ladder, and, looking over her shoulder, she replied merrily. "Follow me and you shall see."



## CHAPTER XX.

## THE MESSAGE DECIPHERED.

It was indeed an old fashioned attic into which the two girls emerged. It was high in the middle and the sloping roof formed the sides.

"Where is your inspiration leading you?" Margaret inquired as she bent to follow Virginia into a dark cobwebby corner.

"It's my old play trunk," the western girl replied, "where I put all of my old castaway toys as I outgrew them, and so, what is more natural than that I should also have placed there the key to the code when I had outgrown it." As she spoke Virginia was dragging a small dust-covered trunk, over near the window, which was the only opening through which light was coming.

The cover was lifted, revealing all sorts of playthings, dolls, books and mechanical toys.

"Oh, good!" Virginia exclaimed, joyfully. Even if we don't find the key to the code in here, how glad I am that I happened to remember this old trunk. What pleasure it will give to the Mahoy children. I will have someone carry it down and let them play with these things to their hearts' content." As she spoke she took from the trunk first one toy and then

another. She did this eagerly, for time was flying and she well knew that she must find the code, but she seemed doomed to disappointment, for everything had been taken from the trunk and not a scrap of paper had been revealed. "How provoking!" she declared as she arose.

Margaret had picked up a queer old doll dressed in the costume of an early pioneer, when, from the folds of its print gingham dress, a yellow paper fluttered to the floor. With a cry of joy, Virginia pounced upon it. "Oh! Oh!" she exclaimed, "that dear old doll, Patience Putney has been keeping it for me all this time. Now we will begin to decipher my brother's message. Goodness, I do hope it isn't too late. Give me the doll, Megsy, I'll take her downstairs and enthrone her in a place of honor to reward her for her faithful vigilance through all these years."

Down the ladder the girls scrambled and into the living-room they hurried. Then on the desk the message from Malcolm was spread and also the key to the code.

Both heads bent over the latter as Virginia said eagerly: "First of all look for a Q with two tails and see what it means. Malcolm has written that all alone at the top so I think we would better decipher it first."

"Here it is," Margaret said, pouncing her finger on the character in question. "It means 'Very important. Great haste required.' "

“Oh, Megsy,” moaned Virginia, and just then the clock chimed twelve. “It is three hours since we first received the message.

“Now look for a T with a cross on the bottom as well as on the top.” Virginia began as they both searched the key, then she added, “Here it is! I’m beginning to recall now how I used the key in earlier days. I believe I will take it by myself, Megsy. I think that I will soon be able to decipher the message.”

“All right and while you are doing it I will make your bed. Perhaps if I leave you all alone, you will make better headway,” the other girl said, suiting her actions to the words.

Fifteen minutes passed before Virginia sprang up and hurried to her friend’s open door. Margaret sat by the sun-flooded window sewing. She glanced up eagerly. “What is it, Virg? You look troubled.”

Virginia sank on the bed truly the picture of despair. “Oh, Megsy, what shall I do?” she said, “but first I’ll read you the message. ‘Dear sister. I find the ore to be of excellent quality; the best I do believe that has been found in these parts for many years. Pat Mahoy and I must go at once to Douglas and record the location papers. Send one of the cow-boys to stay in the hut on Second Peak until we return. Tell him that he is to report to me if he sees anyone lurking about the property.

“ ‘Hastily,  
MALCOLM.’ ”

Virginia looked up woefully. "If only I had been able to read the message before I told Slim to join Rusty in the north! That is fully two hours ago and by this time he is far out of reach. However, he might have gone by the way of the Dartly Ranch, and, if he did, I am sure that Mrs. Dartly would have insisted upon his remaining there for the noon meal. I'll call up and inquire."

Skipping to the telephone in the living-room, Virginia was soon talking with her nearest neighbor four miles away. "Slim isn't here now," that good woman replied. "He did stop some time ago and I asked him to stay to lunch but he said he had some business to talk over with old Mr. Dodd up at Double Cross Ranch and that he would get some frijoles there. If it's very important Virginia, I could send my boy over to the Dodds, but it would be several hours before he could make the round trip. It's a pity now that they haven't a 'phone."

"No, indeed, don't send Jack. I'll just have to manage some way without Slim. Thank you, Mrs. Dartly."

Margaret was standing near, eagerly waiting for Virginia to finish the telephone conversation.

The western girl rose with a determined expression in her eyes as she said: "Megsy, there is only one thing left to do, and I'm going to do it."

"What is it?" the eastern girl asked.

"It is that I must go myself and stay in the log cabin on Second Peak until my brother returns from

recording the location papers in Douglas. He will have started already, believing that I will at once obey his instructions and send one of the cow-boys to watch the property, and since it is as much to my interest as his to have it protected, I must go."

Margaret's eyes were wide with amazement. "Why, Virginia," she exclaimed, "do you mean that you, a mere girl, would go and stay alone all night in an old log hut on that desolate mountain?"

Virginia nodded. "Well, then, I'm going with you." Margaret's tone sounded as determined as her friend's.

"But I couldn't allow you to go, dear," Virginia protested. "You aren't used to the loneliness of the mountains as I am. I love it. Then night noises do not frighten me in the least and there is very seldom a wild animal prowling about that is not more afraid of me than I am of it."

"If you go, I'm going also," Margaret repeated with emphasis, then putting her arms about her friend, she declared gaily: "It will be something exciting about which to write to dear old Babs." Then she added with sweet seriousness. "I'd be heaps more worried and unhappy all alone here on the ranch, not knowing what might be happening to you than I would be were I with you. If you are to be eaten by a grizzly, then I wish to be devoured also."

Virginia laughed as she began to don her khaki riding habit. "What if the fierce outlaw that is sup-

posed to be hiding somewhere in the Seven Peak Range should happen to visit the hut in the night?" she asked merrily. Not that she had any faith in the existence of the rumored outlaw, but she wished to persuade Margaret to remain at home.

"Let him come if he wishes," the eastern girl said. "If you aren't skeered of him, neither am I." This sounded very brave, but in her heart Margaret was hoping that they would meet neither a bear nor an outlaw.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## TWO COURAGEOUS GIRLS.

HALF an hour later the two girls were in the saddle, cantering toward the distant mountains.

"Isn't it good to be alive on a day like this?" Margaret exclaimed as she gazed over the wide desert that was gleaming white in the early afternoon sun. "Somehow, when everything is sparkling and seeming to rejoice, I just can't be skeered of a bear or even an outlaw that may be lurking on Second Peak."

"I love the desert," Virginia declared, "but then, I have always lived here. I do believe that I will feel smothered and as shut in as a bird in a cage if you and I go east to boarding school next winter."

The two girls were riding side by side. A mile ahead of them the Seven Peak Range loomed rugged and uninviting.

"Yes, I suppose that boarding school will seem strange to you," Margaret continued the conversation, "and probably the chatter of so many girls will make you dizzy just at first. It did me, for although

I had never lived in as silent a place as this, I had been an only child, unused to the merriment of many girls, but one soon becomes accustomed to it." Then suddenly she turned toward her friend with eyes that glowed. "Oh, Virg," she exclaimed, "before we do go, I will write to Mrs. Martin, she's the principal and such a dear, and ask her if we may reserve the big, sunny corner room that overlooks the orchard. There are three single beds in it and so you and Babs and I can be roommates."

Virginia laughed. "Megsy," she said, "we are letting our imaginations run riot. We are like the old woman who counted her chickens before they were hatched. Here we are spending the money that we hope the mine will bring to us when, as yet, the location papers have not been recorded."

"But they will be, won't they?" Margaret asked, turning questioning eyes toward the speaker. "Surely in a short 24 hours no one else will discover the place when it has been there for centuries undisturbed."

"Stranger things have happened," Virginia said, "but here's where we go single file, Megsy. The trail is very steep in places. Don't try to direct Star. Let him climb as he wishes and he will carry you to the old hut in safety."

"How dark it is in the canyon," Margaret said as she looked ahead with a shudder. "No one would dream that the sun is shining so brightly out on the desert."



"You'll get used to the dimness in a minute and then you will see many interesting things," her friend assured her. Megsy did not reply but she sincerely hoped that the interesting things would not be a bear nor the rumored outlaw.

Virginia had been right. As soon as their eyes became accustomed to the dimness of the canyon after the glaring sunlight on the desert, Margaret did see many things that interested her. This was not the trail they had ascended on the day of the storm.

"It is a shorter way," Virginia had said. "I am so eager to reach the old hut at least an hour before sunset that we may make ourselves comfortable before the night settles down."

The trail in some places seemed perilously steep to the eastern girl and how glad she was that Virginia was riding ahead, for, she did not wish her friend to know how truly terrorized she was, and there were times when she even closed her eyes tight and clung to the pony. Luckily her trust was not misplaced, for Star, being accustomed to mountain trails ascended slowly and without stumbling until the wider upper trail was reached. There, Margaret once again breathed freely. Then to her surprise Virginia swung around in her saddle and called merrily, "Bravo, Megsy! You took that climb like a true Westerner. Honestly I expected any moment to hear you protest that you simply couldn't make it."

Margaret was half tempted to explain that she had closed her eyes tight that she might not see the sheer descent below her, but she decided not to tell at present. She was pleased with Virginia's praise and hoped that in time she would be courageous enough to deserve it.

"Just another turn or two and then we will see the hut among the pines," Virg called over her shoulder when suddenly Margaret whispered, "Hark! Did you hear a noise?"

They drew rein and listened intently, but heard and saw nothing. However, when they started on again, a lithe, cat-like creature leaped from near jutting rocks, darted ahead of them up the trail and then disappeared.

Margaret was terrorized. She had seen Virginia reach for her small gun, and then, as though seemingly on second thought, replace it allowing the creature to escape.

"What was it, Virg, and why didn't you shoot it?" she inquired.

"It was only a small lion," the western girl replied, "and it was more afraid of us than we were of it." Margaret doubted this statement, but said nothing.

Then Virginia added. "My brother Malcolm does wish me to shoot them whenever I see them because they prey upon our young calves, but I didn't this time because I do not wish anyone who might be near to know of our presence."

This was not very reassuring to the eastern girl, for it suggested that Virginia believed that someone might be lurking near whose closer acquaintance they would not wish to make. This was truer than either of the girls dreamed.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## NIGHT IN THE MOUNTAINS.

THE sun was nearing the western horizon when at last the two girls swung from their ponies and entered the log cabin which did indeed look deserted and desolate standing alone so high on a mountain surrounded only by stunted pines.

Margaret glanced around fearfully thinking that the wild creature they had met might have selected this cabin as a safe retreat, but the place was empty.

“Good,” Virginia exclaimed brightly. “Malcolm has left us plenty to eat. Here is cold fried rabbit enough for our supper and I certainly am hungry. There are good beds for us, too. The pine boughs are fresh under the blankets. You will be surprised to find what comfortable beds Malcolm can make with boughs. He knows just how to place them one on another to make a mattress both soft and springy. Megsy, suppose you get out the sandwiches that we brought and spread them on this rustic table while I feed the ponies, and too, I’ll bring some water from a spring just above here.”

Margaret was on the verge of saying that she hoped the spring wasn’t far away, as she dreaded

being left alone even for a moment, but instead she said: "Very well, Virg, I'm hungry too, and we'll have a fine feast when you return."

Margaret had begged Virginia to permit her to come to the mountains and so the eastern girl determined to appear brave if she succumbed in the attempt. She wondered what Babs and the other girls in boarding school would think if they could see her at that moment, and the thought so amused her that she almost laughed aloud, when suddenly, something crashed behind her and with a cry of terror she whirled about, sure that she would behold the mountain lion crouched to spring upon her, but instead she saw a small box lying on the floor beneath the open window. Believing that it had been blown from the ledge by a breeze that was rising, Margaret, with a sigh of relief, went to pick it up when she saw, fastened to it, a piece of yellow wrapping paper on which a message was scrawled in a language unknown to her. Again she was frightened. What if the rumored outlaw had reached in and had left that message as some sort of a warning for the girls.

Tiptoeing to the open window she looked out. Not a sound was to be heard nor a creature seen and yet there was the message. Where had it come from?

A moment later Virginia appeared with a pail of water. "We'll have to hurry, Megsy," she said, without looking at her friend, who stood in the

middle of the room, pale and trembling; "that is if we are to eat our fine feast before the sun sets, and I'd heaps rather eat it by daylight than by the one lone lantern that Malcolm seems to have left for us."

While Virginia talked, Margaret was trying to regain her courage and to the surprise she heard herself saying quite calmly: "Virg, here is a message of some sort."

The western girl took it and exclaimed: "Oh! Malcolm's writing." Then, after glancing it over, she added in a matter-of-fact tone, "You see he thought one of the cow-boys would be here tonight and so he has written some directions in the Mexican lingo which we all understand."

Margaret was greatly relieved. "Is it anything important?" she asked.

If Virginia hesitated before replying, it was for so brief a second that the eastern girl did not notice it. "Not so very," she replied. "Malcolm expects to be back early tomorrow morning."

Then together they sat on the rude bench by the rustic table that leaned against the wall and if Virginia seemed thoughtful, Margaret decided that it was because her responsibility was really more than a girl should assume. Had Margaret known the real character of the message left by Malcolm, she would have been unable to partake of the sandwiches and fried rabbit with the zest that she did.

Virginia after a thoughtful few moments began

an assumed merry conversation and then, as soon as the sun was set, she suggested that they retire early that they need not light the lantern.

“Why?” Margaret asked, on the alert at once. “Do you fear that some one might see it and find out where we are?”

Virginia’s laugh sounded natural. “A light always attracts bugs and beetles,” she exclaimed merrily, “and we will sleep better if they stay away. I do not want to close the one window, since it has only a wooden blind and we will need the air.”

Margaret did not openly protest, but to herself she thought: “I’ll never sleep a wink, I know, with that window open, for how easy it would be for the mountain lion to spring in and eat us up before we knew it.”

But after a time, the fragrance of pine boughs lulled the tired girl to sleep, and when Virginia was sure that the slumber was not feigned, she rose very quietly and tiptoed toward the door.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## NIGHT PROWLERS.

VIRGINIA, sincerely hoping that the eastern girl would not awaken, tiptoed out of the log cabin and very quietly closed the door. She was carrying the unlighted lantern and some matches. Not far from the cabin was a small cave. In this Virginia went and struck a light when she was sure that it would not be seen by anyone outside. Then opening the brown paper, she read again and more carefully what her brother, Malcolm, had written.

The property which he wished observed lay directly below the cave far down in the canyon, but it was not this part of the message which had stirred Virginia to action. It was that which followed.

“Pat Mahoy states that about a week ago while he was prospecting about here, a desert-rat sort of a man took him by surprise. He has feared ever since that the man may have suspected that the property was valuable and that he might return, so don't sleep until we get back. Keep alert and on the watch.”

Little did Malcolm dream when he wrote that hastily scrawled message that it would be a mere girl



and his most dearly loved sister who would assume the truly dangerous position of night watch.

Leaving the lantern in the cave, Virginia went out into the darkness and stood leaning against a boulder where she could not be seen but where she could observe the downward slope of the canyon.

Every half hour she went to the cabin and listened at the open window that she might be assured that Margaret was still sleeping undisturbed.

It was on her return from one of these visits to the cabin that she uttered an exclamation of dismay, for, far down in the canyon, she saw lights moving about.

What could it mean? At first she thought there were but two, but then she counted three. Tensely she watched. For a brief while the lights were close together as though whoever carried them were conferring on some plan of action. Then one of the lights seemed to settle permanently in one spot and two of them began to ascend the trail that led toward the log cabin. Virginia leaped into the cave and put out the light in her lantern. Then she sprang back to her post of observation. It would be some time before whoever was coming could reach the top of the trail. What ought she to do? What could she do?

Perhaps she ought to warn Margaret at once and yet the eastern girl would be so terrorized that it would but add to the problem confronting Virginia. Moreover, if it should be Malcolm returning, she

would have frightened Margaret without reason, and so she determined to wait until she herself might be assured of the identity of the bearers of the light who seemed to be slowly ascending the trail.

At last they were near enough for Virginia, who was listening intently to hear their voices, and to her dismay, she realized that she had never heard them before. Then as the light of the lanterns was thrown upon them, although she could not see their faces, she knew from the build of each that to her they were strangers. One was of slight, graceful build and the other heavy set. They seemed to be having a heated discussion and Virginia clearly heard the younger man say: "If it's crooked work you are up to, I'll not go a step further."

"You'll do as I say," was the surly reply.

Terrorized, when again the lanterns began to ascend the trail, Virginia sped to the cabin and awakened Margaret.

"What is it, Virginia?" Margaret asked, half awake, as she rose. "Is it a bear or the outlaw?"

"Hush! Hush!" Virginia whispered. "Be quiet as you can and follow me. There are two strange men coming up the trail. They do not mean to harm us, of course, for they do not know of our existence, but they probably plan visiting this hut, and we don't want them to find us here. Climb through the window and then we will crouch down in the dark until we can slip away."

Although Margaret was terrorized, the courage of

her Puritan ancestors must have asserted itself, for she did just as Virginia bade her. Silently the girls crept through the small open window and hurried to a place of hiding in a clump of dwarf pines, and none too soon, for a moment later lights appeared in the cabin.

They were near enough to hear an exclamation of surprise, followed by a surly voice. "Huh! Folks been here seems like, and mighty recent. Two hats yonder belonin' to gals, I take it. Tom, get a move on ye and find who 'twas just left here. Like as not whoever 'tis has the information we're wishin' to obtain."

Evidently the one addressed as Tom didn't move. "Stubborn again?" the voice inquired. "Then it's myself as will hunt for whoever escaped."

Hearing this, the frightened girls crouched lower, hoping that they would escape observation, but unfortunately, the grey of the dawn had come and Margaret's red belt and neck handkerchief gleamed among the green pines and attracted the roving eye of the searcher.

"Wall," he remarked, "sort of playin' hide and seek with me, was ye? Come out now, and if ye'll tell all ye know about what's goin' on around here you won't be hurt, not one scratch."

Virginia, holding Margaret's hand in a firm clasp, arose, for she knew there was no other alternative. The heavy-set man was a type of which she had heard but had never before seen. She knew that

he could be merciless and so with a pretence of bravery which with difficulty she assumed, Virginia led Margaret toward the cabin.

She glanced at the slight young man who stood watching them and she was sure that she saw in his bronzed face an expression of pity. Then in another moment, something very unexpected had happened.

The surly man, intent upon obtaining whatever information he could from the two girls, had forgotten for the moment that the lad, whom he had addressed as Tom, was not in sympathy with his plans. Had he chanced to glance at the youth he would have seen an expression in his eyes that would have warned him that he would better not bully the girls too much. But, for the moment the older man had entirely forgotten his companion.

When they neared the cabin, he commanded, "Turn around here, gals! Tell me all ye know about this here mining property and tell it quick."

Virginia was defiantly silent, but Margaret, whose courage was gone, began to sob, and it was at that moment that the lad called Tom confronted the bully and in each hand he held a gun.

"Coward!" he said, "I'll not stand by and see you frighten two mere girls. Down the trail with you and don't so much as look back or I'll fire."

The man obeyed sullenly, and Tom stood leaning against the boulder to be sure that his orders were carried out. Then, turning to the girls, he said, "Young ladies, do you wish me to remain here until

you are better protected or do you prefer to be alone?"

"Oh, please, please stay!" Virginia implored, for, brave as she had been, she was after all only a girl, and she had been thoroughly frightened. "My brother Malcolm, and Pat Mahoy may return at any moment now and so I am sure that you will not be long delayed."

"It doesn't matter how long I am delayed," the youth said, and in his voice there was a tone of hopelessness which Virginia noted with sudden sympathy. "I'll stand here and watch the trail for a time," he added.

"And I will prepare breakfast," the western girl said brightly; "then you come when it is ready."

Half an hour later Virginia called and the lad left his post feeling sure that they were not to be molested. When he had washed at the spring he entered the hut and sat with the girls at the rustic table. Virginia liked the lad and was indeed puzzled to know why he had been in such bad company.

"You girls were brave to come up here alone," Tom said, "Weren't you afraid?"

"Indeed I was," Margaret confided, "because, you see, we had heard that an outlaw is hiding somewhere on Second Peak. Do you suppose that it is true?"

"Yes," the lad replied, "it is true. I am the outlaw."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## A "TAME" OUTLAW.

WHEN the lad called Tom calmly remarked, "I am that outlaw," Margaret, who had supposed an outlaw to be a villain, such as she had seen in the moving pictures, did not know how to reply, but Virginia, used to the ways of the West, held out her hand to the lad and said with sweet sincerity, "Tom, I believe that you are either innocent, or that you hastily committed some act which you now deeply regret."

"Thank you for your confidence," the lad replied.

The eastern girl found it hard to convince herself that she was awake. Could it be that she, brought up in the most conservative manner, was really breakfasting in a log hut on a mountain peak with an outlaw? She glanced furtively at the lad and, noting a kindly expression in his face, she decided that he must be a tame outlaw and one of whom she need not be afraid.

What an exciting letter she would be able to write to Babs, and how that girl, who had always thirsted for adventure, would envy her.

Suddenly Tom leaped to his feet and listened intently. Virginia followed him as he went with long strides toward the open door.

"Two men are coming up the trail," he reported, "but they are not the ones we so recently dismissed."

Virginia sprang forward with a cry of joy. "Oh, it is brother Malcolm," she exclaimed. When the young man in the lead had dismounted, he stared in uncomprehending amazement at the two girls and the strange lad.

"Virginia! Margaret! What does this mean?" he asked. He sensed at once that something very unusual had happened.

"Rusty and Slim were away," Virginia explained, "and so we girls had to come, and oh, brother, brother, we have been so frightened, but this brave lad has been our protector."

When the whole story had been told, Malcolm held out his hand. "You say that you are an outlaw. As you know it is the custom of the desert to ask no questions, but, Tom, you are not an outlaw from our home. From this day on, for as long as you wish to remain, I engage your services. Will you accept?"

"I do and thank you. I sincerely hope that you will find me worthy of the trust."

"I know we will," Malcolm declared heartily, "and, to complete your name cow-boy fashion we will call you Trusty Tom."

An hour after the return of Malcolm and Pat Ma-

hoy, Virginia approached her brother, saying, "Do you think it would be safe now for Margaret and me to return to the ranch? We are both very weary and believe that we could rest better at home."

Malcolm glanced up from the rustic table where he had been so busily figuring that the time had passed unnoticed.

"I had planned returning with you," he said thoughtfully, "but I would rather remain here a few hours longer. Where is Trusty Tom? I will ask him to accompany you home."

"He is with Pat Mahoy," Virginia began, when Margaret, from the doorway said, "Here he is now." Then she called to the approaching lad, "Tom, Malcolm wishes to speak to you." The boy at the table looked up with a welcoming smile. "If you believe that it would be safe for the girls to return home, Tom, I wish you would accompany them," he said.

"Indeed, I will gladly," the other lad replied, "and if need be, I will protect them with my life."

Half an hour later the three horses left the canyon trail and started across the gleaming desert.

"I'm glad to get away from the mountains," Margaret declared, "for out here on the open desert, we can see whoever is coming and not be surprised by friend or foe."

"Except in one place," Virginia added, "and that is where the trail crosses the creek bottom. The banks are so high, a whole regiment could be hiding



down there and we wouldn't know it until we were quite upon them, but I'm not anticipating trouble, are you, Tom?"

"No," the lad replied, "not for you girls," he added. "Surely no one on the desert would wish to harm you."

Virginia glanced up quickly and wondered if he were fearful that someone might be watching for him. How she did wish that she could ask him to tell her all about it, but she knew that on the desert no one asked a stranger his name or destination.

An hour later, as they were approaching the spot where the trail descended into the rocky creek bottom, Tom, who was in the lead, whirled in his saddle and lifted a warning hand.

"Stay here," he said softly, "while I ride ahead that I may be sure that it is safe for you to descend the creek trail."

The girls did as he bade them, and while the lad rode forward, Margaret asked fearfully: "What aroused Tom's suspicions, do you suppose?"

"Perhaps he just wishes to be cautious," Virginia replied, but had Margaret been able to see her friend's face at that moment, she would have known that her words were not expressing her true thought, for the western girl had also seen the something that had alarmed the lad and that something was a face peering above the bank close to the mesquite bush. It, however, had quickly disappeared when Tom started alone toward the creek trail.

Virginia delayed but one moment, and then touching Comrade with her quirt, she was soon riding at the boy's side.

"Tom," she said in a low voice, "I also saw that face. Do you think it is the man with whom you were last night? Is he lying in wait for us?"

"I think not," Trusty Tom declared. "I believe whoever is in hiding is there for some other reason."

Margaret, not wishing to be left behind, had urged Star to a gallop and rode close to Virginia. In another moment they would be able to see down the slope of the creek trail, but, before they were near enough to begin the descent horsemen appeared, coming up, and with a cry of relief, Virginia urged Comrade ahead of the others as she exclaimed to the man in the lead, "Oh, Mr. Rizer, it is only you, isn't it? We girls have such active imaginations today." Then, turning to Margaret, she added, "Megsy, this is the sheriff from Douglas. Mr. Rizer, these are my friends, Margaret Selover and Tom, who are from the East."

Virginia had been thinking fast from the moment she first saw the sheriff, and yet, from the self-possessed way in which she talked none could have surmised that she was truly concerned. Her first thought had been, "Tom is a self-confessed outlaw. If the sheriff and his men are looking for him I must try to protect him as he protected us."

"My wife told me you had a girl friend stayin'

with you from the East, Miss Virginia," Mr. Rizor was saying, "but she didn't mention a boy."

As the sheriff spoke, he gazed keenly at the lad whose expression, Virginia was glad to note, did not express guilt.

"Are you looking for someone who has been breaking the law, Mr. Rizor?" the western girl asked, anxious to attract those penetrating grey eyes from Tom.

"Yes, that's who we're after," the sheriff replied. "Two nights ago, the Number Six Limited was held up in Rattlesnake Canyon and the mail car was robbed. The track walker reported that he had seen two men and a lad of about eighteen, lurking around there an hour before the limited was due, and he thinks he could recognize any one of them if he could see them again."

At that moment one of the men uttered an exclamation and pointed toward the south, where, faint and far through powerful glasses he saw two horsemen making for the Mexican border.

The sheriff took the glasses and looked through them intently for a long moment.

"See you again," he called over his shoulder, as, with his men, he started in quick pursuit, and Virginia with a sinking heart, noticed that the steel grey eyes looked directly at Tom as though the words were meant especially for him.

When the sheriff and his men were gone, the three

young people rode silently down the dry creek trail and up on the other side.

Tom was the first to speak.

“It was mighty good of you, Miss Virginia, to protect me the way you did,” he said, earnestly. “I am afraid however, that you believe me to be one of the three who held up the mail train, but indeed, it is not so. I was in Rattlesnake Canyon when the two men came along. I didn’t have a bite to eat and they shared with me. I told them that I was planning to walk the tracks until I reached Douglas, and that there I meant to obtain work if I could. The man, with whom you saw me later, assured me that he could give me remunerative employment if I would wait for them over at Second Peak. I did not at the time inquire the nature of the employment nor, did I know, until I heard the sheriff telling about it, that they had robbed the mail train. The next day I met the two men at the spot upon which we had agreed, and they told me what they wished me to do. I refused, saying that I did not care to do crooked work. I hope that you will believe me, for what I have told you is the truth.”

“I do indeed believe you,” Virginia exclaimed, “and if need be, we will tell your story to Mr. Rizer. Good! Here is dear old V. M. I’m glad to be home, aren’t you, Megsy? I feel as though we had been away a year. Tom, there is the bunkhouse yonder, I think Slim and Rusty Pete must be there for their ponies are in the corral. Tell them that

you are our new cow-boy. They'll like you and I'm sure that you will like them."

When the girls had dismounted at the wide front veranda, and Tom had led their ponies back to the corral, they entered the house and Margaret sank down in a big, comfortable chair as she said with a sigh of contentment. "Well, now I am beginning to feel real once more. Honestly, Virg, I haven't been a bit sure but that I might wake up and find either that I was a character in a Zane Grey story or that it was a dream and a nightmare at that."

"Oh! Here's the mail pouch!" Virginia exclaimed gleefully. "Someone has been to town."

"I do hope that there is a letter from Babs," Margaret said.

"I am so eager to know if she has learned more, as yet, about her lost brother, Peyton."

## CHAPTER XXV.

## THE SHERIFF'S VISIT.

A LETTER from Babs was the first one that tumbled out on the big library table when Virginia held the pouch upside down. Other papers and letters rattled out, but both girls were eager to hear the news from Margaret's former room-mate in the far-away boarding school.

"Dearest Megsy and Virg," Margaret read aloud.

"I'm so happy today that I could sing like a lark, but since it is silence period, I would better just pen my joy to you two dear girls, who will, I know, rejoice with me. I am just absolutely convinced now that I know where my dear brother Peyton is. Of course his messages to me continue to be mysterious; that is, he doesn't sign his full name, only his initials. I'm sure that they must be his, for I do not know anyone else in the world whose name begins with P. and W.

"It is just as I supposed in the very beginning. He did run away to sea, for I have now received five picture postcards signed P. W., and they were mailed at different ports in China, Japan and the

East Indies. I know he is sending them to me because he realizes how unhappy I would be if I had no knowledge of his whereabouts.

"I do wish that I could write to him and tell him how happy I am just to be assured that he is well and alive, but since he wishes to be so mysterious, I will have to be content.

"And now I will tell you something else. I am saving every penny of my allowance, and before I start for the West I am going to buy a whole khaki outfit like the girls wear in the moving pictures. Oh, Megsy, how you would have laughed the other day if you could have seen our French riding master's expression when I asked him if he would try to get a horse that bucks, upon which I might practice riding.

"'Mees Wente,' he said, 'how is it that you mean? [A horse that bucks? In Paris we do not have heem.'

"Every girl in the riding class wanted to shout, but of course, you know Professor La Fleur is so prim and proper we couldn't even smile.

"However, as soon as we came back from the canter, we all met in my room and made fudge and we laughed so loud and so long that Miss Pickle put her head in at the door and asked if we thought it was quite ladylike to laugh in so boisterous a manner.

"Girls, when I get out on the desert, I am going way up on the trail Virginia calls her Inspiration Peak, and I'm going to shout just as loud and long

as ever I wish. I'm so tired of always having to be proper and ladylike.

"Good-bye for now.

"Your pal,

"BABS.

"P. S.—Megsy, aren't you glad that I have located my dear brother, Peyton? B. B. W."

Before Margaret could comment about the letter, there came a sharp rap on the front door, and Virginia, springing to open it, wondered who might be there.

It was Mr. Rizor but his men were not with him. Luckily Virginia had expected that the sheriff would stop at V. M. on his way back to town and so she did not express surprise, although Margaret did. Luckily Mr. Rizor did not glance at the eastern girl, who wisely busied herself in another part of the room. "Miss Virginia," he said, "may I come in? There's a matter I wish to be speakin' about."

"Why, of course you may come in Mr. Rizor," the girl said, opening the door welcomingly wide, "and I hope that you will remain with us for the midday meal which is about to be served."

Evidently he had not accompanied his men to the Mexican border, and Virginia was wondering about his reason for not having done so.

"Thanks, I'll not be stopping but a minute," he said. "My men are following what they think is a pretty sure trail, but my presence is more needed



back in town today and so I'm headin' that way, but, bein' as I had something very important to say to you, I thought I'd stop even though it is a mile farther."

Virginia's heart beat rapidly. Had the sheriff real knowledge about Tom, and had he come to arrest him? If so, she must try to save their new cow-boy, but, how could she do it? The girl had been so busy with her own anxious thoughts that she had failed to note the expression of pleased pride that appeared in the face of the sheriff.

"Well, to come to the point, Miss Virginia," he was saying, "we've got company down to our house, so to speak. Little Virginia Rizer arrived yesterday and she weighs eight pounds. My wife told me whether I caught the mail thief or not, I was to be sure and stop and tell you that she wants you to come as soon as you can to see your little namesake." Then he added, "we're hoping that she'll grow up to be as fine a girl as you are."

Virginia's relief was so great that she almost shouted for joy. "I am indeed glad, Mr. Rizer!" she said. "Margaret, did you hear that splendid news? Please tell Mrs. Rizer that my friend and I will ride into town in a very few days to see her and the darling little baby."

When the sheriff was gone Virginia almost cried, her relief was so great.

"The queer part of it is," she told Margaret, "I just know that Mr. Rizer believes our Tom was the

lad who was with the men who robbed the mail train, but for my sake he isn't going to say a word about it."

"I'm not so sure," the other girl replied as she pointed out of the window. Virginia looked and saw that the sheriff, instead of taking the trail toward town, was slowly and thoughtfully riding toward the bunkhouse.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## WIELDING A CAN OPENER.

WHEN Margaret pointed out of the window, Virginia sprang up and looked down toward the bunkhouse. Was it possible that the sheriff did suspect that Tom was one of the three who were supposed to have held up the train in Rattlesnake canyon and was he about to arrest the lad? If so Virginia determined that she would try to save the young outlaw even as he had saved the girls the night before on lonely Second Peak.

She stood gazing intently out of the window ready to run to the bunkhouse if she felt that her presence were needed, but instead, when the sheriff drew rein, and hailed, it was the cow-boy Rusty Pete who appeared in the doorway. Slim quickly joined him, and, from their smiling faces and the hearty way in which they shook hands with Mr. Rizor, Virginia realized that after all the sheriff's mission had been a peaceful one.

"He is a proud and happy father," she said as she turned from the window, "and he wants all of his friends to rejoice with him, and so, after all, Tom is safe here, at least for the present."

Then, glancing at the clock, she exclaimed. "It is nearly noon, and brother said that he would surely reach V. M. at that hour and I just know that he will be as hungry as a wolf."

Virginia went to her room and Margaret to the one adjoining and they visited through the door that opened between while they changed from their khaki riding habits to fresh pink and blue gingham house dresses. Then arm in arm, they marched to the kitchen.

"You set the table, Megsy," Virg directed, "while I produce the viands. That is easily done on the desert where we have to depend upon canned foods."

As she talked, she climbed up on a low step-ladder in the adjoining pantry and selected several cans. "Can you open them, Megsy, while I go to the cooling cellar, and skim some nice thick cream for us?" she inquired.

Margaret looked doubtfully at the can opener which Virg was handing to her, but she replied confidently enough. "Oh, I am sure that I can. I have often seen our Dinah wield that weapon."

"It's easy enough," Virg told her. "See, I'll do this one to show you how."

"Oh, I can do that, I am sure I can." Megsy declared, and so Virg taking the skimmer and a big bowl, went out the back door and descended to the cool walled-in cellar where the milk was kept.

Megsy found that opening a can was not as easy as it looked. "May I help?" a pleasant voice asked and there in the open door stood the good-looking young outlaw, sombrero in hand.

Virginia, who had at that moment appeared with the cream, noted that, with his hat off, Tom's face looked refined, even aristocratic, and she was more puzzled than ever concerning the identity of their new cow-boy guest.

"Oh Tom," Margaret looked up, her face flushed from the unusual exertion. "Some good fairy must have told you that we are in dire need of a strong arm. Do you know how to wield this weapon, commonly called a can opener?"

"Indeed, I do," was the quick reply. "I have often camped in the hills at home and so I am quite an expert at the culinary art."

Virginia made a mental note. Wherever Tom came from there also were hills. Hanging his sombrero on a rack near the door, Tom took the weapon and dexterously opened one can after another.

"This surely is a varied menu," he laughingly exclaimed when the task was done. "How many cans have you allowed for each boarder?"

Malcolm came in before Virg could reply, and after having washed at the pump on the back porch and rubbed his head well with the big rough towel that was daily renewed, he took from his pocket a

comb and looking into the small mirror, he made himself presentable.

He then went to his room for a moment's rest and when he was gone, Virg inquired. "By the way, Tom, how did you like our cow-boys?"

"First rate. They are fine lads," Tom said with enthusiasm, "but their lingo is so different from that which I am used to that at times I can hardly grasp their meaning."

"Point two," thought Virginia. "Tom hasn't been in the cattle country long else he would be familiar with the cow-boys' manner of speaking."

Oh, if one might ask questions—but the courtesy of the desert forbade it.

Tom proved a very valuable aid and in a short time Margaret was out on the back porch pulling the rope which rang a bell and called the other two cow-boys in for the noon repast.

One amusing thing happened which did not escape the watchful Virginia. Tom, eager to assume his new role of cow-boy, began eating in the manner approved in the best society, but, noting that Slim and Rusty Pete ate with their knives, a twinkle appeared in his blue eyes while he did likewise. He handled his knife, however, in a way which showed plainly that he was unused to wielding it in a manner so uncouth.

Virginia turned away to hide a smile. Of one thing she was convinced. This outlaw had a sense of humor.

Half an hour later when the dishes were washed and cleared away and the girls retired to their rooms for an afternoon siesta, Virginia confided, "Megsy, I have never before been so interested in a boy as I am in Tom, have you? Do you suppose we will ever find out who he really is?"

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE NEW COW-BOY.

WHEN the girls awakened from their siesta, arm in arm they sauntered down to the corral where they saw Tenderfoot Tom trying to ride a broncho, but without much success. He leaped to the ground when he beheld the girls and removing his hat, in a manner unknown to cow-boys, he held it while he talked. "Young ladies," he said, "do I look important? Slim and Rusty Pete have gone with your brother to some distant part of the range and may be away until the morrow and I, if you please, am the cow-boy in charge of V. M. Ranch and no longer merely a—."

He did not finish the sentence and Virg wondered if he had planned saying outlaw, but Margaret was finishing it for him by merrily adding, "can opener."

"Let me prove that I really am a cook," the lad exclaimed brightly. "Suppose you two damsels go for a canter and do not return until six o'clock, and then you shall see what you shall see."

Catching and saddling Star and Comrade took but a few moments and then the lad stood waving his sombrero to the girls as they rode away. Ten



minutes later when they had reached the top of the mesa trail, Margaret looked back. Her exclamation of surprise caused Virginia also to turn. They saw Tom with his gun over his shoulder riding away in the opposite direction. "What can that mean?" Margaret wondered. "Do you suppose that he wishes to be rid of us that he might leave the V. M. Ranch?"

"Well, if he wants to go, let him," Virginia replied. "We will ride over to the junction and ask Mrs. Wells if she knows someone who would like to cook for us. That is the part of our home work that Uncle Tex assumes when he is here. I never knew that dear old man to stay away from V. M. for two whole months before, and now it is nearly three. He often goes for six weeks or so. I believe that he likes to roam but he gets homesick after a time and comes back for a good long stay."

"Poor old man," Margaret said. "Perhaps he plans staying away until he thinks I am gone. The mere idea of being my guardian evidently frightened him."

Virginia smiled but her thought had reverted to Tom. "I can't believe that our new cow-boy is really deserting us, and yet it did seem strange for him to ride away as soon as we were gone. However, we will find out when we return. Here is where we dip down into the dry creek bottom. At this time of the year it is perfectly safe to ride along there. It's a short-cut to the Junction but woe to man or beast

who takes it in the spring for a sudden cloud burst in the mountains changes this creek into a raging torrent before the trail leading out of it could possibly be reached."

Margaret looked anxiously at the sky that was gleaming blue above the mountains, but not a sign of a cloud was to be seen.

Half an hour later, they reached the trail that led them again to the desert on the other side and there, near the Santa Fe tracks, stood a combination station, general store and dwelling. In it lived Mr. and Mrs. Wells and their small son, Danny.

When at their rap Mrs. Wells opened the door, she exclaimed:

"Virginia Davis, what is your brother thinking of to permit you to ride around alone these days? Doesn't he know there's an outlaw supposed to be hiding near here in the mountains? Folks say he is fierce looking, like a story book pirate. There's a posse over from Texas hunting for him and a reward offered for his capture dead or alive. He'll be caught soon, of course, but till he is, seems like you girls ought to stay pretty close to home."

Luckily at that moment Mrs. Wells was called into the store, which opened from her living-room, and so she did not see the look of concern and amazement in the faces of her guests. "But that outlaw can't be our Tom," Margaret protested. "He isn't fierce looking. He—" she said no more for their hostess was returning.

She shook her head when Virginia inquired if she could recommend someone who could cook for them. "Miss Headsley's gal might have liked the place only she's tuck another. She and Rattlesnake Jim got jined last week and they're homesteadin' a place now up her pa's way."

The girls refused a kindly given invitation to remain to supper and they were soon in the saddle cantering at top-speed toward V. M. Ranch. Virginia felt very anxious, she hardly knew why. If this posse was really searching for Tom, she ought to be glad if he had escaped, but it didn't seem a bit like to him to go without even saying goodbye. She just couldn't believe that he had done so, but, when they reached V. M., and no-one came to take their horses, with heavy hearts they walked up to the house from the corral.

Virg in the lead, opened the front door and then stood staring in amazement at what she saw within.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## A JOLLY SURPRISE.

"TOM!" Virginia's manner of uttering the name seemed almost like a cry of joy and the lad who was wearing a white apron chef-fashion, turned toward the open door with a pleasant smile of greeting. If he noted the surprised expression on the faces of the two girls, he did not attribute it to its real cause. He supposed that they naturally were surprised to behold the fine supper that was spread on the living-room table which had been drawing close to the grate where a cheerful log was burning.

"Oho! What a feast!" Margaret exclaimed hurriedly, to cover their all too evident amazement at finding the outlaw calmly preparing a meal when a posse from Texas was supposed to be searching for him. "Where did you get the young rabbits that you have fried such a crispy brown?"

"I took my gun as soon as you were gone," the lad told them, "and went a-hunting, and, as you well know, Miss Virginia, it takes only a short time in the sage to bag as many young rabbits as one may desire. Tomorrow, if we are still cooks of the V. M. Ranch, I will vary the menu by bringing in quail."

While they were eating Tom asked: "What news did you hear while you were away, or perhaps you didn't see anyone who had news to tell." He was looking at Virginia and his eyes seemed to hold an eager inquiry. What should she say? Ought she to tell him the truth and give him an opportunity to ride to the north where the mountains were wild, rugged and desolate and where he could hide with greater safety?"

"Yes, we did hear news," Virginia replied. "At the Junction we heard that a posse from Texas is searching for someone who is supposed to be hiding about here."

Then impulsively she leaned toward the lad and placed a hand on his arm as she said pleadingly, "if you were my brother I would suggest that you ride to the north where the mountains are nearly impenetrable and stay there in hiding until this search is over. I do wish that you would go, Tom, this very night."

The lad shook his head. "I can't go—not tonight, Miss Virginia," he said. "You two girls are all alone on V. M. Ranch and your brother trusts me to look after you. I will stay right where I am until your brother returns or until—well—until I am found."

When the repast had been cleared away the three young people sat about the fireplace watching the burning log. They talked little. The eastern girl felt strangely uneasy and every little while she would

glance at one of the uncurtained windows as though she expected to see a face peering in at them.

At last the clock chimed the hour of nine and Tom arose. "Miss Virginia, Miss Margaret," he said as he held out a hand to each, "I want to thank you for having been so kind and sisterly to me. Do not be concerned about me. I promise to ride north as soon as you are well protected. Goodnight."

The two girls lay awake for hours waiting for, they knew not what. It was nearly midnight before they slept. Half an hour later Margaret sat up suddenly and listened intently. Had she heard something, she wondered, and if so, what?

Again she heard the noise which she believed must have awakened her. Someone was trying to enter the house, of that she was sure. Springing up and throwing her bathrobe about her she ran into Virginia's room and shook her friend.

"What is it?" that girl asked, on the alert at once.

"Hark!" whispered Margaret. "Can't you hear someone at the kitchen door?"

The western girl listened, "I surely do," she replied, "but my dear Megsy, it must be someone who feels he has a right to come in, for he is not trying to be quiet and he is using a key."

"Do you suppose that it is your brother, Malcolm, returning?"

"Maybe," Virginia replied as she arose and slipped on her robe. "Whoever it is has opened the door

and has entered the kitchen. I'll light a candle and investigate."

"Oh, Virg! Please, please don't go out there alone! Can't we call Tom or someone?"

But it was too late for the girls could hear that whoever had entered the house was approaching Virginia's bedroom. Margaret clung to her friend. Even Virginia was puzzled, but the thing that gave her confidence was the fact that the intruder was not trying to be quiet. A moment later there came a tap on the door.

"Who is it?" the girl asked, and, with a sigh of relief, she recognized the voice that replied, "Miss Virginia, dearie. Don't be skeered. It's jest me a comin' home after all these weeks away. It's yo' old Uncle Tex, Miss Virginia, dearie."

With a cry of delight, the door was flung open and the girl embraced the kind old man who had trotted her on his knee when she was a baby and had granted her every whim, if he could, since she was grown.

"Oh, Uncle Tex, where have you been ever since you ran away just because you didn't want to take part in the 'play-actin'?" the girl exclaimed.

The old man told that he had been way up north on a sheep ranch. "But ah got wistful feelin's to see my little gal," he said, "and so ah's come back home. They're needin' help up thar and they didn't want me to leave but ah tol' them as how ah would send a younger man to take my place if ah could

find one." Then Uncle Tex scratched his head in a puzzled manner, for he had suddenly thought of something. "Miss Virginia, dearie," he said, "thar's a parcel of men camped in the dry creek bottom a mile below here. They stopped me, but they let me go quick. They're lookin' for an outlaw from Texas, and course they knew as ah wasn't him. Said they'd be up here in the mornin' and ask yo' fo' breakfast. Wall, good night, Miss Virginia, dearie. Ah's sure glad to be home."

When the old man was gone, Virginia began to dress hurriedly.

"What are you going to do?" Margaret inquired.

"Warn Tom!" was her reply. "Uncle Tex is here to protect us now and Tom must start for the north without an hour's delay."



## CHAPTER XXIX.

## TOM'S SPEEDY DEPARTURE.

"I WISH you would dress, Megsy," Virginia said. "I would like you to accompany me."

Ten minutes later Virginia opened the door very quietly that she might not attract the attention of the old cow-man and together the two girls stepped out into the gathering darkness.

"What a cold black night it is," Margaret said as she drew more closely about her the woollen scarf that she had thrown over her shoulders.

"Hark, what is that moaning sound?"

"It's the wind rising. I believe we are going to have a sand storm. Let's creep low that we may keep hidden among the mesquite bushes. The house may be watched."

This they did until they were sheltered by a rise of ground; then Virg said: "Take my hand now and we'll race for the bunk house."

Margaret felt her hand being firmly grasped and then she was fairly dragged along the trail toward the smaller adobe where the cow-boys had their quarters.

"Oh, Virg," the eastern girl said with sudden

terror, "Don't go so fast. We might step on a rattlesnake."

"No danger of that," the other responded. "This is February and the snakes are still asleep in their winter homes."

When they reached the bunkhouse Virginia darted to the side farthest from the dry creek and there she paused for breath.

A moment later she called at an open window, "Tom! Tom! Come out please, quickly."

Puzzled by this summons at so late an hour, the lad hastily dressed and opened the door.

"Miss Virginia! Miss Margaret! What does this mean?" he exclaimed as he joined the girls. "Why are you out at this hour and on a night so cold and blustery? Were you frightened? Has anything happened at the house?"

"No, Tom. That is—yes! Well, I will have to begin at the beginning," Virginia replied. Then she rapidly told of the coming of old Uncle Tex and of the posse that was camped in the dry creek bottom a mile below the ranch house.

Then placing her hand on the lad's arm, she pleaded, "Tom, we girls are well protected now that Uncle Tex has come and I beg of you ride to the north where you will be much safer than you are here."

There was no reply and Virginia wondered if the lad would refuse her request. Just then the moon appeared above Inspiration Peak, and the girls

saw that in the lad's face there was an expression of wistfulness, almost of sorrow. Impulsively he held out his hand. "Miss Virginia," he said, "thank you for your interest in me. I don't want to go. I am so happy here. It is the first bit of home life I have had in many a day. You girls have been so kind. If I had an own sister she could not be kinder. But there is no alternative, I suppose. You know this country better than I do, how shall I go?"

"I have thought it all out," Virginia replied. "I lay awake for hours planning what would be best for you to do, if you had to leave suddenly, and now that Uncle Tex has come, he has given me another idea. First of all I want you to ride to the north, following a trail which I will indicate, until you come to a group of white-washed buildings. That is the Wilson Sheep Ranch. Tell Mr. Wilson that you have been sent from the V. M. Ranch, as an old cattleman called Uncle Tex said that he was in need of help. There you will be absolutely safe, I am sure. Tom, will you go?"

"Yes, Virginia," was the reluctant reply and the girl noted, with a feeling of real pleasure, that for the first time the lad had said just "Virginia."

"Prepare what you need," she added hastily, "and I will make you a map of the trails you are to follow. Then to the girl who was shivering at her side: "Come Megsy, we will return to the ranch house."

Fifteen minutes later, Virginia arose from the

old desk at which she had been busily engaged. Margaret, who had been watching at the door, beckoned to her friend. "Tom is coming," she whispered.

Hurrying to the veranda, Virginia handed an envelope to the lad. "Take the trail due west until you reach the sand hills, then turn to the north," she said. "You ought to reach the Papago village early in the morning and my good friend Winona will gladly give you some breakfast. Good-bye, Tom. We will see you again."

It was this hope that the lad bore in his heart as he rode away into the darkness and increasing wind storm, and it was this hope which was to help him bear the hardships and loneliness of many a day to follow.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## A BATTLE OF WITS.

WHEN the girls went back into the house, Margaret exclaimed, "Pinch me, Virg, will you? I want to make sure that I am a flesh and blood person and not a character in a book. I never felt so strange and unreal before in all my life."

Virginia laughingly placed an arm about her friend's waist and hugged her hard. "Won't that do as well as a pinch?" she inquired. "You are real enough, dear. Hark! The clock is striking the midnight hour. Let us return to our beds. I want to get some sleep. I must be up at a very early hour, for, as you know, we are expecting company for breakfast.

"No, indeed, Megsy," Virginia replied. "You will be glad to learn that our culinary troubles are over." Then noting her friend's puzzled expression, she added gaily. "We now have with us the best cook on the desert. Uncle Tex has had charge of the 'chuck' wagon at all of the roundups hereabouts for many years and the cow-boys would rather have him as chef than either a Frenchman or Chinaman."

"Good! Then our problem of finding a cook is

solved," Megsy said. Ten minutes later all was quiet in the V. M. Ranch house, for the girls, truly weary, were soon asleep.

The sun was streaming into Virginia's room when there came a rap on the door. Springing up, the girl slipped on her robe as she called, "Who is it?"

"It's yo' Uncle Tex, Miss Virginia, dearie. Ah has breakfast a-started, but I thought yo' all was a-oversleepin' and maybe yo'd like me to call yo'."

"We'll be with you in a moment, Uncle Tex. Thank you for calling us," Virginia replied.

The girls were just emerging from their bedrooms when Margaret, glancing through one of the wide living-room windows, exclaimed, "Here come six horsemen. Are they your expected guests?"

"I suppose so," Virginia replied, and she was right. A few moments later six men of middle age and all of them with weather-bronzed faces appeared at the back door. The young hostess bade them welcome with a kindly dignity and they were soon seated about the long table at one end of the sunny kitchen. Uncle Tex was busily making the griddle cakes for which he was justly famous, while Margaret and Virginia assumed the role of waitresses.

"Don't your cow-boys have breakfast about this hour?" a keen-eyed man evidently the leader of the posse, inquired. "I understand that there's two as you've had a long time and a new one you call Tom."

Margaret glanced quickly at the face of her friend

and was glad to see that Virginia was mistress of the situation. "Yes, we have three cow-boys," she replied with indifference. "They left yesterday to ride the range."

This was the truth, for Tom had left just before midnight.

"Which way did they all go?" was the next question.

"I really don't know," was the calm reply. "It is not the custom of Lucky or Slim to tell me their plans for turning back the cattle."

"But this other fellow, the one you call Tom: perhaps you know which way he went," the man persisted.

"Yes, he rode toward the West," Virginia frankly replied, and then she added, "May I serve you to more cakes?"

"A cool one for her age," the leader of the posse thought. "Thanks," he said aloud, "I believe I will have a few more."

While he was eating the cakes he was trying to think of a question that he might ask the girl that would find her off her guard and perhaps obtain for him the information he desired.

Virginia was busily refilling the huge coffee cups which were used only by the cow-boys, when the leader of the posse asked in a casual manner:

"This ranch house is one of the oldest hereabouts, I understand. Have you any idea how long it's been standin', Miss Davis?"

Virginia paused a moment before replying, but she could see no possible trap in the query, and so she said:

"It was built by my grandfather. He came from the East in a prairie schooner when my dad was a boy of 7."

"Those were excitin' days," the man remarked with seeming indifference as he continued eating. "I suppose you've heard your pa tell many a time about the Indian raids they used to have every once in so often."

This had all happened so very long ago that Virginia was sure that the conversation was following a safe channel, and so she replied:

"Yes, I have heard dad tell that when he was a boy they were in constant dread of a raid at the full of the moon. Every month at that time some one's ranch house was attacked and of course grandfather never knew when it would be his turn to receive one of those most unwelcome visits."

"Must have been powerful uncomfortable for the women folk those days, never knowing when they might be scalped, but I suppose your granddad had an underground room where he could hide his family if he knew the Indians were coming."

This had been said in an off-hand manner, but instantly Virginia understood the meaning of the seemingly innocent conversation.

The leader of the posse believed that she had Tom hidden in the underground room which many



of the old ranches had in the days of frequent Indian raids. They were often some distance from the house, the entrance being well concealed.

Knowing, as she did, that Tom was many miles away, Virginia calmly replied:

"Yes, we have an underground room. Would you like to see it?"

The man looked at her keenly and then he decided that he must be on the wrong trail, for, if this girl really did have the supposed cow-boy Tom hidden in an underground room, she would not so willingly and frankly invite him to visit the place.

"No, Miss Davis," he replied, as he arose; "I've seen many of them and I suppose, architecturally speaking, they are all about the same. Guess we'd better be gettin' on. Thanks for the grub. Good day."

Five minutes later the two girls stood with their arms about each other, watching from a wide window as the men rode away and Virginia noticed that they were taking the trail toward the west. How she did hope that they would not turn north at the sandhills, and also that Tom had not been delayed.

She glanced at the clock, as she said:

"By now Tom ought to be safe in the Papago village."

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## WINONA, THE INDIAN MAIDEN.

LUCKILY for Tom's comfort, the storm which had threatened when he left V. M. Ranch was turned by a changing wind toward the south; and, when the chill grey of daylight came, he found that he had ridden many miles to the north and that he was slowly crossing a vast, wild broken upland, which was gradually ascending toward a range of mountains that looked grim, lonely and forbidding.

In those barren walls of rock, Virginia had told him that he would find the almost hidden entrance to the Papago Indian village.

No creature was in sight at that early hour save a low sailing hawk, and, now and then, a lizard, frightened by the horse's hoofs, darted across the trail. So near was it to the color of the sand that only by its quick flashing motion could it be discerned.

As Tom neared the seemingly impenetrable wall of rock, it was hard for him to believe that this was really a fortress surrounding a village of any kind. He was weary and hungry, but, try as he might, he could not find the entrance.



When the two riders appeared a pack of wolf-dogs made a mad rush at the stranger.

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(Virginia of V. M. Ranch)



Suddenly his horse snorted and stopped. Tom wondered what it had heard for surely there was nothing to see, but he was not long puzzled, for a second later a lean, shaggy pony, ridden by a small Indian boy, emerged from what seemed to be solid rock. Tom urged his horse forward and hailed the little fellow who, after looking at the stranger with startled eyes, seemed about to return by the way he had come. Then it was Tom remembered something. He had been told to say to the first Indian he met, "Virginia Davis sent me," which sentence, he had been assured would prove an open sesame that would win for him admittance and welcome.

Nor had he been misinformed, for, when the small Indian boy who was about to disappear, heard the name which Tom called, he smiled, showing two rows of gleaming white teeth, and then, silently beckoning he led the way through a crevice, so narrow that Tom no longer wondered that it had escaped his observation.

It gradually widened, however, into a canyon which at last opened into a huge bowl-shaped valley where the grass was green and where clumps of scarlet flowers were blossoming.

Scattering about were a dozen or more low adobe huts and in the midst of them in a large corral were many wiry Indian ponies.

When the two riders appeared a pack of wolf-dogs made a mad rush at the stranger, barking furi-

ously. However at a word of command from the small Indian boy, they slunk away, to Tom's secret relief. The lad had evidently assured them that the intruder was a friend and not a foe.

The Indian boy knew little English, but he led Tom to the most imposing of the adobe huts. There he paused and uttered a cry like that of some wild bird.

Tom gazed curiously at the open door which was festooned with dried red peppers. He wondered who would appear. He hoped and believed that it would be Winona, the Indian maiden, who was Virginia's friend, but instead a shriveled old Indian woman wrapped in a bright-colored blanket shuffled to the door and evidently asked the lad what he wished at the home of the chief.

Tom understood only one word in the lad's reply and that was "Winona." For answer the old woman silently pointed toward the nearest cliff. Tom, looking in that direction, saw a graceful Indian girl approaching and on her head she was balancing a very large red pottery jar which was almost brimming full of sparkling water from a mountain spring.

Whirling his pony, the little Indian had galloped toward the dusky maiden, who paused to listen to what he had to say with an eager interest.

Then, placing her water jar upon a large, flat rock, she approached the newcomer who had dis-

mounted, having first assured himself that the pack of wolf-like dogs was not in evidence.

To his surprise the Indian maiden spoke in the English language and, without the least embarrassment held out her slim, dark hand as she said, "Welcome, Virginia's friend. You have traveled far and are hungry. I am Winona and I will give you breakfast."

Tom thanked her and, as she was about to lift the jar again to her head, he said with his frank, friendly smile, "I ought to offer to carry that, but I fear I could not manage it as skilfully as you do. Since it is without handles, it must be a difficult feat."

Winona smiled up at him as they walked side by side; the Indian lad, whose name was Red Feather, having taken Tom's horse to the corral.

"Perhaps," she replied, "but we learn early and do not forget. Look yonder."

Tom's glance followed that of Winona and he saw a group of little Indian girls, the oldest not more than 10. They were coming from a mountain spring and each was balancing a water jar upon her head. The small girls gathered about gazing half shyly and half curiously at the newcomer, until Winona spoke a few words in a tone of gentle rebuke, then the little, wild, coyote-like creatures scattered and soon disappeared in different mud huts.

"What did you say to them, Winona?" Tom asked curiously.

The Indian girl's smile was almost merry. "That

it isn't manners to stare at company," was the reply. "For seven winters, as Virginia told you, I learned the white man's way, and now I have a little class and teach what I learned. Here we are at my home. My father awaits to welcome you."

Tom saw an old Indian squatted upon the mud porch, and about his jet-black hair was a band into which had been woven with garnet beads the emblem of the tribe.

"My father, Chief Grey Hawk, this is Tom, friend of Virginia." The bronzed, wrinkled face had a kindly expression as the old man replied in his own tongue, offering hospitality.

"Sit and rest and I will bring refreshment," Winona said as she went within, soon to return with steaming coffee and a hard cake made from Indian meal.

The chief having retired, Winona sat beside Tom on the adobe porch and asked many questions about Virginia.

An hour later Tom bade the Indian girl farewell, and with little Red Feather as guide, he again rode toward the north. As he looked ahead at the rugged, uninviting mountains, in his heart there was an impulse to whirl his horse about and gallop back to the V. M. Ranch, whatever the consequences, but instead he followed the lad who led the way across an ever rising sandy waste where there was no sign of a trail. Had there been one the frequent whirlwinds would have hidden it with sand.



Tom wondered if the Indian boy had the same unerring instinct that a bird seems to have in its flight. Once only did the small guide pause and listen. Tom, too, drew rein, but heard nothing, although it was evident that the Indian lad did. He was intently watching a sandhill nearby, around which, in another moment, there appeared a bunch of wild, shaggy ponies, but, upon seeing Tom and Red Feather, with a shrill whistle-like neighing, they whirled about and galloped in the other direction and were soon hidden in a cloud of sand.

The Indian lad looked back and his white teeth gleamed as he said, "Much pony-wild."

That was his first attempt at speaking the English language and would have surprised Tom greatly had he not recalled that Red Feather was probably a pupil in Winona's little class, and so, riding closer, he asked, "Is it far yet we go? Long way?"

The lad shook his head. He had understood. "One up, one down," was his curious reply. Tom decided that the little fellow meant that they would cross one more range of mountains and then descend into a valley, nor was he wrong, for they were soon climbing a clearly defined mountain trail and at last reached a high point from which Tom could see, far below them, a wide, fertile valley.

Red Feather drew rein and pointed. "Sheep," he said. "I got back." Not waiting for Tom to express his gratitude, and without a formal farewell, the Indian lad returned by the way he had come.

Tom, believing that the sheep ranch he sought lay in the valley below, started the descent.

As he neared the group of low, white-washed buildings, Tom felt in his heart a strange loneliness and a sense of homesickness for the V. M. Ranch.

After years of wandering, the few days he had spent there had meant so much to him, but it had been Virginia's wish that he seek refuge on this sheep ranch, and so he rode on, wondering what manner of welcome he would receive.

Mr. Wilson and his 18-year-old son, Harry, were mounted and apparently about to ride away from the big white-washed ranch house when they perceived the newcomer and drew rein to await him. They wondered who the visitor might be, as few riders passed that way, the sheep ranch being isolated and difficult of access.

When the lad was within hailing distance, Mr. Wilson, in his bluff, hearty manner, called:

"Welcome, stranger!"

Tom responded to the greeting and said:

"Mr. Wilson, I am from the V. M. Ranch. An old catleman, whom they call 'Uncle Tex,' brought word that you were in need of help and I have come to apply for a position."

"Good! We do indeed need help," was the hearty response. "Have you any knowledge of sheep?"

"None whatever," was the frank reply, "and before I accept a position with you, I would like to tell you just who I am."

"That is not at all necessary," Mr. Wilson replied, heartily. "Your honest face and manner are all the recommendations that you need. Your past, my boy, is past. Your present will be what you make it now." Then he added, "This is my son, Harry. What shall we call you?"

"Tom," was the simple reply.

"Tom," Mr. Wilson repeated, "you have come at a very opportune time. Harry and I were just setting out for the Red Canyon camp. Our herder there, Juan, reports that many sheep are being killed in his flock, but that alone he cannot watch them at all hours. Of course he must have sleep, and although I am really needed on the home ranch, I am so short of help that I was about to accompany Harry. Will you go in my place?"

"Gladly, sir," Tom replied.

"Then first come within and have refreshments and meet the Little Mother who makes home for us."

Mrs. Wilson welcomed the lad with the same kindness that her husband extended to him and led him at once to the big, comfortable kitchen where he was soon given a bountiful dinner, which he greatly appreciated.

An hour later, with Harry and on a fresh mount, Tom started again toward the north. The boys liked each other at once. Tom was soon asking many questions about sheep ranching, which the other lad seemed glad to answer.

Then, for a time, they rode on silently. Tom was

thinking how pleased Virginia would be if she could know of the kindly welcome he had received. How he wished that he could write to her.

“Can one send a letter from here to the V. M. Ranch?” he inquired.

“Yes,” Harry replied; “about once a month we send our mail to Red River Junction, which is thirty miles away. Little Francisco will go to town in about a week.”

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## A FIERCE WARRIOR.

A WEEK had passed and it had been an anxious one for Virginia and Margaret as they had no way of knowing whether or not Tom had managed to escape the posse that had been searching for him. True, they had one day ridden to the Junction and there they had learned from Mrs. Wells, the station master's wife, that the posse had returned to Texas, but whether they had captured the young outlaw or not the good woman could not tell.

One glorious day Margaret asked Virginia if she would like to go for a ride but the western girl wished to remain at home and suggested that Megsy go for a short canter by herself.

"You will be perfectly safe, dear," Virginia assured her. "Suppose you follow the trail over the mesa and toward the sand hills, then circle around them and come home again. That ride will make you good and hungry for the delicious something that I am going to bake. Our miners are to return tomorrow, and since Uncle Tex does not know how to make pies, Mrs. Mahoy offered to teach me this morning."

Half an hour later Margaret cantered away, feeling very brave indeed, as this was the first time she had started out on a desert trail all alone and unprotected. When she reached the mesa, she drew rein and looked about. Not a horseman was to be seen, only the gleaming white sand with here and there a mesquite brush, or a clump of wiry grass or a spot of flaming color where some hardy plant was blossoming.

Toward the north lay the desolate sandhills on which tall stalks of yucca stood like silent sentinels. Margaret decided to do as Virginia had suggested, gallop around the small group of hills and then, home again. How she did wish that Babs was with her, for well she knew that her eastern schoolmate would enjoy a canter on so glorious a morning. It wouldn't be long though before Babs would be coming. "Today is the first of March," Margaret was thinking. "April and May will soon pass and then it will be June and Barbara will come."

Margaret was nearing the first of the three isolated sand hills when she felt her saddle slipping. She dismounted to tighten the girth when suddenly she lifted her head and listened intently.

What had she heard? Perhaps nothing really, for well she knew that being timid, she was very imaginative. She fastened the girth securely and had one foot in a stirrup about to remount when again she heard the sound, and this time it was much nearer than before. Leaping to her saddle, she was

about to gallop away when she saw a band of horse-men coming around the nearest sand hill. Terrorized she whirled her pony's head toward the south and urged Star to his top speed.

She knew by the racing hoofbeats back of her that she was being pursued. Could she reach the V. M. Ranch before she was overtaken?

Virginia was proudly surveying the row of pies, which, with the help of Mrs. Mahoy, she had just made, when she heard the front door burst open and slam shut. Then, almost before she could turn around, a terrorized girl rushed into the kitchen, and seizing Virginia, clung to her wildly as she said, "Oh, Virg, I was almost captured by Indians. They came around the sand hills. The minute I saw them I galloped for home, but two of them pursued me. Do you suppose they are coming to raid the ranch as you said they used to do when your father was a boy?"

"No, no, Megsy, of course not," Virginia replied. "Tell me what did your Indian pursuers look like."

"One of them was a big fierce warrior, and—"

Just then there was a rap at the front door. "Oh! Oh! There they are now! Virg, you aren't going to let them in?"

"Megsy, my dear, the only Indians living near here are the friendly Papagoes. Please do not hold me so tight." The western girl had to fairly drag herself away from Margaret.

When the door was opened there on the porch

stood the Indian maiden, Winona, and by her side was little Red Feather.

Virginia was delighted and embraced her Indian friend just as she would have welcomed a white girl whom she loved and had not seen for a long time.

“Margaret,” she called, “come and meet my dear friend Winona, of whom I have so often spoken.”

Margaret approached, feeling rather overcome by the sudden change of emotions. She held out her hand to the Indian girl and said sincerely that she was indeed glad to meet Virginia’s friend. Then she smiled at the little fellow whom she had called a “fierce warrior.” About his straight black hair there was a band of green, in which, perched at a jaunty angle, was a bright red feather. The Indian boy’s white teeth gleamed as he said admiringly:

“Fast pony! Go zip!”

Luckily neither of the Papago visitors had suspected that Margaret had been frightened by their sudden appearance at the sand hills.

“Can’t you stay awhile, Winona?” Virginia asked.

“Not this time. Some other, perhaps. My father, Chief Grey Hawk, awaits me. We have buying to do in town, but I wanted to tell you the nice young man, your friend, he came and went again soon to the north. Red Feather showed him the way. He reached there safely.”

Virginia’s eyes glowed, and again taking the Indian girl’s hand, she exclaimed, “Oh, Winona, I am



so glad that you stopped to tell me. We were eager to know if Tom really found your village. It is so hidden that the entrance is hard to find."

When the farewells had been said and the two visitors had ridden away, Margaret went to the old writing desk, declaring that she was going to pen Babs a letter that would make the boarding school life seem dull and monotonous. Scarcely was the epistle finished and sealed, when Lucky called to say that he was riding to the Junction and would take the mail.

"Be sure to bring us back some letters," Virginia called merrily as the cow-boy, waving his sombrero, rode away.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## A SAND STORM.

"MARCH winds surely are blowing," Margaret sang out, as she and Virginia were hurled along at a merry pace from the "hen corral," the small fenced-in enclosure whither the girls had been to gather eggs.

When they reached the shelter of the kitchen, Virginia declared, "It's great fun to race with the wind back of one, but I wouldn't care to go far across the desert facing this gale. I suppose that it will blow now for days and days. It usually does in March. Sometimes it hurls the sand against our windows in terrific gusts and woe to the horesman who is caught out in a such a storm."

"What happens? Is he buried alive?" Margaret asked.

"No, not often that. Sometimes he turns and rides with the wind until it has abated. Let's get the darning basket, shall we? This is such a cozy time to sit by the fire and mend. I always enjoy it most when there is a storm outside, don't you?"

Fifteen minutes later the two girls were comfortably curled up in easy chairs in front of the wide

grate on which a mesquite root was cheerfully burning. Margaret, dropping her darning into her lap sat watching the flames.

"A penny for your thoughts," Virginia teased. Margaret looked up with a little laugh. "Virg," she said, "my thoughts had gone way back to the first chapter. I was thinking how I had rebelled when you wrote that I would have to leave boarding school and come out here to live on the desert. I was so sure that I was leaving happiness behind me and that I would be miserable ever after, but instead—" she paused.

"Have you been unhappy, dear, and are you hiding it in your heart?" Virginia asked anxiously.

"Unhappy?" Margaret lifted such a glowing face that Virginia felt that her question was answered before the next words were uttered. "I have never been so happy before in all my life. This is the first real home that I ever had. Mother died when I was so very young, and then father placed me in boarding school, and then he died. Of course I was happy at Vine Haven and Babs was like a dear sister, but Oh, Virginia, there's nothing like a comfortable, love-filled house for a home, is there? Of course I still love Babs, and now I have you, and Malcolm for a brother."

Margaret had returned her attention to the sock she was darning which chanced to belong to the lad she had just mentioned, and she smiled as she continued, "How nice Malcolm is. But isn't he much

more serious than most boys of eighteen? Is it because he has had so much responsibility since your father died?"

"Perhaps, and also because he is of a serious nature," Virginia replied, as she threaded a needle. "And yet there is lots of fun in Buddy. You haven't had an opportunity to become acquainted with him. He has been so occupied since you came. If he does return to V. M. Ranch tomorrow I do hope he plans staying at home for a while. He has been away now for two weeks."

"Whew-oo!" Margaret said with a shudder. "Virg, did you hear that gust of wind? It's blowing the sand, and how dark it is getting!"

Virginia glanced anxiously at the window. "I do hope Lucky will reach here before nightfall," she said. "However, he may remain all night at the Junction. That would be the wise thing to do."

"Hark!" Margaret exclaimed listening intently, "I'm sure I heard someone calling just then. Did you?"

They both listened but heard only the rush of the wind and sand.

However, a moment later, there came a rapping on the back door and both girls dropping their darning, hurried to see who the newcomer might be.

As they had really expected, it was the cow-boy who had ridden to the Junction for the mail.

"Lucky!" Virginia remonstrated, "you are covered with sand and your face is almost bleeding.

Why did you come out tonight? The mail was not so important."

"No, Miss Virginia, 'twant the mail that fetched me but the stock. Slim ain't here and I hadn't tol' Uncle Tex about the little sick heifer as I've got down in the hospital. I knew it would be dead by morning if I didn't come home to tend to it." As the long, lank cow-boy talked, he was taking the mail from the pouch and placing it on the kitchen table. At first he seemed puzzled, and then troubled about something. He turned the mailbag upside down and shook it.

"What's the matter, Lucky? Have you lost something?" Virg inquired.

"I'm afeared I have, Miss Virginia," the cow-boy replied. "I know as how I had five letters for V. M. Ranch, but now I don't count but four. One of 'em must have blowed away. I'm powerful sorry, Miss Virginia. It was a longish one and it was from Red Riverton, I just don't see where that letter can be."

The poor cow-boy was so distressed that Virginia assured him that the missive was of no great importance and that probably it would be found in the morning.

Then, returning to the living-room the girls drew their chairs close to the center table where Virginia had lighted the lamp with its cheerful crimson shade.

"Where did Lucky say the lost letter was from?"

Margaret asked as she slipped a gourd into the toe of one of Malcolm's socks. "I had never heard of the place before."

"Oh, I imagine it is a letter from some neighboring rancher to my brother," Virginia remarked as she took up her darning. "Red Riverton is in the northern part of the state, and—"

"Virg!" Margaret interrupted, "do you suppose that letter was from our Tom? Or rather I should say, your Tom, as he never seems conscious of my existence."

Virginia's eyes glowed and springing up she exclaimed, "I do believe that you may be right. I'll ask Uncle Tex the name of the nearest postoffice to the Wilson Sheep Ranch." Into the kitchen she skipped returning with a woe-begone expression. "You are right, and, Oh Megsy, isn't it dreadful? We have lost the very first letter that Tom ever wrote to us, for of course it must be blown far away. Just listen to that wind. It is traveling sixty miles an hour or more and by this time the letter will be far over the Mexican border. I am just sure we never will find it."

"It might have been caught on a thorny cactus," Margaret said, but neither of the girls had any real hope of finding the missive in which they were so interested.

During the night the wind subsided and the next day dawned gloriously still and sunny. The cowboy, Lucky, arose before daybreak and rode up to

the mesa, searching everywhere for the lost letter until the bell on the back porch of the ranch house called him to breakfast.

When he entered the kitchen, he looked so troubled that Virginia said with her friendly smile, "Don't you worry about that letter. If it doesn't turn up, I know who sent it, and I will write and explain that it was blown away in a sand storm."

After breakfast the two girls tramped over every bit of sand between the ranch house and the corals; then they mounted their ponies and rode over the trail toward the Junction, but not a gleam of white did they see.

"How the sand has changed!" Margaret exclaimed. "It is lying in billow-like waves. It isn't smooth, the way it was yesterday."

"That is how the three little sand hills were formed, I suppose," Virginia remarked. "Something must have been there, a giant cactus, perhaps around which the sand first gathered, and then, being held, other storms added to it until the mounds became quite sizable sand hills standing all alone on the desert, but these little waves have nothing to hold them and they will soon smooth out again."

At noon they gave up the search and returned for lunch. As they entered the house, Margaret suddenly exclaimed, "Why, Virginia, how could that letter have blown away? Lucky took the mail out of the pouch right here in the kitchen and before that the flap was buckled down."

"That's so," Virginia replied, "and yet he remembers having had it and I have looked in the pouch several times." Then, chancing to glance out of the window, she laughingly added, "You'd better hide, Margaret, for here comes your fierce warrior and he may be after your curly scalp."

Megsy took the teasing good naturedly and both girls went out on the veranda to see what message little Red Feather had for them.

Far on the mesa they saw a gray line of horse-men whom they knew were the Papagoes returning to their mountain encircled home. Probably Winona had sent the Indian boy down to the V. M.

As the little fellow rode up, he reached under his red saddle blanket and drew forth a long white envelope. This he handed to Virginia with a slip of brown wrapping paper on which Winona had written:

"Dear White Lily:

"Mrs. Wells sent this. Your cow-boy dropped it at the station. Your friend,  
WINONA."

"Oh thank you, Red Feather!" Virginia exclaimed, when she had read the message. "Tell Winona to come soon again and pay us a real visit."

The little Indian lad showed his white teeth in a wide smile but whether he understood or not the girls could not tell.



When he was gone, Virginia dragged Margaret into the living-room and whirled her about merrily. Then they sank down on the window seat and Virginia tore open the long white envelope.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## TWO LETTERS FROM TOM.

“A LETTER from an outlaw,” Margaret laughingly exclaimed as the two girls curled up on the window seat, one to read and the other to listen to their very first letter from Tom.

“Virginia, isn’t this the strangest thing you ever heard of?” Margaret added. “What would my primly and properly brought up friends in Vine Haven Seminary think if they knew that we were corresponding with a young man labeled an outlaw whose last name we do not even know?”

Virginia laughed. “I suppose your Miss Pickle would be frigid with horror, but luckily she knows nothing of your present misdemeanors and cannot make you go without dessert for a week for breaking a rule. Now for the letter:

“Dear Virginia and Margaret:

“Greetings from a sheep ranch. Virginia, when I was outlawed from your home, I felt that I was leaving the sunshine of the world behind me and I didn’t much care what happened, but you will be glad to know that my destination proved to be a real home

where I was kindly welcomed by a motherly woman, her big hearted, splendid husband and their son, Harry, who is just my age. I offered at once to tell them who I really am, but they would not permit me to do so. Luckily for me, Mr. Wilson was in great need of help and within an hour after my arrival, his son Harry and I started to ride to the Red Canyon Camp where the sheep herder, Juan, was alone with several hundred ewes.

“A very small Mexican boy with a very big name, it being Francisco Quintana Mendoza, is ranch rider. It is his duty to visit each of the four outlying camps, which he does on his brisk little burro, finding out the needs of each herder and then he returns to the main ranch house. It takes him a week to make the round trip. He had ridden in that morning with a message from Juan of Red Canon Camp. The flock was being nightly attacked by wild animals, and, try as he might, the herder had been unable to capture the invader.

“‘Of course even a sheep herder must sleep part of the time,’ Harry declared as we rode through a valley that was covered with dry grama grass. Close to the mountains we came to the herder’s hut, which consisted of one earth-roofed adobe room, a stove, two bunks, a rude table and bench were the only furnishings, while strings of dry red peppers were the decorations. Juan was farther up the valley with the flock, but toward sundown, he came driving the sheep into the sheltered corral. Harry at once

saw that something was wrong with the herder. The faithful shepherd had broken his arm and was enduring much pain, but he would not leave his flock until someone came to care for it. Harry skilfully bandaged the broken arm and then bade Juan ride at once to a physician in Red Riverton. He is to leave now as soon as he has his supper, which Harry is preparing; so I must end this letter that I may send it by Juan.

“Harry and I are going to take turns watching the flock. How I do hope that I will be able to catch the wolf or mountain lion that is killing the sheep. I would like to prove my gratitude to Mr. Wilson by some helpful deed.

“Virginia, how may I show my gratitude to you? Will you let me know? Your outlaw, Tom.”

“What an interesting letter!” Virginia exclaimed; “I am so glad that the Wilsons are being so kind to him.”

Several days later the girls were surprised to receive another letter from Tom. They were riding on the mesa trail when Slim came from town with the mail. There were several letters for each of them and so eager were they to read them that they dismounted and bidding their ponies return to the home ranch, the girls sat on the sun-warmed sand and looked over the mail.

“A letter from Babs!” Margaret exclaimed happily.

“And another from Tom, so soon!” Virginia said. “Which shall we read first?”

“Tom’s, of course,” Margaret replied, “Babs won’t mind waiting.” So Virg began to read aloud.

“Dear Virginia and Margaret: I have had such an exciting adventure and I want to tell you about it. Last night Harry permitted me to watch the flock, as he had done the night before, but without discovering the invader. In fact, when he came to the cabin to breakfast, he told me that nothing had happened to disturb the sheep, and yet, an hour later, when he drove the flock to the valley pasture we found that two of the best ewes had been killed on the far north side, so it was there that I determined to hide and watch. That part is nearest the Red Canyon which is a narrow gorge of red rock leading into the mountains.

“I crouched in the shelter of an overhanging ledge behind a scrub pine and waited. The hours dragged by but nothing happened. It must have been about midnight when I thought that I heard soft, stealthy footfalls as though made by padded feet. Too, the sheep nearest me became fidgety and stood up facing the canyon. The wind evidently had brought a scent to them that they feared.

“I arose, and leaning on one knee with my gun ready to fire, I watched the opening of the canyon intently, expecting to see a dark figure appear, or, cat-like eyes gleaming in the dark, but nothing hap-

pened. Suddenly something impelled me to look up, and it was well that I did, or I would not be writing this letter to you, for there on the jutting ledge, was a lion crouched to spring, not at the sheep, but at me. I whirled to shoot, but in that moment the creature leaped. By turning, however, I had changed my position and the lion leaped beyond me.

“Instantly it was upon me, however, but I had time to lift my gun, and it leaped against the muzzle. ‘What if the gun should fail me?’ I thought, but it didn’t, and the lion fell over.

“I sat down again to wait for dawn, feeling none too secure, and glancing often at the ledge over my head for where there is one mountain lion, there might be another, but nothing happened, and when day dawned, Harry rode over and found me sitting beside the largest dead lion, he said, that he had ever seen. The creature had torn the right sleeve almost out of my coat and my arm was scratched but the sheep were all there.

“I tell you, Virginia, it makes a chap feel that he is not entirely useless in this world when he can do something that really helps.

“We are back at the home ranch now; another herder, Josef Lopez, having ridden in from Red Riverton to take Juan’s place for two weeks. Little Francisco Quintano Mendoza is about to ride into town with the mail, so I will say good-bye now. How I do hope, when he returns, that he will have a

letter for me from you. Greetings from your out-law,  
"TOM."

Virg paused and gazed intently at the signature.

Margaret inquired:

"What do you see, Virg? Hieroglyphics that you find hard to decipher?"

"Well, it is something puzzling," the western girl declared. "I believe that Tom first signed another name to this letter, and then, remembering that his real name was to be kept a secret, known only to himself, he has carefully erased it, but even so there is a faint lining of letters perceptible. How I do wish that we could make them out, although, perhaps we ought not to pry into Tom's secret if he does not wish to share it with us."

"May I look at the signature?" Megsy asked. Virginia gave her the letter, and Margaret taking the sheet of paper held it up to the sun.

After gazing at it intently for several seconds, she uttered a squeal of excited delight. "Virginia," she announced, "I am just sure that I can make out the capital letter beginning the last name. See! It's a W, isn't it? There can be no mistake as to that."

Virginia also looked and although none of the others could be recognized, she too, was convinced that the last name began the letter her friend had mentioned.

Suddenly Margaret turned toward her, with eyes that glowed.

"Virginia Davis," she exclaimed excitedly "has it ever entered your thought even remotely that our Tom might be Peyton Wente, the lost brother of Babs?"

"Why no, dear. It never had," Virginia replied. "Do you suppose that it might be possible? And yet, if it were true, we wouldn't want to tell Babs that the brother whom she so adores is a fugitive from justice."

"No, we wouldn't," Margaret reluctantly admitted. Then, after a thoughtful moment, she added, "but I would like to know for our own sake, wouldn't you, Virg?"

"Yes, I would," the western girl agreed. "The more I know of Tom the more I am convinced that he belongs to a refined family, and I also believe there is a mistake about the mysterious something for which he is an outlaw from Texas."

"I know what let's do," Margaret exclaimed brightly, "let's ask Babs to send a photograph of her brother, telling her merely that many lads drift West, lured by the fascination of life on the desert, and that if her brother should happen to be among them, we would want to be able to recognize him."

"That will be a good plan," Virginia agreed. "Now, suppose you read the letter from Babs. I hope it isn't feeling offended because it has been kept waiting."



## CHAPTER XXXV.

## NEWS FROM SCHOOL.

VIRGINIA settled comfortably on the warm sand still holding the letter from Tom while Margaret eagerly opened the plump epistle from her best friend in the far away East.

"I just love to get these chatty letters from Babs," she prefaced and then read:

"Vine Haven Seminary,  
"March 15, 1922."

"Dearest Cowgirls:

"Megsy, you remember how prim and proper Miss Pickle was when you were here at school and how 'skeered' of her we girls always were. Well, some mysterious power is surely working a transformation. I told you about the Surprise Valentine party she gave for us and how we entertained young Prof. Pixley and thirteen of the boys from the Drexel Military Academy. Well, ever since that night Miss Piquin has been kindlier in her manner; she hasn't done her hair up quite so tight and she even attempted a joke in algebra class. We girls hardly dared laugh, however, but yesterday something hap-

pened to convince us that Miss Piqulin can be called the sour Miss Pickle no longer.

“It was her birthday and it was also mine. It being Saturday Miss Piqulin decided to celebrate and she invited her algebra class to spend the day in the city with her. Weren’t we excited though? You know our club, ‘The Lucky Thirteen,’ (we asked Jennie Clark to join when you left school that we might keep the same number), are all in that class. We decked up in our very best and looked pretty nice, so we thought, when we gathered in the lower corridor to await the coming of the school bus. Betsy Closson was the last down and she seemed excited about something. ‘Girls,’ she said, ‘watch Miss Martin’s office door.

“‘A strange young lady just went in there and she had on the prettiest spring suit. It’s the very latest style. I wonder who—’ Betsy said no more for the office door was opening. The strange young lady appeared with her back toward us, but suddenly she turned, and if it wasn’t our very own Miss Pickle. She had on the prettiest grey suit and a grey tulle hat trimmed with crushed pink roses.

“I’m afraid we stared our astonishment, but luckily the bus arrived just then and so we went out and climbed in. Miss Piqulin was with Patrick on the front seat but she smiled at us over her shoulder. We sat there in two rows as solemn as though we were at a funeral.

“‘Girls,’ Miss Pickle said, ‘have a happy time; laugh and chatter all you want to.’

“Megsy, did you ever suppose the day would dawn when Miss Pickle would say that? Well, anyway, she did, so we started to sing a school song when suddenly Betsy Closson held up one hand and said, ‘Hark! Don’t you hear bugles?’

“‘Look! Look!’ Jenny Clark was pointing back at the bend in the road. “There comes a carryall and it’s filled with boys from the Drexel Military Academy. Don’t they look nice in their dress uniforms?’

“‘That jolly young Professor Pixley is with them,’ Flora Wells added. Miss Piquin heard this and her cheeks became as pink as the roses on her hat. The mystery was solved. Miss Pickle is in love!

“Well, to make a long story short, the carryall dashed up and both vehicles stopped while greetings were exchanged. When Prof. Pixley heard that we were to spend the day in town, he asked us to join them at a theater party at two in the afternoon. Weren’t we girls excited and delighted, and what a fine time we did have! I sat next to such a nice boy and Virg, how pleased I was when he said that his home is in Arizona. His name is Benjamin Wilson. Have you ever heard of him?

“That was a whole lot of excitement for boarding school girls all in one day, wasn’t it Megsy? Nor was that all, for when I reached my room that

night, I found a birthday box from China. In it was a pale blue silk kimono embroidered with pink cherry blossoms and slippers to match. It was from my dear brother Peyton. He has never missed giving me something on my birthday. Now that I know where he is, I am so happy and content.

“Farewell for now. Your BABS.”

“Then after all our Tom isn’t Peyton Wente,” Margaret said as they started walking toward the V. M. Ranch.

“I’m disappointed,” Megsy continued. “I did hope your outlaw would turn out to be—well—somebody just ever so nice and of course even if he did run away from a very stern father, Peyton Wente must be nice, else how could he be my adorable Barbara’s brother?”

“That argument can’t be disputed.” Virginia said, then leaping to her feet she added: “Let’s go home, dear, I’m hungry as a lean coyote! How I do hope that Uncle Tex will have a fine dinner waiting for us.”

Upon reaching the ranch house the girls went at once to their rooms to prepare for the midday meal, but when the Chinese gongs rang, they sallied forth arm in arm and were confronted by a young giant of a lad.

“Malcolm Davis, are you home at last?” Virginia fairly flew at her dearly loved brother, and was caught in his arms. Then turning, the smiling

young man, held out his right hand to Margaret.

"I feel as though I ought to be introduced to my ward all over again," he said with his pleasant smile. "I have been away at the mines for so long that I have hardly had time to become acquainted with her. Has she been a dutiful ward?"

Virginia smiled at her friend as she replied, "Oh, Malcolm, you can't know what a comfort Margaret is to me. We two girls do have the nicest times together."

Then, when they were seated about the table, Slim having been detained at the corral and Lucky still being out on the range, Malcolm remarked, "Slim tells me that Tom is not here now. Did you have cause to dismiss him from our service, sister?"

"No, indeed, Buddie," was the earnest reply. "Tom proved to be as trustworthy as you believed that he would, but, for some reason, he seems to be a fugitive from justice as he told you. We advised him to go farther north, but he would not leave the V. M. until we girls were well protected. That very night Uncle Tex returned telling us that Mr. Wilson up Red Riverton way needed help on his sheep ranch and so we urged Tom to go. We have had two splendid letters from him. He seems to be enjoying his work up there and he likes the Wilson family just ever so much. Do you know them, Buddie?"

"Yes, indeed I do. I often stayed all night with the Wilsons when I was one of dad's range riders,

and when I had gone that far north in search of strayed cattle. Of course the cowmen and the sheep ranchers are supposed to be bitter enemies, but my theory is that there is room enough in our big state for all of us to live and let live. The Wilsons are the nicest kind of a family, Virg. Mrs. Wilson is a dear, mothering sort who reminds me of a hen with wide, warm wings that can always take one more chick in out of the cold. Dad thought very highly of Mr. Wilson, and then, there are two sons. One of them, Harry, is about my age and there is a younger chap. I think he is nearly sixteen. He was fonder of books than Hal and so they sent him East to school. I can't recall his name."

"Was it Benjamin?" Virginia asked.

"Yes, that's it. Benjy, his mother called him. I haven't ridden that far north for two years at least. However, I hope that I will get up that way some day. I like to keep in touch with such kindly neighbors."

Malcolm then told the girls about the progress made at the mine.

"I am very much encouraged with the output," he told Virginia, "but I am a rancher, not a miner, and so I asked Pat Mahoy to send for his former associates in Bisbee to assist him. I can trust Pat to look after our interests as he will his own. I will stay at home for a time and get acquainted with my ward and my sister."

"Oh brother, I am so glad, and some day will you

take us for a long, long ride? I am eager to have Margaret see more of our wonderful desert."

"That's a splendid suggestion," Malcolm said with enthusiasm. "We might even ride as far north as the Wilson Ranch."

Although Virginia's reply expressed her pleasure, it did not reveal to her brother how very much she did hope that plan would soon be carried out.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

## CAUGHT IN A TORRENT.

A MONTH had passed. The wild March winds had blown itself out. The spring rains had filled the usually dry creek with a rushing, raging torrent which could be forded by neither man nor beast. Then, when at last the sun shone out, the desert glistened, while here and there a clump of bright flowers gleamed. The sand had been washed from cactus and mesquite and there were fresh leaves on the cottonwood trees. Birds sang, and also there was a rejoicing in the hearts of the two girls who had been so long held prisoners by the inclement weather.

“Think of it!” Margaret said as she swept the veranda the first clear morning after the rains. “It is three weeks since any one has been for the mail. Do you suppose that it would be safe for us to cross the creek today and ride to the Junction?”

“Oh, I’m sure that it would,” Virginia replied. “There isn’t a cloud anywhere to be seen and isn’t the sky the shiniest, gleamingest blue?”

Half an hour later, when their morning tasks were finished, Virg hailed her brother, who was on



his way to the valley pasture to see what damage had been done to the mile square fence. "Buddy," she called, "is it safe for Margaret and me to ride to the Junction for the mail? There must be just stacks of it there waiting for us?"

The lad scanned the horizon and replied in the affirmative.

The two ponies, Star and Comrade had been in the corral so long that they were high-spirited and galloped across the hard, desert trail as though racing with each other..

Having reached the rocky creek bottom, where only a little water was trickling along, Virginia turned her pony toward the opposite bank where she expected to find the trail which they had always ascended but it had been washed away leaving a steep perpendicular cliff, up which they could not ride.

"What shall we do?" Margaret asked. "Is there no other way to reach the Junction?"

"Yes, there is another trail farther up the creek, but, to reach it we will have to ride between these high banks for about a mile. At this time of the year it is rather a risky thing to do, for if there should be a cloudburst in the mountains, we would find ourselves in a raging torrent, but since brother assured us that it is not going to rain, suppose we take the chance."

Margaret agreed and silently they rode along the creek bottom. On either side of them the banks rose

sheer and high. Virginia felt strangely troubled. She almost wished they had not taken the chance. They were within sight of the low banks, when Virginia suddenly drew rein and listened intently. Somewhere, up in the mountains ahead of them, she heard a sullen, roaring noise. What could it be? There was no wind and the sky was clear. Intuitively, however, the western girl knew that something was wrong.

"Megsy," she called, "ride as fast as you can." The creek bottom was covered with stones of all sizes and the eastern girl, frightened by Virginia's command, urged her horse to greater speed. The dull roaring in the mountains grew louder and louder. Then, there was a report like a crash of thunder.

Virginia was only two lengths from the low bank when a rush of water hurled past them. It had risen to the stirrups when Comrade with a frightened snort, started to climb the low bank. Virginia looked back, and to her dismay she saw that Star had reared and that Margaret was about to be thrown into the swirling ever-deepening torrent. Seizing Margaret's bridle, she called: "Let go of the rein, Megsy, and cling to Star's neck. It's your only chance."

She again scrambled up the low bank with Star in tow and not a minute too soon, for following the last booming noise in the mountains, a mad rushing

torrent was hurled down the creek, overflowing the low bank.

"That was a narrow escape," Virginia had just said when Mr. and Mrs. Wells and their young son, Davie, rushed out of the station house to see what had happend.

"It's the new Pine Canyon reservoir that's burst!" the excited man exclaimed, then he added, "Miss Virginia, you gals wasn't a ridin' along the creek bottom, was ye?" When Virg replied in the affirmative, he ejaculated, "Wall, I'll be jigger-switched. You sure had a narrow call, but if its mail as yer after there's a stack of it for ye."

Kind Mrs. Wells led the way indoors and gave each of the girls a cup of steaming coffee. As soon as the flood had passed, Malcolm and Slim, with anxious faces, appeared, and how relieved they were to find that the girls were safe. The cow-boy shouldered the bulging mail bag and they returned home by another trail.

Uncle Tex opened the ranch house door to admit them, and Virg felt his hand tremble in her clasp.

"Miss Virginia, dearie," he said in a quivering voice, "don't yo' be doin' reckless things any more. If yo'r wantin' the mail, send yo' old Uncle Tex. He'd ruther be swept away in a torrent than be livin' without ye."

The old man was almost overcome with emotion and the girl whom he had trotted on his knee as a baby, kissed him tenderly on his wrinkled leathery

cheek. "Dear Uncle Tex," she said. "I'm sorry we worried you all so much. We won't take chances again. Honest Injun;" and then in a higher tone, she added, "We're powerful hungry. Have you something nice for us?"

"That I have Miss Virginia dearie, an' ah'll open up a can of the preserved strawberries yo' all like so much."

The young people did justice to the good meal, and, when the last delicious strawberry had been eaten Virginia sprang up, quite her old self again as she said, "Now brother Malcolm, let's open the mail bag."

They went into the living-room and the young giant of a lad unbuckled the cover of the pouch and shook the letters and papers out on the library table. Margaret pounced upon one addressed in Bab's familiar scrawl. Although Virginia received several letters from girl friends who were away at school, there was not a line from Tom. She was surprised to realize how truly disappointed she was, and, not feeling in a mood to read chattery letters from girl friends just then, she picked up one of the papers, and, sitting on the sunny window seat she idly glanced it over. Margaret was about to read the letter from Babs, when an excited exclamation from her friend sent her hurrying to her side as she inquired. "What is it, Virg?" "What have you found in the paper?"

For answer the western girl sprang up and seizing

the astonished Margaret, she whirled her about as she exclaimed gaily. "I knew it. I knew it all the time."

"Knew what?" asked the mystified Megsy. For answer Virginia drew her friend down on the window seat and then read aloud an astonishing bit of news.

"WANTED, ONE TOM WENTWORTH."

"When I read that heading I was sure at once that it referred to our Tom," Virg said.

"And does it?" Megsy asked eagerly.

"Read along and decide for yourself," her friend replied and so Margaret bent her head over the sheet and read aloud:

"To all whom it may concern, and to the young man calling himself Tom Wentworth in particular, this article is addressed: Be it known that a Mexican, Miguel Lopez, on his death-bed confessed to having been guilty of a crime, the circumstantial evidence of which he cleverly turned upon an innocent bystander who has ever since (being unable to prove his innocence) been a fugitive from justice. Tom Wentworth, a young man of about eighteen is tall, slim, with wavy light brown hair and blue-grey eyes.

"When last heard of he was hiding in The Seven Peak Range just across the Mexican border in Arizona. Anyone reading this article who has knowledge of the whereabouts of the young man in ques-

tion, will confer a favor upon the state authorities of Texas if he or she will inform the same that he is no longer held guilty of the crime which was unjustly attributed to him."

"There!" Virginia exclaimed. "Now what do you think of that?"

"It surely must mean our Tom," Megsy began. Then she added excitedly, "Oh, Virg, I was right, wasn't I? Tom's last name does begin with W, but it is Wentworth and not Wente. However, it is curious, isn't it, that he and Babs have last names so near alike?"

Virginia nodded. "Now," she said, "the big question is, how shall we get this glorious news to Tom in the shortest possible time?"

"It surely can't be done tonight," Margaret, said as she lighted the lamp with its warm crimson shade, "for it is nearly dark." Then she added, "Isn't there some way to telephone to the Wilson Ranch?"

Virg shook her head. "No," she replied, "distances are so great here on the desert that the only telephone lines are those that have been erected by neighbors for their own private use. Our telephone connects us with the Dartley ranch and was put up merely for protection in case either of us might be in urgent need of assistance."

Then as she seated herself by the table, Virg said, "When Malcolm comes in we'll ask his advice. Oh, I am so happy about it! How I wish I might be with Tom when he hears the good news that I

might see his face glow when he realizes that he is no longer a fugitive from justice. But who is your letter from?"

"Another plump epistle from Babs!" Megsy replied. "Shall I read it to you?" Virg nodded in the affirmative and took up her sewing. Margaret unfolded the truly voluminous letter and began reading another chapter in the life of Babs at the Vine Haven Boarding School.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## AN APRIL FOOL ROMANCE.

Vine Haven Seminary,  
April 4, 1922.

Dearest Cowgirls:

You never could guess what has happened since I wrote you last and, since you are too far away for me to really enjoy mystifying you, I will tell you all about it.

Well, to begin at the beginning. You know there are certain girls in this school who have always wished that they could be members of "The Lucky 13," but, for various reasons, we have not wished to enlarge our membership nor include these particular girls, and so they formed a club of their own and called it "The Exclusive Three." Then, if you please, they actually told around that we had invited them to become members of our club, but that they had refused since some of our fathers were tradespeople, while all of their fathers are retired gentlemen

Of course, you know, that sort of snobbishness never impresses "The Lucky Thirteen." We took it all as a joke and were glad they were to have a club of their own, for we want everyone to be happy.



Poor Miss Piquilin happens to have the entire membership of these rival clubs in her algebra class, and, since the members of "The Exclusive Three" are not very studious, they often fail in their lessons. The consequence is that while Miss Piquilin is just dear to "The Lucky Thirteen," she is still Miss Pickle at her sourest to "The Exclusive Three." It seems that they decided to punish her by playing a practical joke on April Fools' Day. We found out about it in this way. I went down to the library one evening to get a reference book. I didn't turn on the light for I knew exactly where the book stood on the shelf. Just as I was reaching for it, I heard whispered voices in the portiere-covered alcove and I recognized Rose Hedge's voice. She was saying: "We'll get even with that sour Miss Pickle. She's in love with Professor Pixley at the Drexel Military Academy. As though he would even look at her!"

Then I heard Hattie Drew ask: "How shall we get even, Rose?" I did want to stay and hear the answer, but mother has taught me that it is as wrong to listen to a conversation not intended for my ears as it is to steal something that does not belong to me, and so, having found the book, I left the room without having made my presence known.

I told the members of "The Lucky Thirteen" that the girls in "The Exclusive Three" were plotting some April Fool mischief against poor Miss Piquilin and we all decided that it was a mean shame if those

spiteful girls succeeded in doing anything to shatter the budding romance.

We guessed this and surmised that, but, of course, we had no way of really knowing what those girls planned doing.

"Oh dear," said Betsy Clossen, "I do wish it were not dishonorable to listen. Don't you think that sometimes the end justifies the means?"

"Never!" Kittie Squires said so emphatically that we all jumped. Kittie seldom speaks but when she does, it's right to the point.

"Well, then, what shall we do?" Jennie Clark asked. "Miss Piquilin has been so kind to us, it doesn't seem right for us not to make an effort to save her romance from being shattered."

"Leave it to me!" Betsy Clossen said. "I'll find a way." When Betsy spoke in that tone of voice, we all knew she would accomplish whatever she set out to do. We were curious to know how she would go about it, but it was April the first before we found out.

We girls played all of the regulation jokes. the same ones that are played every year. We bought candy that had cotton inside of a delicious chocolate coating; we slipped into each other's closets and sewed up sleeves, but those things were tame compared to what happened during the two o'clock study hour.

Dora Wells had put a small green toad into Kittie Squire's desk. I will never forget the terrorized cry

that shrilled through the silence when that timid girl opened her desk and the equally frightened little frog, giving a leap for liberty, landed, first in Kit-tie's lap, and then out on the floor of the study hall. Instantly it was like bedlam let loose.

The girls, who couldn't see what wild animal was in their midst, imagined the worst, and scrambled up on their desks holding their skirts tight about them.

I laugh every time I think of the comical sight they made, and just at that moment the door opened and in came our principal, Mrs. Martin, and with her were the Reverend John Thornton and a very wealthy lady who was visiting our school, we heard afterwards, to see whether or not it was a proper place to send her niece who is related to nobility or some such.

Well, I wish you could have seen the expression on the face of dear Mrs. Martin when she beheld so many of the girls standing on their desks looking everywhere about as though they expected to see at least a huge rat.

"The Marchioness," as we afterwards dubbed her, stared through her lorgnette in amazed horror, but the Reverend John proved that he was really human for there was a twinkle in his eye when he spied the frog and picking it up, he dropped it out of an open window into the garden below.

Of course, as you know, the young ladies of Vine Haven are well trained in manners, and so, a sec-

ond later, we were all lined up on the floor making properly graceful courtesies, but afterwards we were told that "The Marchioness" decided not to send her niece to our school as she did not wish to have her drilled in "acrobatics." She evidently supposed that we were all doing our daily exercises in some outlandish American fashion. The young lady, we heard later, was sent to a convent in Paris. My, but we're glad she didn't come here if she is anything like her aunt.

But all this time none of us knew what Betsy Clossen was doing to save the romance of poor Miss Piquilin.

When we went to our algebra class we of "The Lucky Thirteen" held our heads high and looked daggers at "The Exclusive Three," who were whispering every time Miss Piquilin wrote on the board.

I glanced often at Betsy and I realized that her mind was not on algebra. Evidently she had not discovered what the enemy planned doing, but I had never known Betsy to fail in anything she undertook, and so I was sure that in due time she would unearth the desired information if it could be obtained in an honorable manner.

Nor was I wrong as we soon found out.

Becky Hensley was the only member of "The Exclusive Three" who did not appear happy. She seemed to have something on her mind that was making her miserable. Every little while she stared into space and when Miss Piquilin spoke to her

directly, she seemed to come back to the school room with a start. We just knew that the other two had used Becky as a cat's paw for their scheme, whatever it was.

Becky is really a nice girl, but she is easily led. Well, she failed completely on the test that morning, and Miss Piquilin, truly out of patience, and rightly so, commanded her to remain in that class room until she could hand in a perfect paper.

The poor girl was sobbing when the other pupils filed out and I was sure that in her upset state of mind, the child wouldn't be able to solve the simplest kind of a problem if she stayed in the class room all night.

Betsy Clossen, who was monitor that day, stayed to put things away and she told us afterwards that as soon as they were alone, Miss Piquilin looked very sorrowfully at the bent head of the sobbing girl. Then going to her, she said kindly, "Becky," don't you understand at all what I have been trying to teach you? Tell me! Don't be afraid. Perhaps I have not been as patient as I should have been. It all seems so simple to me, now, perhaps I forget that once it was difficult."

Becky looked up, seemingly surprised, and yet touched by the kind tone. "No, Miss Piquilin," she replied, "I really don't understand algebra at all.

"I was absent during the first part of the term, when—when mother died, and I guess I missed so much that I just can't catch up."

"Dear girl!" Miss Piquilin said tenderly, "Forgive me if I have been harsh. If you wish, I will stay during my rest period for half an hour and review what you have missed."

Becky's eyes glowed her gratitude. "Oh, Miss Piquilin, how kind you are!" she said. "Dad is so proud of me and I want to do well for his sake. I'm all he has, now."

"And so he shall be proud of you," Miss Piquilin declared. "Now dry your eyes, dear, and run out and play."

When our teacher was gone, Becky sat staring out of the window with such an unhappy expression; then, all of a sudden she put her head down on her arms and sobbed harder than before.

Betsy went over to her and said, "Dearie, don't cry now! Didn't Miss Piquilin excuse you?"

"Yes. Yes," the girl sobbed, "but, Oh Betsy, I wish I hadn't done it, especially now that she has been so kind. When I thought she was a mean, horrid old thing, it wasn't so hard to do. Oh dear! Oh dear!"

Then, all of her own free will, Becky told what she had done that she so deeply regretted. We were all horrified when Betsy told us half an hour later.

"We had a meeting of "The Lucky Thirteen" in my room to try to decide what was best to do and Becky Hensley was with us. You simply never could guess the April Fool's trick that Rose Hedge

of "The Exclusive Three" had planned, and so I will have to tell you.

"Becky Hensley, you don't mean to tell us that Rose Hedge actually wrote a letter to Professor Pixley and signed Miss Piquilin's name to it?"

Becky nodded. "I feel like a traitor telling you girls. Rose and Hattie will hate me and they'll make my life so miserable I'll just have to leave school."

Betsy Clossen slipped an arm about the younger girl. "Dear," she said, "your conscience would make you more miserable if you did not try to right the wrong you have done in the lives of these two good people, and, as for Rose and Hattie, I do not like to speak unkindly of anyone, but do you think they are the girls your mother would want you to choose for your best friends?"

"No, indeed not," Becky declared "and I do so want to get the letter back if I can." Then she looked eagerly at Betsy, as she asked, "Do you suppose that we could get it before it is delivered? I slipped out and put it in the street mail box before the nine-ten collection."

"Then it has been delivered by this time," Betsy replied. "What was in the letter?"

"Rose wrote it," Becky said, "and she wouldn't let me read it all, but this was the beginning, 'Dear Professor Pixley, thank you for asking me to marry you. I will be glad to do so next June,' and then it was signed 'from your loving Beatrice.' Rose

copied Miss Piquilin's signature from a letter she found in the waste basket."

"Oh, how dreadful!" we all said with horrified glances one at another.

"Miss Piquilin will be mortified when she finds out and of course it will completely shatter their romance."

Suddenly Betsy sprang up as she exclaimed, "Girls, it is moonlight, I suggest that three of us cut through the woods, go down to the Chocolate Shop and telephone to Professor Pixley and tell him that the letter he received was just an April Fool joke, and beg him never to tell our dear Miss Piquilin a word about it. I am sure he'll understand because he has such twinkling eyes."

Of course Betsy and Becky were two of the three to go, and Betsy chose me for the third. She and I have been chums, Megsy, since you left. Well, it was 8 o'clock and we knew we would have to hurry if we were to be back and in our beds before 9 o'clock, lights out, bell rang and so away we skipped.

It was dark in the woods but through the trees we could see the little creek gleaming in the moonlight. It was so pretty down there in the spring when the water is high.

Suddenly Betsy clutched my arm and pointed. Just ahead of us was a white object that looked for all the world like a ghost. Unfortunately for us, Becky screamed. A dark object appeared at the



side of the ghost and they hurried toward us. It was our Miss Piquilin and Professor Pixley. Scared as we were, we could see that both looked radiantly happy.

"Girls!" Miss Piquilin exclaimed with an attempt at severity, "What does this mean? Where are you going?"

"Don't scold them, Beatrice," the young professor intervened, "They probably came to see the moonlight on the water just as we did." Then he added, "Young ladies, you will have to look for another algebra teacher next term for your Miss Piquilin and I are to be married in June."

"Oh—oh—I am so glad!" Becky gasped, then seizing us each by the hand she fled back to the school with Betsy and me in tow.

We never knew what happened, but it didn't matter, for surely all is well that ends well. The very next day Alice Barker went home for the rest of the year, and so Becky Hensley was admitted to membership in "The Lucky 13," and wasn't she the happiest girl?

Goodbye, dear cow girls! You'll see me in two months and one week. Lovingly, your BABS.

"Wasn't that an interesting letter?" Virg said. "Good! Here comes Malcolm. Now we can tell him about Tom Wentworth."

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## A SUDDEN REALIZATION.

WHEN Malcolm entered the ranch living-room, his sister Virginia told him of the newspaper article which they had discovered. "That's great news!" he exclaimed, "We must convey it to the one most interested as soon as we can. Let me see. This is Tuesday. Perhaps by day after tomorrow I can arrange things here so that I can ride into Douglas. There I can telephone to the postoffice at Red River-ton and possibly get in touch with some one from the Wilson ranch."

"Oh brother! Two whole days! I could send a letter in less time than that," Virginia protested.

"But, of what use would a letter be if it were left lying in the postoffice for no one knows how long?" Margaret remarked. "Tom wrote, you remember, that their mail is not often called for."

"You are right," Virginia agreed as she returned to her sewing, "but I am so impatient to have Tom learn this glorious news."

"But Sis, why are you so sure that the article refers to our Tom?" Malcolm asked as he glanced from the paper which he had been reading.

"True, it does describe him and yet this same description would fit a dozen other fair young men. There is nothing unusual about it, and we have no reason to think that his last name is Wentworth, have we?"

"Oh, Virg, we never told Malcolm about that letter, did we?" Margaret exclaimed, and then, turning to the curious lad, she explained about the scratched out name, the first initial of which had been faintly visible.

"That does seem like almost conclusive evidence," Malcolm declared. "Well, I sincerely hope that you are right," he added, "for I liked Tom's frank, pleasant face the moment I saw him on Second Peak with you girls and even after he had declared that he was an outlaw. I still liked and trusted him."

"Brother," Virg said a few moments later as she dropped her sewing in her lap and looked up, "if Tom wishes to do so, may he return here and live with us? Before he left he told us that his week at V. M. had been the happiest bit of home life that he had had since his own mother died."

"Why, of course he may return if he wishes," Malcolm said in his hearty way. "I need someone to remain on the ranch when I am gone. Slim and Lucky are splendid fellows, but they do not care to assume the entire responsibility during my absence. Tom has had greater advantages, and, though he may not know as much about cattle, he is intelligent enough to learn in short order."

Then glancing at the clock, Malcolm added, "The hour is nine and if I am to do two days' work in one tomorrow that I may be free the next, I must hie me to my slumbers."

The lad bade them goodnight and started to leave the room, but he turned at the door and said, "The mountain road is in bad condition, otherwise I would ask you young ladies to accompany me to Douglas on Tuesday, but I fear it would not be safe for our Rollabout, and it is too far for Margaret to ride."

That maiden looked up eagerly. "Oh Malcolm, I do wish you would let me try riding Star into Douglas. If Virg can, surely I can also."

"Good!" the lad declared, "I shall indeed be glad to have your company."

The girls visited for half an hour longer, and then they too retired. Virginia felt strangely eager and excited.

The next day the two girls gave the ranch house a thorough cleaning. "Time goes much faster if one keeps every minute of it occupied," Virginia had declared, "and the spring cleaning is due, so let's go at it."

When Malcolm and Lucky came in for the noon repast, they laughed to see the two young housekeepers in all-over gingham aprons with pretty dust-caps on their heads, wielding broom and brush in so vigorous a manner.

"You boys will have to lunch alone today," Margaret told them, "for we girls must finish sweeping

the living-room and then while we dine, the dust will be settling."

The boys pretended to be greatly disappointed, but that night at dinner Virg and Margaret made up for their seeming neglect. They dressed in their prettiest house gowns and laughed and chattered, making the meal a merry one.

"How everything shines!" Malcolm declared as he looked at the glistening glass and silver. "You aren't expecting company, are you, Sis?"

"Of course not!" Virginia replied. "You know we always go over the house this way every spring and fall and many times in between."

Later in the evening when the cow-boy had gone to the bunkhouse and the three young people sat about the library table, the girls sewing, and Malcolm reading a cattleman's magazine, Virg suddenly exclaimed, "Just think Megsy, tomorrow Tom is to know the wonderful news. How I wish that he might be able to leave the sheep ranch right away and come back to us. I do hope that he has not entered into an agreement of any sort promising to remain with Mr. Wilson for a definite length of time."

The girl, happening to glance up just then, found the kind, gray eyes of her brother earnestly regarding her. "Do you care so much about Tom's coming, Virginia?" Malcolm asked. Then fearing that his question would be an embarrassing one for his sister to answer (for he had noted the sudden rose

in her cheeks) he hurriedly added, "I, too, will be glad to see Tom. I believe he will be free to come whenever he wishes."

After that Malcolm seemed to read on, apparently deeply absorbed in the articles in his magazine, but in reality he did not even see the printed page for he had suddenly realized that his sister was a little girl no longer, that indeed she was verging on young womanhood, and that some day, perhaps soon, she would care more for someone else than she did for him; she might even go somewhere else to live and leave him alone on the V. M. Ranch.

After about half an hour of vain endeavor to grasp the meaning of the scientific article, Malcolm closed the magazine and, looking up, caught an amused twinkle in Margaret's violet eyes and saw the dimple that he had always thought the prettiest thing a girl could possess.

Leaning over Megsy said merrily, "Malcolm, hand me that magazine! I am going to give you an oral exam in what you have read. You have been staring at one page for so long, I think you must have been memorizing the commas."

Malcolm laughed and said irrelevantly, "Thank you for darning my socks, Mistress Megsy. I see you have one now in your nimble fingers."

Then, rising, he added, "Nine o'clock, girls, and I want you to be ready for the saddle by five tomorrow morning. It's a long, hard ride to Douglas and back. Good night."

The girls soon heard him whistling in another part of the house.

A sudden glad hope had awakened in Malcolm's consciousness. Perhaps, just perhaps, he might not have to live alone after all.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## LONG DISTANCE PHONE MESSAGE.

THE sun was just appearing above a range of misty gray mountains far across the desert on the eastern horizon when the three young riders reached the top of the mesa trail and drew rein to watch while the glory of the dawn flamed the mountain peaks with rose and gold.

"A wonderful day has come and surely that is a good omen," Virginia said. "I feel as excited as though something very unusual were about to happen."

Virg was right! Something very unusual and unexpected was about to happen, but the nature of the something was very different from that which they anticipated.

It was nearly noon when Douglas was reached and Malcolm declared that the girls must go at once to the Inn and rest for several hours before making the return trip. Virg consented, declaring, however, that she wished to remain with Malcolm until she knew the result of his endeavor to get in touch with the Wilson Ranch, so together the three young people went to a long distance telephone. Red Riverton postoffice soon responded and the postmistress inquired, "Do you say that you wish to



communicate, if possible, with someone from the Wilson Ranch? Harry Wilson was in here about half an hour ago. He always hitches his horse in front of the postoffice. Hold the wire and I will see if it is still there."

While Malcolm held the receiver he rapidly told the girls what the communication had been.

"Oh, I do hope he hasn't gone," Virg said when Malcolm's attention was again called. "No, Harry Wilson hasn't left town. His horse is still in front. I will have a small boy stand there and tell Harry to see me when he returns. Where will he be able to get in touch with you?"

"Give the telephone number of the Inn," Virginia said when her brother turned to her for a suggestion.

This was done and the three young people hurried across the hall and sat in the queer little parlor to await a call from Harry.

Several times the phone rang but it was always for someone else.

At last the lone clerk at the desk went away and while he was gone the telephone rang imperatively several times in rapid succession. Malcolm sprang up and answered it, then he beckoned to the girls.

"It's for us," he told them; then to Harry, who was at the other end of the line, he said, "This is Malcolm Davis. Surely you remember me, don't you?"

"I stayed several days at your place two years ago

in September. I thought you'd remember that. We had great fun that day, didn't we? Yes, I do plan coming up north again some time, but today I called up to ask about our friend Tom. We are eager to get into communication with him as soon as possible.

"He isn't in town with you, is he? What? You don't know where he is? Has he left you? How long has he been gone? Over a week now? And no trace of him has been found? There hasn't been a storm, has there? Hum! That certainly is serious. You are sending out a searching party? When do they leave? I'll try to get there. Yes, indeed. I'll start for your place as soon as I possibly can. Goodbye."

"Malcolm, what is it? What has happened to Tom?" Virg asked her face suddenly paled with anxiety.

The lad led the girls back to the stiff little parlor.

"Tom hasn't deserted them, has he?" Virginia asked eagerly. "Oh, brother, I am so sure he hasn't proved untrustworthy."

Malcolm shook his head. "Not that," he said dismally. "I wish he had deserted of his own free will. Anything would be better than that which has happened. I'm terribly sorry now that I brought you girls with me into town, but, of course, you must know the truth. Instead of being untrustworthy, Tom may have risked his life to prove his worthiness of a trust. Harry says that his father had

five hundred very valuable Merinos coming by rail and they wanted to send their best man to meet them and drive the sheep in from the station, so they selected Tom, and as there was need of two drivers for so large a flock, little Francisco Quintano Mendoza accompanied him. Harry expected that about three days would be required to drive the flock through the mountain pass, stopping to graze and rest in the grassy valleys, but four and then five days passed and Tom did not return.

“Harry had not accompanied them because his father was away at the time and his mother alone on the ranch, but, at last he became so anxious that his mother urged him to ride to Red Riverton. There he found that the Merinos had arrived safely the week before and that Tom and the small Mexican boy had driven them away about noon on the day of their arrival, and that they had taken the beaten track toward the mountains where they had been lost to sight when they entered the Red Rock Pass.

“Harry then visited the sheriff and together with several men, they rode to the pass, but although they could see many hoof-prints in the soft mud where a spring kept the ground ever moist, they could not trace them on the desert where the winds often changed the surface of the sand.

“The sheriff and his men seemed to believe that Tom has turned rustler and that he had spirited away the valuable Merinos for his own gain, but

to this suggestion Harry would not listen. He knew Tom to be absolutely trustworthy, he declared, but since he had no better theory to offer, the men left him still unconvinced.

“The father has now returned and at his suggestion a large party of men are to start on a wide circling round-up of the entire sheep raising section of the state, hoping in that way to come upon some evidence that may at least solve the mystery if it does not enable them to recover the lost sheep. They need more assistance, Harry tells me, and so I promised to go to him as soon as I possibly can.”

“Oh dear! Oh dear!” Virg exclaimed, unshed tears in her eyes, “I shall never forgive myself for having sent Tom north if harm has befallen him.”

“My theory,” Malcolm continued, “is that a band of thieves, rustlers, knew that the very valuable shipment of Merinos was due, and that they were lying in wait in the pass for Tom and in some manner they have spirited away both the flock and the drivers. I believe that this will be proved true when we round up that entire section.”

Then looking at Virginia anxiously, he added, “I ought to go north from here, as I can follow the state road and reach Red Riverton at least half a day sooner than I could from home but I do not like to leave you girls unprotected. I wish—”

He stopped speaking and stared at someone who

had just entered the Inn. Then excusing himself, he hurried out.

The persons whom Malcolm had seen were no other than his good neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Dartley. They were surprised to see the young man and note his very evident excitement. Hurriedly Malcolm explained the situation. "Of course we will look after the girls," the kindly Mrs. Dartley declared, then, going into the prim little parlor, she held out both plump, freckled hands as she said sympathetically, "You poor dears! I just know how worried you are about your friend Tom, but you'll feel better, I'm sure, to have Malcolm help in the search. My husband and I drove in with the buggy. We'll be going back about 3 o'clock, and you can ride along with us as far as the sand hills. You won't mind going the rest of the way to V. M. alone, I know, because you ride it so often."

The girls assured Mrs. Dartley that they would be in their saddles at the hour of 3 and that good woman then bustled away to do the shopping that had brought her into town.

Malcolm returned and took his sister's hand. "Virginia," he said earnestly, "don't grieve yet, I honestly believe that we are going to find Tom somewhere, unharmed and being worthy of the trust that was placed in him."

After dining together at the Inn, Malcolm departed. When he was gone, the girls wandered out

to look about the stores and make a few purchases and pass away the time until 3.

That hour at last arrived and Virginia and Margaret were waiting in their saddles, when the Dartley equipage appeared from the stables. The girls were not very talkative and the kind woman, realizing that they were greatly worried about their friend whom she herself knew little, did not expect them to talk and the long journey was made almost in absolute silence.

When the sand hills were reached, it was growing dusk. "My, but you two girls must be all tired out," Mrs. Dartley said as her husband drew rein. "You've been in the saddle most all day, being as you left home before sunrise, but Uncle Tex will have a good supper waiting for you and then you get right into bed. Young folks like you two rest up easy and tomorrow you'll be as bright as ever. Telephone to me, Virgie, if you need anything or hear any news."

"Yes, I will Mrs. Dartley, and thank you for escorting us this far. Goodnight! Goodnight!"

Then the girls started down the trail toward V. M. through the gathering dusk. "How I do hope it will be a good night for our Tom," Virginia said, wherever he is." Then, as they dismounted at the home corral, she added, "Oh, if only I were a man so that I might join in the search."

Virginia little dreamed of the very important part she was to play even though she were only a girl.

## CHAPTER XL.

## A SURPRISING TELEGRAM.

THE next day the girls were restless; troubled by the uncertainty of it all, and anxiously waiting for news, although they had no way of hearing directly from Red Riverton. However, Malcolm had promised that he would telegraph Mr. Wells at the Junction if there were any definite news, then he could ride over and deliver it to the girls.

Uncle Tex, when told all that had happened, shook his head dismally. "Ah reckon as how Malcolm is right," he drawled, "Rustlers 'twas as took the herd, like's not, and if so, they've hushed up the drivers someway." Then noting the white face of the girl he so loved, he hastened to add, self-reproachingly, "Thar! Thar! Miss Virginia dearie, ah ought not to skeer yo' all that-a-way. Like's not yo' friend Tom is safe somewhar. Ah feels in ma bones as we'll heah news somehow today."

"So do I," Margaret declared, "and honestly, Virg, I believe that it will be good news."

Virginia smiled wanly, and then, springing up she exclaimed, "Let's ride over to The Junction, Megsy, and see if there is any mail for us. That will help to pass the time away."

They were soon in the saddle, but, before they had left the dooryard, Margaret pointed up toward the mesa trail. "Someone is coming at topspeed," she called over her shoulder. They drew rein and watched the rapidly approaching cloud of sand in the midst of which they soon saw a small horse and a boy rider.

"It's Wells," Virginia cried excitedly, urging forward to meet the newcomer. "I do believe that he has a telegram for us."

"He certainly has," Megsy agreed, as she rode alongside. "See! He is waving a yellow envelope. I am sure it is good news or Malcolm would not have wired it."

But a surprise awaited the girls. It was a telegram, to be sure, that the boy gave to Virginia, but it was not about Tom nor from Malcolm.

"Margaret Selover!" Virginia exclaimed, her eyes wide with surprise when she had read the message. "Who do you suppose this telegram is from?"

"Babs?" was the eager inquiry.

"Yes, Babs. The school has been closed because of an epidemic and her father is bringing her West at once. In fact, she will arrive at The Junction this afternoon at 2."

"Isn't that the most wonderful news?" Margaret cried. "Oh Virg! I can hardly believe it possible that I am to see my beloved roommate this very day."

"It is hard to believe but it must be true," her



friend laughingly replied; then she called to the little boy who was starting away on his Pinto. "Wait, I am going to give you something."

The something was a big shiny silver dollar. The boy's eyes were almost as big and bright when he clasped it in his small grimy hand. "Is it all fo' me Miss Virginia?" he asked, and, when assured that it was he ejaculated, "Gee Whilikers!" Then, quite forgetting his manners, he started the pony on a mad race for home but whirled around to shout, "Thank you, Miss Virginia!" from up on the mesa trail.

"If I only knew that all is well at the Wilson Ranch," Virginia said, "I would be so happy about Barbara's coming. Of course I am glad, as it is, to have her visit us, but it does seem as though I can't be really merry again until I know what has happened to Tom."

"I understand just how you feel, dear," Margaret replied as the two girls, having returned their horses to the corral, started walking arm in arm toward the house.

At dinner that noon Virginia asked Lucky if he would drive them to The Junction in their car, which Malcolm called the "Rollabout," to meet the 2:10 train. The kindly cow-boy assured them that he would do so. At 1 o'clock the two girls were in the big touring car with Lucky at the wheel, and at 2 o'clock were waiting at the Junction for the coming of the train.

"Maybe some word about Tom will arrive from Malcolm while we are here," Virginia said, as she and Margaret sat on the bench in front of the long, low building which was station, postoffice, general store and home of the Wells family.

There were no other buildings in sight, only desert and mountains with here and there, near the creek bed, a clump of cottonwood trees where a silver thread of water trickled from the rocks.

Suddenly Virginia sprang up and listened to the clicking of the instrument within. "A telegram," she said. "But Mr. Wells isn't here so how are we to know what it is?"

"There he is, down the track," Margaret told her, and Virginia, running forward, eagerly called, "Oho, Mr. Wells, isn't a telegram coming in?"

"Wall, now, like as not," the good man replied, as he bustled into the small ticket office. The girls, with tightly clasped hands, waited breathlessly. Would it be a message from Malcolm?

At last Mr. Wells peered smilingly at them, over his glasses. "Tain't nothin' unusual," he said. "Tain't nothin' unusual," he said. "Train's late. That's all, but it may make up time on the down grade. It usually does."

The girls sank back on the hard bench truly disappointed.

"Here comes the train!" little Wells sang out ten minutes later as he raced toward them. The roaring noise in the tunnel proved the truth of his

statement even before the long train drawn by two engines emerged into the sunlight.

The girls ran forward and eagerly scanned each coach.

"There she is! There's my Babs!" Megsy sang out as she saw her friend's face beaming through one of the windows. A moment later, when the train had come to a standstill, Barbara leaped to the platform, dropped suitcase and umbrella, and gave Megsy a good, hard, schoolgirl hug. Then she whirled about and held out both hands to Virginia as she bubbled, "I'm not going to wait to be introduced for I know you well and love you right this very minute." Then putting an arm about each she exclaimed happily, "I wonder if you dear cow-girls have any idea how excited and delighted I am to be here."

"We are just as excited, and I do believe even more delighted," Margaret declared. "We hardly know what to say or do."

"Well, first of all, please, lead me to a cafeteria," Babs implored. "A—a which?" Virginia inquired, truly puzzled, for the western girl had never before heard of such a place.

How Margaret laughed! "Babs," she said, "if you can find one on our desert, we will gladly pay for whatever you wish to order."

Barbara looked about, her eyes glowing. "Oh! Oh!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad—glad that there isn't one around. I've been just longing to get away

from civilization, and so, the wilder it is out here, the better I shall like it." They were starting toward the car, when kind Mrs. Wells hailed them from her kitchen door. "Virgie!" she called, "wouldn't you girls like a few of my sugar cookies? They're just fresh from the bakin'."

"Do my ears hear right?" Babs said dramatically, in a low undertone, while Virginia was gladly accepting the proffered treat. "Barbara," the western girl called, "you and Megsy come here. I want Mrs. Wells to meet the newest addition to the V. M. family and if we like, we may each have a glass of buttermilk."

"Wall, now, Miss Barbara, you've come to stay on the desert for a spell, hev yo'?" the motherly woman asked as she smiled down at the petite Babs. Then she added, "Yo' aren't much bigger than a pint o' honey, and I can easy tell by your sunny face that you're most as sweet."

Virginia took two of her sugar cookies over to the waiting Lucky who had spent most of the hour discussing desert topics with Mr. Wells.

Babs gazed at the lean, sinewy, sun-browned cowboy with unconcealed interest, and when she was introduced, she extended her small gloved hand saying eagerly, "Oh, Mr. Lucky, you do look like Bill Hart, don't you? He's the cow-boy I'm best acquainted with, but he always has a gun sticking out of his hip pocket or somewhere. I don't suppose that you carry a gun, do you?"

The cow-boy replied, with his good-natured drawl, that he usually "packed" along a couple or so, and to prove this statement, he produced two small guns. After a whispered hint from the fun-loving Margaret, Lucky threw an empty bottle high in the air and then, firing three times in rapid succession, he shattered the bottle, much to the delight of the newly arrived easterner.

Later, when Babs and Margaret were on the back seat of the "Rollabout" the former confided in a low voice, "I'm so glad to find that cow-boys are really like moving pictures. The girls in school said they knew I was going to be disappointed, but I'm not! Everything is just as I had expected, only heaps more so!"

Megsy reached out and took her friend's hand. "You'll love it here, Babsie," she said, "and, too, you will love Virginia and Malcolm.

"I care for my guardian now just as though he were my own brother," she added, trying to convince herself that her words were true. Then she leaned back, wondering where her guardian might be at that moment. Babs, too, was glad to be quiet that she might look about at the desert and mountains and rejoice that at last she was in the land of which she had so long dreamed.

Uncle Tex was waiting on the porch of the ranch house, and, if Babs wished to see a character who would have rejoiced the heart of a moving picture director, she surely did in the old man who had

been a cow-boy since those early days when the desert teemed with exciting adventure.

"Miss Virginia, dearie," he drawled, when he had carried in the luggage, "that thar Injun boy was here twict while yo' all's been gone."

Babs was eagerly listening. "Oh, was that little Red Feather, Megsy, that you wrote me about? I'm just wild to see him."

Virginia assented. "I wonder what he wanted," she said, then, as a sudden thought came to her, she caught Margaret's hand as she exclaimed, "Megsy, if Tom manages to escape from the rustlers, I do believe that he would go to the Indian village to hide. A stranger never could find the entrance in the wall of rocks unless he just happened to stumble upon it."

"I do hope you are right," Margaret replied. "I hope our Tom is safe with the Papagos."

"Girls," the mystified Barbara exclaimed, "who are you talking about? Has anything happened to the outlaw Tom about whom you wrote me?"

Virginia, remembering that she was hostess, and that her anxiety must not occupy her thought to the exclusion of the comfort of the newly arrived guest, then exclaimed, "Margaret will tell you all about it while you unpack. I am sure you will want to wash and rest a while before supper. You two are to room together just as you did at school. Meanwhile, I will hie me to the kitchen and assist Uncle Tex in preparing an early repast, for I am

sure that you are still hungry after so long a journey."

When the two eastern friends had entered Margaret's pleasant room Virginia did not go at once to the kitchen. Instead she took her brother's powerful glasses and looked long up the mesa trail, hoping to see the little Indian boy reappearing, but he did not come. At last, with a sigh, she turned toward the kitchen and her heart was heavy. "I wonder what message Winona has for me," she thought. "It must be important or she would not have sent twice."

## CHAPTER XLI.

## A HOPE RENEWED.

THAT evening as the three girls sat in front of the wide hearth on which a mesquite root was cheerily burning, they talked quietly together of all that had happened.

“Have you heard lately from your brother, Peyton?” Margaret asked.

Babs shook her head and there were sudden tears in her pretty blue eyes as she replied, “Oh, girls, I try to forget my great disappointment, but of course I must tell you about it. The cards that were sent to me from China, bearing only the initials P. W., were not from my darling brother after all. I had actually forgotten that I had an acquaintance with those same initials. Who do you suppose Megsy, that the cards were from?”

“Patty Warren, perhaps,” Margaret surmised. “Long ago I thought of her, merely because of the initials, but I supposed that she was still in school with you. Had she gone to China?”

“It would seem so,” Barbara replied. “I did know that Patty had left school because her widowed mother had married a minister to some outlandish foreign country, but, though the child was very fond of me, I never thought much about her, partly, be-



cause she was younger, and also, because I had you and Betsy Clossen for pals and two intimate friends are as many as I care for, but last week I had a letter from her postmarked London asking me if I had received the truly lovely Chinese kimona that she had sent for my birthday and giving me for the first time, a return address. Of course, I wrote her at once to express my appreciation, but I was heart broken. I cried for hours and hours that night, for I had been so sure that my dear lost brother was keeping in touch with me and somehow, even that little had been a comfort to me. Now, I am convinced that Peyton must be dead. He was so loving and tender-hearted even when he was a little fellow; he wouldn't let month after month pass if he were alive without assuring me that he still cares for me and that all is well with him."

"Poor Babs," Virg said as she reached out, with real sympathy, and placed a comforting hand over the petite one of their friend. "I know how my heart would ache if Malcolm were lost, but don't give up hope, dear. Such strange things happen in this world."

"I am going to keep on hoping," Barbara assured them. Then she added, "I have no way of knowing, of course, but I do believe that the object of my father's visit to the West is to try to find Peyton. You see, when the epidemic broke out in school, we packed and left that very day, all of us who had not been exposed, and when I reached home

father was not expecting me. I quietly entered the house and stood in the open library door. There he was, pacing up and down, an expression of grave anxiety on his face. I knew at once that he was greatly troubled about something, and for the first time since mother died there was a rush of tenderness in my heart for him. He looked so gray and sad and so all alone.

"Father!" I cried as I ran to him. He didn't seem surprised, someway; he just reached out his arms and held me close.

" 'Little daughter,' he said, 'I needed you and you came to me; just as your mother came once, when I needed her—but—she couldn't stay. If only that other Barbara had lived, all this would not have happened.' "

Then he bent his head down against mine and a hot tear fell on my cheek.

" 'Daddy,' I said; "I hadn't called him that since I was very little. 'Daddy, have you been so lonely? why didn't you send for me sooner?'"

"His reply was, 'I am going West on a very important mission tomorrow, little daughter, so don't unpack your trunk. I'll take you with me and you may visit your friends in Arizona.'

"He didn't tell me what his mission was, but I do know that he bought a ticket for some small town in Texas. He said that he would communicate with me in about a week. Oh, girls," Babs added with a sob in her voice, "I wish I'd been more loving to

my father. I ought to have known that his seeming sternness covered a most lonely heart with mother gone, and his only son wayward, or so daddy supposed."

Margaret was thinking rapidly. "A town in Texas. Tom had been wrongly accused somewhere down there. Could Tom be Peyton after all and had the father received some word that had led him to believe that he would find his boy?"

"Bedtime, girls," Virginia said as she arose. "We may need unusual strength tomorrow."

Megsy sought an early opportunity to be alone with Virginia the next morning and ask her if she thought it possible that Tom might be the missing Peyton, and that the father having received some inkling of the boys whereabouts, had come West to search for him.

Virginia looked up eagerly. "I hadn't thought of it, Megsy," she said, "but now that you suggest it, I do believe that it might be possible. For myself I do not care who Tom may be, all that I want to know is that he is safe and well somewhere, anywhere. Uncle Tex doesn't tell us what he really thinks, but I know. I have often heard the cowboys relate tales of rustlers who came upon a lonely herder, and if they wish to spirit away the sheep, they silence the only man who could witness against them." Then she added, "Babs is calling, dear. We would better not tell her that we think Tom may be

her lost brother, Peyton, for how cruel would be the disappointment were we wrong."

The morning hours dragged slowly to the girls who were eagerly awaiting the hoped-for reappearance of little Red Feather. "I am sure Winona will send him back," Virg said many, many times, but he did not come.

In the meantime Lucky had ridden to the Junction to get any mail that might have come on the early morning train, and about noon he returned with several letters for each of the girls. Virg, with an exclamation of eagerness, tore open an envelope addressed in her brother's familiar handwriting.

"Dear little sister," she read aloud.

"I know just how eagerly you are awaiting a message from me, but I have been unable to communicate with you before. When I reached the sheep ranch, Mr. Wilson asked me to ride with several Mexicans whom he trusted, up toward the Lost Canyon which is in the roughest and wildest part of the mountains to the north. It is seldom visited by herders as there is practically no vegetation there. However, Lopez Andero, one of the herders who has long been in Mr. Wilson's employ, stated that after a spring of heavy rains there was, in an almost inaccessible valley in the heart of the mountains, enough grass to last a herd of 500 Merinos for several weeks and that there could not a better place for rustlers to hide the flock. It was twilight when we started, Lopez in the lead. After a

long, wearisome ride we reached the entrance to the canyon an hour before daybreak.

"We wished to approach the valley under cover of the darkness so that we might come upon the rustlers without their knowledge, if indeed, they were there, but when at last we reached the summit overlooking the valley, to our great disappointment, in the grey light of the dawning day we saw only a lonely, bowl-shaped hollow, in which, as Lopez had said, grass was luxuriantly growing.

"We then rode back to the home ranch and found several other parties who had also returned with the same discouraging report. No trace of sheep or shepherds had been found.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wilson are greatly depressed, as indeed, are we all. The loss of the sheep, Mr. Wilson assures me, means little to him; he is so eager to find Tom. I am sorry, sister, that I have to write this news, knowing that it will sadden you and Margaret. I had hoped that today I would be able to return to V. M. accompanied by Tom and give you a real surprise, but now I do not expect to be able to do that, at least not soon. Send me a line to Red Riverton today if you can conveniently.

"Your brother,  
MALCOLM."

"Margaret," Virginia said when she had finished reading the letter, "I am going to ride to the Papago village today. Will you and Babs accompany me?"

## CHAPTER XLII.

## AN INDIAN VILLAGE.

WHEN Virginia calmly announced that she was going to ride to the Papago village, Margaret exclaimed in surprise: "But, Virg, dear, it's mid-day now and you have said that it is a long, hard ride. Would there be time for us to go and return all in one afternoon?"

The western girl shook her head. "I thought we might remain there over night," was her unexpected reply, "and come back tomorrow morning."

Bab's eyes were big and round.

"Virginia!" she ejaculated. "You don't mean that you would actually stay all night in an Indian village? Why, I wouldn't be able to sleep the least little bit, I am sure of that. All the time I would be listening, expecting to hear moccasined feet stealthily creeping toward my bedside, and—"

Virginia's laughter interrupted the speaker.

"Babsy dear, remember that this is the year 1922," she reminded, "and the Indians whom we are to visit are just as friendly as one could wish neighbors to be. Forty years ago, it is true, we would not have cared to remain all night with the red men of the desert, but, after all, they were unfriendly mere-

ly because they believed the white man to be treacherous, and were they not right? The pale face came and drove them from their happy hunting grounds with his superior cunning and the force of arms. My sympathy has always been largely with the Indians, but come, let's have an early lunch that we may soon be on our northward way."

"Ohee, I'm so excited," the petite Babs exclaimed, skipping gaily along between her two friends as they returned to the ranch house. "I never knew a moving picture story that was more thrilling than the one that we are living this very minute."

Virginia smiled down into the pretty, shining, up-turned face of the younger girl and she thought she had never seen any more charming. Barbara's fresh young joy in everything was a delight to the other girls, for even Margaret had become so used to cowboys, Indians and adventure that the first thrill of it all had somewhat subsided, although as she often declared, she would never cease to love the desert.

When Uncle Tex heard of the planned visit to the Papago village he shook his head, saying he "reckoned" as Malcolm wouldn't like them to ride so far alone, but the matter was settled to the old man's complete satisfaction when Lucky announced that he would be riding north to the Dartley Ranch in about an hour and that he would accompany the girls until they reached the wall of rock surrounding the Papago village.

The great old grandfather clock was striking the

hour of one when Lucky brought up from the corral three saddled ponies. Dixie had been chosen for Barbara that morning when she had been taken to the little fenced-in pasture and introduced to the small bunch of riding horses.

When Babs emerged from her room dressed for the first time in her cowgirl khaki outfit, she was bubbling with glee. "Oh, how I do wish Miss Piquilin and the girls at school could see me now," she exclaimed. "Wouldn't Betsy Clossen be envious, though."

Ten minutes later they were all in the saddle. "Goodbye, Uncle Tex!" they shouted in merry chorus and then they turned to follow Lucky who had already started up the mesa trail.

Margaret noticed that Virginia's eyes were troubled even though her lips were smiling at them.

"I wonder what adventure is awaiting us," Megsy said aloud. It was well, perhaps, that they did not know.

For two hours the girls, accompanied by Lucky, rode over the trail that led to the north. They had circled about the Dartley Ranch, and though Virginia had urged him to do so, the cow-boy would not permit them to go the remainder of the way alone and unprotected.

"But it's taking you miles out of your way, Lucky," Virginia protested. "You know I have never been afraid to ride alone, anywhere on all our wild desert."



"Ah know, Miss Virginia," Lucky replied, "but them times was sort of different like, and what's more, I promised Malcolm as how ah'd look out for you all. A little extra riding won't hurt me no-how."

Lucky was obstinate, and Virginia knew that it was useless for her to protest, but when, at last, they were within sight of the wall of rock, she drew rein as she said, "Lucky, surely you will permit us to ride this last mile alone, for you can see that there is nothing between here and the mountains to do us harm."

To Virginia's delight the cow-boy acquiesced and whirling his pony about he galloped away, waving his sombrero while the girls called after him, "Goodbye, Lucky, thank you for escorting us."

"Where is the Indian village, Virg?" Babs inquired as they neared the mountains. "I can't see a tepee anywhere about."

"Nor will you," the western girl told her. "My Indian friends are modern and live in adobe dwellings."

They rode slowly along the base of the sheer wall of rocks. "It's the strangest thing," Virg declared, "When I was here last with my brother, I made a mental note of a peculiar grouping of cactus plants that grew within a stone's throw of the almost hidden entrance, but now I do not see it anywhere."

Margaret had ridden ahead and she suddenly

whirled about and galloped back toward the others. She seemed excited about something.

“There’s an Indian in ambush just ahead of us,” she said as she glanced fearfully back over her shoulder. “He is crouched down behind a clump of cactus plants and I’m just sure that he’s been watching us!”

Barbara’s eyes were wide with terror. “Oh, Virg,” she exclaimed, “maybe the Papagoes have become suddenly hostile. Maybe they have gone on the warpath.”

Virginia’s laugh was natural and fearless. “It’s probably little Red Feather or one of his comrades,” she said as she urged Comrade forward, but the Indian, who rose as they approached, was not one whom she had ever seen before. However, she knew from the red mark on his forehead that he was a Papago, and so she said the few words that she had learned in their tongue, “Friends--come, see Winona.”

Silently and solemnly, the young Indian pointed toward the wall of rock beyond and back of him, and as they rode in that direction, Virginia soon saw the opening for which she had been searching.

They entered a narrow canyon, riding single file. “Girls!” Babs said, almost in a whisper, “I don’t feel real. I just can’t.” Then she added as she lifted her head to listen, “Hark! Virginia, what is that howling noise ahead of us? It sounds like a

pack of wolves. Hadn't we better go back? Won't they tear us to pieces?"

Virginia, until that moment had quite forgotten the pack of wolf-like Indian dogs that guarded the inner entrance of the narrow canyon. Perhaps it would be unwise for them to ride further unless they were accompanied by someone who could assure the dogs that they were friends. But at that very moment the problem was solved for, silhouetted against the light at the far end of the canyon, there appeared a slender Indian girl riding on a graceful, wiry pony.

"Good!" exclaimed Virg, "There's Winona, so now we may ride forward without fear."

Babs was so excited at the mere thought of meeting an Indian girl in an Indian village that the real object of their visit was somewhat lost to her thought. What would Winona look like she was wondering as they rode along single file. How queer that such a fine girl as Virginia Davis should have an Indian maiden as an intimate friend, and yet, it was true for she herself had heard Virg say how greatly she admired Winona.

A few moments later, when they had reached the inner entrance to the fertile bowl-like valley, Babs understood the charm of the Indian girl who so simply and sincerely had welcomed them to her home. Later, as Barbara and Margaret were riding side by side following the other two the impulsive Babs exclaimed, "Oh, Megsy, isn't she truly

beautiful? How her dark eyes glow and do see those thick shiny black braids that hang far below her waist. I just know that I am going to love her, too."

"She is beautiful," Margaret agreed, "but I think it is because there is something truly noble about her face. Virginia has told me that Winona longed to go away to school but she relinquished her desire that she might remain here and teach the little Papago children and help her own people."

"I wonder what school she would attend. I suppose the girls in Vine Haven would deem themselves too good to associate with her."

Margaret laughed gaily. "Too good to associate with a princess?" she inquired. "For that is what Winona really is; an Indian princess; the daughter of Chief Grey Hawk."

"Is she really?" Bab's eyes were wide and glowing. Then she added, as she glanced about at the small scattered adobe houses over the doors of which red peppers were festooned to dry in the sun, "Margaret, where do you suppose we are going to sleep? In one of those little huts? They look sort of skeery to me, but maybe that's because they are so different from houses with which I am familiar. I love this place, though. It's so wild and picturesque; exactly what one would wish an Indian village to be. Shouldn't you think so, Megsy?"

Margaret smiled at her impulsive chattering friend and nodded, "I'm ever so interested in it too," she

replied. "See yonder, in the shade of that big thorny cactus, two Indian women are squatted on the ground weaving baskets. I wish I might buy one. I always adored the Indian things Betsy Clossen had in our room at school"

Then, irrelevantly: "Oh Megsy, do you suppose that you will ever be my room-mate again back in dear old Vine Haven?"

"It's hard to tell, Babs. It all depends on what will happen. If I am able to go, then our darling Virg will go too."

"Ohee, how wonderful that would be!" the irrepressible Babs exclaimed.

"Let's gallop," Margaret suggested. "Virginia is beckoning to us."

## CHAPTER XLIII.

## THE LOST MESSAGE.

THE enthusiastic Margaret and the bubbling Babs galloped to the place where Winona and Virginia, having drawn rein, were awaiting them. Virg said:

“Winona has been telling me that she did not really have a message for us, that is, nothing that could concern Tom. Red Feather had chanced to capture a carrier pigeon which in some manner had been hurt, and had been unable to continue its flight and deliver the message that had been entrusted to its care.

Winona found a piece of brown paper wound about the bird's leg and securely fastened, but she was unable to read it. It was then that she recalled having heard me say that brother Malcolm and I had often sent messages to each other written in our secret code, and she wondered if the carrier pigeon might belong to us, and so she sent little Red Feather with the bit of brown paper. On his return that night he lost it; he cannot think where, and that is why Winona did not send him again to V. M. Brother and I never did possess a carrier pigeon, and so, of course, the message could not be for me.”

"A pigeon will only carry a message back to its own home place, isn't that so, Virginia?" Margaret inquired.

"I believe that it is," was the reply. Then turning to Winona she said: "I would like to see that bird. May I?"

"Red Feather has it secured somewhere, I think," the Indian girl replied. "There he comes now. We will ask him."

The little Indian boy with a jaunty red feather in the narrow band that bound his shiny black hair close to his head, was racing toward them while a small wolf-like puppy sprang up at him, barking joyfully.

The girls dismounted and Virginia held out her right hand; then turning to the interested Babs, she said: "Barbara, this is Red Feather of whom you have heard. Perhaps he will shake hands with you and Margaret."

The bright, black eyes were lifted inquiringly toward Winona, and then when she smilingly nodded at him, the little fellow extended one hand, his usually solemn little face twinkling merrily as though he were doing something unusual and amusing. This was evidently not the Papago manner of greeting. Babs wondered if they rubbed noses instead.

Winona spoke rapidly in a language strange to the Easterners and the small boy listened attentively. Then, as though complying with the Indian maiden's request, he led the ponies away to the

fenced-in corral which was in the middle of the bowl-like valley and was surrounded by the scattered adobe huts.

"Red Feather will return directly," Winona told them, "and then he will show us his pigeon."

And, indeed, almost before it seemed possible, the Indian boy was racing back, the puppy barking at his heels.

Then with the little fellow in the lead, they walked toward the wall of rock on the north side of the village. There, in a small, high hole in the cliff, Red Feather had the pigeon hidden. A strong cord tied about one leg was securely fastened to a peg which had been pounded into a nearby crevice.

Crushed corn had been scattered about within the bird's reach.

"The wing does not seem broken," Winona said. "I think the bird flew against the wall of rock, and for a time was stunned, do you say?"

She glanced inquiringly at Virginia, who nodded. "I wish we might find the message," Virg said. "If it were in Spanish I could read it."

"We may find it," Winona replied, "but come and I will give you your supper."

"My father, Chief Grey Hawk, is away hunting with several of our men," the Indian girl told them as they walked back to the village, "and so I am alone in my home. There is one wide bed and in it you three shall sleep unless you would rather have another house by yourselves."



"Oh, no, no," Babs heard herself saying eagerly. "Please, Winona, let us stay with you."

The Indian maiden smiled. This pretty, bubbling girl was so different from anyone whom she had met before. "I'd like to have you stay with me. This is my home. Let us go indoors."

Babs glanced about the one large room with eager curiosity. The house they had entered was more pretentious than the others in the village, but that was natural, she decided, since it was the home of the chief.

"Oh, Megsy, what adorable rugs are on this stone floor," Babs said softly, "and what warm, sunny colors are in the blankets on the walls, and oh, oh, if there isn't a fireplace! And that queer-shaped red pottery, and those blankets! I truly never saw anything more artistic than this room. Why, I don't feel skeery at all."

Winona had gone out of a rear door, and Virginia, who had followed her, soon called to the others. "If you want to see Winona's bake-oven, come out here."

The rounding-topped stone oven in the dooryard was evidently used by all the neighboring women, and one buxom young mother, with a papoose strapped to her back, was busy even then making corn cakes. Winona said something in her own tongue, and the young matron nodded. The Indian maiden seemed pleased with the reply she had received, and, going indoors, soon returned with a tray

of basket weave which she held out while the young matron heaped it high with corn cakes, steaming hot, that had just been taken from the oven.

“Oh, good! Are they for us?” Babs exclaimed. The young matron did not understand the words, but she beamed, being sure that whatever had been said was in appreciation of her cooking.

“Supper will be served sooner than I had expected,” Winona told them as they returned to the house. “Red Feather will bring milk. He and his older brother, Eagle Eyes, have gone to the upper end of the valley after the goats.”

“Here he is now!” Barbara exclaimed five minutes later as the little fellow appeared in the open door and set on the floor a large earthen jug that was nearly full of creamy milk.

Winona gave each of the girls a quaint red mug and Babs exclaimed, “Oh, Winona, you have such adorable things! I love this room of yours. I wish I had one just like it.”

The Indian maiden knew, that bubbling as Babs might be, she was also sincere and so she smilingly replied, “I, too, like it. I shall remain here for a time that I may teach my people, and then I want to go away and learn more in the world from which you have come.”

“We’ll all go together!” Virginia said as they sat about the fireplace, tailor-wise, on the floor, and ate the hot corn cakes and drank the creamy milk.

"Who knows? Queer things do happen!" Margaret commented meditatively.

Suddenly there was a cry of delight from Virginia. The others looked at her in surprise. She was pointing and they followed her gaze. Under a corner of the rug was caught a piece of brown paper and there was scrawly writing upon it.

"The message!" Virg exclaimed, springing up. "Oh, how I do hope I will be able to decipher it."

Virginia gazed intently for one silent moment at the bit of soiled brown paper, the others eagerly watching and waiting. Babs stood by the side of the western girl and peered at the scrawl which meant nothing to her. The others did likewise. "Can you read it, Virg?" Margaret inquired at last.

The girl addressed, shook her head. "Not easily," she said. "The writing is very difficult to make out. However, I am sure that the words are Spanish but the letters are so queerly made it may take me a long time to decipher it."

"Why not leave it until morning, Winona suggested. "It will soon be dark and I was going to invite you girls to climb with me to the top of the cliff trail to watch the sun set and the stars come out. Of course sunsets are beautiful anywhere on the desert, but I do feel that my own particular sunset view is a little more wonderful than any other that I have ever seen."

"Let us go then," Virginia said as she refolded

the bit of brown paper and placed it in her pocket, "since this message can have nothing whatever to do with us or our friends, I will postpone trying to decipher the very queer writing until there is more light. Lead on, Winona, and we will follow."

As the girls wandered through the Indian village, many unkempt little wolf-like children paused in their antics to gaze wide-eyed at the "white face" maidens whom they seemed to regard with awe as though they were beings supernatural.

"Poor little kiddies!" Babs said softly to Margaret, "I wonder if they really know how to play." Approaching the group nearest, she asked, "Little folks, do you know how to play 'Ring-around-a-rosie?'"

Of course they could not understand, and the smiling Winona came to be interpreter. Then the oldest of the children, looking eagerly at Babs, prattled something in her own tongue. "Will you play it with them, Sunny Day wishes to know."

"Indeed I will," Babs replied. "You three girls may climb the cliff trail and look at the sunset. I'd a heap rather romp with these solemn-eyed babies. I want to see them smile and hear them laugh."

And so Babs, in pantomime, explained the merry game and soon had those Papago children whirling about and shouting as gleefully as their leader could desire.

The other three girls often looked back as they climbed the cliff trail.

"Who is Barbara?" Winona asked. "I never heard you speak of her, Virginia."

"That is because Virginia never knew her," Margaret replied. "Babs was my roommate at boarding school. She is such a dear, lovable girl, but, though she seems happy-hearted, she is always grieving for her lost brother. She cares more for him than for any one else in the whole world, but it is so long since she has heard from him, she believes him to be dead."

"Poor girl!" Winona said as they paused on the summit. "I know what it is to be lonely, oh so alone," and the others glancing at the beautiful face of the Indian maiden suddenly realized how truly lonely she must be, for no one dwelling in the Papago village could understand her aspirations nor did they really appreciate what she was giving up that she might help them, but Virginia understood, and, slipping an arm about her friend she held her close, then she reached out a hand to Margaret, and so, together, they stood watching the glowing west until the colors had faded and the first star of evening twinkled faint and far.

"It will be a wonderful day tomorrow," Virginia said softly, little dreaming how truly wonderful the next day was to be.

## CHAPTER XLIV.

## THE MESSAGE FOUND.

THE three girls, tired indeed from the long day with its varied adventures, had found themselves weary enough to sleep in the wide bed to which Winona had referred, and even Babs had forgotten to lie awake and listen for moccasined feet to creep stealthily toward her beside as she had been so sure that she should.

The fact was that the Papagoes seemed very kindly folk, no longer thought of them as Indians, but rather as simple, trusting, child-like friends.

It was just before dawn when Virginia awoke with a start. She wondered what had awakened her, and then as the sunlight streamed in through the high opening that served as a window, she suddenly thought of something. The message! Now that it was daylight, she might be better able to decipher it. She could not understand why she was so curious concerning it, since it could have no direct bearing upon her interests or those of her friends.

Nevertheless, she was eager, and, so very quietly, not to awaken the sleeping girls, she rose and

dressed. Then she slipped out to the main living-room. Winona was in the rear door-yard baking corn cakes in the stone oven, and, after greeting her, Virginia seated herself on the adobe step of the front porch to enjoy the warmth of the sun, for the morning was crisply cold. Then opening the brown paper, she studied it intently. On another paper she carefully rewrote the forms of the scrawled letters hoping that would enable her to recognize them more readily, and it did, for when she had three words copied, their meaning came to her as though by inspiration. Her heart gave a sudden leap and she could scarcely keep from crying aloud to the other girls, but she decided to translate the entire message, if she could, before awakening them, for, after all, the first three words did not give the needed information. She read them again and again. Surely they were: "Los Boregos estan—the sheep are—" but try as she might she could not read the longer and more difficult words that followed.

Margaret and Barbara soon sauntered out upon the porch, but, so absorbed was Virginia that she did not know of their near presence. Suddenly she sprang up saying aloud, "We'll do it! We'll do it at once."

"Virginia Davis, you talking to yourself," Margaret teased, "Uncle Tex does that, but we excuse him because he is so very old."

"Don't joke now, Megsy dear," Virginia said

seriously, "I believe that we have come upon a matter of great importance. This message may contain information, if we can get at it, that may not only restore to Mr. Wilson his stolen sheep, but may also save the life of our dear friend Tom."

Then she showed them the three words she had copied and told them what she believed them to mean.

"But Virg, dear," Margaret said, "although I sincerely hope that the message does refer to the lost Merinos, you know that we are now in the sheep country and those three words might refer to any herd, shouldn't you say so?"

Virginia nodded. "You are right, Megsy. My eagerness to find Tom makes me grasp at straws. Nevertheless, I would never forgive myself if I found out, too late, that this message did really refer to Mr. Wilson's lost sheep, and so, I will repeat what you heard me saying to myself a minute ago. We'll do it and we'll do it at once."

"Suppose we have breakfast out here on the sunny porch," Winona said, appearing in the doorway with a basket weave tray heaped with golden corn bread hot from the oven. "Margaret, will you bring the mugs that we used last night, and Barbara, perhaps you will help her, as each one is filled with steaming coffee."

When the two girls had gone within, Winona turned to Virginia who stood intent again upon the message. Laying a slim, dark hand on the arm



of her friend, she asked, "Have you found the meaning yet, Virginia?"

Virg glanced up, her cheeks flushed with excitement, then, taking the hand of the Indian maiden, she held it close as she said, "Winona, maybe, just maybe, this message may tell us where to find Tom, and oh, how I do want to find him."

Tears sprang to her eyes as she added, "He is as dear to me as a brother, I think."

"Tom will be found," Winona said in a tone of quiet conviction.

Virginia looked up eagerly as she asked, "Winona, you say that as though you really knew."

The Indian girl looked out toward the cliffs and in her eyes there was an expression as though she were seeing a vision. "I cannot tell how I know," she said, then smiling directly into the eyes of her friend, she added, "But I know."

The good breakfast was rather hurriedly eaten, for when the girls had heard what Virginia had decided to do, they were all as much excited about it as she.

"You don't mean that we are really, truly, going to ride north to the Wilson Ranch," Margaret exclaimed, and Barbara equally amazed, added, "But Virg, you said one had to cross the mountains that we see towering above the cliff, did you not?"

The western girl nodded. "Aren't you afraid that we might take the wrong trail and be lost?" Babs continued.

"You will not be lost." It was Winona who had spoken in that calm quieting voice of hers, "for Red Feather and I will accompany you, and too, perhaps Eagle Eyes would like to go. The lads know every trail on these snow-capped mountains and they are always glad to have an adventure, whatever its nature."

An hour later, the four girls, with the two Indian boys in the lead, left the almost hidden entrance in the wall of the rock and started on the long hard ride toward the mountains far to the north.

Virginia had carefully fastened the bit of brown paper in a place of safety, and, as they rode along in single file, her eyes were often on the trail ahead of them, and her thoughts were with Tom. How happy they would all try to make him at the V. M. if only they could find him well and unharmed. She and Margaret would let him know that they cared for him like a brother and that they wished him to feel that their home was also his home.

With a sudden thought of what might have happened to him came to her, she closed her eyes and tried not to look at the suggested picture, for, all too well she knew how cruel rustlers could be when they wished to dispose of a herder who might some day be a witness against them.

"Isn't it time to stop for lunch?" she heard Margaret asking, and, so intently had she been thinking, that her friend's voice sounded far off.

"Yes, I believe it is high sun," she replied as she glanced at the heavens.

"Oh, here is an adorable spot by this mountain brook," Babs said as they alighted, but, though Virginia tried to listen to the chatter of her friends, her thoughts kept wandering away to Tom. Suddenly, glancing up, she found Winona's calm gaze upon her and a peace crept into her heart. The Indian girl had said, "Tom will be found."—But when and where?"

## CHAPTER XLV.

## ON A SHEEP RANCH.

IT was mid-afternoon when the long ever upward winding trail had been climbed, and, at last the girls and their guides drew rein on the very summit, where a few weeks before, little Red Feather had paused to point to the valley below, that Outlaw Tom might know which way to ride to reach the Wilson Ranch.

In the sunlight the distant group of white buildings could be plainly seen, and Virginia, noting that their Papago friends were preparing to return, held out her hand to Winona as she said, "Thank you. We will let you know as soon as we can. Good-bye."

Half an hour later the big, rambling white ranch house had been reached and the motherly Mrs. Wilson having observed from her sitting room window the approach of the strangers was out on the veran-do to greet them.

The girls leaped to the ground and Virginia going forward extended her hand as she said, "Mrs. Wilson, I am Virginia Davis and these are my friends from the East, Margaret Selover and Bar-

bara Blair Wente. My brother Malcolm is here, is he not?"

"Oh, Miss Virginia, you haven't heard from Tom, have you? We thought maybe, if he managed to escape, he would try to reach the V. M. Ranch, being as that was where he'd come from?"

"No, Mrs. Wilson. Tom did not come to the V. M., but I am very eager to speak with my brother. Is he here now?"

Virginia awaited the answer almost breathlessly, knowing that Malcolm might be away with one of the searching parties.

"Well now, I'm not real sure as to where he is right this minute," the good woman replied, "but here comes Lopez on his pinto. Like as not he can tell us. Anyhow he can take your horses down to the corral."

Mrs. Wilson beckoned to the young Mexican herder, and then, in reply to her inquiry, he told her that he believed Senor Davis was still at the bunk-house.

He would stop there and see.

"Do come right in," the motherly woman said, "and sit a spell in the comfortable rockers. You must be worn out, being so many hours in the saddle."

The eastern girls were indeed glad to avail themselves of the invitation, but Virginia could not rest. Oh, how she did wish Malcolm was there, for, if the message did tell where Tom was being held

in captivity, every moment might be of the greatest importance.

The doors opened and two young men entered. "Oh, brother! brother!" Virginia exclaimed, rushing toward the outstretched arms of Malcolm. "Please don't rebuke us for coming, for we have news that we thought, or at least I thought, might be of great importance." Then she inquired anxiously, "You have not heard from Tom?"

"No," he replied, and his tone implied that they had all but lost hope of hearing. Then he led his sister to the rocker, saying tenderly, "You are trembling like a leaf, Virginia. You are over tired and excited, but I understand."

Then he returned to welcome Margaret, who in turn introduced Babs.

"It's hard to remember formalities just now," he said. "You girls have become acquainted with Mrs. Wilson. Now permit me to introduce her older son, Harry." Then turning to Virginia he inquired: "Did you say, sister, that you have a message?"

Virginia hurriedly told the story of the captured carrier pigeon and she knew by the eyes of her listeners that they were all keenly interested. "May I see that bit of brown paper?" Harry asked as he held out his hand. "I will be able to read it."

Virginia gave him the small paper and then they all waited, scarcely breathing in their eagerness. The ticking of the big clock on the wall was the only sound that broke the stillness. Suddenly Harry leaped to his feet, his face tense, "Malcolm," he

cried, "there isn't a minute to lose! Quick! Call the herders, we'll need all the help we can get." Then, not realizing that he had not told the message to the girls, he left the house, and raced toward the bunkhouse, shouting to Lopez.

In half an hour many things had been hurriedly done. Malcolm, who had raced after Harry, returned as he had promised Virginia that he would tell the girls the meaning of the message. It was. "The sheep are south of Agua Prieta. Get them at once. Drive to Rebano Rancho. Do away with herders."

"Brother! Brother!" Virginia sobbed. "Are we too late? Have they done away with the herders? Oh, tell me, what do you think?"

"Harry and I believe that whoever is to get the sheep is still waiting for the carrier pigeon and if so Tom may as yet be unharmed. Our hope is, since the message has not been delivered, that we may reach Agua Prieta before the rustlers receive an order from some other source. If we do, we may be able to regain the sheep and save our friend Tom." Then he added, "I know you girls are terribly tired but I think that you would better return with us as our way to Agua Prieta leads so close to V. M. What do you think, Virginia?"

But Mrs. Wilson would not hear of it. "Do let the poor dears rest," she said. "They look as pale as lilies and wilted ones at that. I'm expecting my younger son, Benjy, to return home tomorrow and

on the day after he will gladly escort the girls to V. M."

Bab's heart gave a leap of joy when she heard that she was to see her friend Benjamin Wilson so soon again, and that evening, when the young men had ridden to the south, after having partaken of a bounteous repast, the girls and Mrs. Wilson sat in the big living-room where a log from the mountains was burning cheerily on the hearth.

Mrs. Wilson had been delighted to find that Babs knew her younger son and she wanted to know all about the Drexel Military Academy, and so, to pass the time and to permit Virginia to follow her own thoughts uninterrupted, Babs recounted to a delighted listener the story of her acquaintance, beginning with the surprise Valentine party, where she had first met Benjy, telling of the afternoon in town where she and the lad had seats next to each other at the theater, and ending with the April Fool letter and the happy culmination of the romance of their two instructors, Miss Piquilin and Professor Pixley.

The good woman beamed at the petite girl whom she thought almost too pretty and fragile "like a bit of porcelain that ought to be kept in a glass case," but aloud she said, "I'm real glad you know my boy. Like 'tis you're about his age."

"I'm fifteen," Barbara replied, "and Benjy told me that he would be sixteen this month I believe."

Mrs. Wilson nodded, "Yes, my boy is sixteen



now." Then she added with pride glowing in her kindly eyes, "I don't know where he took it from, but he sure has a great head for the learning. His teacher here in the Red Riverton school said that Benjy didn't no more than open his book before he knew his lesson, seemed like. His daddy and I had always had a hankering to have one son as would have a college education, and so, ever since our first boy came, we put away some money every month in the old tea pot with the nose broken off and we called it 'Hal's schoolin' fund,' but Harry didn't want a higher education and so he said, 'Send Benjy, mother. We'll make a scholar of him, but I'll stick to the sheep raisin'.' That's how it came that Benjy was sent East to school, but come now, it's late and I know you're all tired out. Being as there are three of you, how do you wish to divide?"

"We don't divide," Margaret laughingly replied. "We sleep all together," but there was one of the three who did not close her eyes until morning, and even then she did not sleep for over and over again her thought kept repeating, "If only I could help save Tom."

## CHAPTER XLVI.

## AN EARLY MORNING RIDE.

ON the morning following the departure of Harry, Malcolm and the herder, Lopez, the three girls awakened with different emotions in their hearts.

Virginia, who had not slept at all until nearly morning, awoke with a sense of great weariness and then, of even greater anxiety. It seemed strange to her that she should care so much for one whom she had known for so short a time. Perhaps it was because Tom had seemed to need someone to be loving and kind, he was so all alone in the world. Barbara on the contrary, awakened with a consciousness of a delighted anticipation, and springing up, she merrily exclaimed, "Oh, girls, just think! This is the day that you are to meet that nice boy, Benjy Wilson. I wonder at what hour he is to arrive?"

A surprise awaited them, for a little later, when the three girls trooped out to the kitchen from which a tempting odor of frying ham and eggs and steaming coffee was wafted, they saw not only the bustling, motherly woman, Mrs. Wilson, but standing near the range, warming his hands over the

heat, was a tall, comely youth, dressed in the uniform of a military academy.

He glanced up when he heard the girls entering, and it was evident by his expression that his mother had not told him of the near presence of his friend from the East.

Leaping forward with outstretched hands, his face alight, the lad exclaimed, "Am I seeing visions? Miss Barbara, this surely cannot be you! Only last week I rode over to your school to bid you good-bye and ask when you were coming to visit your friends in Arizona. I was told that all of the pupils had suddenly departed because of an epidemic, and I deeply regretted not being able to see you and make plans for re-meeting you here on the desert. I little supposed that you would be awaiting me in my very own home."

Barbara laughed. "I do not wonder that you are amazed," she declared. "We three girls have been living in a whirl of strange adventure of late, and honestly I am not at all sure that we are real. Perhaps, as you first suggested, we may be merely visions, and yet," she added doubtfully as she sniffed the appetizing odors, "can a vision be ravenously hungry for ham and eggs and coffee? But I am quite forgetting my manners. Doesn't it seem queer that I had to cross a continent to introduce Miss Virginia Davis to her neighbor, Mr. Benjamin Wilson? This other fair maid with violets for eyes and the dimples we all envy, is, or

rather was, my room-mate, Margaret Selover, of whom I have often told you."

Benjy acknowledged the introductions with a grace of manner which he had readily acquired during his year at the military academy, and his fond mother watching the lad, her eyes shining with pride, secretly congratulated herself that she and "pa" had gone without many little things that the money might be put in the broken nosed tea-pot for Benjy's education fund.

"Come to breakfast everybody," she now sang out in her pleasant, hearty way, "and do eat all that you possibly can for you have a long ride ahead of you.

"But there, Benjy doesn't know a word of all that has happened. He arrived just a few minutes ago and took me so by surprise that I've hardly got my breath to coming right yet. Do set down, all of you, and while you're eating, suppose you tell my boy just what has happened. Then, if he isn't too tired with traveling, I'm sure he'll be pleased to escort you back to V. M. ranch. Maybe though, he'd rather be waitin' till tomorrow."

Benjy's curiosity had been greatly aroused by this conversation which suggested interesting adventure of some kind, and so as soon as the young people were seated, he begged Babs to begin at the beginning and tell him all that had happened. As the story progressed the boy ceased eating and listened with eager intentness, and when Babs finished

speaking, Benjy exclaimed, "We will not wait until tomorrow. With mother's permission we will start south as soon as I can get into my riding togs."

It was still early morning when the four riders departed from the group of white ranch buildings, the girls having bidden the kind Mrs. Wilson an affectionate farewell, promising that, as soon as Tom had been found, they would return and spend a week on the sheep ranch.

The good woman looked with especial interest at the petite Barbara. "Poor little lamb," she was thinking with sudden tears in her eyes. "Such a mite of a girl to be all alone in the world without a mother and her poor brother lost. How proud that mother would have been had she lived, for a sweeter, prettier, little girl never trod this earth." Then, as she returned indoors, having waved for the last time to the riders, who were rapidly disappearing toward the mountains, she recalled the tall-good-looking lad whom she had seen riding close to Barbara's side.

"I wish my boy might be worthy of a girl like little Barbara," she thought. "A fine pair they would make and what happiness 'twould be for them both, and for me." Then as she happened to glance into the hat-rack mirror, she smiled a queer little smile with lips that were quivering. "Well, now, Matilda Wilson," she said aloud to her reflection, "if you aren't matchmaking, and it's a thing you've always said you wouldn't do, for it's just a interferin' in

other folks' lives. What's more, the two of them are only children, still a-going to school, but I guess mothers are all the same," she added as she went kitchenward, "first off we try to keep our boys just little fellows and then, when all of a sudden we see that they're nearly young men, we begin to choose a girl we want them to marry, but I'll try to welcome whoever they choose just as I'd want some other boy's mother to welcome a girl of mine if I had one." Then, as the good woman poured boiling water over a great pan full of dishes, her thoughts wandered, with equal pride, from Benjy to her older son, Harry. "Whoever gets Hal for a husband," she thought, "gets a man to lean on who won't prove a bending reed when trouble comes. He hasn't the nice, easy manner, maybe, that Benjy has, but Hal's honest and dependable. He never seemed to take to girls, though, so maybe he won't be one to marry, but, if he does, I wonder, now, who it will be. I hope someone I'd like real well, but if 't isn't, I won't let that make any difference. The dear boy will never know it, or the girl either."

It almost seemed as if the mother heart knew instinctively that Harry's choice was to be someone of whom she could not really approve, and yet, how could she know, for Harry had not even met the girl who was to be the one dearest of all in his life.

It was nearly noon when the four riders drew near the walled-in Papago village and Virginia suggested that they lunch with her dear

friend Winona, daughter of the Chief Grey Hawk.

Benjy was surprised to hear the proud declaration of friendship that this white girl made for a maiden of a race so unlike her own, but he said nothing, although he secretly wondered what manner of a maid Winona might be.

Virginia had no trouble whatever in finding the almost hidden entrance in the mountain wall that surrounded the Papago village for she had carefully noted its exact relation to the clump of cactus on her last visit, and so it was that Winona, happening to look up from the little class which she had gathered about her in the shade of the cliff, was both delighted and surprised to see the four riders approaching her, three of whom she knew. The lad she had never seen before.

Springing up, with the grace which was always in her every movement, she approached the girls who had dismounted with out-stretched hands, and Benjy was amazed to note the real beauty of the dusky maiden whose noble, intelligent face was aglow with the joy of so soon again seeing her beloved Virginia.

The lad acknowledged his introduction to the Indian girl and heard her saying, "You are the son of our nearest neighbor to the north? We Papagoes often climb to the summit of the mountain overlooking your ranch, Mr. Wilson, but we never descend on the other side. Our pilgrimages always take us to the south it would seem."

Then to Virginia she added, "It is high sun, so let us go to my home and lunch together." Turning to the group of unkempt little Indian girls who still seated on the ground, were watching wide-eyed she said something in their own tongue. The listeners concluded that it was a dismissal of the class for the morning, and they were right, for with joyful little cries such as delighted puppies might have uttered, the Indian children sprang up, then to the utter amazement of the watching lad, they surrounded the smiling Babs who, reaching out her arms, gathered in as many of them as she could.

Benjy's first impulse was to draw Barbara away from the embrace of the "Indian brats," but when that girl looked up at him, her pretty flower face aglow, he realized that they weren't wild, uncouth creatures to her, but just little children who loved her, and who were begging her in their own queer language to come and play with them "Ring-around-a-rosie."

When Winona had interpreted their request, Barbara exclaimed merrily, "The rest of you may prepare the lunch. Until it is ready I'll romp with the kiddies."

"May I play, too?" Benjy heard himself asking. Babs nodded gaily, and while the three older girls went indoors to prepare a simple meal of cold corn bread, milk and fruit, Barbara and Benjy skipped about with the shouting little Indian children in a circle which was ever widening because of the ar-



rival of other youngsters who were attracted from their dooryards by the sounds of merriment.

It was 2 o'clock before the riders, having said farewell to Vinona and to the children, left the walled-in village and started on the long four-hours' ride toward V. M.

Uncle Tex had seen them coming from afar. In fact, the old man had gone every hour to the window to look toward the sand hills to see if his Miss Virginia was returning. What joy there was in that faithful heart when the girl whom he so loved leaped from her horse and embraced him. "Dear Uncle Tex," she said, "is there any news? Tell me quickly what has happened? Did Malcolm come this way?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, Miss Virginia, dear, but Mister Malcolm didn't stop long, just to tell me what 'twas he planned doin' and bid me keep a watchout fo' yo'. Ah's been that anxious, Miss Virginia, dearie, but Ah'll feel better now, as yo' are home again." Then when the girls had gone to their rooms, the old man said in a low voice to Benjy; "Ah don' want to worry the gals more'n need be, but Ah's powerful anxious about Malcolm and yo' brother, for they has gone to a mighty dangerous place. Ah knows the rustlers over the border and thar's nothin' as they'd stop at, but shh! Here come the gals. Make out as we was talkin' of suthin' else." But Benjy's anxiety had been greatly increased and though he did talk of something else,

his thoughts were busily trying to contrive some way that he might leave the girls and ride to his brother's assistance.

The young people had reached the ranch in the late afternoon and half an hour after their arrival Uncle Tex suddenly realized that it was nearing the supper hour and that probably the newcomers would be very hungry after their long hard ride and so he departed kitchenward to prepare the evening repast.

He had been gone only a few minutes, however, when he returned to the living-room, and, one glance at his face convinced the young people he had something to tell them which had greatly excited him.

"Horsemen a comin'. Like 'tis three or four," he said. "Yo' all can see them from the kitchen porch Ah's a hopin' it's Malcolm and the rest, but they're too far off yet to be tellin'."

With rapidly beating hearts the young people hurried to the high porch at the back of the house and Virginia gazed through the powerful glasses.

"Uncle Tex is right," she said. "I see several dark objects moving in this direction and I am sure they are horsemen. Oh, how I do hope Tom is with them. I haven't slept, that is, not restfully, since I knew that Tom was lost."

Margaret, noting that Virginia looked pale and worn from days of anxiety, slipped an arm about her friend and led her back to the living-room.

"Let's rest," she said, while Uncle Tex prepares supper. I'm sure he would rather have us out of the kitchen."

"I'll stay and help!" Benjy told them. "I'm a fine cook, if I do say it. I've had a lot of experience when in camp with the herders."

The truth was that Benjy was eager to be alone with the old man that he might learn from him what he really thought about the approach of the riders.

When the girls were gone, the boy closed the door very softly that it might not attract their attention nor arouse their curiosity, then going to the range where the old man was replenishing the fire he asked, "Uncle Tex, did you think you saw four horsemen?"

The old man shook his head. "No, Mista Benjy. I don't honest believe I did. Maybe 'twas though, and maybe 'twasn't. Wall, we'll soon know, for if 'tis Malcolm, he'll be here 'bout as soon as we have supper ready."

Never was a half hour passed in greater anxiety, but even when supper was ready and waiting the horsemen did not appear.

"Perhaps after all they were bound for the Slater Ranch," Virginia said.

Disappointed and with a feeling of depression the young people gathered about the table when suddenly they heard a shouting without, and in another moment the front door burst open.

## CHAPTER XLVII.

## APPROACHING HORSEMEN.

VIRGINIA leaped forward with a cry of joy and was caught in her brother's close embrace. Harry followed, but though they all gazed eagerly back of these two, hoping to see another lad coming in from the gathering darkness, none appeared. Hal was closing the door, and so, of course, there was no one to come.

"Oh, brother," Virginia exclaimed, "you didn't find Tom. Tell me quickly what has happened?"

"That I will," was the reply, "but since Harry and I are almost famished, may I tell the story while we are at supper?"

A few moments later, when they were gathered about the table, Uncle Tex standing near, Malcolm related their experiences.

"We followed the directions in the message taken from the carrier pigeon, and reached the mountain pass south of Agua Prieta where we expected to find the sheep. Lopez knows several Mexicans living in Agua Prieta; in fact, he has relatives there, and they gladly joined us when we told them what the reward would be if we could regain the lost

Merinos and save our friend, Tom. It was nearing nightfall when we ascended a mountain on foot to a point where we could look over into the pass. There, to our great delight, we beheld the lost flock. Two Mexicans, whom Lopez recognized as well known rustlers, were seated by a camp fire close to a jutting boulder near the entrance of the pass. Lopez offered to creep as close as he could to them and report their conversation. This he did while we waited at the outer entrance, our guns drawn, for well we knew that if Lopez made the slightest sound, or in any way betrayed his near presence, he would need our immediate assistance. But luckily the two rustlers were so engrossed with their own grievances that they were not on the outlook for spies.

“After a time Lopez crept back and beckoned us to follow him, which we did.

“He led us some distance away, where in a cave-like shelter, he told us what he had heard. Our friend Tom, he said, was alive unless he had starved. The sheep were all there and the men were impatiently awaiting the carrier pigeon which was to bring them further orders.

“‘But Tom?’ I said. ‘Tell us where he is that we may go at once to his assistance.’ Lopez looked troubled. Then he told us that our friend had been practically buried alive. That is, he had been imprisoned in an adobe hut and without food. The boy Francesco Quintano Mendoza was with him. ‘Tom must have been in that tomb for over a

week,' I said, 'and if he has been without food all that time of course he is dead; but let us go to him at once.'

"Lopez, it seemed, did not know the location of the adobe hut. However, one of the men from Agua Prieta did know, and he led us to the place which was not far distant. My heart was heavy and sad as we approached that lonely crumbling old adobe hut, wooden windows and doors of which were fastened with iron bars. I was sure we would find that Tom and the faithful little Mexican boy had starved, but, as we neared, Lopez uttered an exclamation, pointing to a hole near the ground which had evidently been made by the prisoners. It was small, but Lopez managed to creep through and enter the hut. He soon reappeared assuring us that it was empty. This was indeed good news and we at once returned to Agua Prieta where we were to spend the night. There we were informed that a young man answering Tom's description and a small Mexican boy had left the day before on foot and had gone toward the north. Harry and I rode away from the Mexican village early this morning, Lopez having remained to get possession of the flock if he could. Hal and I did not ride directly to V. M. but instead we followed many side trails, hoping that we would come upon Tom, but when nightfall was approaching, we decided to come home and start out again tomorrow morning."

"And I will accompany you," Benjy said eagerly.

## CHAPTER XLVIII.

## TOM'S RETURN.

EVERYONE in the ranch house the next morning was astir long before daybreak. The boys breakfasted at once and were in the saddle just as the sun was rising above the low line of the desert horizon in the far East.

How the girls did wish they, too, might accompany the lads who were to separate, each following a different trail that they might surely find Tom if he were endeavoring to walk to V. M. Each boy was leading a saddle horse, knowing only too well that Tom, after his week of starvation, would be greatly enfeebled. Malcolm advised them all to ride slowly, hallooing often and searching each sand hollow and mesquite clump which they might pass.

"We must make every effort to save poor Tom and the faithful little Mexican boy," he told them before they parted on the south bank of the dry creek.

The three girls stood on the high back porch watching the lads ride away until one by one they had disappeared, or had become but moving specks in the far distance.

Then they re-entered the ranch house. "It's much harder to remain at home and do nothing than it is to be actively assisting in the search," Margaret declared, "but since Malcolm believed that we would better remain here, of course we must abide by his decision."

“Brother thought that Tom might return to V. M. without having been found by the boys and of course if he does we will wish to be here to welcome him,” Virginia said. A busy morning followed, Virg assisted Uncle Tex with the baking, while the other girls tidied the house. Then, after lunch, they went to their rooms to try to rest, and so weary were they, that in spite of their anxiety, they slept.

It was midafternoon when the girls gathered with their sewing in the big cool living-room.

“Barbara, will you go to the kitchen porch and look toward the Seven Peak Trail and see what you can see.”

Babs complied with Virginia’s wish but returned shaking her head.

“I looked through the glass, Virg, in all directions,” she said, “but I saw nothing at all that was moving.”

“Hark!” Virginia exclaimed, sitting up and listening intently, “Megsy, dear, didn’t you hear a halloing just then, or is it something my own ears hear that isn’t real?”

Babs and Margaret hurried to the window and opened it wide. Again they heard the halloing, close at hand.

“Two horses are coming,” Megsy exclaimed excitedly, “and yes, surely the rider in the lead is Malcolm and on the horse following there are two, so it must be Tom, though his hat is drawn down so far I cannot see his face.”



Virginia joined the others. "It is! It surely must be Tom," she cried, her cheeks flushed with excitement, her eyes aglow with hope.

The girls turned as the door burst open and Malcolm entered, followed truly enough by the lost Tom, looking pale and worn. Before anyone could speak, a glad cry rang out, and everyone turned to look at Babs whose face was radiant with sudden joy.

"Peyton! My brother!"

"Little sister! God is good!" The lad held the girl close and there were tears in his eyes. Then he reached a hand out to Virginia, and Margaret, watching, knew by the way that he looked at the western girl, that he too cared.

Half an hour later, when Tom had recounted his recent thrilling adventures, Virg rose, saying that since they must be about starved, she would prepare the evening meal.

"I wish the others would return in time for supper," Babs said. "Speak of angels and you hear the rustle of their wings," Margaret sang out, holding up a finger as she spoke. Without could be heard the galloping of horses' feet.

"Rather say, 'bad pennies are sure to turn up,' Malcolm exclaimed laughingly, adding with sudden seriousness, "but that is hardly fair, for a finer chap than Harry Wilson it would be hard to find." Then, as he glanced out of the window he informed the others. "It is Hal, and his younger brother, I judge, is with him. They are dismounting down

by the corral. Mendoza Quintano is racing to meet them. He just adores Harry. When Hal sees the Mexican lad, he will, of course, know that Tom has been found. Sure enough, here he comes sprinting at top speed."

A second later, Harry Wilson sprang through the door which Malcolm had opened for him, and going to Tom, he embraced him as tenderly as he would a brother.

Later that afternoon Babs and her brother were alone; Virginia having thoughtfully arranged it, for she felt sure that the reunited brother and sister would have much to say to each other just by themselves.

"Peyton," Babs said, slipping her hand in his, "you haven't asked me about father."

"Dad doesn't care about me," the boy said sorrowfully, "I wish he did."

Barbara was about to tell her brother all that had happened and how changed her father was, when something occurred to assure him of this more forcefully than Babs could have done.

Their conversation was interrupted by a gentle tapping on the closed door, and Virginia's voice called, "Babs, dear, Lucky just rode in with the mail. There are several letters for you and one that I thought you and Peyton might like to read together." The young people had agreed to call Tom by his real name, although at first this would be hard to do.

“Thank you,” Barbara replied, while the lad, having leaped to his feet, opened the door and took the letters from Virginia.

A second later Babs exclaimed, “Oh, brother, here is one from poor dear father. I always think of him pityingly, ever since the day when I returned from school unexpectedly and found him pacing up and down in the library looking so desolate and so all alone. I didn’t understand then, but now I know that through the three years that you have been away he has been grieving for you. I shall never forget how he reached out his arms, when he saw me, and how tenderly he said, “You are like your mother, Barbara. She came to me when I needed her most just as you have come. If only that other Barbara had lived, all this would not have happened.” He meant that our dear mother would have understood you better. Then, after a moment Barbara added, “But brother, I wonder if you and I have ever really tried to understand our father. There must be a very kind heart under his reserve, else our mother, who was so joyous in her nature, would not have loved him. We never thought of it before that way, did we, brother?”

“No,” the lad replied, and there was a quiver in his voice. “I was very young and very head-strong and I felt, if I wanted to ruin my life, as dad declared that I would, it was my own life and I ought to be permitted to ruin it. Read the letter, sister. What has our father written?”

But, though Babs tried hard, she could not read aloud the message. The true feeling of her father, that had never been expressed in spoken words to his children, was revealed to them in the few heart-broken sentences that he had penned.

“Barbara, my little girl, I hope you will want to go home with me. You are all I have now. I have searched this country over and I cannot find my son; my other Barbara’s little boy, and how she loved him! I wanted to find him that I might ask him to forgive me, for I believe that somehow the fault must have been mine.”

“Babs! Little sister!” Peyton exclaimed as he sprang up. “Where is father now? I am going to him, at once, tonight if I can.”

The other young people were surprised to learn that Peyton had decided to leave for Texas, that very night, but Virginia was indeed glad when she learned that he was to be reunited with his father.

After supper the other boys accompanied Peyton to the Junction where he departed on the 10 o’clock train.

The next morning Harry and Benny rode away, promising, however, that they would return in a fortnight, when Margaret and Barbara were planning a surprise house party for Virginia’s seventeenth birthday.

The further adventures of these young people will be found in a book entitled, “Virginia of V. M. Ranch and Her Friends.”

THE END.







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