

LIZETTE EDHOLM

THE MERRIWEATHER
GIRLS IN QUEST OF
TREASURE

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in Quest of Treasure**

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Lizette M. Edholm

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CHAPTER I

ON THEIR WAY

The four Merriweather Girls were assembled at the railroad station where the long string of Pullman coaches stood ready. The girls were starting on a vacation trip to the southwest.

"What's the matter, now, Joy Evans? Why all the tears?" Bet Baxter, her blond hair in disarray, caught the girl by the shoulders and gave her a rough but affectionate shake.

"Oh, let her alone, Bet," laughed Shirley Williams. "That's Joy's good-bye. She likes to weep when she goes away."

"But why?" insisted Bet, her blue eyes serious for a moment. "We've been planning on this western trip all winter. We've thought of nothing but Arizona for months. Tell me why you are crying?"

"Because I feel like it, Bet Baxter," snapped Joy. "It's so thrilling to be going away for a long trip, and when it comes to the luxury of a private car, why it's twice as thrilly." Joy choked as a laugh and a sob got mixed up together. Then making an elaborate but not very polite grimace at her chum, she disappeared into the car that was to carry her and her chums westward.

"There, she's herself again," laughed Bet. "That face indicates that Joy is happy."

Bet was glowing with excitement. It was her first long trip away from her home in Lynnwood on the Hudson, and the promise of a summer of adventure in the Arizona mountains was almost too good to be true. Or so it seemed to the girl.

Her one regret was that her father was not coming with her. From the observation car she was calling her farewell messages to him as he stood on the platform of the station. Bet was his only child and the responsibility of looking after her and trying to make up for the loss of her mother, was sometimes a heavy burden on Colonel Baxter. There was an anxious look in his face now, although he knew that his daughter would be well taken care of by Judge Breckenridge and his wife, who had invited Bet and her chums to be their guests for the summer.

Anyone but an over-anxious parent would have felt confident that Bet Baxter could look out for herself under any circumstances. Her straight young body had poise and assurance of power and she had a resourcefulness of mind that made her a leader among her friends.

Bet was nearer to real tears than she would have admitted to any one. Back there was her father, the very best chum she had, and to be going away where she could not see him every week-end made a strange catch in her breath.

Shirley realized what Bet was experiencing and stepping to her side, called gaily to the Colonel.

"Hold that pose, Colonel. I'm going to take a picture of you."

Wherever one saw Shirley, they usually saw a camera for she rarely let it out of her hands during a trip, and now as the shutter clicked she said to Bet: "That's the third picture I've taken of him. You'll have those to look at."

"Thanks, Shirley, that's good of you. And I shouldn't feel so frightfully homesick for Dad may come out to see us in a few weeks."

"Oh, won't that be great," exclaimed Shirley. "He is just like one of the boys."

"Doesn't it seem strange not to have the boys here to bid us good-bye.

It's never happened before."

The boys were Bob Evans, Joy's brother, and his chum, Phil Gordon, favorites with the girls and always included in their activities when boys were wanted at all. The week before, the girls had waved them good-bye as they started on an auto trip with Paul Breckenridge.

The girls missed their parting nonsense. It didn't seem like going away at all, without the boys to keep up the fun.

As the train began to move, Bet smiled bravely back at her father and waved until a curving road carried them out of sight of the station.

Only then did she answer the insistent calls of the girls inside the car.

"Bet Baxter, do come here and see this," cried Enid Breckenridge, a large blond girl whose serious face told of trouble lived through that had been too heavy for her young shoulders. Her gray-blue eyes were sad.

Bet was about to speak to Enid when the other chum, a tall dark-eyed girl, grabbed her by the hand and dragged her across the room.

"Look at this, Bet!" Kit Patten exclaimed. "You're missing everything!"

But Bet stood stock still and gazed about her in surprise. This was not a bit like an ordinary train. It gave the impression of a very homey living room in a small house, with its shaded reading lamps and the easy chairs that invited one to their soft depths.

"Isn't it wonderful?" breathed Bet with a happy sigh. "I'd love to sit right there and watch the scenery go by."

But that was only the impulse of a moment. There were too many things to see in this marvelous train. And Kit was demanding her attention from one side and Enid Breckenridge from the other.

Kit won, and opening a door, displayed a small bedroom beautifully arranged and furnished.

"Isn't it just too lovely for anything?" asked Kit as she heard Bet's gasp of astonishment.

"I didn't know trains were ever fixed up this way," Bet was taking in all the delightful details of the room. "I always thought it was a lower berth if you were lucky and an upper one if you were out of luck. Why this is just like a lovely little playhouse. Who will sleep here?"

"This is for mother," said Enid. "She gets the best room."

"Of course she does," assented Bet. "But where do *we* get put away for the night?"

"In here!" Kit suddenly opened a door and at Bet's look of surprise she went on: "You didn't know there was a door there, did you? It's almost like magic."

And magic it seemed to the girls as they wandered from one thing to another. The electrical appliances in the dressing room!

"Why, girls, we don't know what half of them are for," laughed Bet.

"We'll have to have a maid to show us how to get dressed here." And as Kit spoke a trim little colored maid appeared as if she had heard a call.

"Is everything all right?" she asked looking at Enid.

Bet had always taken the lead and was chief spokesman. She was about to answer when she remembered that Enid was hostess. "Here's where I'll have to take second place," thought Bet. But in her heart she was glad to see Enid in the position of hostess. Her life had been full of tragedy. Stolen from her wealthy parents, she had not known a home or friends until the previous year when she had been rescued by the chums on Campers' Trail.

The car in which the girls were travelling belonged to Enid's father, and the girl was glad to show her friends around the place.

"Here's one compartment with two beds, and opposite is one with three beds," said Enid. "How will we divide up?"

"As usual, I guess, you and Kit and I in one and Shirley and Joy in the other."

When the maid had left, Enid laughingly pushed Kit into a chair in front of the dressing table. "Sit still now, while I curl your hair!" she directed.

The other girls joined the laugh, for Kit's hair was a mass of dark ringlets that clung close to her head. Bet Baxter, with her straight, blond hair always envied Kit those curls, while her own unruly locks were flying out at all angles.

"But do come and see what I discovered," said Enid at last, pulling Bet by the sleeve. "It's a darling little dining room! Why it's – it's..." And Enid stopped because in all her experience she could find nothing to compare with the tiny room which glittered with crystal and silver.

"I do believe that lunch is getting ready," said Joy Evans. "And let me tell you, it can't come too soon to suit me. I'm starved."

"As usual," laughed Shirley. "You're always hungry, Joy. And it's so nice you can eat *everything!* And still you're thin!" Shirley was inclined to plumpness and had to choose her food more carefully than the others.

As they turned toward the salon once more, Bet dropped into an easy chair and picked up a book.

"Oh, Bet, don't get interested in a story yet! You'll have heaps of time to read before we get to Arizona. Come on, let's see if we can peek into the kitchen. To my way of thinking, that's the most important room on the train," laughed Joy.

"That's what we'd expect you to think, Joy," teased Shirley.

Enid rose and motioned the girls to follow her toward the kitchen compartment, then gave a shrug of disgust as she noticed a sign on the door, "Private."

"Why, the idea," pouted Bet Baxter. "Right on our own car, too! I don't think we ought to stand for it." Then a spirit of mischief overcame Bet. She tiptoed toward the door and shoved it open, bouncing into the room without even looking. The girls watched to see what would happen.

Plenty happened, for at that moment Sam Wilkins, the huge colored cook, was bringing in a large tray of ice water. There was a loud crash. Two glasses fell to the floor, and the man himself almost lost his balance.

Sam's usual smile faded. "Ain't you seen that sign, nohow?" he demanded pointing a long, black finger at the word "Private."

"Why how stupid of me!" Bet tried to look innocent. "Was that there *all* the time? Imagine me not seeing it!" There was remorse in her voice but a merry twinkle in her eyes that did not escape Sam.

"Maybe you can't read yet," he said, frowning.

Bet bestowed on him one of her compelling smiles. "I'm very sorry," she said with her sweetest accent. "I'll promise never to come in here again – that is unless you want me to see your darling kitchen. I know I'd just love it."

Sam's white teeth showed in a broad smile. After that, he was willing to do anything for Bet Baxter. He ushered her into his kitchen as if she were a queen.

When Bet came back triumphantly to the drawing room a few minutes later, Enid greeted her with a shake of her head:

"You certainly have a way with you, Bet Baxter. No one can resist you, no one!"

"What about Edith Whalen?" Bet reminded her.

"Oh, that girl!" said Enid contemptuously.

"Every rule has to have one exception. She doesn't count at all."

"Speaking of Edith, I wonder where she is this summer?" asked Kit.

"Why spoil a perfectly good day by speaking of Edith at all. She's just nothing in my young life. She belongs to the dim and distant past. A summer of real happiness is before us!" exclaimed Bet.

"Huh! That's just what you said last year when we went to Campers' Trail, and see what happened! Edith was there and managed to make our lives miserable for a month and more," Joy reminded her with shrug of her dainty shoulders.

"Well, there is one thing sure, girls," laughed Kit Patten. "She will not be in Lost Canyon. So you are safe in planning on a happy summer."

"Now if we can only persuade Bet not to find any problems to solve, we will have a heavenly time." Shirley had been working hard during the winter. She was the level headed, business girl. She was always ready for a good time, but if she were asked to choose, it would be a quiet one with no great excitement. But Shirley always took things as they came and enjoyed herself.

Joy Evans was different. Her impatience often made her miss the good time that was right at hand. Now she was looking forward to her vacation in the Arizona mountains on Judge Breckenridge's ranch.

"Oh, I'm so glad we're off. I can hardly wait until I see the cowboys.

I think they must be marvelous!"

"Joy, do try to use a little bit of sense. There's nothing remarkable about a cowboy," Kit Patten, the mountain girl, replied. For Kit had lived most of her life in Arizona at the head of Lost Canyon, and as luck would have it, only about half a mile from the ranch belonging to Judge Breckenridge.

Kit had been away from her home for two years and at present was all excited about seeing her father and mother.

"What are you looking forward to, Enid?" asked Shirley. "Joy wants to see the cowboys, I want to rest and Kit wants to see Dad and Ma Patten."

"I want to see what my western home is like. It's so good to have a home, girls," Enid replied, and the girls gave her a tender smile, remembering the experiences on Campers' Trail.

"And I suppose Bet wants some wild adventure," teased Joy. "Problems to solve, great deeds to be done!"

"Oh, I'm not so sure. Maybe I'll be a cowgirl and learn to ride like Kit, and rope a steer like her friend, Seedy Saunders. There are heaps of things I'd like to do. I'd like to meet a western bad man that you read about."

"If you want that, Bet, you'll have to go to the movies. Western bad men are a thing of the past," Kit answered decidedly. "In the early days, Lost Canyon was a wild place but now it's the most peaceful spot in the world."

"Just my luck!" pouted Bet. "I did want to catch a western bad man, single handed, and turn him over to justice."

The girls laughed. They were each looking forward to something different, some particular plan or desire of her own, as far apart as they could possibly be, yet these five girls had bound themselves together, one for all and all for one.

Two summers ago, Bet Baxter, Joy Evans and Shirley Williams had first met Kit Patten, the homesick western girl. They had formed a little club that took its name from Colonel Baxter's estate, Merriweather Manor, a delightful old mansion on the Hudson with its romantic story of Revolutionary days when Lady Betty Merriweather reigned in its stately rooms. Her story inspired the girls to find adventure in life and to be true to their highest ideals.

In the story *The Merriweather Girls and The Mystery of the Queen's Fan*, these four girls solved the problem of the stolen fan. They had tense moments when it seemed as if they had failed, but they held on and won out.

The next year a new member was added to their club. In *The Merriweather Girls, On Campers' Trail*, they found Enid, then known as Tilly, The Waif of the Woods. The girls with quick thinking, daring and devotion were able to discover the girl's parents, and as a proof of their gratitude, Judge Breckenridge and his wife had invited them on this lovely vacation trip to Arizona.

Suddenly the train gave a little jerk and Bet looked up quickly to see Enid Breckenridge staring at her. Each knew that the other had been looking back for a moment and being thankful that they had met and were now journeying together for a summer of happiness.

At that moment Sam's grinning face appeared at the door with the announcement that lunch was ready. Enid jumped to her feet and hastened to help her invalid mother to the table. Years of

anxiety and worry over her daughter's disappearance had broken her health. Strength was coming back slowly and it was hoped that a summer in the southwest would complete her recovery.

With the judge on one side and Enid on the other, the frail invalid walked the few feet to the table. Her face was aglow with happiness. Virginia Breckenridge was still young and the white hair only emphasized the youthful lines of her face. She did not appear much older than the group of girls who surrounded her at the table.

"Isn't this wonderful!" cried Bet in her enthusiastic way, waving her hand toward the passing landscape. "I could keep on like this forever."

"So could I," laughed Joy. "But when do we get to Washington?"

"Not until four o'clock! Why all the hurry?" Shirley was enjoying her day of travel. When the train stopped at stations she was all ready with her camera in case some interesting bit presented itself. Shirley was in her glory. Colonel Baxter's parting gift to her had been a new camera and plenty of films, so Shirley felt that she could take pictures to her heart's content.

"We've got a good cook," whispered Joy across the table to her hostess. "I don't know what he calls this mixture, but it's wonderful!" Joy's face was expressive and Sam noticed her approval of his lunch so during the remainder of the trip it was to Joy he turned if he wanted to make sure that any dish was appreciated.

And while the girls did not find the time dragging, they were ready and waiting when the train pulled into the station at Washington. They were shunted about for a few minutes and finally stopped on a side track where the car would remain while they were in the Capital.

As Bet emerged from the station she gave a little scream of delight. "There it is, girls!" she cried. "The dome of the Capitol! At last my eyes have really seen it!"

"Wait a minute till I get a picture of it," said Shirley. "I might not get such a good view again."

"That view isn't worth taking," interrupted Mrs. Breckenridge. "You'd better wait. That dome is visible from all parts of the city. It's wasting a film to take it here."

"Oh, girls, I can hardly wait until I see everything. The Congressional Library, the..."

"The place where the money is made! That's what I want to see. I hope they'll be making thousand dollar bills. I think that would be fun," sang out Joy as the Judge helped her into the taxi.

When they reached the hotel steps, Shirley was thankful that she had not wasted her film on the other view of the Capitol. In the haze of the late afternoon, the dome looked like a huge bubble.

"There's your picture, Shirley," gasped Bet. "And see, the street in front of us leads right up to the Capitol."

The girls followed the Judge rather unwillingly into the hotel. They were anxious not to miss any of the sights of the city and it seemed a waste of time to go indoors.

"Come on Bet, don't be so slow," called Kit from the doorway.

"This is so nice I'd like to look at it forever," she said with a sigh.

The girls laughed for Bet was always wishing things to last forever.

Mrs. Breckenridge had not stood the trip as well as they had expected.

She seemed completely tired out and Enid refused to leave her.

"You go along and have a good time," Enid proposed to the girls, but without their friend they felt they could not enjoy anything, so a short walk was all they saw of Washington that evening.

They retired early, for even youth gets weary with excitement and new scenes. The girls were glad to get into bed.

"We'll have a hard day ahead of us tomorrow, if we want to see everything we plan on seeing," said Bet as she snuggled down.

Within half an hour they were all asleep.

When Bet opened her eyes it was daylight and she felt ready for the strenuous day ahead. She scrambled out of bed, gave Kit a shake and then ran across the hall to see if Shirley and Joy were up.

Shirley was still sleeping. But Joy was not there.

"Why, she's up and dressed! Her clothes are gone!" exclaimed Bet in vexed tones. "I think she might have wakened us."

Dressing quickly they went down stairs to find Joy.

The lounging rooms and halls and the foyer were empty at this hour. No one had seen Joy or knew anything about her.

She had simply disappeared.

CHAPTER II

A STREET LEADING TO THE CAPITOL

And when breakfast was over there was still no Joy.

Finally one of the porters was found who said he had seen a girl leave the hotel about seven o'clock. "She walked up the street in front of you, up toward the Capitol."

"There, didn't I tell you! Joy's all right. Nothing can happen to her here," said Shirley reassuringly.

"Let's walk up that way. We'll probably meet her coming back." Kit looked anxiously toward the hill. "I can't imagine why she stayed so long. She can't get inside any of the buildings."

"Maybe I won't have something to say to that girl!" exclaimed Bet angrily. "She hasn't any right to run off like this and frighten us." And if Bet had met her at that minute, the girl would probably have been told many things about herself.

But they did not meet Joy. There was no sign of her on the street leading up to the Capitol, and no sign of her on the grounds.

Where was Joy?

Even the Judge looked worried. "Not that I think anything will happen to her, but I'm responsible and I wish she had not gone out by herself," he declared.

The girls were seeing the Capitol in a very different way than they had planned. They were in no mood to be impressed by the majesty of the building. They were watching for the tiny figure of Joy to appear at every corner.

"It's no use, we might as well go back to the hotel and wait. Maybe she's there by this time," suggested Judge Breckenridge.

Still Joy had not returned when the party reached their quarters.

"There may have been an accident!" Bet shivered at the thought. Their laughing Joy! That would be too terrible to think of.

The Judge was about to notify the authorities when Sam Wilkins the colored steward on their train, walked in leading Joy, a woe-begone little creature, tear-stained and tired.

"Why Joy Evans! You – " Then catching sight of the girl's white face, Bet ran and threw her arms about her. "You darling! We thought you were lost and you were at the train all the time. Oh, Joy dear!" Tears came to Bet's eyes.

Joy did not break down and cry again until she had reached her own room. Then the tears came in a flood.

"Oh, I was so frightened," she sobbed.

When she had quieted down, half an hour later, she told her story. "I woke up hours and hours before the rest of you and I couldn't sleep. And when I'm at home I always go walking early in the morning. So I walked up the street leading to the Capitol."

"Yes, we know. We went up there, thinking we'd meet you coming back.

How did you get lost? The hotel is at the end of the street."

"Just you go up there and look!" Joy's eyes snapped, but in a minute her sense of humor returned. "I wouldn't have believed it possible to get lost, for, as you say, the hotel is at the end of the street leading up there."

"Then what happened?"

"Oh, I'm so dumb!" began Joy.

"Tell us something we don't know!" laughed Kit.

"Well, I didn't look at the name of the street. And that old Capitol! Girls, I don't care if I never see it again! It stands up there on that hill as if it were the most important thing in the world, and streets lead up to it from *everywhere*, like the spokes of a wheel. *All* the streets lead to the Capitol!"

"And you didn't know which street you came up?" asked Kit.

"That's it. So I walked down all those streets, up and down and up and down. Why I've seen that building from every angle. It was terrible!"

"Why didn't you just take a taxi to the hotel?" asked the practical Shirley.

"Oh, I'm not so dumb. I thought of that!" exclaimed Joy with a toss of her head. "But the taxi man laughed at me. I didn't know the name of the hotel or the name of the street, and I'd already told him I didn't have any money."

"You poor little kid," soothed Bet.

"He finally went away and I saw him make a sign to another taxi driver as much as to say I was crazy. Then I got frightened for fear they'd speak to me and laugh some more, so I ran away."

"And did you go down all those streets again?" asked Shirley.

"No, I was tired of that. I'd been on all of them, I guess. Then I remembered the train at the station, and I walked there."

"Oh Joy! All that long way? You could have taken a taxi there," said Enid.

"No, I couldn't! I didn't have any money and I wasn't going to be laughed at any more. I couldn't be sure that Sam was there to pay for me."

"Well, it's over now, and we'd better go sight-seeing. We've wasted half the morning," exclaimed Bet sharply.

"I don't want to go sight-seeing!" said Joy decidedly.

"Don't be a spoil-sport, Joy. We're not angry at you or anything. But we do want to see Washington." Bet's voice was raised to a point where angry words were apt to come. At a signal from Kit, she quieted down however.

Kit turned to Joy. "You wouldn't want to leave this city without seeing everything – the Congressional Library and the Capitol..."

"*Please* don't take me to the Capitol! I think I'll scream if I ever lay eyes on that dome again! I've seen it a million times to-day, and that's plenty."

"All right, you can sit in the car while we take a look at it," laughed Shirley, patting the still half frightened girl.

Still Joy shook her head. "I can't go!" she finally exclaimed. "The breakfast at the hotel is over and I'm so hungry I'm weak."

"You poor little girl!" spoke up the Judge with a twinkle in his eyes. "Enid, you take her down the block to that restaurant and get her a good breakfast. She'll be ready for anything when she gets back."

"Not the Capitol, Judge! I draw the line at that." She laughed like the old Joy once more.

Half an hour later Joy returned and announced that even the sight of the Capitol would not prevent her from accompanying them.

For the rest of the stay in the city she had to put up with a good deal of teasing, and the Judge noticed that she did not allow the girls to get out of sight for a moment.

Joy had learned her lesson.

"We're just like tourists," sighed Bet when the day was almost over. "We've rushed around from one thing to another. I don't like it. My eyes ache from looking at so many pictures. Imagine two galleries in one afternoon, besides the White House and the Capitol. That's too much sight-seeing! I'll be glad when we go."

But the trip down the river to Mount Vernon the next day was enjoyed by all the girls, and when they caught sight of the old mansion, Bet cried, "Why, it looks something like Merriweather Manor."

"A little," said Joy, "but I think Merriweather Manor is much nicer."

"Thanks, Joy. I'm always so proud and happy when you girls say you like my home. To me it's just the loveliest place in the world. I wouldn't change it for anything modern. Sometimes Auntie Gibbs gets fussy and says it's too much work."

"Your dear old housekeeper is getting old," said Enid.

"Yes, Auntie Gibbs is almost seventy and Dad wants her to have plenty of help. But she won't hear of it and she won't retire. So what are we to do?" said Bet wistfully. "You know Dad and I love Auntie Gibbs and Uncle Nat as much as if they were really members of our family."

The girls were thrilled as they stepped inside the old mansion. Here Washington had lived. He once sat at that very table, used those dishes, drank from those glasses. They could scarcely believe it.

They tried to imagine him as he had been before the responsibilities of the great war lay heavy on his shoulders. The young Washington, owner of the estate. There must have been gay parties in this house. Bet shut her eyes for a second and could see the belles of that day. She wondered if Lady Betty Merriweather had ever been a guest in the house. It would not be impossible. She hoped that it was so.

"Some day," said Bet, as they were returning to Washington on the boat, "let's come and live for a winter in Washington. Then we can see things thoroughly. This is just skimming the surface. We haven't seen anything well."

"Oh yes, we have!" laughed Joy. "There's that Capitol. I could draw it with my eyes shut!"

But the girls were tired enough so that, a few days later, they welcomed the announcement that they would leave Washington at midnight.

The train with their cozy berths looked good to them and they settled down for the two days' trip to Arizona. It was good not to have to go sight-seeing for a while.

Shirley strapped her camera in its case and laid it away. She had taken so many pictures in Washington that she was tired, for once in her life.

But that did not last long. Very quickly the nature of the country changed and they were going through the south-land, where the huts of the negroes added a picturesque touch to the landscape. Charming little black-eyed pickaninnies were at the stations and grinned at Shirley while she took their pictures.

"Girls, I'll have pictures enough for my shop this winter, and for half a dozen more!" Shirley exclaimed. Shirley was the business girl and had made a success of a little gift shop in Lynnwood. She had helped to support her parents and been able to continue at school with her chums. In this venture, The Merriweather Girls had all joined. They had worked and planned under the leadership of Colonel Baxter, and the little shop had given them many interesting adventures.

Shirley had developed a commercial instinct and, together with her talent for photography, was what the girls liked to call a business success.

The sameness of the desert country through Texas, the dust and dirt was a bit trying to the nerves of the girls. But there was no complaint. They looked ahead to the wonderful experience that would be theirs when they would leave the train and journey into the cowboy land.

"Kit, do tell us about them," begged Joy.

"I won't do it. You've got your own ideas from the movies and I can't change them. Now you'll just have to get disappointed. There aren't any *handsome* cowboys in my country."

Kit spoke impatiently.

"Isn't Seedy Saunders handsome?" Joy asked again.

Kit shouted with laughter as she brought a picture of the old cowboy to her mind. He was a small man, bow-legged and thin. A sort of dried-up desert rat. In looks Seedy was nothing at all. Only when he was in the saddle did he shine, for he could throw a rope better than anyone Kit had ever seen, and as for taming a wild horse, there was no better cowboy in the mountains than this old hand at the game.

"No, of course Seedy isn't handsome. He's old, and plain and common looking," Kit answered.

"I'll not believe it until I see one. For I'm very sure that some of the cowboys on the screen are the real thing. Just see how they can ride and throw the ropes and catch the cows by the horns! Why, they're wonderful!"

Bet Baxter laughed. "Go on, Joy, rave some more! And don't worry, we'll find a handsome cowboy if we have to import one from the movies for you."

"Thanks, Bet," laughed Joy, blowing her a kiss from the ends of her fingers. "I'll pick my own. Kit is trying to discourage me, but I'll find a handsome cowboy. You just wait and see!"

CHAPTER III

THE WASH-OUT

"This time tomorrow we'll be at Benito!" exclaimed Kit. "I do wonder if mother will be there to meet me. I'm homesick for a sight of her."

The heat was intense as they sped through the desert. Small sand-storms swirled across the flat land, and filled their train. They were dirty and tired. They would all be glad when the little desert station of Benito would be reached and they could transfer to the automobiles that would carry them to the hills and the ranch.

Summer storms raged ahead of them, big black clouds that threatened.

The girls watched from the windows the deluge of rain in the distance.

"That's what we call a cloud-burst," said Kit with a pleased smile.

"It's good to get home again!"

"Do you mean," asked Joy, "that you are glad to see that terrible storm? You *must* be homesick if *that* pleases you."

"I love it!" Kit answered.

Suddenly the train jerked to a stop, and all heads came to the window to see the cause of the delay. The train had been flagged. "Danger ahead!"

"What's the matter?" Bet called to the conductor, who had descended and was walking toward the engine. "A wash-out! That cloud-burst you saw tore away a bit of the track. We'll be stalled here for hours, very likely."

The heat seemed worse than ever now. As long as the train was going, there was some breeze, but at a stand-still, the sun blazed down on the roof of the car and made it almost unbearable.

Soon it became apparent that the delay might be longer than they anticipated.

"There's a good hotel at the next station," said the conductor. "If you will ride in the work train ahead, you can go in there in a few minutes."

"Oh, do let us!" cried Bet who was always ready for something different. "We've never ridden in a work train in our lives."

With Sam's help they carried Mrs. Breckenridge across the broken tracks and into the work train. The girls laughed with pleasure as they settled themselves in the box car.

Bet suddenly had a new idea. "Judge Breckenridge, the engineer says I can go in the engine with him, if you will let me. Please say yes," Bet's face was rosy with excitement. "This might be the only chance I'll ever have to ride in the engine, and I'd hate to miss it."

The Judge hesitated but finally gave in. And when Bet joined her friends at the hotel in Willowmere she said:

"It doesn't seem quite fair that we are starting out with so many adventures. It will make the summer seem so uneventful."

"That's just what I was thinking," added Kit anxiously. "I'm so afraid you'll be disappointed. There aren't many adventures in the mountains. It is just one day after another. Nothing new, nothing to do, no place to go, and absolutely nothing ever happens, nothing thrilling, I mean."

"That's what we've decided that we want this year. We'll learn to ride horseback well and we'll learn to use the rope, that is if we ever can, which I doubt," laughed Bet. "And we can read and lazy around. I call that an ideal summer."

After lunch at the hotel, the girls started out to explore the settlement. "I love those adobe houses of the Mexicans," said Enid. "Let's go over and get acquainted with some of the women."

But the women were shy. Most of them disappeared into the huts as they saw the girls approaching. Only the children remained and stopped in their play to stare at the newcomers.

"Aren't they pretty when they're little! Look at those dreamy black eyes!" whispered Enid to Bet, who was trying to coax one small girl to come and get a piece of candy.

Suddenly there was a scream and from the house at the end of the street a small boy dashed out of the door, his clothes a mass of flame.

"It's Pedro Alvarez!" cried a Mexican woman nearby. But she made no attempt to do anything. And the other women were screaming but seemed helpless to rescue the child.

Bet did not wait to ask for a quilt or rug, there was no time for that. She quickly slipped out of her dress, and catching the little fellow wrapped him tight in the gown, smothering out the flames.

One look at the burns and she cried, "Oh the poor boy! Get the doctor quickly, Kit."

While Bet held the child, Enid tore the half burned clothes from his body.

"Bring oil!" Bet shouted, but the women seemed dazed and did not understand. Bet looked about her desperately. "Run to the hotel, Enid, and get oil, lots of it. Will that doctor never come!"

Kit at that moment came running back with the word that the doctor was away and would not be back until noon.

The child's mother stood helplessly by, wringing her hands in despair.

She watched as Enid returned and poured the oil upon the burns.

"I wonder what they would have done if we had not been here," whispered Shirley as the screams quieted down in the settlement. "They don't act as if they knew anything about such things."

Bet held the little fellow in her arms until his cries ceased, then getting clean sheets and pillows from the hotel they fixed up a bed for him.

Later on, when the doctor arrived and examined the boy, he declared he could not have given any better treatment than the girls had done.

"I'm so glad we were right here on the spot," said Bet. "We were trying to get acquainted with the children when it happened."

After the accident, it was an easy matter. The children followed them about the settlement and the women offered them all that their small stores contained. They insisted that the girls must eat tamales, enchiladas, tortillas and all the other Mexican dishes that they cooked, with corn meal and peppers.

And when the train left late that night, the whole settlement turned out to bid them good-bye.

"What a miserable time we would have had," exclaimed Joy as she waved her hand back toward the station, "if it hadn't been for those Mexicans."

Much to the disgust of Sam, a package had been sent aboard by the grateful mother of Pedro Alvarez. It contained more of the Mexican cooking that the girls had praised.

But only Joy really cared for it. "Of course it burns, but can't you get that wonderful flavor?" she exclaimed as Shirley and Bet turned up their noses at the food.

"You like anything that can be eaten!" said Bet with a laugh.

Shirley had brought away many picturesque bits of western life from the little settlement. "If they just come out as lovely as they were in the finder, I'll have some beauties to send back to Colonel Baxter."

The girls were too excited to drop to sleep quickly that night. Early the next day they would reach Benito.

"Dad says that Tommy Sharpe will be there to meet us," said Enid. "I wonder if he has grown?" Enid had found this boy on Campers' Trail. He was half starved and ill. And when her parents had found her, Enid insisted that the child who had helped her, should be looked after. Judge Breckenridge, on the advice of the doctor, had sent the boy to his ranch in Arizona, hoping that he would grow strong.

"Oh, I almost forgot about Tommy," said Bet. "Won't we be glad to see him!"

"I do wish Dad and Mum would come to meet me. I don't suppose they will, but I don't see how I can wait until I get to the hills."

"I think they'll come," said Enid.

At the first peep of dawn Kit was awake. She dressed quickly and went to the window in the drawing room to watch the sun rise on the desert.

Out of the violet-grey mist, streaks of rose shot out like long fingers, reaching far up into the sky. Kit stood it as long as she could alone, then ran and wakened the girls.

"Do come, girls, you don't know what you're missing."

Slipping into robes, they quickly joined Kit at the window.

"Isn't this gorgeous!" Kit's breath came almost in gasps, so excited was she at the spectacle. "Now you never saw anything as gorgeous as that in the way of a sunset over the Hudson. Own up, Bet, you know you haven't!"

"No, Kit, this is magnificent. Do you have this every day?"

"Almost," she answered.

The mountains caught the glow and turned to purple and rose, and deep shadows of blue, and sometimes a bare mountain side shone out like gold.

Shirley had pointed her camera toward it, then put it away, saying, "It won't look like anything in black and white."

"I am going to try and make a sketch of it," said Bet as she flew back to her room for her note book and colors. "But if I painted it that way, no one would believe it. It's too vivid, too spectacular!" she sighed.

Kit often tried to sketch when Bet was at it, but this morning she was too excited to settle down. She walked about the car like a restless animal.

She was glad when Sam announced an early breakfast. Not that she was hungry, but it put in time and that was good. The hour to wait until they reached Benito was one of the longest she had ever known.

"The next station is ours!" called the Judge. "Everybody ready!"

But Kit was already standing at the door, her suitcase beside her.

Kit had tears in her eyes. It wasn't often that she gave way, but when the train pulled into the station, the tears were running down her cheeks.

The Judge's car came to a stop at last at the siding of the station. Benito was a typical desert settlement, the very last link with civilization. For beyond the three squat adobe shacks, lay the sandy, cactus-dotted land that stretched far out in every direction to the rising foothills that skirted the rugged peaks.

"Oh, girls!" cried Bet. "Isn't this wonderful?"

"Yes, just like the movies. I've seen it dozens of times, and I almost expect to see the villain and the handsome cowboy ride up this very minute!" laughed Joy.

"Kit, come here!" called Bet.

But Kit was missing from the group. Her arms were thrown about a tanned, alert little woman. What she was saying the girls could not hear, but they could guess.

Finally she broke loose and with a wave of her arm she cried: "Come on, girls, it's Mum!"

CHAPTER IV

THE DESERT

It was not the strange country that interested The Merriweather Girls at the moment of their arrival, but an old friend.

A tall boy was shaking hands vigorously with Judge Breckenridge. And Enid stepping from the train at that instant, stood and stared in astonishment hardly believing that she was seeing aright.

"Tommy Sharpe!" she cried, running to him with both hands outstretched. "Why, you've grown! You're almost as tall as I am. And what a grand cowboy's outfit!"

Tommy did not speak. He shook Enid's hand but words would not come. The boy's face was burned to a rich shade of brown, his eyes were bright and the huskiness was gone from his voice. Health had come to him in this dry climate. Tommy looked as if he belonged there. He was tall, thin and muscular, a desert dweller, not at all like the sickly boy that Enid had known and cared for on Campers' Trail.

In a moment the boy was surrounded by the girls and everybody was talking at once. It took some time for Tommy's embarrassment to wear off.

Even Mrs. Patten was inclined to be shy with these friends of her daughter but Mrs. Breckenridge in her tactful way soon put her at ease. Kit's mother was a born nurse and one glance at the sick woman made her realize that she was needed. She helped to get the invalid into the car with the least possible jar; she arranged pillows and a footstool in order to ease the bumps on the rough road.

"See, she's deserted me already," laughed Kit as she watched her mother. "I knew I wouldn't count when she saw Mrs. Breckenridge."

Suddenly there was a sort of war whoop and Billy Patten, who had hidden behind the station, dashed out at Kit, much to the amusement of Tommy Sharpe.

"Why you little imp! You haven't changed a single bit, Billy Patten!

You're just as bad as ever," declared his sister. "You're a pest!"

"I am not! You're another!" said the boy, and to Kit it seemed as if she had never been away from home, for the brother and sister had started again just where they left off, half teasing, half in earnest as their quarreling always was.

Billy Patten was not bashful. "Bold," would have described his attitude more than anything else.

"See this stick!" He addressed Bet suddenly at the same time frowning defiantly as he caught Kit's eye.

"Of course I see the stick. What about it?" laughed Bet Baxter.

"It's a humming stick that grows out here in Arizona. Isn't it wonderful! You just tap it gently like that and you can hear it hum."

Kit made a gesture to interfere but the Judge smiled tolerantly and signalled the girl to keep quiet.

Bet took the stick, which seemed like a hollow tube, and tapped it gently on the ground. A strange, buzzing started, continued for a few moments, then quieted. And Bet raised the stick once more.

Billy put forth his hand to capture the rod, but before he could interfere, Bet had brought it down with a thud on the ground. A wasp flew from the hole with an angry buzz and lighted fair and square on Billy's nose, burying its stinger deep into the flesh.

The boy gave a howl, then choked back the tears. He was too much of a sport to make a fuss, especially as the joke was on him. The hollow stem was the insect's nest.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Billy! Please forgive me," pleaded Bet contritely. "I didn't know there was a wasp inside that stick. I really thought it was a strange Arizona plant."

Kit was chuckling. Never before had retribution come so quickly to her young brother who delighted in playing tricks on a newcomer to the desert.

But she only smiled at the boy. She wanted to say, "It serves you right," but she had only been back for ten minutes and decided that it was too soon to plague the child. But Billy saw her gleam of triumph and decided he would get even with Kit at some later date.

"Let's get started, girls! Everybody pile in!" commanded the Judge. "You girls go in that car with Matt Larkin. I want Tommy Sharpe with me."

There wasn't a prouder boy in the whole world at that moment than Tommy. Judge Breckenridge wanted him, and maybe someday he would be his right-hand man, as the Judge playfully called him. To himself Tommy promised that it would not be his own fault if he did not measure up to the Judge's estimate of what a right hand man should be. Bet was amused to notice the slight swagger that Tommy assumed as he took his place beside his friend in the car. She exchanged a smile of understanding with Enid.

A shower of sand hit the chassis of the car as the driver started along the road. The girls gave a cry of alarm as they saw a jack rabbit that had been startled, bound ahead of them for a few yards, then with a wild jump it landed in the shelter of the sage brush.

"Doesn't everything smell good?" Shirley sniffed the air in long indrawn breaths.

"Didn't I tell you it was wonderful!" said Kit. "I used to get so lonesome just for a whiff of the desert. And you girls could never understand it."

"Of course we didn't understand. How could we? We'd never been here!"

Bet Baxter's face was glowing with happiness.

It was only ten o'clock but already the sun was blazing hot. There was a fury about the heat that the girls had never before experienced. They were glad to be under the shelter of the automobile top.

"Oh, Matt," called Kit, when they had driven a few miles, "let's stop and get the girls some of those cactus fruits. They've never tasted them, think of that!"

"You don't say so!" The driver smiled back at the eager young faces and brought his car to a stop. The girls jumped out glad to get nearer to the strange plants of the desert.

Suddenly a rasping whirr seemed to come from the ground at their feet. It was a sound to hold the nerves taut, to send the cold shivers up and down the spine.

"A rattler!" exclaimed Kit delightedly. "Now I do feel as if I were really home again. Where is it? I want a good look at my old friend," she added as another insistent whirr was heard.

Matt Larkin had taken his automatic from his belt and pointed it, and in that instant the girls saw a black and yellow skinned snake coiled, its head poised with darting tongue, ready to strike.

There was a menace in that coil.

But the next minute the head had been neatly severed by a shot and the long body writhed and squirmed on the ground.

"Oh!" cried Bet. "Look at the pretty pattern on its skin."

"Pretty!" snapped the man beside her. "When you live in Arizona you never see any beauty in a rattler. He's just plain pizen to everybody. There ought to be a reward offered for every snake killed. Then maybe they could be exterminated."

The girls were glad to get back into the automobile again, out of the glaring sun. Each held a luscious cactus fruit gingerly in her fingers, trying to open it without getting the tiny pronged spikes in their fingers. The driver climbed into his place and set the car going once more, headed toward the hills that seemed to beckon them.

They had outdistanced the other car, for Judge Breckenridge was driving slowly for the sake of the invalid.

When they saw the foothills ahead of them, Kit began to get excited.

"I've been up that road," she exclaimed. "Once Dad and I went up to Jasper Crowe's claims to sell him a horse."

But Shirley was staring ahead. Suddenly she cried: "There's a lake! Isn't it refreshing after so many miles of desert? I had no idea you had such large bodies of water in this country."

The driver turned and glanced at Kit, then spoke to Shirley: "How far away do you reckon that lake is, Miss?"

"A mile!" replied Bet decidedly.

"No, it's more than that," corrected Shirley. "I remember of reading somewhere that distances in the desert are very deceiving. It's probably a lot farther off than it seems. I'll say five miles."

"Let's hurry and get there so we can eat our lunch at the water's edge," suggested Joy.

"That's an idea!" replied Matt with a sly glance at Kit. "We'll try and get there by lunch time."

"And look at the lovely trees!" cried Joy. "It's like an oasis in the desert, isn't it?"

But half an hour later they were no nearer the lake than when they had first seen it. A haziness now hung over the water, partly hiding it, and the trees seemed to be floating in mid air.

"That lake might be called 'Lake Illusion,'" laughed Bet. "It certainly is unreal enough! Don't let us wait until we get there to eat lunch. I'm starved. After we've eaten we'll appreciate the view more, anyway."

Even as they watched the mistiness increased and then suddenly seemed to dissolve, leaving the desert stretched out before them, hard, sullen and cruel.

The lake was gone. The waving trees were gone.

Then the girls realized what they had just witnessed. The mirage of the desert! That enticing promise of water that had been the undoing of many a pioneer of the early days!

A thoughtful expression came into the faces of the girls, and their enthusiasm vanished for a few minutes. Stories of by gone days came into their minds, stories of weary travellers who had been beckoned by the mirage and taken miles out of their way by this false promise, perhaps to die of thirst.

"How hard life used to be for the pioneers," said Bet wistfully. "And so easy for us!"

"But why did the pioneers go out on the desert?" asked Joy lightly.

"They didn't have to do it, did they?"

"Of course not, Joy," answered Bet. "But they wanted adventure and they were seeing another sort of mirage. It was the hope of gold and a fortune in the hills."

Bet gazed out over the vast stretch of mesa as if she were living through those early days herself, instead of being carried along by a high-powered car that ate up the miles easily and swiftly.

A low whistle from Matt brought the girls out of their day dreams to follow his glance ahead.

Far along the sandy road was a man trudging along with a bundle over his shoulder.

"That ain't no desert man," said Matt quietly.

"How can you tell from here?" asked Bet.

"You can always tell a desert man by his walk. That fellow looks as if he were used to walking on city streets," Matt returned.

"And he hasn't even a burro," exclaimed Kit contemptuously. "Let's give him a lift and see what he's doing here so far from civilization."

The man ahead had turned at the sound of the automobile, deposited his bundle on the ground and stood waiting expectantly.

The girls smiled as they greeted him. His clothes, a neat business suit and light colored shirt, were soiled, his face was streaked with dust but in his eyes there was that indefinable gleam that marks the soul of an adventurer. He was offered a lift.

"I'm very dusty," said the traveller.

"We don't mind at all," answered the girls. They liked the little man with his far-away look as if he belonged to another world and were seeing sights that no one around him was seeing.

"Isn't he a dear!" whispered Bet. "I like him!"

Little did the girls dream that most of their summer adventures would center around this shabby figure; adventures that would thrill them and at times almost overcome them.

If they had guessed it, they could not have been more cordial in their greeting and more eager to help him. Although none of them realized it, a problem to solve was already presenting itself.

CHAPTER V

A SOLITARY EXPLORER

As Matt Larkin brought his car to a stop, the traveller greeted them as if he were an old acquaintance and had made an appointment for them to meet him at this very spot in the desert and had been waiting and expecting them to come along. He took it as a matter of course that he would be invited to ride and the moment the door of the car was opened he scrambled in with quick, nervous movements.

He was a thin faced little man, stoop shouldered as if he had spent his life bent over books, but there was a charm in his twinkling eyes that made friends at once for him, no matter what society he entered. He was equally at home with people of wealth as he was with the poorest of his friends.

So eager was the old man to be seated, out of the scorching rays of the sun, that he left his bundle lying at the side of the road.

"Your pack!" called Kit, as Matt was about to start the car. "You've forgotten your pack!"

The man gave her a grateful smile. "That's just like me to leave it.

Alicia said I was sure to do just that," he laughed nervously.

He jumped out of the car and quickly recovered his property. "Don't know what I would have done if I'd lost it – all my sustenance and books."

"Listen to the old chap," whispered Joy in Shirley's ear. "He's a regular highbrow. Hear him talk! 'Sustenance', what does that mean?"

"Why, his food, of course," replied Shirley with a laugh.

"Then why didn't he say so? Isn't the word 'food' polite enough for him?" giggled Joy.

"I wonder who he is?" Kit was puzzled by the man. He did not belong to the desert, of that she was sure.

As if in answer to her thought, the stranger announced: "I am Anton Gillette of Dorsey College. I'm on an exploring expedition."

"A professor!" gasped Joy in a low voice. "He'll spoil all our fun. We'll have to pretend we're clever or something of the sort." This was whispered in Bet's ear and brought forth a laugh.

"Be yourself, Joy! Don't try to be clever. It might strain you." Bet leaned forward eagerly and addressed the old man. "An exploring expedition! How interesting that sounds. What are you going to explore? And where?"

"Are you going to find a buried city?" asked Enid excitedly.

"Hardly a buried city in this country," he returned.

"But why? When there were seven cities of Troy and maybe more, why can't it be possible that there is one buried city here?"

"And maybe we could find a King Tut grave," suggested Shirley.

"That's an idea," said Bet, and the girls joined in the laugh, but the professor was serious.

"I don't mind telling you that it is something of that sort that I am after. I want to find the ruins of an old Indian village and find the grave of a certain old chief. How did you guess it?"

"We didn't," laughed Kit. "We were just hoping it might be so."

"This old chief was supposed to have been buried with many historical objects of the tribe, and it is his grave that I must find. It is all very interesting – very," nodded the professor.

"There are Indian mounds all over Arizona," said Kit. "I don't see how you will ever find the right one."

"I have a clue. It may be only an old legend without any foundation of truth in it, but I don't think so. It was at the scene of an Indian massacre. A common enough story it is. The white men encroaching on the Indian lands," began Professor Gillette but Kit interrupted.

"There are thousands of legends like that. They are like the cactus, they grow everywhere in Arizona."

But the old professor was not to be discouraged so easily. "The Indians killed some white men and then soldiers came and there was a massacre – mostly whites."

"There's nothing unusual about that story, Professor Gillette."

"True. But in this case a princess, the daughter of a chief, cursed her own people for their cruelty. And within a year the tribe at that village died out. Every man of them."

"Why that's the legend of Lost Canyon!" exclaimed Kit excitedly. "And does this princess come back and haunt the canyon, does she appear when anything crooked is being done around that section?"

"Yes, yes, that's the story. Lost Canyon, do you know where Lost Canyon is?" asked the old man with trembling eagerness.

"Lost Canyon was my playground since babyhood. It's like my front yard. I love it!"

"How wonderful! Then maybe you know this man." He fumbled in his pockets, taking out the contents of all of them, before he found the letter which he handed to Kit. "This is an introduction to a man who may be very useful to me."

Kit laughed happily as she read the name on the envelope. "Mr. William Patten." Returning the paper to the professor she said, "I should know that man well. He's my father!"

"Oh isn't that jolly, Kit!" cried Joy. "Imagine meeting someone who is on the way to see your father! That's a bit of luck, isn't it?"

"Dad will be very glad to help you," continued Kit.

"What a strange coincidence!" remarked the professor glowing with pleasure. His boyish smile offset the formal style that might have bothered the girls. His dark eyes were small and twinkling and he was so very nearsighted that it was necessary for him to look intently in order to see anything.

At that moment a loud report startled them. Joy gave a scream of fright. "What is it?" she cried excitedly. "Indians!"

"Shooting?" exclaimed the professor, half rising in his seat. "Is it a hold up?" He looked around in all directions. But the desert seemed devoid of human life.

"It means that we've blown out a tire," smiled Matt as he brought the car to a stop at the side of the road and got out muttering, "Of all the ding-busted places to get a flat! Not even a spear of grass for shade and no water hole nearer than Coyote Creek and that's ten miles away." Matt puffed as he unstrapped the spare tire and prepared to jack up the wheel.

The girls stood around, anxious to make themselves useful, but Matt paid no attention to their offers of help. He even scowled at Professor Gillette, and went on without answering him. Matt's face was red with the effort under the burning sun that scorched the flesh with its blistering rays. It seemed impossible that life could exist in that burned-out sandy waste.

Bet Baxter had not spoken. She was tremendously interested in the things she saw around her. Suddenly she gave an exclamation of surprise as her foot touched what appeared at first to be a light-colored stone, and saw it move.

"What under the sun is this?" she cried as she stooped over the now motionless little creature.

"Oh, that's a horn toad, it won't bother you," laughed Kit. "You'll see plenty of them around."

"Isn't it pretty!" Bet picked up the little creature between her thumb and forefinger gingerly. "Just look at its funny little tail! I never knew a toad had a tail."

"And look at the thorns all over its body. Isn't it funny?" Enid poked her finger at the toad, prodding it in the sides.

The toad was motionless now as if dead, only an occasional blinking of the eyes showed that it had life.

"If it isn't poisonous, I'd like to take it along for a pet." Bet turned toward the car.

"Oh, leave it where it is, Bet. Maybe it wouldn't want to be parted from its family," said Shirley in her quiet way.

Kit burst into a peal of laughter. "That's what I call considerate. Its mother mightn't like to have it go out for a ride in an auto with strange people."

Bet paid no attention to Kit's nonsense. She was fascinated by this strange creature, covered with horn-like spines.

But at that moment Matt's voice rang out: "Let's go! And here's hoping we'll have no more tire trouble before we reach the ranch."

Bet turned to put down the horn toad, then exclaimed excitedly: "Look, Kit, what kind of a bird is that?"

"That's just a road runner. You'll see plenty of them before the summer is over."

"What a funny name for a bird!" answered Bet.

"You can call it a Chaparral Cock, if that suits your fancy," laughed Matt Larkin.

"I'll do it!" Bet said with a toss of her head. "That name sounds very stylish. And it suits it much better. Look at its lovely blue crest, and its bronze-green body!" The girls gave a little gasp as the large bird, evidently startled by the engine, went off on a run that looked ridiculous in a bird. Aided by its large wings, it made rapid progress.

"I like that bird!" cried Joy with enthusiasm. "I believe it could be taught to dance."

"You can have the job of teaching it," remarked Shirley Williams with a shiver. "I wouldn't want to get a nip from that long bill."

"If you want to know what that bill can do, just get the opinion of the rattlesnakes and lizards around here. Those birds are the worst enemies the snakes have. They certainly fade away when Mr. Road Runner is out for a walk. And by the way, Bet, this bird has a third name, it's 'Snake killer'."

But Matt was calling impatiently and the girls finally left their observations of desert life and took their seats in the car.

For a few miles Matt sent the machine ahead at a rate which troubled the girls but finally his impatience wore away and he slowed down to his ordinary careful driving.

Kit nodded approval and whispered to Bet: "Matt forgot he was driving a car; he thought he was riding a bronc."

"I am greatly relieved," said the professor quietly. "Speed is the curse of the age. We should take lessons from the Indians."

"That's all you know about Injins, Injins ain't so slow as you might think. I've seen 'em with plenty of ginger in 'em. They're only slow when there's work to be done." Matt Larkin had made the longest speech that Kit had ever heard from him at one time. He was not a talkative man, and rarely addressed anyone.

But that did not shake the professor in his conviction that Indians had led a quiet, placid existence and should be an example.

"Yes, we have much to learn from the red man," he continued just as if Matt had not spoken. And if he heard the contemptuous snort from the driver, he did not let on.

Mile after mile slid by quickly and soon the walls of the ranch house were visible.

"There it is!" cried Kit, hardly able to sit still. "We're almost home!"

"At long last!" Joy burst out impatiently. "I had almost given up expecting it. It's been ages since we left the station."

"But wasn't every minute of it perfect!" Enid Breckenridge was enjoying the feeling of ownership in the land. Part of this strange country was hers, her home. "Didn't you enjoy it all?"

"No, I didn't," Joy answered. "I got so tired of those tall smoke-stack cactus things that I wanted to scream." She pointed her hand at the towering pillars of the suhuaro, or giant cactus. "And I hope I'll never have to see a cow again. They're everywhere! Only one thing I dislike more, that's cactus."

"Why, Joy Evans, I think they are the most romantic looking objects I've ever seen. They're wonderful!" exclaimed Bet.

"And as for me, I've taken pictures every time Matt has slowed down enough. That shows what I think of them. I'm enthused over everything! I've taken six pictures of cattle." Shirley, the quiet one, rarely spoke so whole-heartedly over things. She appreciated but seldom expressed her emotions.

Bet had half risen in the auto and craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the ranch buildings, but all they could see for the moment was the high wall of sun-dried bricks.

"What's the idea of that wall about a ranch?" she asked. In spite of Bet's lively imagination, she always wanted a reason for everything she saw. "They don't have Indian raids any more, do they?" Bet's tone indicated that she almost wished they did.

"Oh, I hope not!" cried Joy. "Those fierce-looking Indians that we saw racing toward the station didn't look exactly peaceful. I'm sure I don't feel so very safe."

"Don't worry, girls, the Indians are tame enough now. But the walls date back to the time when they weren't," Kit explained. "When that wall was built the settlers needed it badly."

"Isn't it romantic!" Bet thrilled as she looked at the old adobe wall fully ten feet high with small porthole openings at intervals. "And there are the tiny windows they used to shoot through at the Indians. I'd love to have seen it."

"Oh, Bet, you make me ashamed of you! And you know well enough you wouldn't have wanted to see an Indian raid," sniffed Joy contemptuously. "You're just trying to appear brave and wild."

But there was a look in Bet's eyes that confirmed her remarks. She longed for adventure, wild fighting and glorious deeds of valor. If she had been born earlier and been a boy she would have chosen the life of a soldier or a pirate. Of that she was very sure.

"And down back of that wall is the canyon, where the Indians hid and then rushed the ranch before the people inside knew they were there. The old Indian trail runs off over the mountain on the other side of the canyon," Kit informed her friends.

"Think of having to live out here in those days when there was so much danger! I'm glad I didn't have to," Enid sighed. The memory of her own isolated existence on Campers' Trail through that hard winter was still too fresh in her memory. She did not often mention the unpleasantness of her life. Most of it was too bitter.

Eagerly the girls watched for the first sight of the ranch house, but it was not until the car reached the wide gateway that they were able to glimpse it. It stood far back toward the edge of the cliff and was so completely surrounded by trees that it was impossible to tell just what kind of a house it was. If it had not been for a few windows it might have been taken for part of the old wall. There was no attempt at ornament, in that adobe structure. The front was bare and without imagination. The door was in the center with a stone walk leading to it.

Bet especially felt disappointed. She had planned on a Spanish castle or something equally imposing. A romantic setting for Enid, a gorgeous frame that would bring out all the loveliness of her friend.

Everything was quiet. There was no sign of life.

Matt brought the car to a stand-still, and jumping out, opened the doors. The girls dismounted and stood there hardly knowing what to do.

Then a Chinese boy opened the door of the house and Bet caught a glimpse beyond him of a great patio, or interior court, full of tropical plants like a hot house.

Here at last was a spot romantic enough to suit her taste. Bet clung to Kit's arm as they went along the stone walk to the door.

"It's perfect, Kit, it's perfect!" she gasped.

CHAPTER VI

CASA GRANDE

The soft, tinkling ripple of a fountain in that interior court added to a feeling of unreality. It was a stage set for a play. Palm trees and many flowering plants grew in profusion and The Merriweather Girls, unused to the luxuriant verdure of the south, stood looking about them in surprise.

Even Kit was astonished, for Casa Grande had been neglected for years before Judge Breckenridge had bought it and restored its beauty.

Enid's face shone with happiness. She was the first to speak. "Isn't it glorious!" she cried as she clasped her hands together. "Just think of being miles and miles away in the desert and having a place like this. It's like a miracle! I love it!"

"Who wouldn't?" laughed Joy. "You are a lucky girl, Enid. You simply can't appreciate it!"

"Can't I?" Enid smiled as she gave a little sigh.

Joy noticed the wistful look and hastened to add: "Of course you appreciate it, Enid. I'm just envious, that's all."

Bet was so moved by the loveliness of the garden that tears stood in her eyes. "I'd like to stay here always," she said with a catch in her voice.

"Do you mean it, Bet?" asked Joy. "I think it's great, of course, but it's too much like a hothouse to suit me. I wouldn't think of living here forever."

At that moment they were interrupted by the silent appearance of Tang, the Chinese cook. A tea wagon was being wheeled in by two young Chinese boys, Tang himself being too dignified to help in the serving. When he wanted to give an order to his boys he clapped his hands and they responded as quickly as if he delivered his command in a loud voice.

Tea was served in small Chinese bowls with preserved fruits, ginger and wafer-like cakes. A bland smile covered the face of Tang as he glided softly about the veranda; a well satisfied air expressed his content with life. He motioned to the boys to place a stool here and another there beside the chairs. These were to be used as tables.

"Some service!" whispered Shirley in Bet's ear. "Don't you love it?"

"I feel like a million dollars – or maybe two!" answered Bet.

The old professor seemed quite at ease. He accepted the attention of the servants without the least surprise or embarrassment over his soiled clothes.

The honking of an auto horn announced the arrival of the second car. Somewhere during the trip the silent Judge seemed to have lost much of his reserve. He hailed Tang as if he were an old friend, and the dignified Chinaman placed the pillows on a reclining chair which awaited Mrs. Breckenridge, as the Judge carried her into the patio. The invalid might have been a child, so easily did the tall man lift her and move her from place to place.

"How lovely this is!" the woman cried. "I'm sure I'll get well now. I believe all the peace in the world is right here."

Enid was standing beside her mother, arranging and rearranging the pillows to make sure that the invalid was comfortable.

"Of course you'll get well," laughed the Judge. "Before long you'll be busting broncos, as Kit says. You can't help but feel better in this glorious air," he said, stroking her thin hand.

The woman smiled at the happy faces about her then her eyes rested hungrily on her daughter. Her heart had not yet been satisfied, she was eager to make up to that daughter for the years of separation.

The Judge had owned the ranch for three years, but this was the first visit his wife had made to it. The doctors had tried to persuade her to leave the Long Island home where the memories of

her lost daughter surrounded her, but she had clung to the place, always waiting, always expecting the child to be returned.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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