Norton Carol

The Phantom Town Mystery

Carol Norton
The Phantom Town Mystery

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23169803
The Phantom Town Mystery:

Содержание

Carol Norton
The Phantom Town Mystery

CHAPTER I
LUCKY LOON

A whirl of gleaming sand and dust on a cross desert road in Arizona. The four galloping objects turned off the road, horses rearing, riders laughing; the two Eastern girls flushed, excited; the pale college student exultant; the cowboy guide enjoying their pleasure. A warm, sage-scented wind carried the cloud of dust away from them down into the valley.

"That was glorious sport, wasn't it, Mary?" Dora Bellman's olive-tinted face was glowing joyfully. "Wouldn't our equestrian teacher back in Sunnybank Seminary be properly proud of us?"

Lovely Mary Moore, delicately fashioned, fair as her friend was dark, nodded beamingly, too out of breath for the moment to speak.

Jerry Newcomb in his picturesque cowboy garb, blue handkerchief knotted about his neck, looked admiringly at the smaller girl.

"I reckon you two'll want to ride in the rodeo. I never saw Easterners get saddle-broke on cow ponies as quick as you have."

Then his gray eyes smiled at the other boy, tall, thin, pale, who was wiping dust from his shell-rimmed glasses. “Dick Farley, I reckon you’ve ridden before.”

Dick flashed a radiant smile which made his rather plain face momentarily good-looking. “Some,” he said, “when I was a kid on Granddad’s farm just out of Boston.”

Jerry, a little ahead, was leading them slowly across soft shimmering sand toward a narrow entrance in cliff-like rocks.

Dora protested, “Mary *ought* to know how to ride a cow pony since she was born right here on the desert while I have always lived on the Hudson River until two weeks ago.”

“Even so,” Mary retaliated brightly, “but, as you know, I left here when I was eight to go East to school and since I have *never* been back, I haven’t much advantage over you.”

The cowboy turned in his saddle and there was a tender light in his eyes as he looked at the younger girl. “I’m sure glad something fetched you back, Mary, though I’m mighty sorry it was your dad’s illness that did it.”

Dora, glancing at the pretty face of her best friend, saw the frank, friendly smile she gave the cowboy. To herself she thought, – “Jerry certainly thinks Mary is the sweetest thing he ever saw, but *she* only thinks of him as a nice boy who once, long ago, was her childhood playmate.”

They had reached the narrow entrance in the wall of rocks. It was a mysterious looking spot; a giant gateway leading, the girls knew not where. On the gleaming sand near the entrance lay a

half-buried skeleton. It looked as though it might have been that of a man rather than a beast. The girls exchanged startled glances, but, as Jerry was riding unconcernedly through the gateway, they silently followed.

"What a dramatic sort of place!" Dora exclaimed in an awed voice as she gazed about her.

They were on a floor of sand that was circled about by low mountains, grim, gray, uninviting. Here and there in crevices a twisted dwarf tree clung, its roots exposed. There was a death-like silence in the place. Even the soft rush of wind over the desert outside could not be heard.

Mary shuddered and rode closer to the cowboy. "Jerry," she said, "*why* have you brought us here? Is there something that you want to show us?"

The cowboy nodded. "You recollect that Dora was saying how she wished there was a mystery she could solve – " he began, when he was interrupted.

"Oh, Jerry," Dora's dark eyes glowed with anticipation, "is there *really* a mystery here – in this awfully bleak place? What? Where? I don't see anything at all but those almost straight up and down cliffs and – "

There was an exultant exclamation from Dick Farley. Perhaps his strong spectacles gave him clearer sight.

"I see a house, honest Injun, I do, or something that looks powerfully like one." He turned questioning eyes toward the cowboy.

"Righto! You're clever, old man!" Jerry Newcomb told him. "Don't tell where it is. See if the girls can find it."

For a long silent moment Mary and Dora sat in their saddles turning their gaze slowly about the low circling mountains.

Dora's excited cry told the others that she saw it, and Mary, noting the direction of her friend's gaze, saw, high on a narrow ledge, what looked like a wall made of small rocks with openings that might have been meant for two windows and a door. The flat roof could not be seen from the floor of the desert.

"How perfectly thrilling!" Dora cried. "What was it, Jerry, an Indian cliff dwelling?"

The cowboy shook his head. "Let's ride up closer," he said. He led the way to the very base of the low mountain. The ledge, which had one time been the front yard of the house, had been cracked by the elements and leaned outward, leaving a crevice of about twenty feet. There were no steps leading up to the house. It was, as far as the three Easterners could see, without a way of approach.

Dick Farley rode about examining the spot from all angles. "Jerry," he said at last, "if it isn't an Indian dwelling, who did live there? Surely *not* a white family!"

The cowboy shook his head. "Not a family. Only a man, Danish, but he was white all right. Sven Pedersen was his name but everyone called him 'Lucky Loon.' The name fitted him on two counts. Lucky because he struck it rich so often, and he certainly was 'loony' if that means crazy."

"What did he do?" Mary asked, her blue eyes wide and a little terrified.

"Sven Pedersen had a secret – Dad said – and that was why he took to hoarding all the wealth he got out of his gold and turquoise mines. My father was a boy then. He says he hasn't any doubt but that old rock house up yonder is plastered with gold and turquoise."

Dora asked in amazement, "Doesn't anybody know? Hasn't anyone *ever* climbed up there to see?"

"No one that I've heard tell about," Jerry said. "No one cared to risk his life doing it, I reckon." Then, seeming to feel that he had sufficiently aroused his listeners' curiosity, the cowboy went on to explain. "As Sven Pedersen grew old, he got queerer and queerer. He took a notion that he was going to be killed for his money, so after he'd built that rock house, he shut himself up in it, and if any intruder so much as rode through that gateway in the rocks over there, bang would go his gun and the horse would drop dead. He was sure-shot all right, Sven Pedersen was."

Dick Farley's large eyes glanced from the high house out to the gate in the wall of rock. "I bet the rider of the dead horse scuttled away mighty quick," he said.

"I reckon he did," Jerry agreed when Dora exclaimed in a tone of horror: "He must have shot a man once anyway. Mary and I saw the half-buried skeleton of one out by the gate. We were sure we did."

"Maybe so," Jerry went on explaining. "You see no one could

tell whether the Lucky Loon was in his house or out of it; no one ever saw him in the door or on the ledge, but they found out soon enough when they heard his gun bang."

"How did he get his food and water?" Dick asked.

"Maybe there's a spring on the mountain," Dora suggested.

"Nary a spring," the cowboy told them. "These mountains and the desert around here are bone dry. That's why there's so many skeletons of cows hereabout. Some reckoned that he rode away nights to a town where he wasn't known. He might have stayed away for days and got back in the night without anyone knowing."

"But, Jerry, what happened to him in the end? Does anybody know? Did he go away?" Dora and Dick were questioning when Mary cried in sudden alarm, "Oh, Jerry, he *isn't* here *now*, is he?"

It was Dora who replied, "Of course not, Mary. You *know* Jerry wouldn't bring us in here if there was any danger of our being shot."

"I reckon Sven Pedersen's been dead this long time back," the cowboy told them. "Father was a kid when Lucky Loon was old. Dad says he and some other kids watched around the gate rocks, taking turns for almost a week. They reckoned if the old hermit *had* gone away, they'd like to climb up there and find the Evil Eye Turquoise Sven had boasted so much about before he shut himself up."

"*Did* they climb up there?"

"*What* was the eye?"

"One question at a time, please," Jerry told the eager girls.

"No, they didn't go. Dad said it was his turn to watch one night. There was a cutting wind and since it was very dark, he thought he'd just slip inside of the rock gate where the blowing sand wouldn't hit him. Dad got sort of sleepy, after a time, crouched down on the sand, when suddenly he heard a gun bang. He leaped out of the gate, up on his horse and galloped for home. He laughs when he tells that story. He reckons now that he'd dreamed the shot since Sven Pedersen never *was* seen again and that was thirty years ago." The cowboy had looked at his watch. "Jumping Steers!" he exclaimed. "Most milking time and here I'm fifteen miles from the ranch. Dick, will you ride home with the girls?"

Jerry had whirled his horse's head and had started for the gateway, the others quickly following. Dick, at the end, was just passing through the gate when they distinctly heard the report of a gun.

CHAPTER II
THE GHOST TOWN

Safely outside of the wall of rocks, the four young people drew their restless horses to a standstill. Mary's nettlesome brown pony was hard to quiet until Jerry reached out a strong brown hand and patted its head.

Mary lifted startled blue eyes. "Jerry, *what* do you make of that?" she asked. "We *couldn't* have imagined that gun shot and surely the horses heard it also."

Jerry's smile was reassuring. "'Twas the story that frightened you girls, I reckon," he said, glancing about and up and down the road as he spoke. "It's hunters out after quail or rabbits, more'n like."

Then, seeing that Mary still glanced anxiously back at the gate in the rock wall, Dick said sensibly, "Of course you girls *know* that Sven Pedersen *couldn't* be in that high house. He *must* have been dead for years if he was old when Jerry's father was a boy."

"Of course," Dora, less inclined to be imaginative, replied. Then to the cowboy she said in her practical matter-of-fact way, "Hurry along home to your milking, Jerry, and Dick, don't you bother to come with us. Now that you're working on the Newcomb ranch you ought to be there. It's only a few miles up over this sunshiny road to Gleeson. We aren't the least bit afraid

to ride home alone, are we?" She smiled at her friend.

Mary, not wishing to appear foolishly timid, said, in as courageous a voice as she could muster, "Of course we're not afraid. Goodbye, boys, we'll see you tomorrow."

Turning the heads of their horses up a gently ascending mountain road, the girls cantered away. At a bend, Mary glanced back. The boys were sitting just where they had left them. Jerry's sombrero and Dick's cap waved, then, feeling assured that the girls were all right, the boys went at a gallop down the road and across the desert valley to the Newcomb ranch which nestled at the base of the Chiricahua range.

"They're nice boys, aren't they?" Mary said. "I've always wished I had a brother and I do believe Jerry is going to be just like one."

Aloud Dora replied, "I have noticed that sometimes he calls you 'Little Sister.'" To herself she thought: "Oh, Mary, how *blind* you are!"

Dreamily the younger girl was saying – "That's because we were playmates when we were little so very long ago."

"Oh my, how ancient we are!" Dora said teasingly. "Please remember that you are only one year younger than I am and I refuse to be called elderly."

Mary smiled faintly but it was evident that she was still thinking of the past, when she had been a little girl with golden curls that hung to her waist; a wonderfully pretty, wistful little girl. When she spoke, she said, "It's only natural that Jerry should

call me 'Little Sister.' Our mothers were like sisters when they were girl brides. I've told you how they both came from the East just as we have. My mother met Dad in Bisbee where he was a mining engineer, and Jerry's mother taught a little desert school over near the Newcomb ranch. She didn't teach long though, for that very first vacation she married Jerry's cowboy father. After that Mother and Mrs. Newcomb were good friends, naturally, being brides and neighbors."

Dora laughed. "Twenty-five miles apart wouldn't be called *close* neighbors in Sunnybank-on-the-Hudson where I come from," she said.

Mary, not heeding the interruption, kept on. "When Jerry and I were little, we were playmates. I spent days at the ranch sometimes," her sweet face was very sad as she ended with, "until Mother died when I was eight."

"Then you came East to boarding-school and became like a sister to me," Dora said tenderly. "Oh, Mary, when you came West to be with your dear sick dad, I wonder if you know what it meant to me to be allowed to come with you."

"I know what it means to *me* to have you, Dodo, so I 'spect it means the same to you," was the affectionate reply.

For a time the girls cantered along in thoughtful silence. The rutty road was leading up toward the tableland on which stood the now nearly deserted old mining-town of Gleeson.

Far below them the desert valley stretched many miles southward to the Mexican border. The girls could see a distant

blue haze that was the smoke from the Douglas copper smelters.

The late afternoon sun lay in floods of silver light on the sandy road ahead of them. It was very still. Not a sound was to be heard. Now and then a rabbit darted past silently.

"How peaceful this hour is on the desert," Mary began, glancing at her friend who was riding so close at her side. Noticing that Dora was deep in thought, she asked lightly, "Won't you say it out loud?"

"Why, of course. I was just wondering why Jerry hurried us away so fast from Lucky Loon's rock house."

"Because he had to do the milking," Mary replied simply.

Dora nodded. "So he *said*." Then she hastened to add, "Oh, don't think I'm inferring that Jerry told an untruth, but you know that some evenings he has stayed with us for supper and – "

Mary glanced up startled. "Dora Bellman," she said, "do you think maybe there *was* someone up in that rock house watching us all the time we were there; someone who fired the gun just as we were leaving to warn us to keep away?"

Dora, seeing her friend's pale face, was sorry that she had wondered aloud. "Of course not!" she said brightly. "That's impossible!" Then to change the subject, she started another. "Jerry didn't have time to tell us about the Evil Eye Turquoise, did he?"

"Dora, do you know what *I* think?" Mary exclaimed as one who had made an important discovery. "I don't believe he will tell us about that. I acted so like a scare-cat all the time we were

there, he won't ever take us there again and he probably won't tell us the story either."

"Then I'll find it out some other way," Dora declared. "I'm crazy about mysteries as you know, and, if there *really is one* about that rock house, I want to try to solve it."

She said no more about it just then, as they had reached the old ghost town of Gleeson. They turned up a side street toward mountain peaks that were about a mile away. On their right was the corner general store and post office. A crumbling old adobe building it was, with a rotting wooden porch, on which stood a row of armchairs. In the long ago days when the town had been teeming with life, picturesque looking miners and ranchers had sat there tilted back, smoking pipes and swapping yarns. Today the chairs were empty.

An old man, shriveled, gray-bearded, unkempt, but with kind gray eyes, deep-sunken under shaggy brows, stood in the open door. He smiled out at them in a friendly way, then beckoned with a bony finger.

"I do believe Mr. Harvey has a letter for us," Dora said.

The old man had shuffled into the dark well of his store. A moment later he reappeared with several letters and a newspaper.

"Good!" Dora exclaimed as she rode close to the porch. "Thanks a lot," she called brightly up to the old man who was handing the packet down over the sagging wooden rail.

His friendly, toothless smile was directed at the smaller girl. "Heerd tell as how yer pa's sittin' up agin, Miss Mary," he said.

"Mis' Farley, yer nurse woman, came down ter mail some letters a spell back." Then, before Mary could reply, he continued in his shrill, wavering voice, "That thar pale fellar wi' specs on is her son, ain't he?"

"Yes, Mr. Harvey. Dick is Mrs. Farley's son." Mary took time, in a friendly way, to satisfy the old man's curiosity. "Dick has been going to the Arizona State University this winter to be near his mother. She's a widow and he's her only son. Her husband was a doctor and they lived back in Boston before he died."

"Dew tell!" the old man wagged his head sympathetically. "I seen the young fellar ridin' around wi' Jerry Newcomb."

"Dick's working on the Newcomb ranch this summer," Mary said, as she started to ride on.

"Ho! Ho!" the old man cackled. "Tenderfoot if ever thar was un. What's Jerry reckonin' that young fellar kin do? Bustin' broncs?"

Mary smiled in appreciation of the old man's joke. "No, Jerry won't expect Dick to do *that* right at first. He's official fence-mender just at present."

Dora defended the absent boy. "Mr. Harvey, you wait until Dick has been on the desert long enough to get a coat of tan; he *may* surprise you."

"Wall, mabbe! mabbe!" the old storekeeper chuckled to himself as the girls, waving back at him, galloped away up the road in the little dead town.

On either side there were deserted adobe houses in varying

degrees of ruin, some with broken windows and doors, others with sagging roofs and crumbling walls.

The only sign of life was in three small adobes where poor Mexican families lived. Broken windows in two of the houses were stuffed with rags; the door yards were littered with rubbish. Unkempt children played in front of the middle house. The third adobe was neat and well kept. In it lived the Lopez family. Carmelita, the wife and mother, had long been cook for Mary Moore's father.

A bright, black-eyed Mexican boy of about ten ran out to the road as the girls approached. "Come on, Emanuel," Mary sang down to him. "You may put up our horses and earn a dime."

The small boy's white teeth flashed in a delighted grin. His brown feet raced so fast, that, by the time the girls were dismounting before the big square two-storied adobe near the mountains, Emanuel was there to lead their horses around back.

Mary glanced affectionately at the old place with its flower-edged walk, its broad porch and adobe pillars. Here her mother had come as a bride; here Mary had been born. Eight happy years they had spent together before her mother died. After Mary had been taken East to school, her father had returned, and here he had spent the winters, going back to Sunnybank each summer to be with his little girl.

Hurrying up the steps, Mary skipped into a pleasant living-room, where, near a wide window that was letting in a flood of light from the setting sun, sat her fine-looking father, pale after

his long illness, but growing stronger every day.

"Oh, Daddy dear!" Mary's voice was vibrant with love. "You've waited up for me, haven't you?" She dropped to her knees beside the invalid chair and pressed her flushed face to his gray, drawn cheek.

Then, glancing up at the nurse who had appeared from her father's bedroom, she asked eagerly, "May I tell Dad an adventure we've had?"

Mrs. Farley, middle-aged, kind-faced, shook her head, smiling down at the girl. "Not tonight, please. Won't tomorrow do?"

Mary sprang up, saying brightly, "I reckon it will have to." Then, stooping, she kissed her father as she whispered tenderly, "Rest well, darling. We're hoping you know all about – " then, little girl fashion, she clapped her hand on her mouth, mumbling, "Oh, I most disobeyed and *told* our adventure. See you tomorrow, Daddy."

CHAPTER III
THE MISSING FRIENDS

Upstairs, in Mary's room which was furnished as it had been when she had been there as a child, curly maple set with blue hangings, the two girls changed from riding habits to house dresses. Mary wore a softly clinging blue while Dora donned her favorite and most becoming cherry color.

"One might think that we are expecting company tonight." Mary was peering into the oval glass as she spoke, arranging her fascinating golden curls above small shell-like ears.

"Which, of course, we are *not*." Dora had brushed her black bob, boy-fashion, slick to her head. "There being no near neighbors to drop in." Then suddenly she exclaimed, "Oh, for goodness sakes alive, I completely forgot that letter. It's for both of us from Polly and Patsy. I've been wondering why they didn't write and tell us where they had decided to spend their summer vacation."

Dora sprang up to search for the letter in a pocket of her riding habit. Mary sat near a window in a curly maple rocker as she said dreamily: "If we hadn't come West, we would have been with them – that is, if they went to Camp Winnichook up in the Adirondacks the way we had planned all winter."

Dora, holding the letter unopened, sat near her friend and

smiled at her reminiscently as she said, "We plan and plan and plan for the future, don't we, and then we do something exactly different, and *most* unexpected, but *I* wouldn't give up being out here on the desert and living in a ghost town for all the fun Patsy and Polly may be having – "

Mary laughingly interrupted. "Do read the letter and let's see if they really *did* go there. Perhaps – "

"Yes, they did." Dora had unfolded a large, boyish-looking sheet of paper. "Camp Winnichook," she announced, then she read the rather indolent scrawl. "Dear Cowgirls," – it began —

"Patsy has just come in from a swim. She's drying her bathing suit by lying on the sand in front of the cabin in the sun. Her red hair, which *she* calls 'a wind blown mop,' looks, at present, like a mop that has just finished doing the kitchen floor. Last winter, you recall, she had a *few* red freckles on her saucy pug nose, but now she wears them all over her face and arms and even on her back. She's a sight to behold!"

There were spatters on the paper that might have been water. The type of penmanship changed. A jerky, uneven handwriting seemed to ejaculate indignantly, "Don't you kids believe a word of it. I'm a dazzling beauty – as ever! It's Polly whose looks are ruined – if she ever had any. She won't play tennis and she *won't* swim and she *will* eat chocolate drops – you know the finish, and she wasn't any too slim last year when she *had* to do gym."

The first penmanship took up the tale. "I had to forcibly push Patsy away. She's gone in to dress now, so I'll hurry and get this

letter into an envelope and sealed before she gets back because I want to tell on her.

"You know Pat has always said she was a boy hater, and the more the boys from Wales Military Academy rushed her, the more she would shrug her shoulders and 'pouff!' about them, but she's met her Waterloo. There's a flying field near our camp and a boy named Harry Hulbert is there studying to be a pilot. Pat and I strolled over to the field one day and ever since she caught sight of that tall, slim chap all done up in his flying togs, she's been wild to meet him. I wouldn't be surprised if she's even hoping that his machine will crash some day right in front of our cabin so that she can bind up his wounds and – "

Once again the jerky, uneven writing seemed to exclaim, "Silly gilly! *That's what* Polly is! It isn't the flier, it's the flying that *I'm* crazy about. I *do* wish I knew that Harry Hulbert, but not for any sentimental reasons, believe me. Pouff – for all of 'em! But fly I'm going to!! In truth, if you girls stay West until the end of vacation, you *may* see an airplane landing in your ghost town – me piloting!!!???"

Then came a wide space and when the writing began again, it was dated three days later and was Polly's lazy scrawl. "It's to laugh!" she began. "But, to explain. If you wish hard enough for anything, it's *bound* to happen. Not that Harry Hulbert's plane crashed in front of our cabin but it was forced down when Patsy and I were out in her little green car far from human habitation. Of course we hadn't gone riding *just* because we *saw*

that particular little silver plane practicing up in the air – oh, no – not at all!"

Patsy's jerky scribble interrupted. "She's a mean, horrid, misrepresenting person, Polly Perkins is! She knows perfectly well we *had* to go to the village to get a pound of butter for our camp mother, and wasn't it only *polite* for us to give that poor stranded boy a lift? He *is* a real decent sort, even though the only thing *he's* crazy about is flying, but we *did* learn something about him. His father has some sort of a government position in Arizona, where *you* are, no less. I mean, in the same state, and when Harry gets his pilot's license, he is to be a flying scout, he told us. He said it will be an awfully exciting life. When there has been a holdup out there on a stage or a train and the bandits leap on to their horses and flee across the border, Harry is to pursue them in his little silver plane and see where they go. Then he'll circle back to where a posse is waiting, notify them, and so the bandits will be captured. Won't that be simply too thrilling for words? Oh, *why* wasn't I born a boy? I could have been Patrick, then, instead of Patsy. Believe me, when Harry Hulbert gets his license, and it won't be long now – he's *that* good – don't I wish I could be a stowaway in his plane! We'd have to leave Polly here though. She's so heavy, the plane wouldn't be able to get off of the ground."

The lazy scrawl concluded the epistle. "If Patsy goes West, so do I, but I'll go by train. I have no romantic urge to take to the air with slim, goggle-eyed young men with a purpose in life.

"Our camp mother (nice Mrs. Higgins, Jane's aunt, came with us this year) is calling us to lunch, and right after that Pat and I are going to town to mail this. Pat wants me to say that when *her* friend Mister Harry Hulbert *does* fly West, she'll give him a letter of introduction to you two and I calls that right generous of her considering – "

"Pouff!" came a brief interruption. Then "Goodbye. We're signing off. Patsy Ordelle and Polly Perkins of the famous Sunnybank Seminary Quadralettes."

"What a jolly letter!" Mary said. "Wouldn't it be fun if the missing members of our little clan could be here with us. Patsy is as wild about mystery stories as you are and this ghost town just teems with them."

A rich, musical voice drifted up from the back porch, "Señoritas!"

"Oh, good! There's Carmelita calling us to supper, and *am I hungry*?" Dora tossed the letter on the dresser and slipping an arm about her friend, she gave her a little impulsive hug.

"I don't envy Pat and Poll, not the least little mite," she said as they went down the broad front stairway together. "It *is* lovely at Camp Winnichook as we well know, since we've been there with them the past three summers, but the desert has a lure for me that the little blue lake in the mountains never did have."

"I know," Mary agreed. "Those mountains are more like pretty hills. There's nothing grim or grand about them."

They entered a large, pleasant kitchen, in one corner of which,

between two windows, was a table spread with a red cloth. A good-looking middle-aged Mexican woman, dressed in bright colors, stood at the stove preparing to dish up their meal. "*Buenos dias, niñas*," she said in her deep, musical voice.

"Good evening, Carmelita," the girls replied, and then, when they had been served generous portions of the Americanized Mexican dish which the girls called "tamale pie," Dora flashed at the smiling cook a pleased glance as she said, "*Muchas gracias, Señora*."

Then to Mary, "It doesn't take long to use up all the Spanish *I* know. Let's take a vow that when we go back to Sunnybank Seminary next fall we will add Spanish to – " A wistful expression in her friend's face caused Dora to pause and exclaim in real alarm, "Mary Moore, do you think, because of your dad, that you *won't* be able to go back East to school? You have only one year more before you graduate. You know how we four of 'The Quadralettes' have counted on graduating together."

Mary smiled brightly. "Of course, I expect to go and take Dad with me." Her momentary wistful doubting had passed.

They had finished their supper and were rising when Carmelita, who had been out on the back porch, hurried in and began a rapid chattering in her own language. The mystified girls could not understand one word. But, as the Mexican woman kept pointing out toward the road, they felt sure that someone was coming toward the house, nor were they wrong.

CHAPTER IV
"DESPERATE DICK"

Skipping to the vine-covered back porch, the two girls peered through the deepening dusk at the approaching car. In it were two boys.

"One of them resembles Jerry," Mary said, "but the other one is also a cowboy, so it can't be Dick."

"It is Dick!" Dora exclaimed gleefully. "Jerry must have loaned him some cowboy togs."

"Oh, Happy Days!" Mary exulted. "Now we can ask Jerry about that Evil Eye Turquoise and all the rest of the story about poor Mr. Lucky Loon."

"If there is any rest to it," Dora remarked. "Look!" she interrupted herself to point laughingly at the little car that was rattling toward them. "Dick is waving his sombrero. He wants us to be sure and take notice of it!"

"Isn't he proud though?" Mary chuckled. "His face fairly shines."

Then, as the small car drew up near the porch, the girls clapped their hands gaily, and yet quietly, remembering that Mary's invalid father might be asleep.

"Oh, Dick," Dora exclaimed, not trying to hide her admiration, "your mother must see her to-be-physician son. You

make a regular screen-star cowboy, doesn't he, Mary?"

Before the other girl could reply, Dick, who had leaped to the ground, struck a ridiculous pose as he said in a deep, dramatic voice, "Dick, the Desperate Range Rider."

Dora's infectious laugh rang out. "Your big, dark eyes look so solemn through those shell-rimmed glasses, Mr. Desperate Dick, that somehow you fail to strike terror into our hearts," she bantered.

Then Mary smiled up at Jerry, who was standing near her. Half teasingly she asked, "To what do we owe the honor of this visit? When we parted this afternoon, you called 'we'll see you tomorrow.'"

Jerry glanced at the other boy, mischievous twinkles in his gray eyes. "You might as well 'fess up, old man. Truth is, Dick couldn't wait until tomorrow to let you girls admire him in his cowboy togs."

"Villain!" Dick tried to glower at his betraying friend, but ended by beaming upon him with a most friendly grin. "I suppose I *had* to *rope* you and drag you over here quite against your will."

Jerry's smile at the curly-headed little girl at his side revealed, more than words, the real reason of his coming. What he said was, "Mom had a letter she wanted mailed and – er – as long as Dick wanted to show off, I reckoned – "

"Oh, Jerry," Mary caught his arm, "it really doesn't matter in the least *why* you came. I was wild to see you – " then, when the tall cowboy began to glow with pride, Mary quite spoiled

her compliment by hurrying to add, "Oh, it wasn't *you* that I wanted to see." Jerry pretended to be greatly crestfallen, so she laughingly added, "Of course I'm *always* glad to see you, Big Brother, but – "

"Goodness!" Dora rushed to her friend's rescue. "You're getting all tangled up." Then to Jerry, "Mary and I are wild to know more about that awfully desolate stone house you showed us this afternoon and about the Evil Eye Turquoise – "

"Yes, and about poor Mr. Lucky Loon – " Mary put in.

"Rather a contradictory description, isn't it?" Dick asked. "How can a man be poor and lucky all in one sentence?"

"I'll tell you what." Jerry had a plan to suggest. "Let's go down to the store and get old Silas Harvey to tell us all that he knows about Lucky Loon. I reckon he'd loosen up for you girls, but he never would for me. He knows more than any other living person about that rock house and the mystery of Sven Pedersen's life – "

"Oh, good!" Mary's animated face was lovely to look upon in the starlight. Jerry's eyes would have told her so, had she read them aright, but her thoughts were not of herself.

"Let's walk down," she suggested. "It's such a lovely night." Then she added, "Wait here while Dora and I go up to our room and put on our sweater coats."

"You'll need them!" Dick commented. "Even in June these desert nights are nippy."

The girls, hand in hand, fairly danced through the wide lower hall, but so softly that no sound could penetrate the closed door

beyond which Mary's father slept.

They did not need to light the kerosene lamp. The two long door-like windows in Mary's room were letting in a flood of soft, silvery starlight. Dora found her flash and her jaunty green sweater coat. "It looks better with this cherry-colored dress than my pink one," she chattered, "and your yellow coat looks too sweet for anything with that blue dress. Happy Days, but doesn't Jerry think you're too pretty to be real? His eyes almost eat you up – "

"Silly!" Mary retorted. "It's utterly impossible for Jerry and me to fall in love with each other. Goodness, didn't we play together when we were babies?" Her tone seemed to imply that no more could possibly be said upon the subject.

"No one is so blind as he who will not see," Dora sing-songed her trite quotation, then, fearing that Mary would not like so much teasing, she slipped a loving arm about her and gave her a little contrite hug. "I'll promise to join the blind hereafter, if you think I'm seeing too much, Mary dear," she promised.

"I think you're *imagining* too much," was the laughing rejoinder. "Now, let's tiptoe downstairs, and oh, I must tap at the sitting-room door and tell nice Mrs. Farley where we are going."

Just before Mary tapped, however, the door opened softly and Dick appeared, his mother closely following, her rather tired brown eyes adoring him. "Haven't I the nicest cowboy son?" she asked the girls, glancing from one to the other impartially.

It was Dora who replied, "We think so, Mrs. Farley."

"However," the mother leaned forward to kiss the boy's pale cheek, "I'll not be entirely satisfied until you're as brown as Jerry."

"Has Dick told you that we girls are going? – " Mary began.

Mrs. Farley nodded pleasantly. "Down to the post office? Yes, I hope you'll find that ancient storekeeper in a garrulous mood. Good night!"

Jerry was seated on the top step of the back porch waiting for them. They caught a dreamy far-away expression in his gray eyes. He was looking across the shimmering distance to the Chiricahua Mountains, and thinking of the time when he would build, on his own five hundred acres, a home for someone. He glanced up almost guiltily when Mary's finger tips gave him a light caress on his sun-tanned cheek.

"Brother Jerry," she teased, "are you star-dreaming?"

He sprang to his feet. "I reckon I *was* dreaming, sure enough, Little Sister," he confessed.

Mary slipped her slim, white hand under his khaki-covered arm, and, smiling up at him with frank friendship, she said, "The road down the hill is so rough and hobbly, I'm going to hang on to you, may I?"

Dora did not hear the cowboy's low spoken reply, for Dick was speaking to her, but to herself she thought, "Some day a miracle will be performed and she who is now blind will see, and great will be the revelation." Then, self-rebuking and aloud, "Oh, Dick, forgive me, what were you saying? I reckon, as Jerry says,

that I was thinking of something else."

"Not very complimentary to your present companion." Dick pretended to be quite downcast about it. "I merely asked if I might aid you over the ruts – "

Dora laughed gleefully. "Dick," she said in a low voice, "I'm going to tell you what I was thinking. I was wondering why Mary doesn't notice that Jerry likes her extra-special." Dick's eyes were wide in the starlight. "Does he? I hadn't noticed it."

Dora laughed and changed the subject. "Oh, Dick, isn't this the shudderin'est, spookiest place there ever was?"

They had passed the three small adobe huts that were occupied by Mexican families and were among the old crumbling houses, which, in the dim light, looked more haunted than they had in the day.

"I suppose that each one holds memories of sudden riches won, and many of them have secrets of tragedies, —*murders* even, maybe." Dora shuddered and drew closer to Dick.

"You *are* imaginative tonight," he said, smiling at her startled, olive-tinted face. "It's quite a leap, though, from romance to gunfights and – "

Mary turned to call back to them, "Jerry and I have it all planned, just what we are to do. I'm to ask some innocent question and, Dora, you're to help me out, but we mustn't appear *too* interested or too prying, Jerry says, or for some reason, quite unknown, old Mr. Harvey will put on the clam act. Shh! Here we are! Good, there's a light. Now Jerry is to speak his piece first

and I am to chime in. Then, Dora, you take your cue from me."

Dick whispered close to his companion's ear, "I evidently haven't a speaking part in the tragedy or comedy about to be enacted."

Dora giggled. "You can be scenery," she teased, recalling to Dick the forgotten fact that he was wearing a cowboy outfit for the first time and feeling rather awkward in it.

Jerry opened the door, a jangling bell rang; then he stepped aside and let Mary enter first.

CHAPTER V
POOR LITTLE BODIL

Old Mr. Harvey was dozing in a tilted armchair close to his stove. He sat up with a start when his discordant-toned bell rang, and blinked into the half-darkness near the door. The smoked chimney on his hanging kerosene lamp in the middle of the room and near the ceiling did little to illumine the place. When he saw who his visitors were, he gave his queer cackling laugh, "Wall, I'll be dinged ef I wa'n't a dreamin' I was back in holdup days and that some of them thar bandits was bustin' in to clean out my stock." Then, as he rose, almost creakingly, he said, disparagingly, as he glanced about at the dust and cobweb-covered shelves, "Not as how they'd find onythin' *now* worth the totin' away."

Having, by that time, gone around back of his long counter, he peered through misty spectacles at Mary. "Is thar suthin' I could be gettin' fer yo', Little Miss?" he asked.

Jerry stepped forward and placed a half dollar on the counter. "Stamps, please, Mr. Harvey," he said. "I reckon that's all we're wanting tonight, thanks."

The cowboy put the stamps in his pocket, dropped his mother's letter in a slot, and turned, as though he were about to leave, but Mary detained him with:

"Oh, Jerry, you don't have to hurry away, do you? I thought," her sweet appealing smile turned toward the old man, "that perhaps Mr. Harvey might be willing to tell us a story if we stayed awhile."

"Sho' as shootin'!" the unkempt old man seemed pleased indeed to walk into Mary's trap. "Yo' set here, Little Miss." It was his own chair by the stove he was offering.

"No, indeed!" Mary protested. "That one just fits you. Jerry and Dick are bringing some in from the porch."

The boys sat on the counter. The girls, trying to hide triumphant smiles, drew their chairs close to the stove. Old Mr. Harvey put in another stick. Then, chewing on an end of gray whisker, he peered over his glasses at Mary a moment, before asking, "Was thar anythin' special yo' wanted to hear tell about?"

Mary leaned forward, her pretty face animated: "Oh, yes, Mr. Harvey. This afternoon Dora and I saw that small stone house that's built so it's almost hidden on a cliff of the mountains. Can you tell us anything about the man who built it; *why* he did it and what became of him?"

The old man's shaggy brows drew together thoughtfully. He seemed to hesitate. Mary glanced at Dora, who said with eager interest, "Oh, *that would* be a thrilling story, I'm sure. I'd just love to hear it."

Wisely the boys, who were not in the line of the old man's vision, said nothing. In fact, he seemed to have forgotten their presence.

The storekeeper was silent for so long, staring straight ahead of him at the stove, that the girls thought they, also, had been forgotten. Then suddenly he looked up and smiled toothlessly at Mary, nodding his grizzly head many times before he spoke.

"Wall," he said at last, almost as though he were speaking to an unseen presence, "I reckon Sven Pedersen wouldn't want to hold me to secrecy no longer – thirty year back 'tis, sence he – " suddenly he paused and held up a bony, shaky hand. "You didn't hear no gun shot, did you?"

The girls had heard nothing. They glanced almost fearfully up at the boys. Jerry shook his head and put a finger to his lips.

The girls understood that he thought it wise that the old man continue to forget their presence.

"Wall, I reckon the wind's risin' an' suthin' loose banged. Thar's plenty loose, that's sartin." Then, turning rather blankly toward Mary, he asked in a child-like manner, "What was we talkin' about?"

Mary drew her chair closer and smiled confidingly at him. "You were going to tell us, Mr. Harvey, *why* Mr. Pedersen built that rock house and – "

"Sho'! Sho'! So I was. It was forty year last Christmas he come to Gleeson. A tall, skinny fellar he was, not so very old nor so young neither. It was an awful blizzardy night an' thar wa'n't nobody at all out in the streets. I was jest reckonin' as how I'd turn in, when the door bust open an' the wind tore things offen the shelves. I had to help get it shet. Then I looked at what had

blown in. He looked like a fellar that was most starved an' more'n half crazy. His palish blue eyes was wild. I sot him down in this here chair by the fire an' staked him to some hot grub. I'd seen half-starved critters eat. He snapped at the grub jest that-a-way. When he'd et till I reckoned as how he'd bust, he sank down in that chair an' dod blast it, ef he didn't start snorin', an' he hadn't sed nothin', nohow. Wall, I seen as how he wa'n't goin' to wake, so I lay down on my bunk wi' my clothes on, sort o' sleepin' wi' one eye open, not knowin' what sort of a loon I was givin' shelter to.

"The blizzard kep' on all the next day an' the next. Not a gol-darned soul come to the store, so me'n' and him had plenty o' time to get to knowin' each other.

"Arter he'd drunk some hot coffee, he unloosed his tongue, though what he sed was so half-forrin, I wa'n't quick to cotch onto his meanin's.

"The heft o' his yarn was like this. He an' his little sister, Bodil, he named her, had come from Denmark to New York. Thar he'd picked up some o' Ameriky's way o' talking, an' enuf money to git West. Some Danish fellar had tol' him about these here rich-quick mines, so he'd took a stage an' fetched Bodil."

The old man paused, and Mary, leaning forward, put her hand on his arm. "Oh, Mr. Harvey, tell us about that little girl. How old was she and what happened to her?"

The old man's head shook sadly. "Bad enuf things happened to her, I reckon. She must o' been a purty little critter. Chiny blue eyes, Sven Pedersen sed she had, an' hair like yellar cornsilk

when it fust comes out. She was the apple o' his eye. The only livin' thing he keered for. I sho' was plumb sorry fer him."

"But *do* tell us what happened to her?" Mary urged, fearing that the old man's thought was wandering.

"Wall, 'pears like the stage was held up on a mount'in road nigh here; the wust road in the country hereabouts. Thar wa'n't no passengers but Sven Pedersen an' Little Bodil; the long journey bein' about to an end. That thar blizzard was a threatenin' an' the stage driver was hurryin' his hosses, hopin' to get over the mountain afore it struck, when up rode three men. One of 'em shot the driver, another of 'em dragged out a bag of gold ore; then they fired over the hosses' heads. Skeered and rarin', them hosses plunged over the cliff, an' down that stage crashed into the wust gulch thar is in these here parts.

"Sven saw his little sister throwed out into the road. Then, as the stage keeled over, he jumped an' cotched onto some scrub tree growin' out o' the cliff. It tuk him a long spell to climb back to the road. He was loony wild wi' worryin' about Little Bodil. He ran to whar he'd seen her throwed out. *She wa'n't thar.* He hunted an' called, but thar wa'n't no answer. Then he reckoned as how that thar third bandit had whirled back an' carried her off."

"Oh, Mr. Harvey, how terrible!" There were tears in Mary's eyes. "Wasn't she *ever* found?"

The old man shook his head sadly. "Sven Pedersen follered them bandits afoot all night an' nex' day but they was a horseback an' he couldn't even get sight o' them. Then the blizzard struck

an' he staggered in here, bein' as he saw my light. Arter that he went prospectin' all around these here mount'ins an' he struck it rich. That cliff, whar he built him a rock house, was one of his claims."

"I suppose he never stopped hunting for poor Little Bodil." Mary's voice was tender with sympathy.

"Yo' reckon right, little gal. Whenever Sven Pedersen heerd tell of a holdup anywhar in the state, he'd join the posse that was huntin' 'em but it warn't no use, nohow. Bodil was plumb gone. Sven Pedersen never made no friend but me. His palish blue eyes allays kept that wild look, an', as time went on an' he piled up gold an' turquoise, he got to be dubbed 'Lucky Loon.'"

The old man paused and started to nod his shaggy gray head so many times that Dora, fearing he would nod himself to sleep, asked, "Mr. Harvey, *what* was his Evil Eye Turquoise?"

"Hey?" The old man glanced up suspiciously. "So yo'd heerd tell about *that*." Then he cackled his queer, cracked laugh. "I heerd about it, but I'd allays reckoned thar wa'n't no sech thing. I cal'lated Sven Pedersen made up that thar yarn to keep folks from climbin' up ter his rock house an' stealin' his gold an' turquoise, if be that's whar he kept it. I reckon as how that's the heft o' *that* yarn an' yet, I dunno, I dunno. Mabbe thar was suthin' to it. Mabbe thar was."

"Oh, Mr. Harvey, we'd like awfully well to hear the story whether it's true or not, unless," Mary said solicitously, "unless you're too sleepy to tell it."

The old man sat up and opened his eyes wide. “Sleepy, *me* sleepy? Never was waked up more! Wall, this here is the heft of that tale.”

CHAPTER VI
THE EVIL-EYE TURQUOISE

The old man continued:

"Sven Pedersen hisself never tol' me nothin' about that Evil Eye Turquoise o' his'n. *That's* why I cal'late it was a yarn he used to skeer off onweloome visitors to his rock house, bein' as thar was spells when he was away fer days, huntin' fer Bodil.

"I heerd it was a big eye-shaped rock with a round center that was more green than it was blue. Hangers-on in the store here used to spec'late 'bout it. Some reckoned, ef 'twas true that Sven *had* found a green-blue turquoise big as a coffee cup, it'd be wurth a lot o' money, but I dunno, I dunno!"

Dora recalled Mr. Harvey's wandering thoughts by asking, "It must have been very beautiful, but *why* was it called 'Evil Eye?'"

The old man shook his head. "Thar was folks who'd believe onythin' in them days," he said. "I reckon thar still is. Superstitious, yo'd call it, so, when Sven Pedersen tol' yarns 'bout that green-blue eye o' his'n, thar *was* them as swallowed 'em whule."

"Tell us one of the yarns," Mary urged.

"Wall, Lucky Loon tol' 'round at the camps, as how he'd put that thar turquoise eye into the inside wall o' his house jest whar it could keep watchin' the door, an' ef onyone tried to climb in,

that thar eye'd *see* 'em!"

"But what if it did," Dora laughed. "Was there ever anyone superstitious enough to believe that the eye could *hurt* them?"

The old man nodded, looking at her solemnly. "Sven Pedersen tol' 'round that 'twas a demon eye, an' that whatever it looked at, 'ceptin' hisself, 'd keel over paralyzed. Wall, mabbe it's hard to believe, but them miners, bad as some of 'em was, warn't takin' no chances till 'long come a tenderfoot fellar from the East. He heern the yarn, an' he laffed at the whule outfit of 'em. He opined as how he'd come West to get rich quick, an' he reckoned cleanin' out that rock house o' its gold an' turquoise'd be a sight easier than gettin' it out o' the earth wi' pick an' shovel. Yessir, that fellar did a power o' a lot o' boastin', but yo' kin better believe, 'twa'n't when Lucky Loon was in hearin'."

Dora glanced up at the two boys sitting so silently on the counter back of the old man. She saw that they were both listening with interest. The story was evidently as new to Jerry as to the others. Dick motioned to Dora to ask another question as the old man had paused.

"Oh, Mr. Harvey," she leaned forward to ask, "did that bragging boy actually try to rob Mr. Pedersen?"

"He sure sartin did," the storekeeper replied. "He watched over the rocks o' nights till he'd seen Lucky Loon ridin' off, and, jedging by the pack he was totin', that fellar cal'lated he was goin' on one of them long rides he took, off'n' on, hunting for Bodil. Wall, arter a time, he climbed up, draggin' a bag he'd tuk along

to put the gold in. He peered into the rock house door an' *thar* was that eye, jest as Sven had said, in the wall opposite, an' it was glarin' green like a cat's eye in the dark."

The old man stopped talking and swayed his shaggy head back and forth for a long minute before he satisfied his listeners' curiosity. Dora found herself clutching Mary's hand but neither of them spoke.

"The nex' day," the old man continued, "cowboys ridin' out on the road heerd screamin'. Then it stopped an' they couldn't place it nohow. Arter a time they heerd it agin. Thinkin' as how Lucky Loon was hurt mabbe, they rode in through his gate an' found that young tenderfoot fellar writhin' around at the foot o' the cliff. He was paralyzed, sure sartin, an' arter he'd tol' about seein' that thar turquoise eye, he give up the ghost. *That* much is true. They fetched the tenderfoot fellar in here to my store an' I seen the wild, skeered look in his eyes. Wall, arter that, Sven Pedersen didn't have no more need to worry about his house bein' robbed."

"Oh-o-o! I should think not." Mary shuddered, then she glanced at her wrist watch, thinking that they ought to go. Nine o'clock, and Mr. Harvey's store was always dark before that. They were keeping him up, but before she could suggest leaving, she heard Dora asking still another question.

"Mr. Harvey, when did poor Mr. Lucky Loon die?"

There was actually a startled expression in the deeply sunken eyes of the old man. He turned in his chair and looked up at Jerry. After all, he had *not* forgotten the boys. In an awed voice

he asked: "Jerry, did yo' ever hear tell how old Sven Pedersen give up the ghost?"

The tall cowboy shook his head. "No, Mr. Harvey. I've asked Dad but he said it was a mystery that he reckoned never would be solved."

"It wa'n't never any mystery to *me*," the old man told them, "but I'd been swore to secrecy. Sven Pedersen said he'd come back an' hant my store if I ever tol', but I reckon thar's no sech thing as hants. Anyhow I ain't never *seen a* ghost, though thar *is* folks as calls this here town hanted."

Mary turned startled eyes around to question Jerry. That boy said seriously, "Mr. Harvey, we'd like awfully well to know what happened to Mr. Pedersen, but we wouldn't want your store to be haunted if you believe – "

"I *don'* believe nothin' o' the sort." The old man seemed to scorn the inference. Turning, he beckoned to the boys. "Stan' up close, sort o'. I won't tell it loud; than mabbe it won't be heern by nobody but you-uns."

Jerry stood close back of Mary's chair. Dick sat on his heels next to Dora. The wind that had rattled loose boards had gone down. Not a sound was to be heard. The fire in the stove had burned to ashes. The room was getting cold but the girls did not notice. With wide, almost startled eyes they were watching the old man who was again chewing on an end of his gray beard.

Suddenly he cupped an ear with one palsied hand and seemed to be listening intently. Mary clutched Dora's arm. She expected

the old man to ask them if they heard a gun shot, but he didn't. He dropped his arm and commenced in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Fer the las' year o' his life, Sven Pedersen give up minin'. He reckoned as how he'd never find his sister an' he'd jest been pilin' up wealth to give to her, he sed. He used to spec'late about poor Bodil a lot. She'd be a young woman now, he'd say, sad like, *if* them bandits let her live. Then thar was times when he'd hope she'd died ruther than be fetched up by robbers. He didn't talk much about anythin' else. Folks never knew whar he went to do his buyin'; thot as how he'd go off to Bisbee, but 'twa'n't so. He come here arter midnight so's not to be seen. He tol' me if, chance be, Bodil was alive an' showed up arter he was dead, he wanted her to have his gold. He writ a letter in that furrin tongue o' his an' give it to me. I got it yit. In it he tol' Bodil *whar* he'd got his fortin hid." The old man paused and blinked his eyes hard.

Mary asked softly, "But she never came, did she, Mr. Harvey? That poor Little Bodil with the china-blue eyes and the corn-silk hair."

"No, she never come, an' I cal'late she never will. Lucky Loon didn't reckon she would, really, but he hung on till he felt death comin'. Then he tol' me what he was a plannin' to do to hisself." The old man glanced anxiously at Jerry, who stood with his hands on Mary's shoulders. "It's a mighty gruesome story, the rest o' it, Jerry lad. Do you reckon it'd better be tol'?"

It was Dora who replied, "Oh, *please*, Mr. Harvey! We girls aren't a mite scary. It's only a story to us, you know. It all

happened so long ago."

"Wall, as I was sayin', Sven Pedersen knew he hadn't long to live, so one night thar was a blizzard threatenin' – an' it turned into as bad a one as when he furst blowed into my store years back. Whar was I?" He looked blankly at Mary who prompted with, "So one night when he felt that he was soon to die – "

"Sven come to me an' swore me to keep it secret what he was goin' to do. He sed that back of his house an' opening into it, he had a vault. He'd jest left room for hisself to creep into it. Then he was goin' to wall it up, an' lay hisself down an' die."

"Oh, how terrible!" Dora exclaimed. "Surely he didn't *do* that?"

The old man sighed. "Fur as I know he did. I seen as how he was white as a ghost an' coughin' suthin' awful. I tol' him to stay at the store till the blizzard blew over. It commonly lasted three days, but out he went an' I never seen him sence."

"Poor Lucky Loon!" Mary said commiseratingly.

"An' poor Little Bodil," Dora began, when she glanced at the old man who had suddenly sat erect, staring into a dark corner.

"Oh, Mr. Harvey," Mary whispered, "*do* you see that ghost?"

They all looked and saw a flickering light. Then Jerry, glancing up at the hanging lamp, saw that the kerosene had burned out. One more flicker and the store was in darkness. Mary screamed and clung to Jerry, but Dora, remembering her flash, turned it on.

Dick, matter-of-factly, glanced about, saw the oil can, pulled

down the lamp, refilled it, and relighted it.

"Thank ye! Thank ye!" the old man said. "I reckon that's about all thar is to hants anyhow. I never had no reason to believe in ghosts an' ain't a-goin' to start in now. Wall, must yo' be goin'? Drop in tomorrer an' ef I kin find it, I'll show yo' that yellar ol' letter Lucky Loon left fer his gal."

CHAPTER VII
MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

It was midnight when Mary Moore awoke with a start and sat up, staring about her wild-eyed. "Where am I? Where am I?" her terrorized cry, low though it was, wakened Dora, who, sitting up, caught her friend in a close embrace.

"Mary," she whispered reassuringly, "Mary, you're here with me. We're in bed in your very own room. Did you have a nightmare?"

In the dim starlight, Dora saw how pale and startled was the face of her friend. Mary's big blue eyes looked about the room wildly as though she expected to see someone lurking in the dark corners.

"There's no one here," Dora assured her. "See, I'll prove it to you." She reached for her flash which she had left on a small table near her head. The round disc of light danced from corner to corner of the dark room. The pale blue muslin curtains, waving in the breeze at open windows, *looked* like ghosts, perhaps but Mary knew what they were. Still she was not satisfied.

"Dora," she whispered, clinging to her friend's arm, "are you sure the window at the top of the outside stairway is locked? Terribly sure?"

"Of course. I locked it the last thing, but I'll get up and see."

Dora slipped out of bed and crossed the room. The long door-like window was securely fastened. The other two windows were open at the top only. No one could possibly have entered that way.

"Try the hall door," Mary pleaded, "and would you mind, awfully, if I asked you to look in the clothes closet?"

Dora had no sense of fear as she was convinced that Mary had been dreaming some wild thing, and she didn't much wonder, after the gruesome story they had heard the night before.

"Now, are you satisfied?" Dora climbed back into bed and replaced the flash on the table.

"I suppose I am." Mary permitted herself to be covered again with the downy blue quilt. "But it did seem so terribly real, and yet, now that I come to think, it didn't have anything at all to do with this room. We were in some bleak place I had never seen before. It was the queerest dream, Dora. In the beginning you and I went out all alone for a horseback ride. The road looked familiar enough. It was just like the road from Gleeson down to the Douglas valley highway. We were cantering along, oh, just as we have lots of times, when suddenly the scene changed – you know the way it does in dreams – and we were in the wildest kind of a mountain country. It was terrifyingly lonely. We couldn't see anything but bleak, grim mountain ranges rising about us for miles and miles around. Some of them were so high the peaks were white with snow. I remember one peak especially. It looked like a huge woman ghost with two smaller peaks, like children

ghosts, clinging to her hands.

"The sand was unearthly white and covered with human skeletons as though there had been a battle once long ago. We rode around wildly trying to find an opening so that we could escape. Then a terribly uncanny thing happened. One of those skeletons rose up right ahead of us and pointed directly toward that mountain with the three ghost-like snow-covered peaks. But our horses wouldn't go that way, they were terrorized when they saw that hollow-eyed skeleton, waving his bony arms in front of them. They reared – then whirled around and galloped so fast we were both of us thrown off and *that's* when I woke up."

"Gracious goodness," Dora exclaimed with a shudder. "That *was* a nightmare! For cricket's sakes, let's talk about something pleasant so that when you go to sleep again, you won't have another such *awful* dream. Now, let me see, *what* shall we talk about?"

"Do you know, Dora," Mary's voice was tense with emotion, "I keep wondering and wondering about that poor Little Bodil. If she were carried off by a robber, *what* do you suppose he would do with her?"

"Well, it all depends on what kind of a bandit he was," Dora said matter-of-factly. "If he were a good robber like Robin Hood, he would have sent her away to a boarding-school somewhere to be educated, since she was only ten years old. Then he would have reformed, and when she was sixteen and very beautiful with her china-blue eyes and corn-silk-yellow hair, he would have married

her."

"How I do hope something like that *did* happen." Mary's voice sounded more natural, the tenseness and terror were gone, so Dora kept on, "I think they probably bought a ranch in – er – some beautiful valley in Mexico, or some remote place where Robin Hood wouldn't be known and lived happily ever after."

"I wonder if they had any children." Mary spoke as though she really believed that Dora was unraveling the mystery. "If they had a boy and a girl, suppose, they would be our age since poor Bodil would be about fifty years old now."

Dora laughed. "Well, we probably never will know what became of that poor little Danish girl so we might as well accept my theory as any other. Let's try to sleep now."

Mary was silent for several moments, and Dora was just deciding that her services as a pacifier were over and that she might try to go to sleep herself, when Mary whispered, "Dodo, do *you* believe that story about the Evil Eye Turquoise?"

Dora sighed softly. Here was another subject with scary possibilities. "Well, not exactly," she acknowledged. "I don't doubt but that the thieving tenderfoot *did* fall over the cliff and *was* paralyzed, because he hit his head against a rock or something, but I think it was his own fear of the Evil Eye Turquoise which made him fall and not any demon power the eye really had."

"Of course, that *does* seem sensible," Mary agreed. Again she was quiet and this time Dora was really dozing when she

heard in a shuddery voice, "Oh-oo, Dora, I do try awfully hard to keep from thinking of that poor Sven Pedersen after he'd walled himself into his tomb and lay down to die. What if he lived a long time. I've read about people being buried alive and – "

"Blue Moons, Mary! What awful things you do think about!" Dora was a bit provoked. She was really sleepy, and thought she had earned a good rest for the remaining hours of the night. "Lots of animals creep away into far corners of dark caves when they know they're going to die. That's better than lying around helpless somewhere, and have wolves tearing you to pieces or vultures swirling around over you, dropping lower and lower, waiting for you to take your last breath. For my part, I think Sven Pedersen did a very sensible thing. In that way he was sure of a decent burial. Now, Mary dear, much as I love you, if you so much as peep again tonight, I'm going to take my pillow and go into the spare front bedroom and leave you all to your lonely."

"Hark! What was that noise? Didn't it sound to you like rattling bones?" Again Mary clutched her friend's arm.

Dora gave up. "Sort of," she agreed. "The wind is rising again." Then she made one more desperate effort to lead Mary's thoughts into pleasanter channels. "Wouldn't it be great fun if Polly and Patsy could come West while we're here?" she began. "I wonder how Jerry and Dick would like them."

"How could anyone *help* liking them? Our red-headed Pat is so pert and funny, while roly-poly Poll is so altogether lovable." Mary was actually smiling as she thought of their far away pals.

Then suddenly she exclaimed, “Dora Bellman, that new friend of Pat’s, Harry Hulbert, you know; he really and truly is coming West soon, isn’t he?”

“Why, yes!” Dora was recalling what Pat had written. “Oh, Mary,” she exclaimed with new interest, “when he is a scout, hunting for bandits and train robbers and – ”

Mary sat up and seized her friend’s arm. “I know what you’re going to say,” she put in gleefully. “This Harry Hulbert *may* be able to help solve the mystery of Bodil’s disappearance. But that’s too much to hope.”

Dora laughingly agreed. “How wild one’s imagination is in the middle of the night,” she said.

“Middle of the night,” Mary repeated as she looked out of the nearest window. “There’s a dim light in the East and we haven’t had half of our sleep out yet.”

Long-suffering Dora thought, “That certainly isn’t *my* fault.” Aloud she said, “Well, let’s make up for lost time.”

She nestled down and Mary cuddled close. Sleepily she had the last word. “I hope Harry Hulbert will come, and – and – Pat – ”

At seven o’clock Carmelita’s deep, musical voice called, but there was no answer. The two sound-asleep girls had not heard. At ten o’clock they were awakened by a low whistling below their open windows.

CHAPTER VIII
SINGING COWBOYS

"What was that?" Mary sat up in bed, blinked her eyes hard to get them open, then leaped out, and, keeping hidden, peeped down into the door yard. Near the back porch stood Jerry Newcomb's dilapidated old car, gray with sand. Two cowboys stood beside it, evidently more intent upon an examination of the machinery under the hood than they were of the house. Although they were whistling, to attract attention, they pretended to be patiently waiting. Carmelita had informed Jerry that the girls still slept.

Mary pirouetted back into the room, her blue eyes dancing. "The boys are going to take us somewhere, I'm just *ever* so sure," she told the girl, who, sitting on the side of the bed, was sleepily yawning.

"Goodness, *why* did they come so early?" Dora asked drowsily.

"Early!" Mary laughed at her and pointed at the little blue clock on the curly maple dresser. "Dora Bellman, did you ever sleep so late before in all your life?"

"Yeah." Dora seemed provokingly indifferent to the fact that the boys waited below, and that, perhaps, oh, ever so much more than likely, they were going adventuring. "Once, you remember

that time after a school dance when the boys from the Wales Military Academy – "

Mary skipped over to the bedside and pulled her friend to her feet. "Oh, *please* do hurry!" she begged. "I feel in my bones that the boys are going somewhere to try to solve the mystery and that they want to take us with them."

Dora's dark eyes stared stupidly, or tried hard to give that impression. "What mystery?" she asked, indifferently, as she began to dress.

"I refuse to answer." Mary was peering into the long oval mirror brushing her short golden curls. Her lovely face was aglow with eager interest. "There is only *one* mystery that we are curious about as you know perfectly well and that is what became of poor Little Bodil Pedersen."

Although Mary was looking at it, she was not even conscious of her own fair reflection. She glanced in the mirror, back at her friend, and saw her grinning in wicked glee.

Whirling, brush in hand, Mary demanded, "What *is* so funny, Dora? You aren't acting a bit natural this morning. What made you grin that way?"

"I just happened to think of something. Oh, maybe it isn't so awfully funny, but it's sort of uncanny at that. I was thinking that, pretty as *you* are on the outside, you've got a hollow, staring-eyed skeleton inside of you and that if I had X-ray eyes – "

Mary, with a horrified glance at her teasing friend, stuffed her fingers into her ears. "You're terrible!" She shuddered.

Dora contritely caught Mary's hands and drew them down.

"Belovedest," she exclaimed, "I'm just as thrilled as you are at the prospect of going buggy riding with two nice cowboys whether we find poor Little lost Bodil (who is probably a fat old woman now) or solve any other mystery that may be lying around loose."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.