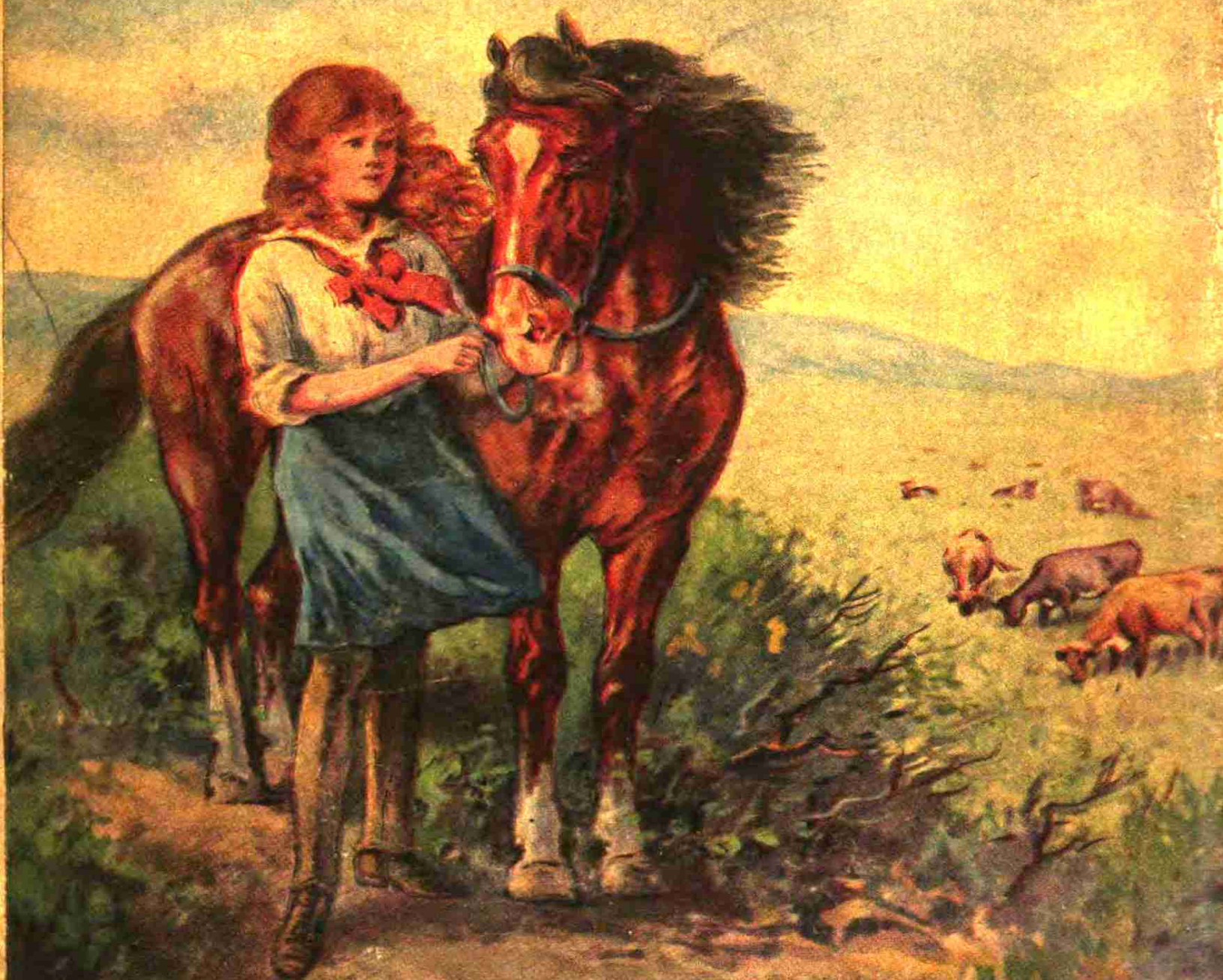
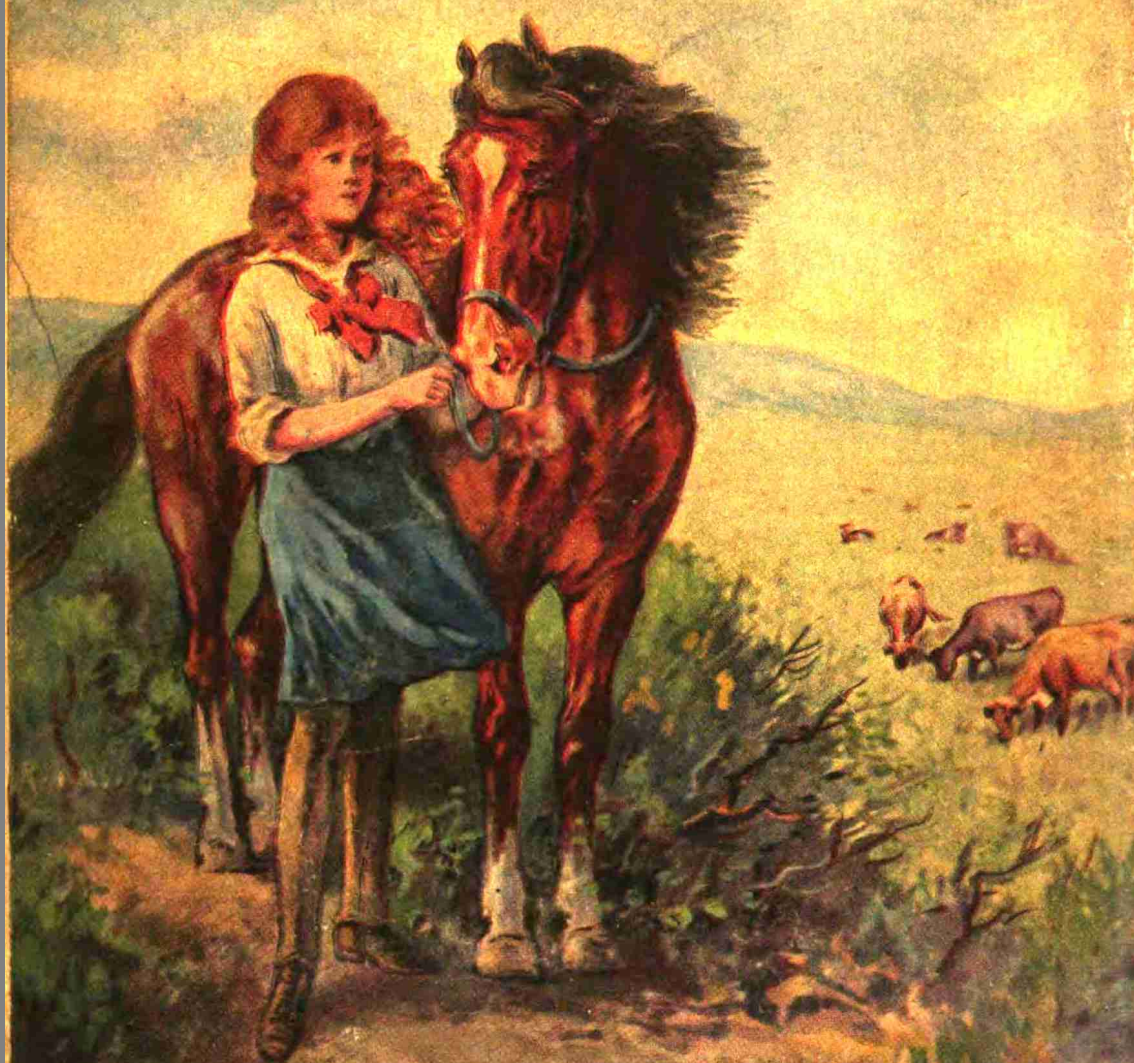


# WHEN ORIOLE TRAVELED WESTWARD



AMY BELL MARLOWE

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westward**

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TRAVELED WESTWARD \*\*\*



# **When Oriole Traveled Westward**

**By AMY BELL MARLOWE**

**AUTHOR OF "WHEN ORIOLE CAME TO HARBOR LIGHT,"  
"THE OLDEST OF FOUR," "WYN'S CAMPING DAYS,"  
"THE GIRLS OF RIVERCLIFF SCHOOL," ETC.**

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*When Oriole Traveled Westward*



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# **WHEN ORIOLE TRAVELED WESTWARD**

# CHAPTER I

## AN ADVENTURE ON THE ICE

Christmas had been so fair, if not balmy, that Oriole Putnam, for the first time spending the principal New England holidays at Littleport, scarcely expected the black frost that followed close on the heels of New Year's Day.

Indeed, the tale of that local celebrity, "the oldest inhabitant," was that for forty years previous the bays and inlets about Littleport had not been so chained by the Frost King as they were now.

Littleport Harbor was frozen over so solidly that a Government ice-breaker was sent to open a channel for the Paulmouth packet to get in and out of the port. This channel, however, did not offer a safe way for Oriole to reach Harbor Island Light in Nat Jardin's power dory.

"And I *am* so worried about Uncle Nat's rheumatism, and whether Ma Stafford has recovered from that felon she had on her finger," Oriole told Lyddy Ann, the maid-of-all-work at Mrs. Rebecca Joy's house and Oriole's confidante and friend. "I just *must* find some way of getting over to the island."

During the open season, and ever since she had come to stay with Mrs. Joy, in the big old Dexter mansion on State Street, Oriole had driven the dory back and forth between the port and Harbor Light at least once a week. To be debarred from this habit and association was really a trial for the girl.

Oriole was an active and ingenious girl, and this, her first winter away from her semi-tropical home near Bahia, Brazil, was a most marvelous experience for her. The fun and frolic to be had in her present environment was neglected in no particular by the girl.

Although she was quite familiar with roller-skating, for the first time that she could remember she now saw ice skating. It was not a difficult matter for the girl to become proficient upon ice skates.

Before the bay was frozen over, as it now was, she had learned to skate on a shallow pond near Mrs. Joy's, in company with Minnie and Flossy Payne and other members of the Busy Bees, as their school society was called. Minnie and Flossy were Oriole's closest chums of her own age. But since Mr. Harvey Langdon had come from the West to claim his twin children, Myron and Marian, Oriole Putnam had spent much time with them every day. And now, while the skating was so good, she took the little ones out on the ice quite frequently.

The ranchman could not do too much for the twins, and he fully trusted them in Oriole's care. That is how it came about that, on this rather bleak if sunshiny afternoon, Oriole was drawing the twins on their sled swiftly over the pebbly ice toward Harbor Light Island.

They were going to have supper with Nat Jardin and his housekeeper, Ma Stafford, and the pleasure in prospect was almost as great, in the opinion of the twins, as that which they were having on the ice.

"Say, Oriole!" shouted the boy twin from his seat on the sled. "Do you s'pose Ma Stafford will have hot cakes for supper?"

"M-m-m!" chanted Marian. "I *des love* hot cakes. With syrup, too."

"Everybody does," declared Oriole, replying first to the little girl. "And of course Ma Stafford will have hot cakes. She always does this time of year."

"I hope she will have plenty of 'em," Myron added. "If she doesn't——"

"Well, what if she doesn't?" asked Oriole.

"I'll have to give part of mine to Mawyann, and she's such a little pig."

"I'm not a pig!" wailed his sister. "But I like hot cakes."

"You should not say that about Marian," admonished Oriole. "Suppose your papa heard you?"

"He can't hear me clear out here on the ice," Myron said confidently. "And anyway, he's gone to see Nurse Brown. He couldn't hear me."

"That does not matter," Oriole told him, still with seriousness. "What are you? Just an eye-server?"

"What's that?" asked the little boy, startled. "My—my eyes are all right."

"I got sumfin in my eye once," cried Marian. "It was a singer. Nursie got it out with the corner of her han'kercher. She did!"

"I guess it was a cinder, not a singer," commented Oriole. She had halted with her back to the wind, the better to talk to and hear the twins. "But an 'eye-server,' Myron, is what Mrs. Rebecca Joy calls those people that you can't trust to do as well out of your sight as they do when you watch 'em. You ought to speak just as nicely of your sister when you are away from your papa as you do when he can hear."

"You're talking about hearing, not seeing, Oriole Putnam," said the young culprit promptly.

"It amounts to the same thing. But I can't stand here all day and argue because you are naughty, Myron Langdon. We must get on," and she caught up her stroke again and jerked the sled into motion.

Oriole was skating rapidly toward the island, the sled following her swift pace at the end of a long rope. Head down, breathing deeply, eyes and cheeks aglow, the girl pursued her flight at top speed while the twins on the sled screamed their delight.

Although Myron and Marian were not many months past their fourth birthday, they were plucky little youngsters. Myron was especially a brave child. He clung to the hand-lines of the sled while his sister sat close behind him, her plump, gaitered legs astraddle and clinging with both hands to the belt of her brother's coat.

There were a good many other skaters on the ice besides Oriole Putnam; but they were not so far down the harbor. But the several iceboats raced from the wharves to the edge of the Tide Flow where the current was always so strong that ice never formed.

Oriole was well away from the Flow and far from the channel the ice-breaking steamer had made, so that there was no danger of either her or the twins going into the water. At least, any one with judgment would have said the trio were quite safe.

There were, however, thin patches in the harbor ice. Usually they were to be observed rods away. The lift of the tide had opened holes here and there, and these holes had been skimmed over again with thin ice. These blue

patches Oriole very carefully avoided. She was not the girl to take risks with her own life or that of her charges.

The objects before her on Harbor Light Island stood out distinctly in the afternoon sunshine. The tall white staff of the light, in the little barnacle-like cottage at the foot of which she had lived when she first came to the island, was an object that could be seen far, far at sea.

But now Uncle Nat and Ma lived in the old house at the northern end of the island, overlooking the main entrance to Littleport Harbor. Oriole was steering for the tiny cove just below the bluff on which this cottage stood.

The girl and the sled were not a quarter of a mile from her destination when Anson Cope's *Bluebird*, the biggest ice-craft on the bay, came whirling down upon them. It did not seem that the steersman of the huge craft could escape seeing Oriole and the sled. And of course he did not. But he ran dangerously close to the small figures on the ice.

Marian looked over her shoulder and began to scream with terror. But it was several seconds before Oriole was aware of the close approach of the ice-craft. Then the peak of the big sail seemed to be hanging right over her head.

Oriole screamed, too, but she was not stricken helpless. She swerved in her course and tried to get the sled off to one side. The *Bluebird* tacked, and as the mainsail swung over, the steersman caught another glimpse of the girl and the sled and its burden.

The peril was too imminent then for the master of the iceboat to change his course. He had the Tide Flow directly ahead. In a moment he must tack again to escape disaster.

His starboard runners crashed through the thin ice upon the pool which Oriole was skirting. It was a terrific smash and the water flew high in the air—a regular geyser.

In falling, the deluge overwhelmed the girl. She fell upon her knees, and, sliding and scrambling, plunged suddenly into the cold sea. She could not cast off the drag-rope; and even that would not have saved the twins from a ducking. The sled was aimed right at the open water and it followed Oriole through the broken ice.

The force of the wind had driven the iceboat a mile on its way back toward the port by the time Oriole and the twins were actually in the water. The boatmen were too far away to render the least assistance. By the time they could return, the three in the water would have been under the ice.

But Oriole Putnam was not helpless. Fearful as she was for her own safety, she thought at once of Myron and Marian. She went down in her first plunge far below the surface of the sea; but during the previous summer while living at Harbor Light she had learned to swim and was not afraid of the water itself.

She made her way to the surface and rose as high as she could among the broken cakes of ice. The entire surface ice of the pool had been crushed by the weight of the iceboat. Its swift passage was all that had saved it from wreck.

There was nothing stable for Oriole to cling to. Nor was she at once looking for escape. She looked for the little heads of the twins.

She saw the sled. Two little blue-coated arms were about it, the mittened hands clinging fast.

She dashed the splintered ice out of her way and plunged toward the sled. One of the twins clung fast. Where was the other?

Oriole was sobbing in her throat, despairing and afraid. What should she say to Mr. Langdon, who had trusted the twins to her care? Oriole felt at this moment that she must be judged guilty for the accident.

She plunged forward and caught one of the blue arms. Myron's head popped up. The boy was actually self-possessed!

"I can't see Mawyann!" he sputtered. "I can't see her!"

"Wait! Wait!" begged Oriole. "She must be here—she must!"

"She ain't," said Myron. "She's so silly! She went right down under the ice."

His own teeth were chattering, but he managed to speak quite plainly. Oriole had all she could do to hold him up and keep above the surface herself. Had she caught sight of little Marian she would have had to desert Myron to get his sister.

Oriole could see nobody on the ice near enough to aid them in their terrible predicament. Little Marian did not appear upon the surface of the troubled water. As the moments slipped by the girl felt that here was tragedy. The little Langdon girl, who had been as much her care as Myron, must be drowned!

## CHAPTER II

### TEDDY FORD

Holding Myron Langdon up in the crook of one arm, Oriole clung to the floating sled with her other hand and tried to kick herself and Myron toward the edge of the thicker ice. This was no light task. She was not at all sure that both Myron and herself would not sink as Marian had.

The girl from Bahia had been through so much tragedy during these last months that she did not give up hope easily. But the chill of the sea and the helplessness of her charge hampered Oriole dreadfully. Her progress in pushing the sled before her was slow indeed.

She had not tried to cry out for help. What would be the use? The iceboat was a long distance away and it would take many minutes for anybody aboard that craft to return to aid Oriole and the twins. And the girl had seen nobody else in the vicinity.

Suddenly, however, she saw a figure scrambling over the thick ice toward the hole where she struggled with her burden. The newcomer was a boy—a boy not much older than Oriole herself, she felt sure; and at this instant Oriole thought him the very handsomest boy she had ever seen!

He did not wear skates and he had some trouble in reaching the edge of the hole; but he came on with determination, and soon she heard him shouting:

"Hold on! Hold on! I'll get you out!"

"Get Marian! Oh, do, please, save Marian!" shrieked Oriole Putnam. "I can hang on to Myron a long time yet. And we've got the sled. Save Marian."

The boy, who had curly brown hair and a pink and white complexion, reached the edge of the broken ice and peered over the surface of the hole. Something dark rose almost to the surface and not very far out.

"I see it!" cried the stranger, who was already drawing off his coat.

Just as though it were summer and he was in his bathing suit, the boy dived into the ice-strewn water. Oriole was smitten with the thought that perhaps she had urged him to disaster. The chill of the sea was fast paralyzing her own limbs and the pressure about her heart was like that of a tightly drawn band.

She feared that she had encouraged this very good-looking boy to risk his life—and in an impossible attempt to drag forth the little girl. Oriole had not seen Marian's body rise so near the surface.

But when the big boy came up with a great splutter not far from Oriole and the sled, he bore the unconscious little girl in his arms. He trod water, standing almost erect, dashed the spray from his eyes and actually grinned at Oriole.

"I got her! The poor kid!" he cried.

It was when he smiled that Oriole saw he had such nice white teeth and that the expression of his face was very winning. She thought, even in this dangerous moment:

"He's ever so much better looking than Billy Bragg—and Billy was a nice boy, too."

Billy Bragg had been connected with the first great adventure of Oriole's life.

Brought up as she had been in the suburbs of the city of Bahia, a Brazilian metropolis, her quiet life with her mother and father, who had gone there years before from the United States, had scarcely prepared Oriole for what happened to her when the Putnam family decided to return to their own country.

Sailing on the British steamship *Helvetia*, the family expected to be in New York in a very few days. But the *Helvetia* met another and unknown ship in collision in mid-ocean and had the purser's boat not been picked up by the *Adrian Marple*, with Oriole as one of its rescued passengers, Oriole certainly would never have seen Harbor Light, and of course she would not have known Billy Bragg.

Billy was the cabin boy aboard the *Adrian Marple*. Billy was, Oriole had often told Nat Jardin and her other friends, the very nicest boy she had ever

known. In spite of the fact that the cabin boy's character seemed to fit his name very closely—Bragg—the girl from Brazil always remembered Billy with interest.

Misfortune seemed to have followed hard upon Oriole Putnam. She believed her mother and father had been rescued by the ship that had collided with the *Helvetia*; but of this neither she nor anybody else could be positive.

The *Adrian Marple*, Boston bound from Mediterranean ports, suffered disaster, as well as the ship on which Oriole had sailed from Bahia, although in a different way. She "stubbed her toe," as old Nat Jardin, the lightkeeper, said, upon the Camper Reef off Harbor Island, and although Billy Bragg and Oriole were together when the steamship struck and Oriole was saved by the lightkeeper himself, she had never seen Billy since the hour of the wreck.

She often thought of Billy Bragg, as well as of her own dear mother and father. The uncertainty of her parents' safety had at first made Oriole very sad, although the lightkeeper and Ma Stafford, his housekeeper, loved and protected the girl as though she were their very own.

The fresh environment of Harbor Island gradually cheered Oriole and she came to the conclusion that her mother and father had been carried away around the world by the ship that had collided with the *Helvetia*. That ship might be a sailing vessel, and she knew that if it was so, and Mr. and Mrs. Putnam were aboard of it, it might be months and months before they reached an American port.

As related in a previous volume entitled "When Oriole Came to Harbor Light," many adventures had come to Oriole since she had landed upon the rock-riven island near which she was now struggling in the icy water. But nothing had really been as serious as this present predicament.

She feared that she could not much longer bear Myron, the boy twin, up above the sea. She tried to place him on the sled, but failed. If she had not been able to cling to the sled she would have gone down herself.

And what could she ever say to Mr. Harvey Langdon if she allowed either of the twins to drown? The big Western ranchman had only recently come East to recover his children after the wreck of the Portland steamboat.

Myron and Marian had been saved from that disaster by Nat Jardin and Oriole; but the children's nurse, who had been with them, had received a heavy blow on the head and had not as yet recovered her memory.

Much against Oriole's and Nat Jardin's desires, the twins had been placed in the town orphan asylum and might never have been discovered by their father had not Oriole written and paid for an advertisement in the newspapers that drew the ranchman East in his search for his lost children.

That Mr. Langdon trusted her so fully with the twins was the thought that now so keenly rasped Oriole's mind. If the twins were lost—drowned! The thought was indeed shocking.

And then she saw this handsome boy who had come to her help lift the little saturated body of Marian out upon the thick ice. He turned swiftly and reached the sled in two strokes. He seized Myron just as Oriole's hold was slipping.

"Hang on to that sled, girl!" commanded the boy earnestly. "I'll come back for you."

"My—my name's Oriole Putnam," gasped Oriole faintly. But the boy evidently did not hear.

He raised Myron, who struggled a little and sputtered too, high in his arms and cast the boy out upon the ice beside his sister. Oriole began to kick again and force the sled nearer the thick ice.

"All right, girl!" shouted the very vigorous and able boy. "I'm going to lift you up, and you grab hold of the ice and try to pull yourself out."

He did as he said he would and Oriole tried to do as he commanded. It was a hard struggle, but it did not last many seconds. She found herself face downward on the ice, her feet still in the water, and kicking vigorously.

Oriole never had seen such a quick and muscular boy as this one. Even Billy Bragg had not been able to perform such feats of strength and agility. The stranger raised himself quickly upon the sled, which sank slowly under him; and then the boy scrambled out to the ice and drew the sled up after him.

"There!" he chattered, yet grinning, too. "I've saved the whole crew and the sled into the bargain. Where—where shall we take these kids?"

"Oh! To the island. Up there to Ma Stafford and Uncle Nat," cried Oriole, and she struggled to her feet and pointed to the bluff on which stood the old house where Nat Jardin and Ma Stafford now lived.

"Come on, girl," said the stranger, offering her a hand to steady her on her feet. "If you can carry yourself I'll take the kids."

"Can you carry both Myron and Marian?"

"I reckon," said the boy carelessly. "Gee! ain't it cold?"

"My name is—is Oriole Putnam," chattered the girl.

"Don't be so particular," said the boy, hurriedly grabbing at Myron and Marian. "My name's Teddy Ford. And I guess nobody knows me much around here, so there isn't anybody to introduce us. Come on! You'll freeze stiff."

Little Marian's coat had already frozen to the ice. She looked so blue in the face, with her eyes shut so tight, that Oriole was terribly frightened about her. Myron sputtered and squalled his objections when Teddy Ford dropped him on the ice again to tear his sister loose from the frost-hold.

"Run!" commanded the boy. "You'll get your death of cold. What's your name?"

"I—I tell yu-yu-you it—it's Oriole," chattered the girl.

"All right. You're a bird, Oriole. Fly!"

Thus adjured Oriole started at a rather stiff-legged trot across the ice. She had lost her skates in the water (and it was lucky for her she had) and found plowing over the ice a very uncertain procedure. But Teddy Ford seemed to be as sure footed as a cat!

He hugged a twin under each arm and ran after Oriole, soon overtaking her.

"Where's that place you are going to? Is there a fire?" he demanded.

"The cottage. Up there. On the island."

"Not to the lighthouse?" panted the boy.

"No, no! Uncle Nat and Ma are at this cottage. It is nearer, anyway."

"That is what we want—the nearest place. Gee! don't fall."

"I wish you would—wouldn't say that," admonished the chattering Oriole.

"Say what?"

"'Gee.' It sounds like driving ox—oxen. And I'm no—not an ox."

"Gee!" ejaculated Teddy Ford. Then: "Oh! I didn't meanter. I mean 'mean to.' You're—you're awful particular, ain't you?"

But Oriole was too cold to answer. This was no time and place, after all, to be "particular."

She fell down once—flat on her face and bumped her chin. But she scrambled up again before the boy could drop the twins to help her.

"Go on! Go on!" she begged. "Don't stop for me!"

"You see that you come, then," he shouted back at her, and hurried ahead, landing and climbing up the path to the top of the bluff several rods ahead of Oriole.

He had not actually known how very badly off Oriole Putnam was. She was as brave as girl could be, but she was chilled to the very marrow (or so Ma Stafford would have said) and when the boy had left her she made but slow headway.

Indeed, the girl was well nigh exhausted—she scarcely had breath to cry out—when the door of the old house opened and Nat Jardin put his head out to see who was approaching.

## CHAPTER III

### STRANGE ACTIONS

Oriole Putnam did not have breath to introduce Teddy Ford to the old lightkeeper. She just panted as she staggered to the open door of the cottage. But Nat Jardin did not need to be introduced to Myron and Marian.

"Sho! I wanta know what's happened to them babies?" he demanded. "You been trying to drown 'em? The poor leetle things! Bring 'em right in here \_\_\_\_"

"For the good land's sake!" broke in Ma Stafford from behind the lightkeeper's rather bulky figure. "What's the meaning of such things, I want to know? Give me that child! She's as blue as indigo and nigh about gone!"

Ma Stafford grabbed Marian out of the boy's arms. Uncle Nat seized the other twin. For the minute the two old people scarcely noticed the boy and Oriole, both quite as wet as the twins—their clothing indeed already stiffening in the cold air.

But Jardin did shout for them to come in and shut the door. There was a hot fire in the kitchen stove and it was just like coming into a conservatory to enter that room from the open air. Oriole and the strange boy hurried to the stove.

"You all been in the water," clucked Ma Stafford. "I knew well enough that ice warn't safe, 'Thaniel. Now, didn't I tell you so?"

"'Twarn't safe where they got, sure 'nough," agreed Jardin. "This boy's all right, Ma. His eyes is open—and he's a plucky little feller, like I always said he was. Ain't you, Myron?"

"Is—is Mawyann all right?" gasped the twin.

"Sure she is," declared Jardin warmly. "Ma'll fix her up."

"Oriole!" cried the old woman, "you get me rough towels out of the dresser drawer. You know where they be. For the land's sake! You ain't fitten to do

anything yourself, you are so sopping."

"Both she and this boy better git their wet clothes off," advised the old man, beginning to strip little Myron before the kitchen stove.

"I'm going to take this child into the sittin' room. There's a good fire in the base-burner. You come, too, Oriole, child," urged Ma. "There must be something dry of yours here that you can put on. How ever did it happen?"

That was what Uncle Nat wanted to know of Teddy Ford when they were left alone with Myron in the kitchen.

"I came over from Paulmouth on that boat of Captain Diggers. He said there might be a job over this way for a boy. And I started down toward that life saving station you can see from out yonder——"

"Cap'n Petty's station at the Flow," interjected Nat Jardin.

"I heard there was a man down there could use a boy. I think I would like to work on a boat, or alongshore. You see, I never saw the ocean before."

"Sho, now! That so?" queried the old man, interested.

"And I was walking on the ice because it was the shortest cut, they said, and it seemed so. I saw that big iceboat make that dive for this girl and the sled ——"

"Whose boat was it?" asked Jardin quickly.

"I don't know. But it was a big one. It just slued right around, almost hitting that girl and the sled she was dragging, and the ice smashed right in—a big splotch of it. Gee! but they didn't have a chance. They all went into the water together."

"That's purt' serious, I cal'late," said Jardin, now, having stripped the little trembling body of Myron Langdon. "Gimme that towel. I got to rub this boy till he shines! You use that other one. What did ye say your name was?"

"Teddy Ford. I don't belong around here."

"No, I see ye don't. Not if you never saw the sea before," chuckled Nat Jardin. "You come from away back in the tall timber, I cal'late?"

"I ain't no greenhorn," declared Teddy Ford quickly, but he smiled, and Nat Jardin found that smile, as Oriole had found it, most winning. "But I come a

long way to get here."

"And why did you come?" asked the old man, rubbing Myron until he was all in a pink glow.

The bigger boy flashed the lightkeeper a curious look. "Oh—I got restless, I guess. Seems to me I wanted to get as far away from my old stamping grounds as possible. And I guess I have. Gee!"

"H'm," considered the lightkeeper. "You look like a purt' nice boy. But that's kind of a swear-word you use so frequent, and I'd rather you didn't say it before this here little feller. Myron imitates just like a parrot."

"Oh!" exclaimed Teddy Ford. "I'm always saying 'gee,' but it don't mean anything."

"Then don't use it," advised the lightkeeper, quite unaware that he used exclamatory expressions himself at times that were quite as meaningless. "You getting warm?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's coffee in that pot. You shove it for'ard. You'll have a cup and it'll warm you up. Ma will make some cocoa or hot milk for these young ones and Oriole."

He wrapped Myron in a big shawl of Ma's, told him to sit still on the kitchen settee and not wriggle, and went off to his own room to find some dry garments for the strange boy.

"You—you are an awful good boy," stammered Myron, gazing at the other rubbing himself down. Myron was what Ma called "a noticing child," which meant that he was thoughtful for his age. "You saved Mawyann."

"'Marian'?" repeated Teddy Ford. "And your name is Myron? Say, that's funny, too!" and Ted stared at the little fellow reflectively.

"What is funny?" asked Myron.

But just then Nat Jardin came back with under-garments, socks, a pair of canvas shoes, and a suit of overalls that would at least cover the strange boy if they did not well fit him. Ted put them on, staring most of the time at little Myron.

By and by Oriole appeared in some of the old clothes she had left on the island when, several months before, she had gone to live with Mrs. Rebecca Joy on the mainland. She began to smile the moment she saw Teddy Ford.

"Oh, dear me!" she said, "how funny you look in those dungarees of Uncle Nat's. But I guess you were just as wet as I was, Teddy Ford."

"I went into the same water," he told her, grinning again.

Oriole thought that smile of the curly-haired boy quite entrancing. She really could not help looking at him.

"How's little Marian getting on?" asked Nat Jardin.

"She is going to be all right," was Oriole's reassuring reply. "Ma says she only swallowed a little water, and she is as warm as toast now."

"The poor child——"

"Sa-ay!" burst out Teddy Ford suddenly, "are these kids twins?"

"Of course they are," said Oriole.

"And their names are Myron and Marian?" insisted the big boy.

"Of course. You saved Marian, and her father will be *so* thankful to you—you wait and see."

"I want to know what their last name is," said the boy, growing suddenly very red in the face. "It can't be—Gee!"

"There you go again, son," said Nat Jardin. "I cal'late it is going to be some hard for you to break yourself of saying that."

But now Teddy Ford paid no attention to the old lightkeeper. He was staring at Oriole.

"Say!" he demanded, "does the father of these kids live around here?"

"He is living at the Littleport Inn. Yes, sir," replied the surprised girl.

"And—and their mother?"

Oriole put a finger upon her own lips and shook her head. "No, no!" she whispered. "They don't know anything about their mother. She—she is dead."

Oriole said this almost in Teddy Ford's ear so that Myron should not overhear what she said.

"Oh!" said the boy. "But they *do* live around here, then? What's their name?"

"Why! Myron and Marian."

"Gee! Don't I know that?" muttered Teddy Ford. "But the rest of it? Their family name?"

"Their father is Mr. Harvey Langdon——"

This time Teddy interrupted her with a very emphatic "Gee!" indeed. His face turned from fiery red to white, and his eyes glowed with what Oriole correctly guessed was anger.

"S-s-s-say!" he stuttered hoarsely, "you don't mean to say the father of these two kids is Harvey Langdon, the ranchman?"

"Why, yes. That is exactly who he is," said Oriole, her own eyes wide with wonder.

"I—I didn't know—I hadn't the first idea he was in the East," stammered Teddy Ford.

"He came on here to Littleport to find Myron and Marian. They were lost \_\_\_\_\_"

"Yes, I heard talk about that," muttered the boy.

"You never came from away out West where Mr. Langdon and the twins live?" gasped Oriole.

"Never mind where I came from," growled Teddy Ford, seizing his still wet cap that he had hung behind the stove to dry. "I know these Langdons—you bet I do!"

"Why, Teddy Ford! you sound just as though you did not like them. And you saved Marian—and Myron and me too—from drowning."

"I would never have saved that kid if I'd known she was Harvey Langdon's!" exclaimed the boy angrily. "You can just bet I wouldn't!"

"Oh! How wicked!"

"I don't care!" muttered the boy. "Let it be wicked. Gee! if you'd gone through what *I* have——"

"But surely these little children never harmed you," began Oriole.

"Never mind. I know what their father is. I don't want to have a thing more to do with Harvey Langdon—nor those kids, either!"

Oriole was too amazed to speak. Uncle Nat had gone into the other room to see for himself how Marian was, while Myron was snuggled down on the settee almost asleep.

Teddy Ford started for the outer door, pulling his damp cap down over his curls. He carried his coat over his arm. That garment had not been in the sea.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Oriole.

"Never you mind. I'm not going to hang around here where Harvey Langdon may show up any minute. Not me!"

The next moment he had dashed out of the cottage. Oriole ran after him and looked out. But she could not see him, so fast had the strange boy moved. Besides, it was past sunset and fast growing dark.

"Well! did you ever?" murmured the amazed Oriole. "Such strange actions! That Teddy Ford is just the funniest boy I ever saw!"

## CHAPTER IV

### ORIOLE IS WORRIED

Nat Jardin was quite as amazed as Oriole when he came out of the sitting room and found that Teddy Ford had departed. But when he considered the boy's garments drying around the stove, and the fact that those Teddy had on were quite too ridiculous for him to wear very far, the old lightkeeper was relieved.

"I cal'late he ain't gone far," he said to Oriole soothingly. "He'll come back. How did you get him mad?"

"I never, Uncle Nat!" cried the girl. "I never said a thing to him. But——" and she volubly told her old friend the strange things Teddy Ford had said about the father of the twins. "Did you ever?" was her conclusion.

"Never heard the beat of that," agreed Nat Jardin. "Looks like he came from clear out West—like Mr. Langdon did. Knowed him at home, I cal'late."

"Why—why, Teddy Ford must be a Western cowboy, too!" Oriole cried.

"He's a boy all right; and I cal'late he's from the West," chuckled Nat Jardin. "What he knows about cows is another matter. And I cal'late I better go milk our'n right now. 'Tis time."

He got his storm hat and coat and started out with the milk pail to do the chores. But actually he was more anxious to find out what had become of Teddy Ford than anything else. The night was bound to be a cold one, and the strange boy was but thinly dressed.

But he found him nowhere among the outbuildings which were nearer to the lighthouse tower than they were to the cottage on the northern bluff which Nat Jardin now occupied. During this winter, because of an accident that had occurred and a long siege of rheumatism he had suffered, Nat Jardin had been replaced in the care of the light by a substitute lightkeeper. But he expected to go back to his old job in the spring.

For more than twenty years Nat Jardin had lived on Harbor Island and had kept the Harbor Light. He would have been "fair on his beam ends" if he had been obliged to go elsewhere to live, as he often declared. But old as he was, he was of a vigorous constitution and save when the rheumatism took him down, he was quite able to attend to the lamp and to the heavier chores about the island. Finally Nat Jardin brought in the milk, announcing that everything was "shipshape" for the night.

"But I cal'late that boy laid a course for the main," he added. "And him only half dressed. I don't understand it, Oriole."

"He seemed like such a nice boy," sighed the girl.

"I guess if he plunged right into that water and saved you all, as he did, he must be nice," said Ma Stafford briskly.

"But we know Mr. Harvey Langdon is a nice man," said Oriole warmly.

Myron and Marian had been given bread and milk and were now in bed, with a hot flatiron at their feet. Ma Stafford was taking no chances in the matter of the twins taking cold after their exposure.

Marian had cried for "cakes." The ducking had not caused her to forget those delicacies, and she was an insistent little thing when she was roused.

"Never see the beat!" Ma exclaimed. "Let that young one see a new moon and she'd think 'twas a silver spoon and would cry for it. But bread and milk is all they are going to have this hour of the night. No knowing how much their stomachs are upsot."

Then she gave further attention to the discussion about the strange boy and his stranger actions.

"Mr. Langdon is a nice feller," said Nat Jardin reflectively. "But mebbe this boy don't know him as well as we do."

"He can't know him," cried Oriole. "And yet he spoke as though he came right from where Mr. Langdon lives."

"That he did," admitted the lightkeeper. "Well, 'tis a mystery. But I cal'late it'll be cleared up like most mysteries."

Oriole sighed again. "Like most mysteries 'cepting the whereabouts of my dear mother and father," she whispered. But neither Nat Jardin nor Ma

Stafford heard this.

Oriole considered that she had many worries—and this was possibly true, when one considered her age; and this mystery about the curly-haired boy, Teddy Ford, was an added burden of anxiety. She could not understand anybody not liking Mr. Harvey Langdon. And that strange boy spoke as though he actually hated the father of the twins.

Ma Stafford said that Myron and Marian could not be taken back to the mainland that night. This began to worry Oriole.

"It will worry Mrs. Joy and Lyddy Ann if I don't get back," she said thoughtfully. "But it will be worse for Mr. Langdon when he returns to the hotel to-night and doesn't find the children in his rooms."

"Where did Langdon go?" asked Uncle Nat, smoking in the corner of the settee by the stove, while Ma fried fishcakes and watched a bannock turning golden brown in the oven.

"He went to the county seat, to the hospital there to see how Sadie Brown, the nurse, is getting along," explained Oriole. "He can't get back until after supper time. But he will expect me to be back with the twins by the time the train arrives."

"That poor creeter," said Ma Stafford, referring to the twins' nurse, who had been badly injured when Myron and Marian were rescued from the wreck of the Portland steamboat. "How is she gettin' on, anyway?"

"The doctors say she will recover. She is anxious to go back to the ranch with Mr. Langdon too. That is why he has waited so long before returning home."

Nat and Ma looked at each other. Oriole thought that was the whole reason for Harvey Langdon's delay in starting West with his recovered children. But the lightkeeper and his housekeeper knew better than that.

Ma suggested, however, that Mr. Langdon might not be much alarmed if he came back to the inn and found the twins and Oriole not there. "He will think, maybe, that you have taken them to Mrs. Joy's until morning."

"But what will Mrs. Joy and Lyddy Ann think?" demanded Oriole. "They will expect me back by bedtime."

"I never! I suppose that's so," murmured the housekeeper.

"And Mr. Langdon will go to Mrs. Joy's to make sure."

"I don't see for the life of me, then," said Ma, "what we're to do. We can't get word to the main."

"If only that boy hadn't run away——"

"I cal'late," put in Nat Jardin firmly, "that I can get over to the main somehow."

"I cal'late you *won't*," declared Ma. "I won't hear to your going, 'Thaniel."

"News travels fast around Littleport—'specially what ye might call bad news. The iceboat-men will tell about the accident all right. They see Oriole and the twins in the water."

"And they must have seen Teddy Ford pull us all out, too," said Oriole hopefully.

"They must be pretty funny folks," murmured Ma Stafford, "to sail right away and never try to stop and save you children. Reg'lar Floyd Iresons—that's what *they* are."

"Oh, my!" cried Oriole, who had a retentive memory, "you mean 'Old Floyd Ireson, for his har-rd hear-rt'—*I* know about him."

"And you know wrong about him—like Ma and other folks. That's an exploded doctrine," said Nat Jardin, puffing more quickly on his pipe. "*If* Cap'n Ireson ever left the crew of another craft without standin' by, 'twas 'cause his own crew or the weather wouldn't admit of it. And the women o' Marblehead ne'er tarred and feathered him, nor drug him in no cart. They was ladies, same as the women of Littleport air, and they wouldn't do such an unseemly thing."

"But that ain't neither here nor there. Them iceboats can't be stopped, as Ma supposes, within their own length. You can't tack, or back your wagon, just in a second or two. By the time they could have gone about in that racer and run down to the hole again, Oriole and the twins would have been fathoms deep."

"Don't talk of it, 'Thaniel," said Ma, shuddering.

"Anyhow," said Uncle Nat, "they'll take news of the accident back to town and it'll spread there like wildfire. Mr. Langdon will hear of it first thing he lands off that train. And I wager Becky Joy has heard the news before now."

"She will be dreadfully scared," said Oriole.

"I cal'late," said Uncle Nat, but smiling broadly, "that that Lyddy Ann woman will be wuss scare't than she was when she took Marm Joy for a ghost."

Ma clucked her tongue again at this, but Oriole smiled—then giggled.

"That was *so* funny," she said. "You ought to have seen poor Lyddy Ann with her apron over her head. But, dear me! wasn't it lucky we saw Mrs. Joy that time? Otherwise the silver casket might never have been found and lots of people would still think I stole it."

This mention was of a very serious incident in Oriole's career at Mrs. Joy's house, and one that she was not likely soon to forget.

While they were at supper a step sounded upon the porch. Oriole jumped up, hoping it might be the strange boy returning. But Uncle Nat boomed out:

"Ahoy, Payton Orr! Come aboard, shipmate. What's the good word?"

The substitute lightkeeper—a young, tanned, smiling and smooth-faced man—pushed open the door and entered. He was bundled up in a knitted "comforter" and mittens, as well as a thick pea-coat.

"Mighty cold, Nat," he declared. "How-de-do, Ma? And here's Oriole! I declare, Oriole, what you been doing now?"

"Er—why—eating," admitted Oriole.

"'Tain't to be wondered at. Anybody would eat Ma's fishcakes and Injun bannock. No, no! Don't you ask me! I stowed away a cargo o' biscuit and corned-beef hash 'fore I went up to light the lamp. Now I'm over here to get the news—not anything to eat."

"What kind of news are ye after?" chuckled Nat Jardin.

"I want to know what Oriole is falling into the breathin' holes out there for? And who it was that got her out, and then she chased off the island so fast? I

want to know."

"Oh, Mr. Orr! did you see Teddy Ford? Did you see where he went to?"

"I don't know him by name," said the other. "But I seen where that boy run to, if you want to know that."

"Oh, I do!" gasped the girl. "If—if anything has happened to him——"

"And him not half dressed," put in Ma Stafford.

"Does seem as though the lad might not have been just right in his mind," ruminated Jardin, "to have gone off like that."

"There warn't nothin' the matter with his legs, if there is with his mind," said Payton Orr. "He run down and across the ice like a scare't rabbit."

"And where 'did he go, Mr. Orr?" begged Oriole.

"He made the Flow station—and he got there all right, too," said Orr. "I watched him close from the lamp gallery. He's some runner, that boy. Who did you say he was?"

"Said his name was Ford," Uncle Nat observed. "Stranger about here. But a real civil-spoken boy."

"And he certainly did snatch Oriole out o' the water. I seen that," said the caller.

"And the twins. He saved the twins, too," said Oriole emphatically, and proceeded to tell the story of the adventure in full.

"He's something of a boy, I do say!" declared Orr. "But what made him run away? 'Fraid to be thanked for what he done?"

Oriole was silent, but Uncle Nat nodded slowly. "I shouldn't wonder," he said composedly enough. "'Fraid to meet Mr. Langdon—and be thanked—like enough."

The old lightkeeper had mixed truth with guile. Ma stared at him, but Oriole was secretly delighted. Payton Orr had one very big fault. He was a dreadful gossip.

"What Payt Orr don't know won't ever hurt him—nor nobody else," said Nat Jardin, when the younger man had gone. "Tell him the particulars of

what that boy said to us about Langdon, and the whole world and his wife will know it all. I cal'late a little caution is allowable with Payt."

"Humph! I'm thinkin' you're runnin' pretty close to the wind, 'Thaniel," admonished Ma. "You want to have a care what you're doin' on. Right before Oriole, too."

"I hope Oriole will take after my virtues not after my faults," chuckled Uncle Nat, smiling broadly at the girl he loved so well.

Oriole was getting sleepy and she nodded more than once before supper was over. Ma made her go to bed in her own little room upstairs without helping with the dish wiping.

"If you ain't got your death of cold plugin' into that icy water, it's more by good luck than good management," said the old woman. "You take a hot flat to bed with you, too. If you got sick, Oriole, what would happen to them little twins? I cal'late Mr. Langdon just about depends on you to look after them till that nurse of theirs gets on to her feet again."

"But he didn't expect me to drag them overboard in that sled," said Oriole, in an anxious tone. "I don't know what he *will* say. And about that Teddy Ford——"

She went off to bed rather stumblingly without finishing her speech. She was very sleepy indeed.

"Funny about that boy," Ma Stafford said to the old lightkeeper when Oriole was gone.

"You're right."

"He does seem to dislike Mr. Langdon, doesn't he? Do you suppose Mr. Langdon is a bad man, 'Thaniel?"

"Ain't none of us perfect," answered Nat Jardin.

"No. I s'pose not. But those Western men—they are pretty tough characters, ain't they?"

"They be in the movies," chuckled the old man. "But I wouldn't worry about Langdon none, if I was you, Ma. He seems a pretty nice feller."

"But he wants to take Oriole along with the twins—you know he does, 'Thaniel. Do you think it's safe? P'r'aps we ought to know more about him first. If Oriole's parents do turn up——"

Uncle Nat made a clucking noise with his tongue and shook his head, intimating that he could not hope much for this wished-for occurrence.

"Well, 'Thaniel, they *might*. And we are responsible for her. Besides loving her," Ma said earnestly. "We must not let her get into bad hands. Maybe that boy knows more about Harvey Langdon than we do."

"Maybe."

"Then we ought to find out," she said vigorously.

"Sho, Ma!" murmured the old lightkeeper, "you are as hungry for gossip as Payt Orr himself."

Ma sniffed angrily at this, but said no more.

## CHAPTER V

### WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT

Oriole slept so heavily when she first went to bed that an earthquake might have shaken Harbor Island without awaking her. The exposure to the cold and the heat of the kitchen afterward, together with the hearty supper she ate, served to deaden her senses.

If she dreamed—of the twins or of the strange boy, Teddy Ford, in whom she had become so greatly interested—the dream did not become a nightmare. She slept calmly even when some disturbance rose outside the cottage on the bluff.

Uncle Nat and Ma Stafford heard this noise however; for it came before they had thought of bed. First it was the creaking of sail-blocks and runners on the frozen harbor. Uncle Nat got his coat and hat and went to the door.

"Another o' them pesky iceboats, 'Thaniel?" asked Ma, busily threading a needle under the Argand lamp.

"I cal'late," agreed the lightkeeper, as he opened and shut the door quickly, himself on the outside.

He saw the falling sail of the ice-craft down in the cove. One of the men tumbled off and started across the ice and up the path.

"Sho!" muttered Nat Jardin, "it's Mr. Langdon, and he's some disturbed, now, ain't he?"

The burly ranchman seized upon Nat Jardin the moment he reached his side, crying in a muffled voice:

"My babies? What's happened to them, Mr. Jardin? Are they——"

"No, they ain't," said the lightkeeper coolly. "You can slat your sails and lash the tiller. Ain't a thing to worry about."

"Thank God!" ejaculated Harvey Langdon. "And Oriole?"

"Right as can be. Don't fret yourself."

"They told me that all the children had been in the water."

"And they didn't tell you no lie—for once," said the old man, leading the ranchman toward the cottage door. "But Ma's fixed them all up and they are abed."

"Oriole! She got them out of the water, did she?" said Langdon. "She is a wonder, that girl."

"Well, I cal'late she helped save the twins," said Nat Jardin, loyally. "Yes, Oriole is some girl."

"I can never repay her. But, Nat Jardin, I want to do much for that girl."

"Way it looks," muttered the lightkeeper, "somebody ought to do a lot for her. I don't cal'late her mother or father will ever show up this side of the River Jordan, Mr. Langdon."

"I am afraid you are right," admitted the ranchman. "I have been trying to find out about them on my own account, and it seems there is nothing to discover. The *Helvetia* sank, I am afraid, with all that were left aboard her."

"Sho!" muttered Nat Jardin, "I begun to believe that long ago."

"I must take the children back to the port at once," said Mr. Langdon, when he welcomed Ma Stafford. "They have no dry clothes here and I can take care of them better at the hotel. Besides, I shall not feel secure until the doctor has seen them. And Oriole——?"

"Now," said Ma, with conviction, "you wouldn't disturb the girl out of her first sleep. Just you send word to Becky Joy. Oriole can get back all right to-morrow. The twins is dif'rent. Though for my part I wouldn't risk them, nor myself, on one o' them iceboats."

"I have sailed those sort of things before," Mr. Langdon said carelessly. "You don't think the children have taken cold, Mrs. Stafford?"

"Not at all. You take 'em wrapped in blankets I'll give ye, and they will come to no harm—though 'tis a master cold night outside."

Nobody chanced to say anything about Teddy Ford, the boy who had really saved the twins and helped Oriole out of the sea. Langdon was anxious to

get back to town. He had great faith in doctors, and he wanted Doctor Simms to look at the twins.

Marian did not even awaken when they lifted her out of Uncle Nat's bed; and as for Myron, he was too brave a boy to fuss. Their father carried them down to the ice without assistance, and Oriole did not even dream that the twins were disturbed. Uncle Nat and Ma Stafford went to bed and all was quiet about the cottage on the bluff when Oriole did awake.

She had no idea what time it was, only that it was pitch dark—or seemed to be—outside. Her first thought was of the twins. But, then, she supposed they were all right downstairs. Then she thought of that strange boy—Teddy Ford. She hoped he was all right over at the Flow station.

But what a strangely acting and talking boy he was! Oriole was worried about what he had said in regard to Mr. Langdon. Not for a moment did she believe that Mr. Langdon was not a good and kind man. Of course, there was some mistake. Yet, how earnest that boy had been when he spoke of the ranchman so bitterly.

"I have just got to *know* about that," Oriole said decidedly. "And there must be some way of straightening out the trouble. Of course Mr. Langdon will be anxious to do something fine for that boy. And—he's—so—handsome ——"

Oriole yawned and snuggled down and would have been off to sleep again in a moment had her sharp ear not heard a noise below. It was outside the house. She sat up in the cold room, shivering. It was a step on the porch.

"Now, who can that be coming to the house this time of night?" Oriole asked herself. She was not at all alarmed. There was nothing or nobody to frighten her on Harbor Island, as she very well knew.

"Maybe Mrs. Orr is sick—or the baby," murmured Oriole, slipping out of bed and beginning to pull on a pair of warm stockings and afterward Ma's slippers that the old woman had given her. "Perhaps Payton Orr has come for Ma."

Oriole was interested in the Orr baby, too. She wanted to know if anything was wrong with the family of the substitute lightkeeper.

She hurried into a petticoat and gown, wrapped a fleecy shawl about her, and hastened downstairs. She had heard the person—whoever it was—enter the kitchen. But there was no sound of voices.

"Why! isn't that funny?" murmured Oriole Putnam, and, creeping down the well-carpeted stairs and tiptoeing across the narrow entry, she peered into the warm but dimly lighted kitchen. There was a certain glow from the stove in which there was banked a good fire; but not even a candle was lit.

She could see the figure at the stove, however, quite plainly. Nor was she uncertain in her recognition of it. There stood Teddy Ford, the strange boy who had saved the twins and her from the bay, just putting on his vest. His garments had all been left by Ma Stafford hanging about the stove, and by this time they must have been completely dry.

"Why, Teddy Ford!" gasped Oriole. "What are you doing now?"

"Oh, gee!" ejaculated the strange boy. "Are you up?"

"Well, I'm *down*," said Oriole. "And I guess Uncle Nat and Ma haven't heard you——"

"I didn't mean to wake any of you up," said the boy.

"I just happened to wake up. Then I heard you come in. But what do you mean to do? I thought you were at the Flow station?"

"Yes, I went there. And I helped the cook clean up after supper and he gave me a bunk. But I snuck out when the morning watch was called——"

"Snuck out!" gasped Oriole. "That—that's worse than saying 'gee'! I do believe."

"Gee! is it?"

"You *mustn't* say that so much," Oriole cried. "And what are you trying to do? You can't go away from here like that. I won't let you, Teddy Ford."

She closed the door into the entry so that they should not be heard by Uncle Nat in his room, or by Ma Stafford upstairs. Teddy looked at her curiously, and then grinned again.

"Ain't you a bossy girl?" he inquired. "You can't stop me from going."

"I guess I can stop you if I really try," said Oriole. "I'm pretty strong."

The boy laughed. "Pooh!" he said.

Now, under certain circumstances, there is no verbal sound in the language as aggravating as "Pooh!"

"Don't 'Pooh!' me. I am strong. So now!" Oriole cried quite furiously.

"Needn't get so huffed about it," said Teddy Ford, more mildly. "But girls ain't ever as strong as boys. They can't be."

"I—I don't think you're so awfully polite," announced Oriole. "And girls *are* strong like boys—sometimes. You just try to get me away from this door!" she challenged.

"Say! I don't fight girls. I was brought up better than that, I hope! Now, you let me go."

"But there is no reason why you should go. We mean well by you," said Oriole, using an old-fashioned expression that she had learned of late. "I am sure Uncle Nat and Ma——"

"Oh, say! I know you folks are all right. But that Harvey Langdon——"

"When Mr. Langdon hears what you did for the twins, he will do *anything* for you," she emphatically declared.

"That's all you know about it," said Teddy Ford sullenly.

"I guess I know as much about Mr. Langdon as you do!" cried Oriole, with considerable heat.

"I don't believe you do. You know only one side of him—the good side."

"Well!" she challenged, "do you know any more? You say you only know his bad side. Though it doesn't seem to me that the twins' papa can have much of a bad side."

"Gee!"

"I *wish* you'd stop using that word," complained Oriole again. "And I am sure if you would let him, Mr. Langdon would—would——"

"Gee! Send me to jail, maybe," and this time the boy smiled ruefully.

"Why, Teddy Ford! what have you ever done?" demanded Oriole.

"There *you* go!" exclaimed the boy. "You're just as quick to believe me in the wrong as the next one," and he started for the door.

But Oriole placed herself before him. She was both earnest and sympathetic. When she seized him by the wrinkled lapels of his jacket, he could not very well throw her off.

"Tell me! Please!" she begged. "Tell me all about it, Teddy Ford. Maybe we can help you. And I am *sure* Mr. Langdon must feel kindly toward you after what you have done for Myron and Marian."

## CHAPTER VI

### TEDDY FORD'S STORY

"You ain't got no call to bother about me," said Teddy Ford rather sheepishly and backing away from the pressure of Oriole's hands on his chest. "I won't ever see you folks again."

"Oh, Teddy Ford! don't say that," murmured Oriole, almost weeping.

"Gee! it wouldn't bother you, would it?"

"Of course it would. We're your friends," declared the girl. "Uncle Nat admires you—and so does Ma Stafford. And when Mr. Langdon hears about Myron and Marian and what you did for them——"

"Oh, stop it!" exclaimed the boy. "You don't know Harvey Langdon."

"I do so too!" cried Oriole indignantly.

"How long have you known him?"

"Why—why, ever since he came East. You know he came to find his children. And now, when their nurse is well again, he is going to take them back to Montana."

"Huh! I know all about that. We didn't hear nothing else but those lost kids out on the ranch all last summer."

"Teddy Ford, did you come from away out there?"

"Yes. I came on with a carload of cattle. Several carloads. Export steers. And I'd have gone across to England with them, only they wouldn't take me on the cattle boat. Said I was too young."

"What a traveler you are," sighed Oriole. "So am I. *I* came from South America—from Brazil."

"That so? Well, I reckon you ain't been up against it like me," said the boy ruefully.

"I don't know about that," observed Oriole. "I have been wrecked twice." She said it with a little pride in her voice. "I don't know what you can call hard luck if *that* isn't."

"I say!" he said earnestly, "that sounds as though you *had* been through something. But I ain't afraid of being wrecked, or anything like that. When folks say you are a thief——"

"Oh, Teddy Ford!" gasped Oriole.

"Yes. I thought you'd change your tune when you heard they called me a thief," muttered the boy.

"Why, Teddy!" murmured the girl, tears in her eyes now, "I guess I ought to know what *that* means. Folks said I was a thief, too!"

"Gee! They never?" cried the boy. "Not a nice little thing like you?"

His face turned very red again and his eyes sparkled. Oriole thought that when he was indignant he was even better looking than before.

"Yes, they did. They said I stole that casket from Mrs. Joy. But she hid it herself when she was asleep."

"Look here!" demanded Ted. "Who said you did it? I bet I know! That Harvey Langdon."

"Oh, he never! He never, neither!" gasped the emphatic Oriole.

"Well, it would be just like him," grumbled Teddy.

"Teddy Ford! I don't believe you know Mr. Langdon at all."

"I ought to. I worked on his ranch. I worked there three months. And he said I stole the family silver—a whole chest full of it. Why! I couldn't have lifted it," choked the boy. "He is an awful mean man."

"How terrible! I am sure there must be some mistake," murmured Oriole.

"You bet there was a mistake," growled the boy again. "I never stole that plate. I told 'em so. But because I was seen around the ranch house when there was nobody else supposed to be there, Harvey Langdon hopped on me and said I knew all about it."

"And you didn't know a thing?" asked Oriole.

"No, I didn't. But I don't expect anybody to believe me," and the boy hung his head again.

"I do. I believe you," whispered Oriole, coming close to him again and putting her hand upon his sleeve. "Oh, Teddy! there must have been somebody out there on Mr. Langdon's ranch who believed in you."

"If they did they didn't mention it," said Teddy with scorn. "The only fellow out there that didn't think I was a thief was the fellow that stole that silver plate himself. Believe me!"

"Oh, Teddy! I can't imagine Mr. Langdon not being kind," sighed Oriole.

"That so? Well, you haven't much of an imagination then," scoffed the Western boy.

"How did you come to be working for Mr. Langdon?"

"'Cause he wanted hands and would take anybody that came along. I'd been working all through that region. You see, my mother died when I was a kid. Dad was a pocket hunter——"

"What is that?" demanded Oriole. "Why did he hunt pockets? Did—didn't he have any pockets of his own?"

"Gee! ain't you green?" ejaculated the boy. "I mean my father was a prospector. A gold miner."

"Oh! Then you must be very rich. Of course you wouldn't need to steal that silver from Mr. Langdon."

"How do you figure that?" the boy demanded. "Pocket hunters don't often get rich. They are just lone prospectors who wander about the hills trying to find gold. Dad never struck it rich—nor ever will!" declared Teddy Ford, with much emphasis.

"Anyway, he wandered off the last time in search of an old Indian mine somebody told him of, and he never came in again. So I had to leave school in Helena and hustle for myself. I ain't got any folks now at all."

"No more than I have—till my mother and father come back," murmured Oriole. "I understand."

"Well, that's how I wandered out to the Langdon ranges. I got a job around the corrals. He's got a big ranch and is worth oodles of money. He spent a fortune with detectives, so they say, trying to find the twins."

"He loves them dearly," said the girl. "And he loves them so much that no matter what he *thinks* you have done, if you will let him he will treat you right because you saved the twins from drowning."

"Gee!" scoffed Ted, "you're sure of him, aren't you? Maybe he treats girls different from what he does men. But believe me, he is a hard boss and a hard man."

"I don't want him to give me anything for saving his kids—if I saved them. And he never will give me a fair deal."

"I cannot believe that, Teddy Ford," whispered Oriole, shaking her head. "He is so good to me——"

"I don't care. I'm going back there to the Langdon ranch when I've got me a lot of money, and I'll make him own up that he was wrong. I never stole that silver," declared Teddy stolidly.

"But won't it be a long time, then, before you go back?"

"Huh?"

"You know, you can't make your fortune in a little while."

"Gee! that's so," admitted the boy. "Well, *when* I am rich——"

"But money won't help you prove your innocence, will it?" asked the girl quite sensibly.

"Money will do 'most anything," said Teddy with cheerful optimism.

"I don't know. There are *some* things—Anyway," said Oriole briskly, "you can't very well do anything toward proving that you never stole those things when you are away here in the East."

"Huh!"

"I should think you would want to be right there where it happened, and hunt for the real thief. I stayed with Mrs. Joy when they all said I stole her old casket. And finally the truth came out," said Oriole with satisfaction.

"How's the truth coming out about Harvey Langdon's silver?" demanded the boy.

"I—I don't know. But of course everything always *does* come out all right. Of course it does!"

"Gee! you believe a lot of old-fashioned stuff, don't you?" gruffly commented Teddy Ford.

"Why, Teddy Ford!" gasped Oriole. "I hope you are not a *bad* boy. Don't you believe in Providence?"

"I guess you are real religious, ain't you?" returned the boy. "I don't know much about it. But I know that a fellow gets a lot of hard knocks when he is alone in the world. My dad was pretty good to me; but he went off and left me all alone. Maybe he just had to. Those old prospectors have just got to keep traveling and looking for 'color,' like they say, until they drop. But it was pretty hard to be left alone."

Teddy kicked the toe of one shoe against the heel of the other and looked down.

"Then that Harvey Langdon treating me so mean——"

"Oh, Teddy!" cried Oriole, softly, "do let me talk to Mr. Langdon. I know he will listen after all you did, saving the twins."

"And just because I did save them," returned the boy, "he wouldn't believe I was innocent of that robbery. He'd just give in 'cause you asked him. No! I came over here to get my clothes and get away so that none of you folks could tell Harvey Langdon where I was."

"But—but, you won't run away!" cried Oriole, her lips quivering.

"Ain't got to run away. Nobody's got any hold on me. I'm just moving on."

"Oh, Teddy Ford!"

"Why, you ain't got any call to take on about it," declared the boy, looking at her wonderingly.

"Of course I have!" cried Oriole, half angrily. "Aren't you my friend? I feel just as bad for you, about that stolen silver, as though it was me that was being accused again."

"Gee!" murmured Teddy Ford.

"And you *stop* saying that word!" commanded the girl. "I won't have it. And I won't have you keep running away—first from one place and then another."

"G—Well!" murmured the boy.

"They will of course think you stole Mr. Langdon's silver if you hide away like a regular burglar," declared Oriole.

"Who's hid away like a burglar?" repeated Teddy Ford indignantly.

"Aren't you? You left Mr. Langdon's ranch——"

"He bounced me," interrupted Teddy, glumly enough.

"But you didn't have to leave that neighborhood, did you?"

"'Neighborhood'! What do you think? The nearest ranch to Langdon's is forty miles away. And Hempdell, the shipping town, is seventy-five miles. He takes two weeks to herd a shipment of steers to the railroad, or they'll lose so much weight they aren't worth shipping. Gee! there ain't any neighbors."

"Oh, dear me! won't you ever learn to stop saying that word?"

"G—Huh! I forgot," admitted Teddy Ford with real remorse. "You are an awful nice girl—the nicest girl I ever saw. But you can't change me. I'm too tough."

"What nonsense you talk!" ejaculated Oriole in her most grown-up way. "I know you *can't* be so bad a boy as Shedder Crabbe. And he's changed a lot—since he almost got drowned and I saved him."

"Mebbe I'd better jump into that hole in the ice down there again, and you pull me out," said Teddy, grinning.

"Now, don't try to be funny," Oriole told him seriously. "I want you to give Mr. Langdon a chance to get acquainted with you——"

"Not much! He kicked me off his ranch. That's enough—too much."

"I can't understand it," sighed Oriole. "He is so nice to me and so loving to the twins."

"You ain't ever got him mad," grumbled Teddy. "He's what they call out where I come from a regular rip-snorter when he gets mad."

"Oh, dear!"

"Why, Ching Foo, the ranch cook, told me Harvey Langdon ran one puncher clear off the ranch once—followed him thirty miles. Only the fellow had the best horse, Harvey would have got him."

Fortunately Oriole did not understand all the terms Ted used. But she was troubled. She loved Mr. Langdon, and she liked this very good looking boy from the West. She could not understand the ranchman being harsh without cause; yet she did not believe that Teddy was dishonest.

Indeed, her very shrewd young mind instantly evolved this question: "If Teddy Ford was guilty of stealing silver plate why was he dressed so poorly and why did he want to work on a cattle-boat?" It seemed to Oriole that he would be living on the proceeds of the robbery if he were a thief.

But he seemed so hopeless—so desperate! What could she say to him to make him do what she believed to be the right thing?

On the other hand, how could she influence the ranchman to give the boy a fair and square deal? Convinced as Mr. Langdon must be that Teddy Ford was a thief, Oriole Putnam wondered what *she* could do or say to change the man's belief.

## CHAPTER VII

### OTHER PEOPLE'S TROUBLES

The girl had lived so long among "grown-ups" that she usually considered matters deserving thought at all with more seriousness than most children. This trouble Teddy Ford was in was no light matter. Nor was Mr. Harvey Langdon's side of the question something that could easily be put aside or ignored.

The boy had been hurt to the quick by the ranchman's angry harshness. The ranchman (as he believed) had very good reason for being harsh with Teddy. There the matter stood. Oriole was very, very uncertain.

"Won't you wait and see Mr. Langdon when he comes for the twins, Teddy?" Oriole finally pleaded. She did not know that the ranchman had already been to the island and had taken Myron and Marian back to Littleport on the iceboat.

"Me see Harvey Langdon?" gasped Ted. "Gee! No!"

"But I *know* he will do something for you."

"I don't want him to do anything for me," said the boy independently. "Only just one thing. And he won't do that."

"Yes?"

"I want him to say he don't believe I stole that silver," growled Teddy.

"But how can you ever make him see that he—he made a mistake, if you have run away from the ranch country. You don't give Mr. Langdon a chance," said Oriole.

"A chance to chase me off his ranch again?"

"Don't you see, if you remained out there, something might turn up to give you—you a clew. You know what I mean? Of course, *somebody* stole that chest of silver."

"You bet they did. And got away with it slick, too. Nobody but me and Ching Foo about the ranch house—and I know I didn't see a soul."

"Is—is Mr. Ching Foo a Chinaman?"

"Yes. Cook, I tell you. Oh! *he* is not to be suspected. Ching Foo has been at the ranch for twenty years—and sent home long ago for his coffin and has it stored away in his bedroom."

"Goodness, Teddy Ford! what are you saying?" cried Oriole.

"That's right," said the boy. "Ching Foo is an old-fashioned Chinaman, and no American-made coffin would do for him. He showed it to me. All lacquer-work and dragons and fancy doo-dads on it. He will be put in that when he dies and be shipped back to Canton to sleep with his fathers. Mr. Langdon has promised him that it shall be done just as he says. Otherwise he would go back to China himself and die there, for he has plenty of money saved up."

"Dear me!" said Oriole in a worried tone, "I think that is too, too dreadful. Are all Chinamen like Mr. Ching Foo?"

"You got me there, Oriole," said the boy. "He's not a half bad old chap. And he said something funny to me when I was coming away from the Langdon Ranch. I ain't forgot it."

"What do you mean—funny?" asked the interested girl.

"Why, it sounded as though he might know—or suspect—more about who was the real thief than he let on. The Chinese are awfully closemouthed. He only said to Harvey Langdon: 'Me no catchee pidgin; him no my pidgin.'"

"Goodness me!" ejaculated Oriole. "I thought you said it was silver that was stolen, not pigeons."

"It was silver plate," chuckled Ted Ford. "But Ching Foo talks what they call pidgin English sometimes. He is a Canton Chinaman, and he can't say business. Pidgin is the nearest he can come to saying business. You see, he meant to tell Langdon it wasn't any of his business, and he shouldn't ask him about the lost silver."

"Oh!"

"It looked to me as though the old man was scared to tell everything he knew. I went after him alone in the kitchen, and asked him if he didn't suspect who stole the plate? He said:

"'Plenty bad mans here. Melican boy get away; mebbe get hurt.' And then he added the thing that afterward set me thinking. It was: 'Three topside bad men—alli same talkee-talkee. Melican boy look out!'"

Oriole still looked at the boy curiously.

"You see," said Teddy, his voice lowered, "afterward I remembered that Ridley, Shaffer and Tom Mudd were always roosting around on the fences when they weren't working, and talking together out of the corners of their mouths. Three tough fellows, they were, and don't you forget it. They had only just come to the ranch and, although they were good punchers, some of the boys said they were bad eggs."

"Why didn't you tell Mr. Langdon about them?"

"You can't talk to Harvey Langdon when he's mad and his mind is made up. And, besides, I never thought much about what Ching Foo said till I was half way across the continent on the cattle train."

"I think that is too bad," said Oriole soberly. "But I wish you would stay and talk with Mr. Langdon, Teddy Ford."

"Not me!" cried the boy emphatically.

"Then I wish you would go back home and see if you can't find those three bad men. It must be that they have made some use of the silver."

"Melted it up. Sell it for silver bullion at one of the mining towns. That would be their game."

"That is terrible! But if you could *prove* that they did just that?"

"It wouldn't prove they were the robbers," grumbled the boy, shaking his head.

"But it would *look* so. Mr. Langdon would believe you were innocent, then, I am sure."

"Not much he wouldn't. You have to show Harvey Langdon. You can't tell him. And anyway he would not listen to me."

"But he will listen to me," said Oriole firmly. "And I mean to tell him all about you—what you say and what you did in saving us from the water. You go back to Montana and fight this, Teddy Ford—that's what *you* do," said the girl earnestly.

"G-g-g—I mean, do you want me to?" he gasped.

"That is the way to do. Stay right there until you have proved your innocence."

"Well, I can work back that way. I know how," said Teddy, doubtfully. "Do you think that is the right thing to do?"

"So I believe," Oriole confidently responded.

"I imagine you know more about what's right than I do," said Teddy Ford soberly. "If you say so——"

"I do say so. And I will tell Mr. Langdon. He will meet you differently out there I am sure. He might just want to give you money here in the East and thank you for saving Marian and helping Myron and me. But if you go right to him at home and tell him you want to clear up that awful mystery I am sure he will think you really *are* honest."

And in her shrewd mind Oriole meant to talk to Mr. Langdon in such a way that he would be sure to meet Teddy Ford in just this way! The boy was impressed by her words. He nodded his head thoughtfully.

"That sounds right, Oriole. I guess you are giving me the 'real steer,' as the punchers say. I'm going to do it. I got a chance to go on a boat around to Boston, and I must start now. Good-by. You'll hear from me some time—though I ain't much on writing letters."

"Oh, Teddy, be *sure* to write to me!" Oriole cried, almost in tears as the boy pushed past her to open the door.

"You bet I will. Good-by!"

He turned back and squeezed her hand, blushing furiously as he did so. Then he ran out of the house. Oriole watched from the window but could see nothing of him after he crossed the porch and started down the path to the cove, it was so dark. Then she sighed.

"I do think other people have so very many troubles," she said, and she took this thought back to bed with her.

In the morning she certainly was surprised to learn that the twins as well as Teddy Ford had gone away in the night. Mr. Langdon had been right here at the island without seeing the boy from the West. Oriole was much disappointed.

But she made up her mind, nevertheless, to talk to Mr. Langdon about that lost chest of silver. It was impossible for her to believe that Teddy Ford was in any measure guilty of the robbery.

She hurried home, dragging the sled with her, and arrived at Mrs. Joy's before noon, finding that the widow and Lyddy Ann had been informed of Oriole's safety by Mr. Langdon after his return from the island the night before.

"I do think that bay is no place for you, Oriole," Mrs. Joy said. "It is too dangerous for anybody to risk themselves upon it. Now you must wait for open weather before you go to the island again."

"Tell you what," Lyddy Ann told the girl, "you might's well wait for one of these flying-machines to take you. 'Tis safer, I do allow. That Anson Cope ought to be lashed to the mast for ever running you down that way with his iceboat. You wait till I give him a piece of my mind!"

As Lyddy Ann was forever threatening to give people "a piece of her mind," Oriole wondered that she had any mind left at all. But of course she did not say just that.

Her own mind, in fact, was quite occupied with the trouble of Teddy Ford and how she should broach the subject to Mr. Langdon. She had told Uncle Nat all about her interview with the youth and what he had said and what she had advised him to do.

"You got the right idea, Oriole," the old lightkeeper declared. "Let the boy go back there to that ranch and prove his innocence. He can do it if he goes about it right. And I believe Mr. Harvey Langdon is a kind man at heart. You put a flea in *his* ear."

So Oriole started over to the hotel after the noon dinner to do just this. She knew the twins were all right, for Mr. Langdon had sent her word. Neither

Myron nor Marian seemed a whit the worse for the plunge into the icy harbor.

"You are a mighty brave girl, my dear," said Harvey Langdon, warmly. "I know that few girls of your age could have kept their heads and saved the children."

"Oh, Mr. Langdon! I didn't save Myron and Marian. At least, little Marian would have been drowned had it not been for somebody else."

"I did hear from Anson Cope that somebody aided you."

"Why! he *saved* us. That's what Teddy Ford did. He jumped right in——"

"Who did you say?" broke in Harvey Langdon, with a queer look on his bronzed face. "What is his name?"

"Ted—Teddy Ford," stammered Oriole.

"Indeed! A boy?"

"Yes, sir. He is a boy. And he jumped right into the water and brought poor little Marian up from under the loose ice. Then he helped me with Myron, and finally he got me out and the sled too. Oh, he is a wonderful boy, Mr. Langdon!"

"He is, is he? And his name is Ford?"

"Yes, sir," hesitated Oriole. "You owe the twins' lives to him, and that's a fact."

"I do, do I?"

The ranchman continued to look so "funny," as Oriole expressed it in her thoughts, that she could scarcely tell the details of the rescue as she had intended to. But she managed to make a considerable impression on the man's mind—and, she hoped, in Teddy's favor.

"So that's how it was, eh?" commented Langdon. "And you think that this boy is more to be commended than you are?"

"Oh, yes, sir! For he really saved us."

"Where is he now?"

"He's—he's run away."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, Mr. Langdon," said Oriole sorrowfully. "He is afraid of you."

"He is, is he? Humph! And maybe that is so. He is the Teddy Ford who used to work for me, I suppose?"

"He says he worked on your ranch. And—and he ran away——"

"Because he stole."

"Oh, no, sir! He never! Why, think of it! He has no money and is just knocking about working for his living. If he had got that silverware of yours don't you suppose he would be *rich*?"

"Ha! He told you about it, did he?" asked the ranchman sternly.

"Oh, yes, sir. All about it. And he doesn't know a thing about the robbery, Mr. Langdon. 'Deed and he don't."

"He would not admit it of course. And I don't suppose he did the whole thing himself. Whoever he was in with cheated him out of his share of the loot of course—he being only a boy. I am afraid Teddy's a bad egg."

"Just the same he saved Marian's life," Oriole declared with some sharpness.

"That is right. I owe him a good deal for what he has done. We won't say anything more about that silver—although it was very valuable and had been handed down in our family for several generations. Brought from England by the first Langdons.

"Well, when you see Ted again you tell him not to be afraid of me. All that is wiped off the slate for what he did yesterday, and I stand willing to help him all I can. He is nothing but a boy after all."

The ranchman's bluff heartiness pleased Oriole. Yet she felt that it would be just because he was grateful to Teddy Ford if he helped the boy—provided the latter would give the ranchman the chance. Langdon still believed Teddy guilty of complicity in the robbery at the ranch.

She could say nothing more about it. She knew that it was not in her province to criticize the ranchman or to try to convert him from his opinion. Time—and Teddy Ford's own efforts—must change the man's opinions.

Mr. Langdon gave every evidence of being fond of her, and on this very day he broached a subject that delighted Oriole. She was very fond of the twins, and Mr. Langdon had told her so much about his ranch and the Montana country that in her heart there had begun to bud a desire to see the far-distant plains and mountains.

"I don't see why you shouldn't come out there and see the twins and me next summer," the ranchman said. "It would please Myron and Marian, I am sure. I am going to start back very soon with the children and their nurse. Sadie Brown can travel now, and she wants to go home. I'll have to run up to Maine for a day or two with the children so that their grandparents may see the twins, now that we are in the East. But of course we can't have a visit there now, too much time has gone by and we must start home as soon as possible. Yes, we must see you out on the ranch."

"Oh! I'd love to come to see you," cried Oriole.

"Then I guess I can fix it with Mrs. Joy—and Nat Jardin."

"But when my dear mother and father come——"

"We'll hear about it at once by telegraph," Langdon assured her. "I will make some special inquiries myself, anyway, Oriole, before I leave for the West. Perhaps we can get some line on what part of the world they are now in."

"Oh, wouldn't that be glorious!" gasped Oriole, clasping her hands. "I've been studying my geography. Perhaps, if that ship took them 'way round the world, they may land at San Francisco. Montana would be much nearer to them than Littleport."

"Quite so, my dear," agreed the ranchman.

And so plans were begun for Oriole Putnam's wonderful trip to the cattle country in which, quite unsuspected by the girl, she was to have many quite wonderful adventures.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ORIOLE'S OWN TROUBLES

School began again and Oriole Putnam was glad, after all, to meet the boys and girls who, previous to the holidays, had been inclined to scoff at her because of their suspicion that Oriole had stolen Mrs. Joy's ancient jewel-casket.

Although she had borne this trouble courageously, the suspicion of some of her schoolmates had made the girl very unhappy. Her mind was completely freed of this. But all her mates were not inclined to welcome Oriole kindly.

May Rabey, whose widowed mother was one of the jealous relatives of Mrs. Rebecca Joy and feared Oriole's influence with that eccentric woman, was quite as "snippy" as ever. And Shedder Crabbe had evidently not been entirely cured of what Lyddy Ann called "his mean streak" when Oriole had aided him one day out in the open harbor.

"A crab is a crab, no two ways about it," declared Mrs. Joy's maid-of-all-work. "They'll always travel sideways and be as onsartin as a cross-eyed man. And that Shadrach!"

Further expression of her opinion of Shedder was beyond Lyddy Ann's speech. And it was quite beyond Oriole's speech, too, after the first meeting of the Busy Bees which was held after the vacation.

Minnie and Flossy Payne, who lived on State Street too, but not quite so far out of town as Mrs. Joy's house, where Oriole lived, invited the dolls' sewing society to their home for this meeting. There was a sun parlor on the south side of the Payne house. And behind the Payne premises, on the next street, was the home of the president of the Town Council, Mr. Enos Crabbe—the two properties adjoining.

That Shedder was so near a neighbor perhaps was one reason why the Payne girls disliked him so very much. And it must truthfully be said that he made himself very annoying to all the girls in Oriole's set.

He was half afraid of Oriole, for she always seemed to get the best of him in the end. And Shedder respected Oriole's muscle and determination. Several times she had proved herself to be more than his equal.

In fact, only once had the son of the storekeeper and councilman managed really to get the best of Oriole. That was when he had removed the ladder to the loft of the old cottage on Harbor Light Island and thus left Oriole marooned in the cupola on the roof of the exposed structure.

But Shedder got wind of this meeting of the Busy Bees and learned that the girls were going to sew in the conservatory, as it was warm there with the sun lying full upon its many windows until sunset.

The end of the room faced the dividing fence between the Payne yard and that of the Crabbe property. And in this fence was a low gate.

Before Enos Crabbe had bought the place behind Mr. Payne's, the then owner's family and the Paynes had been the very best of neighbors and friends. Both families had used the communicating gateway in the high board fence. When Enos Crabbe had come to live here he had fulfilled the promise of his name and nailed the gate shut.

"Not that we ever wanted to be friendly with those Crabbes," sniffed Flossy Payne. "Only our father wouldn't be so impolite as to nail up the gate that everybody used."

It seemed, however, that Shedder had drawn the nails. The gateway offered a handy means of egress for him to State Street when he chanced to want to go that way.

Like most boys, Shedder had pets—a rabbit hutch in the back yard, a pair of bantam fowls, a squirrel in a cage which Tabby, the house cat, was quite as much interested in as was Shedder himself. But the boy's chief possession was a well-grown male sheep named Jingo.

Jingo had been a cosset lamb, and for once Enos Crabbe had been prevailed upon not to turn Jingo into money at the proper time.

Now Jingo was four years old, well-grown, with curled horns as hard as iron and "as vicious as sin," the neighbors all declared. Whenever Jingo got loose in the streets of Littleport even the most savage dogs made for instant cover.

On this afternoon Shedder, knowing the girls of the Busy Bee society would soon arrive for their sewing party, slipped through the gateway in the fence and hung the poster-picture of a shaggy, bearded goat standing rampant on a barrel, across the lower windows in the end of the conservatory, the sills of which were not more than a foot above the ground. The girls did not notice the three-sheet poster outside the windows. They gathered chatteringly to their party and the sly Shedder watched them through a crack in the fence till he was confident the girls were settled to their work and gossip.

Then, giggling delightedly in anticipation of the trick he was about to play, the Crabbe boy opened the gate in the fence and released from confinement the ram that was as crabbed of temper as though he had really been born into the Crabbe family.

Jingo wore a broad leather strap about his neck, and by this Shedder urged him along to the opening. There were patches of snow on the ground, and they were just crusting over again, for it had been mild at noon. Jingo's hard little hoofs clattered through this snow-crust to the gate. He recognized Shedder as his master, and the boy could control him when nobody else could.

Now Jingo pushed his black muzzle through the gateway and looked about the Payne premises. Almost instantly the rampant goat on the poster caught his eye. It looked enough like another ram to Jingo to rouse in him the desire for battle.

Jingo stamped his hoofs and shook his head in no uncertain way. Shedder snickered with delight and urged the big sheep through the gateway.

"Go to it, Jingo!" he yelled. "Go it!"

Once on the Payne side of the fence and with his supposed enemy right before him, the big ram wasted no time. He needed no further urging. Head down and bunching his four feet under him, he charged with an angry blare of his sharp voice.

"Wheel!" yelled Shedder, and almost fell to the ground he laughed so.

With a crash that startled the ram as much as it did the girls inside the sun parlor, his horns smashed through paper and glass and the beast appeared half through the window. Only his thick wool kept him from being badly cut by the broken glass.

His nose was scratched a little, and as he stood there, half in and half out of the sun parlor, with the remains of the poster and part of a window frame hung about his neck, the girls might have been highly amused had they not been so frightened.

To Shedder's vast delight they expressed their emotions by screaming and running. All but Oriole. She was as startled as any of her friends when Jingo crashed through the glass; but she immediately realized what it was and who was at the bottom of the trick.

"That mean Shedder Crabbe!" she ejaculated as Minnie and Flossy and the other girls ran from the place. "This is his Jingo—Oh! The dreadful thing!" for Jingo made a lunge for her but could not get farther into the room.

There were heavy curtains at the inner door of the sun parlor looped back by thick cords and tassels. Oriole ran to the door, pulled out the knot of one cord and ran back with it to the stamping sheep. He could only shake his head at her and threaten with his horns, after all.

Oriole drew an end of the cord through the sheep's collar and tied him fast to a brace under the window sill. When he finally backed out he could not get away.

Shedder's head popped through the hole in the fence and he bawled:

"You let that ram alone! Here, Jingo! Jingo! That's you, Oriole Putnam! I see you. If you hurt that sheep I'll tell my father on you."

Oriole opened the outer door of the conservatory and told him emphatically that "she didn't care whom he told."

"Just wait till Mr. Payne comes home and sees what you did with your old ram. Your father will have to pay for this glass."

At that Shedder disappeared. He had not thought of that possibility. He hoped nobody else had seen him at the gate but Oriole. He determined to deny that he had set the ram free.

But Oriole left Jingo tied and went back into the house to tell the other girls. Mrs. Payne chanced to be out that afternoon and Flossy and Minnie were afraid of the sheep and allowed him to stand there in the cold.

But the incident broke up the sewing party and Oriole went home. To her surprise she found Mr. Harvey Langdon talking with Mrs. Joy in the "museum," as Oriole always called the big sitting room.

"Oh, Mr. Langdon, nothing has happened to the twins, has there?" the girl cried anxiously.

"You see?" the ranchman said to Mrs. Joy. "She is quite given over to the children. And they think more of Oriole than they ever did of Sadie Brown." Then to the girl he replied:

"Myron and Marian are all right. It is your personal affairs I must talk about. I have some news."

Instantly Oriole's face flamed and her lips parted.

"My dear, dear mother!" she cried. "You have heard from her and from father?"

"No." He said it bluntly and shook his head with gravity. But his expression of countenance was very sympathetic. "I have heard from neither of your parents, my dear Oriole. But I believe we have heard of them."

"Oh!" the girl gasped, and then went speechless. She could just stare at him pleadingly.

"I was in Boston yesterday. I went there because of something I read in the Boston paper. It was an account of the rescue of some seamen from a rocky island off the coast of British Guiana."

"Oh! Castaways?" cried Oriole. "Not my mamma and father?"

"They claim to have been members of the crew of the *Helvetia*; but none of the passengers had been of their party," Mr. Langdon said, much moved by the girl's anxiety.

## CHAPTER IX

### A GREAT CHANGE COMING

Oriole could not keep back the tears, although she tried hard to do so. She realized that the ranchman was patting her hands and saying:

"Now, now! Don't take on so, my dear. Let me tell you all I have learned."

"Ye-yes, sir!" sobbed Oriole. "I want to know the worst!"

She had got that expression from Mrs. Joy herself. That good woman was now wiping her eyes frankly as she watched Oriole's sorrowful face.

"Well, my dear, maybe it is not as bad as it seems," Mr. Langdon said. "But I think you ought to know the particulars. I talked with one of the seamen who was rescued from that rocky island. He is in the East Boston Hospital. He certainly was a member of the *Helvetia's* crew. He remembers you very well."

"Oh, dear!" gasped Oriole. "And my mamma and father?"

"This man says that not long after the purser's boat was sent away with you and the other passengers that the *Adrian Marple* saved in it, the other boats were lowered. The wireless was out of order. That must have been why so few other vessels knew anything about the *Helvetia's* trouble.

"Your father, Oriole, planned to go with your mother in the captain's boat. This seaman remembers Mr. Putnam clearly. He says your father went to work with some of the seamen to lower that boat—got into it himself while your mother waited to be lowered by a sling.

"But, my dear," the ranchman pursued, with his arm about the girl's shoulders, "an accident happened. The fall-block fouled, and one end of the boat went down suddenly and tipped the men in it into the sea. Your father was thrown against the hull of the sinking ship and—and he never came to the surface of the sea again."

"Oh! Oh! My dear daddy!" sobbed Oriole, her face against Mr. Langdon's coat.

"But listen!" urged the ranchman. "This seaman thinks your mother was saved. She was put in another boat—one commanded by the first officer of the *Helvetia*—and the seaman saw that boat picked up by another ship, not the *Adrian Marple*, of course, on which you were brought to the States.

"It seems a fog shut down. This seaman thinks that the ship that rescued the boat your mother was in was what he calls a 'tramp.' She was a freight ship and perhaps was bound to a distant port. She probably carried no passengers and possibly no wireless outfit.

"So that is why no word has come from your mother. The shock of your loss and your father's disappearance may have made it quite impossible for your mother to take steps to communicate with the steamship company that owned the *Helvetia*. Her first officer must have neglected to do so, as well. It is all a mystery as to what became of that strange freight ship, but there is good reason to hope."

"Oh, but my dear father is dead!" murmured Oriole. "What will mother do without her Noddy?" and she burst into sobs again. "Out there—all alone—in that strange—strange ship! What will happen to her?"

"Now, Oriole, don't you take on that-a-way," urged Mrs. Joy, likewise in tears.

"But, my poor daddy——"

"Don't grieve so, child," urged Mr. Langdon huskily. "I will be a father to you, Oriole. You shall never want for a thing. You are just like a sister to Myron and Marian now. They love you dearly."

"And I love them," sobbed the girl. "But I want my mamma so much! I—I just don't think I can—can live without her!"

"Don't say that. There is a good chance, we believe, of her coming back to you, my dear," said Mrs. Joy. "Don't lose heart, Oriole. Providence works in wondrous ways, the hymn book says."

"I am going to take care of you till your mother comes back," declared Mr. Langdon firmly. "I have talked with Nat Jardin and with Mrs. Joy, here. They both agree that a change will do you good."

"Sadie Brown is well enough to travel. She is a good woman and will be fond enough of you when she knows you. And those twins of mine—well! when I tell them you are going to be their sister—or nearabout—they are going to be tickled pretty near to pieces."

"I—I know. They—they are just *dears*," gasped Oriole, struggling for composure.

"Everything will turn out all right, Oriole," said Mrs. Joy again. "Me and Lyddy Ann will miss you. But you'll be back to visit us some day. I am sure you will be happy with Mr. Langdon. He is well able to take care of you—and he's got no hypercritical relatives, I understand," and the sea-captain's widow shook her head gravely.

"Yes. He's better able than either Nathaniel Jardin or me to give you what you ought to have in this world. I shall miss you a good deal. But at my age I hope I've got past being selfish."

There was much more to be said, but it was all in the same vein. Mr. Langdon went away before supper time; and then Lyddy Ann must be told. Lyddy Ann declared she was "taken all aback" by this sudden change in Oriole's fortunes.

"I thought you was here in this old house for the rest of my nateral life, at least," grumbled the fleshy maid-of-all-work, after a while and when Oriole had had another cry. "I don't like changes, Oriole Putnam. And I am going to miss you a lot. And what Becky Joy will do without you—Well! I don't see how she can be so foolish as to let you go."

"But I am going to have lots of good times out on that ranch," said Oriole, child enough to begin already to anticipate. She dried her eyes. "Mr. Langdon says I shall have a pony to ride, and——"

"Goodness! A *horse*? I wouldn't no more trust myself on a horse than I'd think of going into a wild tiger's cage," declared the woman with emphasis. "No, indeedy! Now, if 'twas a boat you'd ride in—that would be some sense. A body knows what to expect in a boat."

"But I don't think," said Oriole cautiously, "that Mr. Langdon's ranch is near enough to the sea for him to have a boat."

"Humph! Funny place, I say! I couldn't imagine anybody from choice living so far away from blue water. But I hope you'll be happy there, Oriole. And you can always come back if you don't like it. I've got some money saved up. Becky Joy has paid me well, and goodness knows I never get any chance to spend money with all the work there is to do in this house.

"So if you don't like it out there on that dairy farm——"

"It's not a dairy farm. It's a ranch," corrected Oriole.

"What's the difference? They keep cows, don't they? I got a second cousin in Hepsbury that keeps a farm like that. And sells butter and milk to the city. Well, if you don't like the cows—and they ain't much society for a gal like you, I do allow—you come back here. You sha'n't suffer none for a dollar as long as I am alive and the Littleport Bank don't bust."

Oriole kissed the fleshy woman warmly. "Dear me!" she cried, "how good everybody is to me."

"Sure. They ought to be," replied Lyddy Ann. "You are worth your weight in ambergris, as my brother who whaled it all his days used to say of me. I was twenty year younger than him. If he could see me now," added the woman, shaking with mirth, "I guess he would change his statement. With ambergris at eighty dollars an ounce I'd be worth some money, wouldn't I?"

Oriole tried to figure out this enormous sum, knowing that Lyddy Ann had weighed the fall before at "hog killing time" the huge amount of two hundred and forty pounds. But she almost fell asleep over the problem. Mrs. Joy had company in the museum—the room lined with cabinets of curios and with marine souvenirs on the walls—so Lyddy Ann and the girl were alone in the kitchen until bedtime.

"I got to take in those clothes before we go to bed," said Lyddy Ann at last. "I don't care if they be frozen. They won't need sprinkling down in the morning and I can iron them early. You want to hold the lantern for me, Oriole?"

"Oh, ow!" yawned the girl, waking up. "Of course I do."

Really, Lyddy Ann did not need the illumination of the barn lantern to enable her to take down the clothes from the lines in the side yard; Oriole quite knew that. But she knew likewise that the woman was very timid,

despite her superabundance of flesh and good health. Lyddy Ann feared "ghosts." To her imagination the old Dexter Mansion and its surroundings were peopled with the spirits of departed people whose lives had been spent in or about the place. Nothing could shake her belief in such intangible visions. But even Oriole Putnam had had experience enough to scoff at such ideas.

She agreed to hold the lantern, however, and they went out into the faint gray glow of the star-light. Objects were plainly visible about the door yard. The white garments hung upon the line might be said to look ghostly, and there was frost enough in them to make some of the garments appear to be clothing rather tangible bodies. Oriole mentioned this and laughed.

"Don't you laugh, child, at such solemn things as ghosts," advised Lyddy Ann.

"I'm not," said the girl gayly. "I'm only laughing at the *idea* of there being such things. Especially in Mrs. Joy's nightgown and my blue gingham frock."

"Now, don't you laugh," repeated Lyddy Ann, and then she uttered a muffled scream. She dropped the clothes basket into which she had already placed several of the garments, and seized Oriole's arm.

"Now! Look at that!" she gasped. "See that sheet—down there at the end by the old plum tree. *There's something in it.*"

Oriole looked. She did not find speech again for a moment. The big sheet which was hung over the line seemed to be alive! There was no wind to blow it, but it was jerking about and seemed trying to advance up the yard just as though there really was something inside of it.

"It *is* a ghost," murmured Lyddy Ann. "Oh, Oriole! I'm scare't nearabout to death!"

# CHAPTER X

## PARTINGS

Oriole might have become as panic-stricken as the fleshy Lyddy Ann, only at this moment a rasping voice hailed them from the street, and a tall and lank figure strode into the yard.

"Is that Oriole Putnam I see there? Say, gal, what do you know about my boy's pet sheep? He says you stole it on him and wouldn't give it back. I want to know what sort of actions that is?"

"Oh, I never!" cried Oriole, instantly indignant and so quite forgetting her fright. "I wouldn't touch that old Jingo."

"You *did* touch it, didn't you?" demanded the man shrewdly. It was Mr. Enos Crabbe and it was quite plain that he was angered. "Shaddy says you tied Jingo with a rope and then when he went back into Payne's yard for it, you had led it away."

"Oh, I never!" cried Oriole again. "Anyway, I never led it away. I wouldn't dare."

For the moment Lyddy Ann's attention was attracted from the "ghost." She turned a scornful look on Enos Crabbe.

"Ought to have led it to the pound—that's what she ought to have done. What are you Crabbes trying to do to Oriole *now*?"

Mr. Crabbe ignored the fleshy housemaid. He still stared accusingly at Oriole.

"You have a bad name in this town, gal," he declared, bitterly. "I wouldn't put stealing sheep past you—no, sir!"

"Oh!" gasped the girl, hurt to the quick.

"Now you stop that, Enos Crabbe!" shouted Lyddy Ann. "Somebody ought to hit you *hard* for talking so."

Mr. Crabbe had advanced upon the fleshy woman and Oriole, with the lantern in her hand, who stood at the end of the clothes-drying yard. Their backs were now turned to the gyrating sheet at the far end of the line. But Mr. Crabbe suddenly beheld the strangely behaving sheet charging up the yard.

"Wha—what's that?" he cried out, shrinking in apparent size and courage. "Keep off! Help! He-e-lp!"

With this wail he turned and ran for the gate. The motive power of the charging sheet took his flight as a challenge. It started after Mr. Crabbe, and although Lyddy Ann, moaning and weeping, backed to the steps and sat down with a thud, the "ghost" gave her no attention.

The streaming sheet passed Oriole too, and made for the gate after Mr. Crabbe. Oriole fortunately guessed what the thing was. When it passed through the gateway all possible misunderstanding was removed.

The sheet caught on either post and was torn from the sheep's horns. Jingo, in wandering around the neighborhood, had come in contact with Lyddy Ann's wash. But the sheet did not blind him to Enos Crabbe's retreat.

Jingo burst from the enfolding sheet and shot out into State Street. The driveway was empty but for the fleeing storekeeper and councilman. There was little dignity in the method of Mr. Crabbe's attempted escape. There was less when Jingo managed to catch up with him.

The head of the angry ram landed just in the bend of the long-legged man's knees. The shock threw Mr. Crabbe to the hard roadway and he uttered a terrified shriek, while Jingo ran right over him, never stopping to see whether his victim recovered or not.

But the victim did recover! Lyddy Ann likewise had recovered her feet when she was convinced by her own eyesight that it was not a ghost running through the yard. She stared in evident satisfaction at Mr. Crabbe when he scrambled up again and turned to run away from the disappearing sheep.

"For the good land's sake!" she gasped, "I never expected to live to see such a sight as Enos Crabbe beaten up by that nuisance. It—it's a pleasure!"

"Oh, Lyddy Ann!" Oriole murmured.

"Don't waste your sympathy on the likes of him," said the housemaid energetically. "And 'twasn't a ghost after all! Well! But look at that sheet! I don't know what Becky Joy will say."

"I—I wonder what will happen to Shedder?" said Oriole. "His father is going to be awfully angry with him about that old Jingo."

This query was quite sufficiently answered by the forlorn appearance of the redoubtable Shedder the next day at school. He stirred uneasily on his seat in the schoolroom, too, sitting down and getting up gingerly as though he bore physical reminders of his father's indignation. It was noised about, too, before the week was out, that Shedder's pet ram was made into mutton.

"And the town folks will buy it out of that Enos Crabbe's store and eat it!" exclaimed Lyddy Ann. "Ain't that a shame? You can't beat that Crabbe family. If they were Feejees they'd invite the whole tribe to a dollar-a-plate banquet if their great-grandfather died."

"Oh, Lyddy Ann! that is awful," murmured Oriole, who heard this.

She was by this time, however, so much interested in the plans for her great change that she could not worry much about the Crabbes' affairs or Lyddy Ann's comments thereon. It had been fully decided that she should go West with Harvey Langdon and the twins, Sadie Brown, the nurse, being a member of the party. And the start would soon be made.

News of her departure for the West spread among the young people of the town like wildfire. Naturally she was an object of envy to most of the boys and not a few of the girls; for the Western movies are the delight of the younger element irrespective of sex. There is an attraction in out-of-door life for all young folks. The open plains, the mountains, the broad rivers, the forest and the canyons and gorges of the Rockies in contemplation make local matters seem tame indeed to the Eastern youth.

These young people, used only to the shore and the sea that lapped it, thought of the land to which Oriole was going as a much freer and wilder locality. When they could they gathered around Mr. Harvey Langdon and begged him to tell them of his ranch ("farm" some of them called it) and the wonders of Montana. But the ranchman was wont to smile broadly when he saw their interest and repeat for them some doggerel verses which he called "The Western Boy's Lament" and which began:

"I wish't I lived away Down East  
Where codfish salt the sea,  
And where the folks have punkin pie  
And apple-sass for tea."

"All the boys out my way," he said, "hanker to come East just the same as you folks want to go West."

Oriole Putnam had many good-byes to say. First of all she must separate from her school friends, and she found that this was something of a wrench, although she had only attended school in Littleport three or four months. In spite of May Rabey and her clique, Oriole had plenty of friends at school, including all the teachers with whom she had come in contact.

Flossy and Minnie Payne and some of the Busy Bees determined to show their liking for Oriole in an unmistakable way. They arranged with Mrs. Joy and Lyddy Ann to give Oriole a surprise party in the great Dexter Mansion on State Street on the following Saturday.

Meanwhile Oriole had gone to the island where Nat Jardin and Ma Stafford lived (the ice still held) and had spent half the week with the old people. It might seem that there would be few interests in common between the lightkeeper and his housekeeper and Oriole Putnam. But the girl had lived very close to the old couple during the first months after her arrival from South America. She bore all their sorrows and interests in her heart. No matter where she might go in the future, she could never forget the lightkeeper and Ma Stafford.

And could they forget Oriole? Not likely!

"Just you remember, child, that we air thinking of you and praying for you all the time," said Ma before Oriole came away from Harbor Island. "I'm only a-hoping none of them cattle of Mr. Langdon's trample on you—or them cowboys do you any harm. They are rough men, and it's a wild country."

"I cal'late," said Nat Jardin in his drawling way, "that 'twon't be many years before them cowboys might be in danger from Oriole, 'stead of t'other way 'round. She's getting to be a big gal now, for a fact!"

But this speech was enigmatic to Oriole. She had not visualized herself yet as grown-up. No, indeed! She was just a healthy, moderately happy girl; and the chance of change after all delighted her.

Nothing more had been heard of Teddy Ford. He had not appeared at the island again and one of the men from the life saving station told Oriole that the boy had gone away as he said he would, and had not returned with the coasting vessel on which he had sailed.

"I do hope he has started back for Montana!" Oriole told herself. "And if he goes there, won't he be surprised to find me at Mr. Langdon's ranch?"

The parting came from the old folks on the island, and from Payton Orr and his wife and the baby. Oriole could scarcely see for tears when she started on her new skates for the port late that Saturday afternoon. But she was quite cheerful again by the time she climbed off the ice at Griffith's dock.

As she went up past the hotel she saw the twins playing in the yard connected therewith. Abel Hubbard, who was general factotum about the Brick hotel, as well as liveryman, was renewing the tar-paper strips on the trunks of the trees in the yard, and Myron and Marian were very much interested and had asked all about the operation and the reason for it.

"You see, Oriole," explained Myron earnestly, "when spwing comes and the fwost isn't in the gwound any more, bugs an' other insects cwawl up out of the gwound and eat the twee-leaves and buds. But Mr. Abel stops 'em fwom cwawlin' up by tying *that* awound the twees. Ain't it wunnerful?"

"I don't like bugs and things," shuddered Marian, as she and her brother ran out to join Oriole on the street. "If they cwawl on *me*—ugh!"

"Never mind. They don't begin to cwawl this time o' year, Mawyann," Myron said soothingly. "They are all fwoze up now."

"I wish they'd stay fwozed," declared the little girl. "Oh! See there, Oriole. Look at that man."

A stranger in the town—evidently a traveling man—was coming out of Enos Crabbe's store and to him the little girl pointed.

"Just see his arm, Oriole," exclaimed the excited Marian. "He's got one, too."

"He's got what?" demanded Myron, staring.

Oriole saw immediately what the little girl meant. The stranger wore a band of crepe about his left arm signifying that somebody near and dear to him had recently died.

"Oh!" gasped Myron.

"See?" questioned Marian of Oriole quite innocently. "What's to keep them from cwawling up his other arm?"

This story, told at the surprise party that evening, added much to the gayety of the occasion. The twins were at the party, too, although Mr. Langdon took them back to the hotel at an early hour.

Mrs. Joy had seen to it that the plans of the Busy Bees were developed in such a way that no party for young folk in Littleport that winter would be longer remembered than this given in Oriole Putnam's honor. And there was not a person in the house that Oriole did not love!

May Rabey and her crowd had been ignored. Left to choose for herself, Oriole would undoubtedly have invited all her schoolmates and "played no favorites." But the Busy Bees were abetted in their desire to make the affair one exclusively by Oriole's real friends, for Mrs. Joy too did not admire "Maria Rabey's girl" and her set.

Therefore the party was bound to be a happy time for all who attended. Lyddy Ann, forewarned in time, had baked for two days and added her delectable cakes and cookies to the ice-cream and sherbets sent down from Salem by the caterer. They played games; they danced in the big "museum room" which was cleared for the occasion of all but the curio cases. For the last time Oriole led in a "dress-up" pageant, finding the ancient garments in the mansion garret a treasure-store for masquerade.

It was, altogether, the nicest party Oriole ever remembered—even better than the New Year's affair Mr. Langdon had given her. But there was bitter with the sweet of it too.

When she kissed each girl and shook hands with every boy as they filed out of the house at eleven o'clock, Oriole knew that this might be the last opportunity she would have of speaking to them for many months—perhaps for ever.

For on Monday forenoon Oriole Putnam, with Mr. Langdon and the twins, who had returned from their short trip to Maine, left Littleport on the train to meet Sadie Brown at the Junction, and from thence to travel westward.

## CHAPTER XI

### A GREAT DEAL THAT IS NEW

Oriole Putnam knew ships and shipping much better than did most girls of her age. But traveling on the railroad for any distance was an entirely new experience. Even the twins, Myron and Marian Langdon, could remember about their journey eastward from Montana, and were more familiar with the Pullman car and the stateroom the party occupied, and other traveling conveniences, than was the girl from the sea.

But Oriole was greatly interested from the start of the journey from Littleport. Of course, they did not get into the fine vestibuled train until they left Boston. Before that, however, Oriole had begun to see and wonder at many new things.

In the first place, she met for the first time since she had recovered the twins' nurse, Sadie Brown. Miss Brown had no remembrance of Oriole, although the latter had aided Nat Jardin in rescuing the poor woman from the wreck of the Portland steamboat.

Sadie Brown had heard all about Oriole from Harvey Langdon and she was eager to meet and to thank Oriole. The latter felt somewhat embarrassed, Nurse Brown made so much of her share in her rescue from the wreck. But fortunately it was the first meeting the twins had had with "Nursie" since their separation from her, and their vociferous welcome of the woman relieved Oriole's embarrassment to some degree.

"You look like a very capable, up-and-coming sort of girl, I must say," said the nurse, who was a product of the West herself and a very frank person. "I am going to like you, Oriole Putnam, aside from the fact that without you and that wonderful old man Mr. Langdon tells me about, I might not be here now."

"Oh, Miss Brown," Oriole murmured, "Uncle Nat Jardin *is* wonderful. Indeed he is."

"I shouldn't be surprised. And you are a little wonder yourself, child," laughed Miss Brown, hugging the girl. "Their father says the improvement in the twins is partly due to your influence. The dear little things! How mad I must have been at the time of that wreck. I can't even remember what happened after the stewardess ran through the cabin screaming 'We are sinking!' until I awoke in the hospital with Mr. Langdon beside me, and learned that long months had elapsed.

"Well, this is a strange world. I had promised Mr. Langdon to take every care of Myron and Marian when we started East to see their grandparents. But we never know what is going to happen to us, do we?"

"I am sure we do not, Miss Brown," Oriole agreed very earnestly. "My dear mamma and I did not dream when we went to sea in the *Helvetia* that we were to be separated, and that my dear father would be—be lost——"

Oriole choked up here, and could say no more. Nurse Brown patted her hand.

"Mr. Langdon has told me all about that," she said to the troubled girl quietly. "Even now there is some hope. Especially hope of the return of your mother. Nothing can be stranger than my own case, child. I had lost all memory of my past, for months. And I am well and strong again. So have hope."

Oriole did have hope—a deal of it. She tried every time she thought of her dear mother to think of her as alive. Dear daddy was gone. She felt quite convinced of that. But he had never meant so much to her as "Sister."

She and her mother had called each other that even when Oriole was very little. That was because there had been no other children about for Oriole to play with (the Portuguese-Brazilian children who were her neighbors did not count in Oriole's mind) and it made it seem less lonely for the little girl if mother played at being a companion of her own age.

Why, they had even played dolls together! Oriole had loved her family of dolls very much. But because they had been lost when she so hastily left the *Helvetia* after the collision, she had never cared for others. Her doll family had been the equal care and joy of "Sister" and herself. Oriole determined to remember or think only of her dear one as in health and strength—no matter how far away she was, geographically speaking.

However, even Sadie Brown's remarks did not make the interested Oriole dwell at present upon the misfortune of her loss. There was too much new in this journey to interest her.

After meeting Nurse Brown at the Junction the party went on to Boston and there boarded the west-bound train in the evening. They pulled out of the great station at late dinner time, and even the twins were allowed to go into the brilliantly lighted dining car for the evening meal.

"It is just like a narrow ship's saloon-cabin," declared Oriole. "And what nice colored men to wait on the table! We had colored men on the *Helvetia*; but on the *Adrian Marple* they were Italians. And *they* were nice too. Of course, 'most everybody aboard ship is always nice to you."

"I imagine," chuckled Harvey Langdon, "that most people are nice to Oriole Putnam everywhere. These waiters are all white teeth and white eyes when they look at you. Isn't that a fact, Nurse?"

"It would be hard to turn a sour face on the girl, Mr. Langdon," replied Miss Brown, who was looking after the needs of Myron and Marian.

They went back to the stateroom—at least, Nurse Brown and Oriole and the twins did—and Myron and Marian were put to bed in the end berths. Nurse Brown and Oriole took the side berths, while Mr. Langdon of course had his berth in another part of the car.

The swing of the car over the rails and the hum of the wheels Oriole thought very soothing after she got to bed. She had no more fear of wreck or disaster than she had had at sea. Indeed, it merely seemed as though she were sleeping in a swing.

She went to sleep finally with this thought in her mind. And whatever happened to the train—how it was stopped, started, or otherwise was run—did not disturb her slumber in the least. But at daybreak she awoke. Not for any outside reason, it seemed; but just because she had had sleep enough.

The train was standing still. There was a narrow window just above her eyes, but across the compartment. She rose up and leaned on her elbow to look out. The narrow panel-window was open and in the twilight of early morning she could observe the fact that right beside her train was another.

This other train was not a limited express, however, made up for the most part of Pullmans. No, indeed! It was the odor that assailed her nostrils through the open window that first apprised Oriole of the nature of the car that stood on the other track right beside this sleeping coach in which the girl lay.

"Why!" murmured the girl, "it—it smells just like our old muley cow's stable on Harbor Island. I declare! it must be a cattle car. No!" as a sleek, handsome head, with erect ears, came into view through a narrow aperture in the other car, "it's a horse car!"

Then she burst into a smothered giggle, for this sounded funny to Oriole. It was not a *horse car*. She had seen one of those ancient vehicles in one of the shore towns near Littleport. This car on the next track was a car in which horses traveled, not one which horses drew!

She could occasionally see the glossy coat or intelligent head of one of the horses in the car. There was somebody with the animals too. A voice said:

"Step over there! Whoa!"

And that voice quite startled Oriole Putnam. She peered through the narrow window to see if she could see more. Why, the voice sounded just as familiar! Who that she knew could possibly be with those horses on the siding?

She told herself that her hearing had deceived her. Yet she continued to listen and peer through the aperture. A voice she knew! She tried to think who it could be. Surely nobody she had known at Littleport could be traveling with horses in that cattle car.

Was it somebody she had known previous to her coming to Harbor Light? Somebody she had met on shipboard? Even some person Oriole had been acquainted with away down in Brazil where she had lived with her mother and father?

She heard the voice again, and with another shock—a real shock—realized that it was a boy's voice, not a man's.

Oriole swung her feet out of the berth and slid quietly to the floor. She crossed the stateroom and stood on the bench there to look through the

window. The keen air of out-of-doors made her shiver, but she did not withdraw for a long moment.

In that moment she saw the very strangest thing! Right across from her car—not exactly opposite the window, but a little further along—was the side door of the stock car. It was a slatted door and she could see in between the slats.

Standing there against the door, with his back toward her, a tight cap pulled down over his curls, was a boy that looked very much indeed like Teddy Ford!

Oriole drew back with a little gasp and huddled quickly into her warm robe that Mr. Langdon had bought for her. She slipped her feet into downy slippers. All the time she kept saying under her breath:

"Oh, it can't be—it just *can't* be! I cannot believe it is Teddy Ford. How would he get here?"

She went to peep again. He had disappeared. Yet she could not overcome the feeling that the handsome boy she had known such a little time at Harbor Island was right in the very next car!

"I know what I'll do," murmured Oriole. "I'll wash my face and comb my hair and get dressed quickly. Then I'll run out on the platform and call him. I wonder how long this old train will wait here?"

She made her toilet as quickly as possible and then put on her fur-trimmed coat and tam o' shanter. When she appeared in the car corridor the black porter gazed upon her in amazement.

"Yo' surely is an early riser, Missy," he said, displaying all his teeth. "Yo' ticket don't call for yo' gettin' up so early. We ain't got to Chicago yet—an' de way it looks we won't git there right soon."

"Then I can go out of the car?" asked Oriole eagerly.

"Well, it might be safe enough, but I dunno. I'd better ask the conductor, Missy. She might start sudden like an' leave you."

"Oh!" cried Oriole, "I wouldn't like that at all. But there is somebody in that train standing right next to this one that I think I know. I—I want to talk to him."

"Bless yo', Missy!" exclaimed the porter, "that's a stock train. Leastways, that car is full o' horses—race horses. They're likely being took to Bowlin' Green, or some sech place. I's Kentucky bred myself, Missy, an' I's allus int'rested in racin' stock. So I took note ob dat car. Yes'm."

He smiled affably and accompanied her into the vestibule. He opened the door overlooking the freight track on which the stock car stood. Oriole put out her head. She could see the slatted door of the stock car. She opened her lips to call Teddy Ford's name.

And just then, with a sudden lurch and bump, the Pullman train started!

## CHAPTER XII

### EXCITING TIMES

The train Oriole was on started very slowly, but the girl was at once afraid that if the boy of whom she had caught a glimpse *was* Teddy Ford, she would be carried on so quickly that she could not attract his attention.

This, Oriole thought, would be a tragedy. Since the boy from the West had run away from Harbor Light Island she had often thought of him and wondered where he had gone—what he was doing. A boy like him traveling around the country alone, with no home and "nobody to be nice to him!" Oriole had a notion that boys could not really take care of themselves—not properly. Who would sew his buttons on? Or mend his jacket? Or darn his socks? These questions were quite serious in her opinion.

"Oh, Teddy Ford! Teddy Ford!" she shouted, as the slatted door of the car in which the horses were stabled came nearer and her train gathered speed. "Teddy Ford!"

"Hey! Hullo!" responded a voice. "Who's callin' me?"

The face of the boy appeared between the slats just as the platform of the sleeper came opposite. It was Teddy Ford!

"Oh, Teddy!" gasped Oriole.

"Gee! if it ain't that—that Skylark Putnam——"

"*Oriole.*"

"Oriole, I mean!" shouted Teddy Ford. "Gee! how'd you get here? Where you going?"

"I am going to Montana! With Mr. Langdon! And the twins!"

These shouts were in crescendo as the Pullman train gathered speed. Then, at the very top of her voice, the girl cried:

"*Are you coming, too?*"

"I'm on my way!" was the shrill answer. "I'll—be—there—by—the—spring—round-up."

Oriole, rosy-faced and with her eyes dancing, took this promise back into the sleeper and to the stateroom she occupied with the twins and Nurse Brown. She did not know what a "round-up" was, but the promise was for the spring. And even beyond the Rockies the spring could not be so very far away now.

She was so full of this adventure and her sight of Teddy Ford that she had to awaken Nurse Brown to tell about it. And then the twins woke up and the day's adventures began. Later, of course, Harvey Langdon had to hear about it. And he shook his head rather soberly over the incident.

"I wish now that boy had come to see me at Littleport," he told Oriole. "Of course, he's a tough young chap, but something *might* happen to him, roaming around the East here alone, and all."

Oriole was frankly curious.

"Is it more dangerous here in the East than anywhere else—out West, for instance?" she asked.

"Seems so," Mr. Langdon said seriously. "In the big cities—even on these railroads. Ain't like our Western country. Not much to harm a boy there—good, honest, out-of-door work, clean living and good cooking. Nothing fancy, but *good*, you know."

Oriole wondered if it was the cooking that might hurt Teddy Ford in the East. But, on the other hand, she was wise enough not to say too much at this time about the wandering boy from the West. She could see that Mr. Langdon was "coming around." He held a less harsh opinion of the boy whom he had accused of the robbery of his ranch home.

Oriole was a loyal soul. Once convinced that Teddy Ford was innocent, nothing short of his own confession could have changed her opinion of him. But she was delighted to see that Harvey Langdon was changing his opinion.

How could he help it, when he really had Teddy to thank for the life of Marian? Perhaps for the lives of both the twins? Oriole felt very sure that if

she could have got Teddy Ford off that stock car and into the Pullman it would have all been "made up."

And now, as Mr. Langdon said, something easily might happen to the boy. She did not see it just as the ranchman did—she could not consider the East a more dangerous place for a boy than the West. But she had heard Uncle Nat Jardin tell the old story of the seaman when his bark was in the midst of a terrible gale, who said: "Heaven help the poor folks ashore to-night, Bill!" and understood its significance. The dangers we know seem of much less importance than unknown perils.

To Oriole the range and cattle camps seemed to be breeding-places for danger and adventure. Since knowing she was going West with the Langdons she had visualized much that would never happen to her, perhaps; but she knew her expectations were possible and reasonable.

Sadie Brown, the nurse, grew much more animated, too, as the party traveled westward. To get back to the open plains and mountain ranges of her own country she thought promised complete health for herself, after her sad experience in the Eastern hospital.

"And once you have learned to ride a mustang pony and have scampered over the Langdon Three-bar Ranch once or twice, you will never care about the sea and shore again, Oriole. Ugh! I can't think of the water without a shudder."

Mr. Langdon chuckled. "Going to make it pretty hard for you, Sadie, ever to even drink water again, isn't it?"

"I don't think I ever shall be very thirsty," she told him, smiling. "A water-hole is all very well. But I am going to shut my eyes when we cross the Mississippi River."

But that crossing was made in the night, and even Oriole did not see it. Before that, however, she saw something of Chicago, and then something of the great stockyards. She saw a herd of the Three-bar cattle (that was Mr. Langdon's brand) that had been shipped to market by the ranch manager whom Mr. Langdon spoke of as "Sol Perkins." In fact, Oriole in her observant way, noted that most of these Western people whom she met were inclined to speak of each other by their first names. Even Nurse Brown almost always prefixed Mr. Langdon's name with "Harvey." It marked a

good-fellowship among the people, both employers and employees, that seemed to draw them into a closer alliance.

At Kansas City a tanned, hard-looking man, in a great sombrero and hairy chaps, came aboard the Pullman for a moment and shook hands with Mr. Langdon and gave him some message from the ranch. This was George Belden, the ranch owner said, who was trail foreman and had come on with a beef herd to the Kansas City market. Oriole liked the man, his blue eyes were so clear and steady, and his mouth wreathed with such humorous lines.

"I know that man is going to be a friend of mine," Oriole confided to Nurse Brown.

"What! George?" cried Sadie Brown. "That fellow is the most reckless cowpuncher on the Three-bar. I wouldn't make a friend of him, Oriole Putnam, if I were you," she added with a sniff.

"Oh! he isn't really *wicked*, is he? He can't be, I'm sure, with such a—a funny mouth and such twinkling eyes."

"'Wicked?' No," said Sadie Brown shortly. "He's just silly. He hasn't got but a single idea in his head—and that's a nonsensical one."

"What is it?" asked Oriole, her curiosity aroused.

"Just an idea that he wants to get married. It's all he thinks of," declared the twins' nurse. "I never did see such a silly man."

Oriole considered this statement in silence. She had never imagined before that getting married was classed as "silly." Sadie Brown seemed to have a personal feeling about it—quite a spiteful feeling. Just the same, Oriole had liked the looks of George Belden.

Two days later the train-tired party alighted from a branch road train at Teeman's Station, forty miles by the trail from the Langdon Ranch. That forty miles could only be covered on horseback or in some kind of vehicle; and the only vehicles in sight were two buckboards for the twins and Oriole and the baggage. Sadie Brown was supplied with a rough-and-ready riding costume, and she mounted a fierce little black mustang that Oriole secretly admitted she would have been afraid of.

Mr. Langdon had a much bigger mount—a thoroughbred that was one of the prize horses on the ranch. There were several other employees of the ranch riding along beside the drivers of the buckboards. They made quite a jolly party, and on the way Oriole began to learn much about the cattle country and stock raising (Mr. Langdon bred horses for the market as well as raised cattle) that interested and surprised her.

In a bushy and wild-looking hollow through which they rode, the trail winding tortuously among the patches of prickly brush, the party raised a cow with a yearling calf running by her side. Mr. Langdon was instantly interested.

"Hey!" he shouted to his men, "isn't that a Three-bar cow? One of our cows?"

"You said it, Boss," agreed one of the punchers, pricking his mount into a faster stride.

"Then that long-ear is ours," declared the cattleman. "That cow's been lost two years, I bet. And she's worth sixty dollars of any man's money. The maverick is worth another twenty just as he runs. Get him!"

The man who had answered and another started after the loping cow and her calf.

"What will they do to the poor cow?" asked Oriole anxiously of Nurse Brown.

"Nothing much, honey."

"Oh! They are after the calf, then?"

"Just you watch, honey."

One puncher distanced the other and drew close to the running cow and her calf. He made his cast and missed it. His mount swerved aside at the very instant he made the cast and the rope dragged.

"Hi, Lenny!" shouted Mr. Langdon, "I'd massage that horse of yours a pile with that rope. He ain't a cow-pony any more than he is a spread-eagle. Look out!"

When the puncher proceeded to slap the horse he rode with the re-coiled lariat, the creature fell to frantic pitching, and the rider was quite out of the

running for the unbranded yearling.

The second man went at the attack with more success. Ten rods beyond the scene of the other man's fiasco the second puncher's rope circled the calf's neck. The puncher flipped the slack before the calf's nose and the latter crossed it and fell with a crash.

"Oh!" cried Oriole, standing up in the buckboard and clinging to the broad shoulders of the driver. "They *will* hurt that poor calf."

"Not 'nough to do damage," the driver of the buckboard assured her.

The man who had roped the yearling got down from his saddle and ran down the rope, loosing the hogging string hanging from his belt as he ran. He dropped on his knees, gathered the yearling's struggling feet, and tied them together most expertly.

The puncher stood up, grinning, and re-coiled his lariat—"la reata," to give it its proper, and Spanish, name. He tied the rope to his saddle horn. From under the horn on the other side he took an iron three-eighths of an inch in diameter, a foot long, and shaped like a shepherd's crook.

"That is what we call a 'running iron,'" explained Mr. Langdon to the round-eyed Oriole.

"Oh! Where does he run with it?" she asked. "And isn't he hurting that poor calf?"

"Well," the ranchman said slowly, "the yearling doesn't like it, I imagine. But he won't be hurt—much. It's the only way we have of keeping run of our stock."

"Oh!"

"They have all to be branded. Otherwise some other brand will get 'em. We know this chap belongs to the Three-bar now, for he is running with his mother—Er, where did that cow go, Lenny?"

"Into the brush—My hickey, here she comes! Mad as a hatter! Locoed, for fair."

There suddenly burst from the chaparral the cow the calf had been running with. The calf was blatting forlornly, and his cry had brought the mother back in a desperate temper.

The puncher, Mr. Langdon, and Nurse Brown spurred their mounts out of the way. The sharp horns of the maddened cow were not to be scorned. Yet the Westerners were more amused than frightened.

However, the cow plunged straight ahead at the buckboard on which the twins and Oriole were seated. The driver could not whip up his ponies in time. They began to dance and snort rather than draw the vehicle out of the path of the mad cow.

"Look out!" shouted the ranch owner again. "Get a move on you, Long Jim!"

The half-broken ponies drawing the buckboard would not be urged ahead. Long Jim laid his quirt along their flanks without avail. Oriole stood up in excitement if not in fear, and Myron and Marian clung to her, shrieking.

## CHAPTER XIII

### AT THE RANGE CAMP

It really was the very "maddest" cow Oriole Putnam had ever seen. She was used to the old muley cow on Harbor Light Island and the spotted cow in the stable behind Mrs. Joy's house in Littleport. Indeed, she had milked, fed, and been friendly with both of these.

But this outlaw cow—of Hereford stock and wild-eyed and fiery enough, now she was roused—seemed quite like a wild beast to the girl from the Atlantic coast town. She was not at all like any cow that had heretofore crossed Oriole's path.

That she was dangerous was proved by the way Mr. Langdon and Sadie Brown, though laughing, had spurred out of the creature's path. Those sharp horns certainly could do a deal of harm to a pony. That the grown folks were not at first seriously disturbed was because they were such good riders and understood how to manage their mounts.

But here was quite another thing. The cow aimed for the buckboard itself, and the three children (for the driver had his hands full with the cavorting ponies) were in real peril.

Myron and Marian were screaming—either in excitement or fear, it would be hard to say which. Oriole uttered no word at all, but her round eyes glared at the charging cow in terror.

That heavy body, backed by the force of the speed it had gathered, could overturn the rangy vehicle, if nothing worse, and the buckboard is a wagon not easily tipped over. The cow's forehead collided with the end of the rear seat—the seat on which Oriole and the twins had been sitting.

The buckboard groaned, was lifted up, and the spokes of the dry wheels rattled. Long Jim, the driver, whooping loudly, sailed over the tangle of harness that held the nigh pony.

Oriole needed nobody to tell her to jump. That was exactly what she did—and in the very nick of time. As the cow's horns and forehead collided with the seat the girl leaped out of the vehicle, bearing a twin under each arm.

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**ORIOLE LEAPED, BEARING A TWIN UNDER EACH ARM.**

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"Hurrah for Oriole!" shouted Harvey Langdon, wheeling his horse in a narrow circle and charging back toward the overturned buckboard.

"What a nimble child she is!" gasped Sadie Brown.

But it needed strength as well as nimbleness to accomplish what Oriole did. The twins were heavy, and she saved them from falling to the ground when she landed herself so solidly. She was jarred all over by her jump. And even then she and the twins were not safe.

The cow overturned the buckboard, wrecked one hind wheel, and plowed right through the wreckage in her endeavor to get at the three children. Their fluttering garments drew the attention, perhaps, of the mother cow and occasioned such determination to get at the trio.

"Come, children! Run!" Oriole commanded, setting the twins down.

She seized their hands and they scampered over the short sward, away from the wagon tracks. The cow became entangled in the wreckage of the buckboard. The cowboy, Lenny, came along with his quirt and drove the animal, bawling, away from the vicinity. The vehicle could not be used, however, until it was repaired.

"We'll have to take these children up before us as far as the range camp," said Mr. Langdon. "Whose outfit is it ahead, Lenny?"

"Rodney Granger's, Mr. Harvey," replied the puncher, in his drawling way. "'Tain't more'n five mile."

But first Oriole had to watch the puncher who had roped and tied the calf. There was something enthralling about this branding, although she hated the idea of the poor calf being hurt. As Mr. Langdon had said, however, there was no other way to account for the growing cattle.

The puncher had gathered a few dead branches of what was called "mahogany bush" even while the cow was on the rampage. He now made a small fire between two stones, cunningly arranged for a quick draft. He thrust the crooked part of the branding iron into the hottest part of the fire.

While the iron was heating the calf suddenly began to bawl again. The puncher had slit one of the animal's ears—"nicked it," he said—which Oriole thought most unnecessarily cruel. But it didn't bleed much, and she wiped it carefully with her handkerchief.

"I should think," she said warmly, "if it's absolutely necessary to mark 'em on the ear, that you'd have some salve, or something. I know Ma Stafford

had salve with which she anointed even the hens' feet when they got hurt. The poor thing——"

"Well, I tell you how 'tis, Miss," said the puncher, with grave face but twinkling eyes. "Us cowmen have to carry so much with us—camp 'quipment, and hog-strings, and a rope, and all—that we don't seem to have no room on horseback for a medicine chest. But you speak to Harvey Langdon 'bout it. Mebbe he'll give us a pack-mule to trail along behind us when we're out on the range."

Oriole knew well enough this was jokingly said. And she shut her hands together ever so tight when that white-hot iron came out of the fire and the Three-bar mark was put upon the protesting calf. But she just *had* to see it done! She had watched the sea in its might, she had suffered shipwreck and disaster, she had been through some harsh adventures; why shouldn't she see a yearling branded and learn how it was accomplished?

She knew girls, at least girls in Littleport, were supposed to shriek and run away when anything unpleasant like this was done. There was a man on State Street, a little beyond the Dexter mansion where Oriole had lived with Mrs. Rebecca Joy, who killed pigs just before Christmas. She had heard the poor pigs squealing and had stopped her ears with her fingers just as Flossy Payne did.

Now Oriole thought that she had been rather foolish. The bawling calf made a lot of noise over his split ear and burned hip; but he would soon get over it. She was just as tender hearted as girl could be, but she was perhaps more sensible than most.

At any rate, as before said, Oriole realized that this branding of cattle was a necessary operation. Otherwise the calves would be lost. For after a certain time the mother cow would drive the yearling away from her anyway.

Then she got up astride the saddle before Harvey Langdon. Sadie Brown carried Marian in her arms, and Lenny, the cowpuncher, bore Myron. They rode on, leaving the other puncher and the driver to patch up the buckboard the best way possible and come on slowly to the range camp.

The herd was sighted in half an hour—a great, reddish smudge, it seemed at first, moving slowly across the rolling plain. But the cattle were grazing earnestly, as night came on, and soon Oriole saw that they ate of the newly

sprung, succulent grass far from each other. Instead of closing in together like a driven herd, the cattle covered acres upon acres of land.

Here and there on the outskirts, statuesque in pose, was a horseman. Riding around the herd was only followed by night, it seemed. By day the punchers merely watched. There was nothing much to trouble the herd here on the uplands, so far from the savage heights or gulches choked with jungle-growth. Even the chaparral was sparse.

"And did Teddy Ford ride around these cows, and watch them feed, Mr. Langdon?" Oriole asked doubtfully, after they had all alighted from their horses.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the ranchman. "Teddy was cook's helper part of the time; but he could ride. I'll say that much for the kid—he could ride. You seem to have a deep interest in him, Oriole?"

"Yes, sir. Why shouldn't I? I—I guess he is the first cowpuncher I ever knew. And I *do* think they are awfully interesting."

"I'll tell the boys that," chuckled Harvey Langdon. "If there is anything interesting about herding steers and riding mean-tempered cayuses, I know the boys will be glad to hear it."

Nevertheless the girl from the East was not disabused of her belief that riding after cattle must be a most romantic business. Why! consider this eating at the range camp, and afterward rolling up in blankets and sleeping in a wagon that looked like the pictures of those in the old emigrant trains. Oriole was quite entranced by these new experiences.

It seemed to her as though she had only just closed her eyes when she opened them again and found a red and windy dawn outside the covered wagon. How could even a dreamless night have gone so quickly? She crept out of the roll of her blanket and peered forth from the end of the wagon.

There was a stir already among the horses and around the cook wagon. Red flames blinked and sputtered as though the fuel was greasy. Two or three moving shadows marked the cook and helpers. She saw a tall and lean man rise like a sapling out of the shadow that masked the earth and stretch long arms like tree limbs. Then he cupped his hands like a megaphone and shouted in the high, plainsman's drawl:

"Beds!"

He repeated the word thrice, turning slowly as he did so to all four points of the compass. All around the camp men roused up sleepily, but took up the cry weirdly in the half darkness:

"Beds! Beds!"

"What can it mean?" murmured Oriole, hopping out of the end of the wagon.

She ran, all tousled of hair and sleepy-eyed as she was, to the fires to ask. She ran into Lenny, the puncher who had come over from the railway with them the afternoon before.

"Hullo, Sissy," he said. "What do them hombres mean yelling that-a-way?" and he chuckled. "Why, camp's going to be moved to-day. Bed-rolls have to be made and chucked into that wagon you been sleepin' in. See that feller yonder, rolling his bedding and tarp to a tight cylinder? That's what it is—all your lares and penates, as the old Greeks called it, eh? The herd's on the way already. We'll camp to-night by the Joppa water-hole. We'll be on our way shortly. See! The bobtail's already eat and are saddling up."

"Dear me," asked Oriole in curiosity, "what's a bobtail?"

"The bobtail," explained Lenny, "relieves the last guard watching the herd, so it can come in and breakfast. Watches on the range are divided something like watches at sea. I been to sea myself," he added. "This bobtail is something like the dog-watch—only it comes in the early morning. There they go."

The rat, tat, tat of the ponies' hoofs announced the departure of the small group of herdsmen who relieved the more numerous guard. From another direction came the sound of trotting hoofs. Oriole turned to look.

"It's the wranglers," went on Lenny, "driving up the horse herd. We-all got to rope our mounts out o' that bunch. You don't ride yet, Sissy?"

"Oh, but I am going to!" she cried.

"I bet you. Well, there ain't so many quiet ponies in this bunch. Good cutting-out stock, and wise old critters that can almost herd steers by

themselves. But they ain't gentled much. You'll find a good pony at headquarters."

"Oh, I hope so!" cried Oriole. "I do want so to ride!"

The camp was becoming very lively now. And the smell of broiling steaks and boiling coffee, together with the refined air that blew down keenly from the mountains, sharpened Oriole's appetite to an edge. She went nearer to the fires and saw the men forking generous steaks out of the cook's pan, dipping up gravy, adding biscuits to the plate and a portion of canned corn or tinned baked beans for good measure. The cups were filled with coffee by one of the helpers, and there was condensed milk.

"Have it black or tan?" sing-songed the helper pouring the coffee, as the men lined up.

Delightedly Oriole joined the line, stabbed a beefsteak for herself, and accepted the other food and a "tan" cup of coffee. But she could not sit down on one foot as the punchers did to eat. She used the end of a box for a table, and the cook grinned at her as he spread a clean hand-towel for a table-cloth.

"Isn't this jolly?" cried Oriole to Harvey Langdon, who had come from some other part of the camp and joined the breakfast line.

"Like it, do you?" rejoined the ranchman. "Are they treating you right, Oriole?"

"Oh, yes, sir! It couldn't be nicer! I just know I'm going to enjoy myself here on the Three-bar, Mr. Langdon," returned the girl, and he was sure that she meant it.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CHING FOO

After the men finished breakfast they surrounded the horse herd and began roping out their mounts for the day. Oriole hastened her own meal so as to watch this activity.

They made a circle around the horses, a rope stretching from each to each on three sides, and the night and day wrangler—the men having the particular care of the ponies—mounted and guarding the fourth arc of the circle.

The bobtail were back at the camp before the roping was done, and they got out their own fresh mounts. Everybody was busy—drivers getting the mules for the wagons out of the herd, men saddling animals that objected strenuously to being put to work again, and all shouting and skylarking.

Just about as the camp was cleaned up and the herd was released in care of the day wrangler, while the mules started with the chuck and bed wagons (the latter piled high with bed-rolls), a buckboard rattled in from the northwest. It was one from headquarters that Mr. Langdon had sent for the night before after their adventure with the mad cow. Yet for Oriole's part she would not have minded at all riding before the ranchman on his saddle.

"I'm just *crazy*," she said to Nurse Brown, "to ride one of these cunning little ponies all by my lonesome. Will it take long for me to learn, do you suppose?"

"You are a smart child," answered the Western woman. "Of course you will learn to ride easily enough. Why, these twins will be cavorting about the ranch on leather, come a year from now. At least, Myron will."

Before noon the party was in sight of the two-story, sprawling building which had been built in Indian times and marked then one of the most advanced posts of the pioneer era. The upper story advanced beyond the walls of the lower all around the structure. Nurse Brown showed Oriole the plugged holes in the upper flooring that had originally been made for the

thrusting through of rifles. The Three-bar hacienda had withstood several stiff attacks by Indians in the old days.

"Nothing like that now," she said, smiling at Oriole's wondering face. "We are just as civilized here as they are in Boston."

"Only they don't wear the same kind of clothes in Boston that you do here," returned the girl, smiling suddenly. "Just think what folks would say if Lenny went riding into Boston—or into Littleport! My! wouldn't folks run to see him?"

There were many curious things and much to interest the girl in and about the ranch house. But the most curious, she thought, was Ching Foo. As it chanced, Oriole Putnam had never before seen a Chinaman. Of course, there must have been Chinamen in Bahia, for they are everywhere in the civilized countries. But Oriole had never seen one before she sailed for the States; and most certainly no Chinese laundryman had penetrated to Littleport.

Ching Foo was an old-time Chinaman, with hairless face and an oiled queue. He had not cut this hirsute adornment with the coming in of the Chinese Republic. And he had lived so long at the Three-bar that he considered himself as much a part of the household as Harvey Langdon himself.

The old cook, in his clean blue denim blouse and voluminous trousers, appeared on the wide veranda when the buckboard arrived with the party from the East. He stood with his hands buried in his sleeves, his round black eyes twinkling.

"Hello, Ching Foo!" cried Harvey Langdon. "See what we got? You saby these twins? How do they look to you?"

"Yes. This number-one tlin b'long you," returned the cook, his yellow face cracking into a smile. "Vellee fine tlin. More bet' you keepe lil' boy, lil' gel allee same home. That they b'long," added the Chinaman more gravely. "You saby Ching Foo?"

"I understand you," laughed Harvey Langdon. "You think they will be better off at home. I reckon you are right."

"Sure. I talkee stlaight talkee. I go now catchee one piece big, fat chicken. Make vellee good stew. You saby? Gettee tllins fat."

He trotted off at once to put his words into effect. Ching Foo's main thought in life was cooking for the purpose of making people fat! Oriole at first did not understand much of the cook's pidgin English; but it was not long before she made quite a friend of the old Chinaman. And she had a particular object in thus getting into Ching Foo's good graces.

She had by no means forgotten what Teddy Ford had said regarding Ching Foo's secret knowledge of the robbery at the ranch. Oriole had heard further particulars of the incident coming across the continent; but nothing to explain it.

The old silver that had been brought from England by some ancestor of Harvey Langdon, and which was worth a deal of money because of its antiquity in addition to its intrinsic value, had disappeared from the ranch in a most mysterious way.

In the first place, the chest in which it was kept was very heavy. It was a greater weight than one man could carry. Sadie Brown, the children's nurse, told Oriole this.

"And yet Mr. Langdon believes that poor boy took it?" cried Oriole.

"Harvey Langdon believes that boy knows who took it—and that he had a share in the robbery. Oh, yes. Ted Ford is without doubt a young scamp."

"Oh!" cried Oriole, "I don't want to believe that, Nurse Brown."

"Most of these boys that hang around a ranch are bad ones. Tough as they can be," declared Sadie Brown.

Oriole's opinion was not in the least changed by this statement. She did not think Teddy Ford was "tough" at all.

Now that she was at the Three-bar and had become acquainted with Ching Foo, she was determined to pump the Chinaman for information regarding the robbery. She remembered that Teddy had believed the cook knew something about it that he had not been willing to tell.

What was it Ching Foo had said to Teddy before the boy ran away from the ranch? Oriole finally recalled the queer language, as she had now become

used to Ching Foo's pidgin English:

"Plenty bad mans here. Melican boy get away; mebbe get hurt." Oriole recalled that and his final words to Teddy as well: "Three topside bad man—altee same talkee-talkee. Melican boy look out!"

These mysterious words puzzled Oriole very much—as they at first had puzzled Teddy Ford. She tried her best to get the Chinaman interested in the old story of the lost silver. But Ching Foo seemed to be just as dense as any Celestial, who did not want to express an opinion, ever was. And very tantalizing Oriole found the old man could be. One might as well talk to a wooden man.

"Now," often thought Oriole to herself, "who are the three bad men Mr. Ching Foo meant? Are they here now? Can I find them and watch them? Teddy thought he knew who the Chinaman meant. Their names were Ridley, Shaffer, and Mudd."

She proceeded to put the question to George Belden, the cowpuncher with whom she had already struck up a warm friendship. This man, who was one of Mr. Langdon's most trusted foremen, was frequently at the ranch house. And Oriole soon learned that he came particularly to visit Sadie Brown.

But the twins' nurse treated Mr. Belden very harshly—at least, so Oriole thought. There was a look in Belden's blue eyes when he gazed at Nurse Brown, Oriole observed, like the expression in the eyes of a dog that has been beaten by its master. And certainly Nurse Brown did lash the lanky cowman with her tongue in a most unkind way.

"I think Mr. Belden is real nice," the girl ventured again to say to the nurse. "Do you *have* to be cross to him?"

"I reckon I've got to be to keep him in his place," said the determined spinster. "If I don't he'll be roping me and carrying me off to a parson whether I want to go or not. He's a terribly positive man."

Oriole thought Belden was quite meek. At least, he was not as fierce looking as some of the other punchers. She was not afraid to ask him on one occasion:

"Are there men on the ranch named Ridley, Shaffer and Mudd? And will you point them out to me, please, Mr. Belden?"

"I want to know what you want to be interduced to *them* for!" demanded the foreman. "Does beat all! They are as ornery punchers as are on the payroll, if you ask me."

"I guess I'm just curious, Mr. Belden," said Oriole frankly. "And—and I heard about them."

"It's little good anybody would be telling you about those three," replied Belden, eyeing her aslant. "They are off with the herd—at the far end of the range. You didn't see them at the cowcamp that time. I think Sol Perkins has been keeping them away from the ranch house for his own good reasons."

"Are—are they real *bad* men?" asked Oriole.

"'Tis little good they are. But if you mean do they tote guns and shoot up the neighboring towns," and George Belden grinned, "they do not. They would not be let. But nobody trusts them. They have been with the Three-bar six months; but I think they were run out of whatever place they previously worked at. And they stick together like three old cronies. The other boys don't seem to take to 'em much."

"You don't know a thing really bad against Shaffer and Tom Mudd and Tony Ridley," declared Nurse Brown, breaking into the discussion. She seemed to feel it her duty to oppose almost everything that George Belden said.

"Well, I sure don't know anything good about them," rejoined the foreman. "And I don't reckon Oriole wants to make friends of them."

Oriole was quite sure this was so when, by chance, she caught a view of the three men whose names Teddy Ford had first mentioned in her hearing. But before that the girl had become well enough acquainted with Ching Foo to ask him about the suspected punchers.

She had already told the cook of her acquaintance with Teddy Ford. Although it was so difficult for her, a stranger, to understand Ching Foo's queer speech, she knew that the cook fully understood all that she said. And as Sadie Brown observed, Oriole was by no means tongue-tied.

She told Ching Foo all about the accident on the ice when Teddy had saved the twins and Oriole herself from drowning. And then she wanted to know

if the Chinaman really believed Teddy knew about the robbery of the ranch silver.

"You know, Mr. Ching Foo," she said earnestly, "Teddy could not have carried away that chest of plate that Mr. Langdon lost. He just couldn't!"

"All light," said Ching Foo, in his staccato way. "Missy say who did, eh?"

That rather nonplused Oriole.

"How do I know?" she asked. "You were here at the time, and I wasn't. *You* might know."

"Him not my pidgin," declared Ching Foo, with a blank expression of face.

"Was any of those three men about the ranch the day the silver was stolen?" asked Oriole shrewdly.

Ching Foo wagged his head solemnly in reply.

"Me no see," he said.

## CHAPTER XV

### MOLLY

The day after Oriole had arrived at the Three-bar Ranch she was introduced to Molly. Molly was what Harvey Langdon called a "blue" pony—almost the color of a Maltese cat—and she was a "dear" as Oriole immediately declared. The girl from the East had seen plenty of bucking, snapping, ugly-looking half-broken ponies; but Molly was as kind looking and affectionate of disposition as a cocker spaniel.

"Oh!" gasped Oriole, "I am just going to *love* that pony."

"You'd best learn to ride her first," was the comment of the practical Sadie Brown.

That was not hard work, for Oriole took to the saddle famously. And Molly was as gentle as a horse could be. Yet she was spirited, too, and could cover a deal of trail in an hour. In a fortnight Oriole was riding about the ranch as though born to the saddle.

And how much there was to see! The girl from the East began to realize that she had come to a very, very busy country. No room for drones on this ranch. Shedder Crabbe, for instance, would have been given short shrift here. But Oriole thought that a boy like Teddy Ford must have been quite in his element at the Three-bar Ranch.

She spent, of course, much of her time with the twins. Sadie Brown was actually Mr. Langdon's housekeeper as well as the twins' nurse. Oriole relieved the woman of many small duties, and Myron and Marian were perfectly contented when the visitor was with them, giving Nurse Brown time for other duties.

Aside from Ching Foo, the cook, there were several houseboys—all Mexicans. Not many ranches in this country were as well governed and the houses as luxuriously furnished as Mr. Langdon's. There was a fine player-piano and a talking machine in the great living room; and it was plain that

the owner possessed good taste as well as much wealth, or the house would not have been so comfortable and beautiful.

The twins were well supplied with playthings; but they lived out of doors most of the time, early as was the season. The middle of the day was warm, although from the veranda great patches of snow could still be seen upon the sides of the mountains, and the nights were still cold.

But the spring had no set-back. The grass flourished and the distant forest line was as green as green could be. Oriole often rode Molly out to where one of the herds grazed, and she met most of the punchers employed on the Three-bar in this way. So she was bound, before long, to see the three men in whom she had become so deeply interested—Ridley, Shaffer and Mudd.

Both Harvey Langdon and Nurse Brown believed that there was little to hurt Oriole when she scampered over the plain on Molly. That is, by daylight. Even the coyotes slunk into hiding at sight of a mounted person during the daytime. And unless one penetrated the cañons or gulches of the foothills, a bear or mountain lion was not to be found.

The girl herself soon gained the impression that no man was to be feared on the Three-bar Ranch. Sometimes a bunch of Indians passed the house and corrals; but they were as simple and kindly people as Oriole had ever seen. And she *did* love the copper-colored babies!

She wrote Flossy and Minnie Payne—as well as Nat Jardin and Ma, and Mrs. Joy and her housekeeper, Lyddy Ann—all about her new life and the strange sights she saw. First of all in interest, she thought, were the "papoose babies" belonging to the nomadic Indians—some of them strapped to a board in the old style, for all the Indians were not modern in their ways.

She scampered away from the house one afternoon on the blue pony and finally fell upon a trail that she had never traced before. She had been warned not to venture into the hills at any distance from the grazing herds; and usually when she rode she could go to the top of any little ridge and see some of the punchers riding herd. This trail she chanced to find was only a narrow path, but cut deep in the sod. It was an ancient water-trail; but of course Oriole could not read signs.

Molly cantered along the path easily, twisting and turning as the path did, and finally plunged down into a deep coulee and through a patch of high sage. Instead of coming up directly out of the shallow hollow, the path followed a gully that at one time must have been a water-course, and in a few moments the girl was riding through a scrub oak patch and in as wild a ravine as she had ever seen.

"Oh, my!" murmured Oriole, and drew Molly to a sudden stop. "I must go back. This is a wild country and I may get lost."

Just then Molly raised her head, stretched forth her nose and gave every indication of being about to whinny. Oriole had seen the blue pony do this before, and she knew how to stop her. The girl leaned forward in the saddle and seized the pony's nose, shutting her nostrils firmly.

"Be still, you naughty girl!" commanded Oriole. "I don't want you to call like that. Suppose—suppose somebody we don't like hears you?"

For she was suddenly smitten with the thought that in this unknown and wild ravine there might lurk some danger—some enemy, although she could not imagine what kind of enemy there could be here on the Three-bar Ranch.

But as she whispered to Molly to keep still Oriole suddenly heard a gruff voice say:

"Do as you like, you two. I'm going to get my time from Harvey Langdon and beat it out of here. And, be-lieve me! when I split the breeze away from the Three-bar I aim to visit that old prospect hole first, no matter what you fellers say."

"You'd better keep away from there, Tom Mudd, unless you're aiming to peeve me and Shaffer a pile. You know what the agreement was," said a still gruffer voice.

Oriole listened with more than curiosity. The names she heard spoken were of two of those very "bad men" of whom Teddy Ford had first told her. She removed her hand from Molly's nose, but the pony only sneezed softly. It evidently was not heard by the men in conference beyond the clump of scrubby trees.

"Be-lieve me!" said the man called Mudd, "I never ought to have agreed to any such fool idea. And I break the bargain right now! We ought to have gone to that old pit and made our getaway while Harvey Langdon was East. Now he is home again and the worry about the kids is off his mind, he is a-goin' to keep his eyes open. If he sees us pirootin' up that-a-way toward the Three Sisters, he'll mebbe smell a rat."

"He'll smell a heap more than one rat if you try to double-cross us, Tom, and go up there to the old pit alone," said a third voice, which the sharp-eared girl believed must be that of Shaffer.

"Don't you fellers think I'm afraid none of you!" exclaimed Mudd. "You and Hank can't put nothing over on me——"

"Aw! who is trying to hurt you, Tom?" broke in the second speaker. "It is you that seems to be wantin' to bust up this here triumvirate, as the feller said. Hold your horses."

"Well!" grumbled Mudd.

"Well, yourself! If we had left when Harvey Langdon was away, he'd have been leary of us, sure! Now we better stay till the spring rodeo. After that we can light out 'most any time. It will be the dark of the moon, too."

"Golly!" exclaimed the third man, "I couldn't find that pit in the dark. The trail is as blind as a maze."

"I'll *smell* it out," said Mudd confidently. "If Hank and you can't——"

"Don't you go to smellin' too sudden, Tom," advised the voice that Oriole knew must belong to Hank Ridley. "We agreed to share and share alike—and that stuff can't be shared in the shape it is."

"Laws, no!" agreed Shaffer. "And we'll have a nice time carting it——"

"Leave that to me," broke in Hank Ridley.

Oriole had finally got Molly turned about and her nose headed for the direction of the ranch house. She stopped to listen to no more. For some reason she felt that these men would not be at all friendly to her if they knew she had overheard this conversation.

Yet she did not understand it at all! There was nothing about an old "prospect hole" and "the Three Sisters" in the story she had been told of the

robbery of the Langdon Ranch.

Once out upon the open prairie again Oriole drew Molly in. She hesitated. She had never as yet observed Hank Ridley and his two mates, and she wanted very much to do so.

She believed the trio—"the triumvirate" as Ridley called them—would soon appear out of the brush-grown ravine. They might be hunting stray cattle; but Oriole felt that they must soon return to the open plain.

Nor was she mistaken. From the very path which she had followed appeared three riders. Molly was bearing the girl by this time well away from the coulee which was the entrance to the scrub-oak patch. Oriole circled around and came up to the three men from the rear.

"Hullo!" shouted one of them—a dark-faced, mustached man whom she knew to be Tom Mudd from his voice. "Here's the gal Harvey Langdon brought from the East with him and Sade Brown. Hullo, Sissy! How do you like it out here?"

"Oh, I think it is very pleasant, sir," Oriole replied demurely.

"That's that there blue horse we brought up from the bottoms last horse round-up," said another of the three. "Likely critter."

"And right gentled, she is," observed the third.

They paid no further attention to Oriole, who rode slowly by. But the girl scrutinized them all keenly, photographing the three upon her mind indelibly. So these three rough looking fellows were Ridley, Shaffer and Mudd! She was quite ready to believe that they were untrustworthy and that perhaps, as Teddy Ford had intimated, they knew more than they were willing to tell about the disappearance of the chest of silver plate from the ranch house.

To George Belden Oriole went again with her questions the next time he came to make one of his calls upon Sadie Brown. Why he continued to call upon the twins' nurse Oriole could not imagine, for Miss Brown showed plainly that she scorned the foreman's attentions.

However, as Sadie Brown treated the man so unkindly, Oriole found all the more time to talk with him. And she wanted to know now about certain

matters that had assumed importance in her mind since she had overheard the snatches of conversation between the three "bad men."

"What is a 'prospect hole?'" repeated George Belden. "Why, it's a prospect hole—that's all," and he chuckled. "The pocket hunters and prospectors that searched those hills yonder for gold and silver ore sunk many shafts and the like, hunting for color, or following a vein of ore that usually petered out before they got very deep. There's dozens of 'em over there," and he pointed with a flourish toward the dim, blue hills to the north and west of the ranch house.

Oriole pointed, too. She had suddenly made out three nice, rounded hilltops quite close together—just as though the trio must encircle a half-hidden glen.

"What are those?" asked the girl.

"What are what?" drawled Belden, squinting up his eyes in his funny way.

"Those three—hills, are they? They seem taller than the other bumps I see over there."

"Why, sure, they are," said the foreman, carelessly. "Those are the Three Sisters."

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE SPRING ROUND-UP

Oriole Putnam might have pursued her inquiries about the prospect hole somewhere near the Three Sisters and have learned something of importance about these landmarks had it not been that about this time a number of very interesting things happened at the Langdon ranch. There really was enough going on to drive out of her thoughts a much more vivid impression than she had gained from overhearing the broken sentences spoken between the three rough men she had observed in the chaparral.

Of course, Oriole did not often ride alone. Harvey Langdon had bought in the East, and it had now been delivered, a roomy basket-phaeton for the children's use; and to this was hitched a lazy old pony called Blooey. Blooey dragged the twins and Oriole over hill and dale, while Sadie Brown, Mr. Langdon himself, or one of the punchers, rode alongside. Oriole learned to drive as easily as she had learned to ride horseback.

They kept to the smoother wagon-trades for these outings, for the phaeton pitched and tossed like a boat in a heavy sea if the way was at all rough.

The Chinese cook was always ready to supply picnic lunches. Ching Foo, as has been shown, approved of any and all attempts to make the already chubby Langdon twins "grow fat."

"I dess," Marian lisped, "Chinese little girls and boys just *have* to be fat."

"Maybe they throw the skinny ones away," suggested Myron, who must have heard something about pagan sacrifices of babies in the missionary class at Littleport. "Ching Foo is afraid papa won't want us here if we don't keep fat."

With Ching's lunches the children traveled far across the ranges. The driving pony was just as gentle as Oriole's Molly, but nowhere near as "cute" in the girl's opinion. "That Molly horse," as George Belden called Oriole's pony, was an intelligent animal. Oriole began to find out just how smart Molly was at the time of the spring round-up.

This was a busy and exciting season on the Three-bar Ranch. Mr. Langdon grazed his cattle on both fenced and open ranges.

The herdsmen merely "rode fence" on the home pastures—mending the wire, driving in the posts after the "heave" of the frost coming out of the ground, and roping or driving in the stray cattle that broke out of bounds.

But on the open ranges, farther up in the hills, the cattle business was conducted differently. There the punchers must stand watch and ward over the herds by day and ride continually around the herds at night, alert for trouble.

The whole ranch family went up into the higher range to the round-up—Sadie Brown and the twins, as well as Mr. Langdon and Oriole. Ching Foo alone remained at the ranch house, and Oriole wondered if the conditions were not similar to those at the time when the chest of silver was stolen.

However, when the party reached the branding camps the girl saw Ridley, Shaffer and Mudd at work with the other Three-bar punchers, so she considered that while the three "bad men" were here they could not be in any mischief.

The brief conversation Oriole had overheard between Hank Ridley and his mates continued to puzzle the girl. What was in or about the abandoned mine-shaft, or prospect-hole, up there near the Three Sisters—the rounded summits of which she could see from any part of the ranch—and which so interested the men she suspected of bringing about Teddy Ford's trouble? The question, vaguely insistent, continued to fret the girl's mind.

Yet, at present, it was merely a fleeting thought. The details of what was being done hour by hour here on the range was so fascinating that Oriole could attend to little else.

Besides being a good saddle pony, Molly was trained to range work of all kinds—was what the punchers called a good "cutting-out horse." If Oriole had known as much about the work as her mount did, she might have done a puncher's full part at this heavy season.

She was not the only girl rider on these upper ranges. There were several women and girls from other ranches, for the cattle of many different brands were mixed up on the "free grass." There was not much opportunity for

social contact at this time, for the effort was being made to gather and brand as many steers as possible within a short time.

But Oriole was nothing if not friendly. Nor did these Westerners stand aside and look at her scornfully as had some of the Littleport people when Oriole was first introduced to them. The girls, as well as the boys, of the ranges welcomed her cordially.

Knowing so little about the tasks, however, the girl from the Eastern coast could not enter into the work as she really desired; so she was much alone when she rode about on Molly. She practiced continually with the lariat nevertheless and really improved in this delicate art from hour to hour.

"You keep on, Oriole," chuckled George Belden, "and you'll be able to rope the hind leg of a spider. You're going to make some cowgirl, I'll tell the world!"

Although this was said as a joke, Oriole secretly was made very proud by the trail-foreman's approval. When she rode out on Molly from the camp she roped every bush and stub she came to. Once she even tried to put the loop over the head of a half wild yearling that had not yet been dragged to the branding-pen.

Fortunately there was no mother cow with this red-and-white "doggy," for Oriole actually did get the noose over the creature's head, and he bawled loudly and dolorously.

"Oh, dear me!" gasped the girl, when Molly lay back on the rope in a most matter-of-fact way, keeping it taut no matter how the yearling jumped.

"Oh, dear me! Now I have done it! How am I ever going to let him loose again?"

She had seen the cowboys "run down the rope" after they had noosed a steer; but she could not do that. She dismounted gingerly enough and approached the blatting yearling that had now struggled to its feet.

"Come, bossy! Don't be cross," she urged. "I—I didn't really hurt you, you know. Soo, boss! Soo, boss!"

That was the way Ma Stafford had spoken to the cow when she was unruly, but this yearling did not seem to be soothed by the words at all! He shook

his head, blatted again, and then sprang toward Oriole with an unquestioned determination to butt the girl.

Although the little beast's horns were merely "buttons" at this stage of his growth, had he been able to hit Oriole he certainly would have hurt her; for his forehead was hard bone and there was considerable force behind his charge. The girl saw her danger and screamed as she tried to spring to one side. Unfortunately she stumbled and fell backwards. She looked up to see the yearling bearing down upon her, tail in the air and forefront threatening—and she screamed again.

Whether it was her scream that made Molly move, or (as Oriole frankly believed) the pony's intelligence, she jumped aside just in the nick of time and the tautened lariat, fastened to Oriole's saddle, brought the angry yearling tumbling to the ground again.

Oriole was on her feet in an instant, and she ran several yards from the struggling yearling.

"Oh, Molly Langdon!" she cried, gazing at the pony, "you are just a wonderful horse! But—but how am I ever going to get that rope away from that mean, mean calf?"

The pony eased up on the rope, and again the yearling scrambled to its legs. Fortunately the noose loosened when the little animal shook himself, and as it stood there bawling the rope fell down about its legs and the creature stepped out of the noose.

Oriole ran to leap into the saddle again. But the yearling, when it found itself free, did not charge her a second time. Instead, tail up and blatting joyfully, the animal galloped across the range and into a coulee out of sight.

"Well!" murmured Oriole, "I surely won't do *that* again. I guess I will stick to stumps and bushes until I know better how to manage this rope. I guess Teddy Ford would laugh if he had seen me just now."

She rode on with great enjoyment, having left the twins and Nurse Brown behind at the branding camp. Above her on the hillsides the herds of cattle grazed—thousands of them. They looked black in the distance, but Oriole knew they were almost all red.

"If Uncle Nat or Ma Stafford could see all these cows, what would they say?" the girl thought.

Already Oriole had learned that there really was nothing on the range to hurt her—at least, in the nature of wild creatures. For if she left the cattle alone, they would not trouble her. Occasionally she had seen a coyote slink away into the brush, but she had been assured that they were creatures too cowardly to attack human beings, no matter how helpless the latter might be.

The farther she went along this dim trail, however, the lonelier the surroundings appeared. Yet she knew by the sun that she was heading toward the railroad. She had no particular object in view. The chance of adventure teased her on.

The incident of the aroused yearling did not keep her from trying her lariat again and yet again. Over first one bush and then another she flung the whirling coil. Really, she did improve—almost with each cast!

"Won't Mr. Belden and Nurse Brown be surprised when they see how well I do it?" was Oriole's exclamation at last. "Oh! there's a fine stump to try."

The stump in question was two feet across and six feet or more tall. She turned Molly a little nearer, coiling the lariat carefully. Then whirling the rope with a proper regard for distance, Oriole flung it.

Molly sprang away, eager to tauten the rope as the noose fell. The stump was caught fairly—the noose encircled it. And then, as Molly stopped with a jerk, there came a wild yell from behind the stump. Aghast, Oriole saw a figure struggling in the noose of the lariat.

Some person had been captured as well as the stump, and the taut rope held that person with painful severity, as his audible outcry proved.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE BIRD OF FREEDOM

The more the unfortunate victim of Oriole's skill struggled, the harder the pony dragged back upon the rope. And for a few moments the girl did not know what to do.

"Aw, let up! Yow—yowie!" yelled the person caught with the stump within the noose of Oriole's lariat. "What do you think you're doin'? Aw, quit it! Let up!"

It could not be doubted that the victim was being most unmercifully squeezed. With his last yelp his breath seemed to be quite expelled from his lungs. Oriole was frightened. She started Molly forward and thus loosened the strain on the lariat.

"My goodness! who can it be?" the girl cried.

"Ugh! oh!" came from behind the stump. "Do you want to choke me to death?"

A tousled head appeared around the side of the stump. Oriole drew Molly to a halt. She stared at the brown face—although it was red with anger as well as tanned. The eyes framed by the hair sparkled with wrath. Nor could she blame the victim for being thus excited.

But what amazed Oriole the most and held her at that spot on her pony was the wonder which rose through her recognition of the victim of her skill with the lariat.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed again, but faintly, "if it isn't—it *is*—Teddy Ford! What were you doing behind that stump?"

"Hullo!" ejaculated the boy, and he struggled out of the noose of the rope and appeared from behind the target of Oriole's attempt at "roping."

"Hullo!" he exclaimed again, his face finally broadening into that unforgettable grin which Oriole had thought, at her first meeting with him,

so very attractive. "It's never the bird-girl—what's your name?—Oriole, is it?"

"I should think you'd remember me," pouted Oriole. "I'm Oriole Putnam. I sha'n't tell you again."

"Don't get mad," said the boy. "It's *me* should be sore. You near about strangled me with that rope. Gee! Oh! you don't like that word, do you?" he added, showing that he remembered Oriole more clearly than he had at first admitted. "Then I'll cut it out. But I never looked for *you* to come along and rope me when I was just eating my lunch. And, g—Well! Anyway, that lunch is scattered all over the shop."

"I'm so sorry," Oriole hastened to say. "But if you will come back with me to the camp, I know you can get something to eat."

"H'm—yes? What camp?"

"The branding camp. You know."

"Are they at it already? I hoped I would get here soon enough to help. They are always short-handed at round-up time."

"And, dear me, Teddy! you could do so much around the ranch if you would only stay here."

"Huh!" said the boy, but his eyes twinkled, "didn't I tell you Harvey Langdon ran me off?"

"He wouldn't now."

"How do you know he wouldn't?"

"Well, I think he feels differently toward you. I—I have tried to speak about you often to Mr. Langdon, and I know he wants to thank you——"

"Aw, shucks! What's thanks? I don't want to be thanked. I want a fair deal."

"Now you know very well, Teddy, that you would not have come back here if you did not expect him to treat you differently."

"Say! I haven't got to work for him," growled Ted.

But Oriole smiled at him understandingly.

"I am so glad you have come, Teddy," she told him. "You mean to work for Mr. Langdon again, don't you?"

"I don't know. I am not so fond of him as you 'pear to be," the boy said. "Ain't you found out his mean traits yet?"

"I don't want you to speak like that of Mr. Langdon. You give him a chance and he will treat you well."

"Just because I helped you get his young ones out of the water that time? That ain't all I want of him," said the boy, somewhat sullenly.

"Oh, dear me! I wish you wouldn't be so contrary," cried the girl. "I am sure Mr. Langdon would give you every chance——"

"You don't know as much about Harvey Langdon as I do," grumbled Teddy. "But I mean to see him. I'll work for him if he will give me a job. But I mean to do something else, too. It is what I came back for."

"Oh, I know!" she cried. "You believe you can find that stolen silver?"

"I don't know about that. But I'd like to. If those fellers—Say! are Shaffer and his side partners around here yet?"

"You mean those three bad men you told me about?"

"Yes. Ridley and Mudd and Shaffer. Hard nuts, they were. Bet if they had anything to do with that robbery they got away from here with the loot long ago."

"Oh! Maybe they didn't, after all!" Oriole cried.

"Didn't what?" he demanded.

"Maybe they didn't steal Mr. Langdon's silver plate. For they are here now. They are helping right now at the branding pens."

"You don't say?" and Teddy Ford's voice revealed his disappointment too. "Well! Maybe I thought all wrong. I didn't think of them much anyway till I got run off the ranch that time by Harvey Langdon. Probably they weren't any more guilty than I was."

"Oh, Teddy," murmured Oriole, frankly disappointed, "who *could* have stolen the silver then?"

"Don't know. If Langdon hasn't found out anything about it——"

"But he hasn't!"

"I give it up then. If Ridley and his chums had got the stuff they would have split the wind away from here long ago. Why, the stuff must be melted down and sold long ago."

"Suppose—suppose," murmured Oriole, thoughtfully, "that it was only hidden? Suppose it hadn't been taken far away from the ranch house?"

"But they would have had the chance to get it away off before this," scoffed Teddy.

"Well, I suppose so," admitted the girl. "But I really wish the silver plate could be found. Just like Mrs. Joy's silver casket was found. I told you about that, Teddy Ford."

"Well," the boy said rather gloomily, "you don't wish Harvey Langdon's plate could be found any more than I do. That's sure. Where are you going, Oriole?"

"I'm going back to the branding camp with you," she declared. "Want to ride?"

"No. I'll walk the rest of the way—I've stuck it out so far. But does seem as though my feet were near about worn down to stubs, tramping it from Timmins."

"It is not so far now," she said, still eyeing him with frank admiration. "How *did* you find your way clear out West again?"

"G—Shucks! that wasn't hard. I went to Bowling Green with those horses. That's in Kentucky, you know. From there I got to the river and worked my way down around Cairo and up to St. Louis. I helped a candy-butcher on a train running to Kansas City. There I found some fellers from the Tumbling B Ranch up north of here, and they eased me along with them in a car and I didn't have to pay any fare. So—I got here."

"My! you are quite wonderful, *I* think," murmured Oriole. "I never could have made my way alone clear across this continent."

"Didn't you tell me you came all the way from Bahia to near Boston, there? That's lots farther."

"But that is boat-sailing. It's different. I just went where the boat went. But you worked this out all by yourself."

"G—Shucks, I mean! Don't seem much to me. Guess I take after my father. He was always traveling around—hunting pockets and the like. And mostly alone. The Fords come of pioneer stock."

"This is a very wonderful country, and you are all wonderful people," sighed Oriole. "How you all learn to ride so well—and throw lariats——"

"We haven't anything on you in that," chuckled Teddy, coiling up Oriole's rope as he moved toward her. "Do you ride round roping every stump you see?"

Oriole began to giggle at that. She told him of her misadventure with the maverick, and Teddy proceeded to give her a few additional lessons in rope throwing, for the boy was really a master of that art.

"You see," he explained, "I began when I was about the size of that little shaver of Harvey Langdon's."

"Oh! Myron?"

"Yes. We kids all made ropes out of our mothers' clotheslines between washdays, and practiced on every dog in town. Take it from me," and he grinned, "every time a dog saw a boy with a rope he skun out o' town in a hurry!"

"The poor dogs!"

"And, oh, say, Oriole, I 'most forgot to tell you something you'll be mighty glad to know," burst out Teddy suddenly.

"What is that?"

"It's about Billy, that cabin boy of the ship you sailed on—the fellow you thought was drowned."

"Oh, was Billy saved? Don't tell me he was—was drowned!" and Oriole gave a gasp.

"He wasn't drowned. I met a sailor on the very day I started westward. He was from the *Adrian Marple*—that was the name of the ship, you know—and he told me that Billy Bragg was saved sure."

"Oh, good! good!" cried the girl and her face showed her satisfaction.

"The sailor said Billy Bragg had gone to Boston. That was all he could tell about him. But he was sure he was saved. I asked him twice, because I knew you would want to know."

"Billy was a nice boy. I wanted so much to hear what became of him. He didn't say——"

Oriole broke off short, as Teddy Ford suddenly threw up a hand.

"Look at that, will you!" he shrilled.

They had proceeded toward the hidden camp along the faint trail Oriole had followed out. But what Teddy called her attention to was in the sky. It was distant—very high up. But with the sun behind it, the body and outspread wings of the bird could clearly be seen.

"That's not a buzzard," cried Oriole.

"Guess not! Buzzard! Don't have 'em up here in Montana."

"But it's a big bird," said the puzzled Oriole.

"Just so. It's a big eagle—the bird of freedom. Real American eagle, Oriole. Look at him sail!"

"I never saw an eagle before. It must be very big."

"Seven or eight feet across his wings, I bet," declared the boy. "Now look at him! He's spotted game."

The eagle spiraled down for some distance—like an aeroplane. Then suddenly it slanted and shot down with terrific speed.

Oriole and Teddy were vastly excited. The girl hastened Molly's pace, and, tired as he was, Teddy began to run. They came to the top of the ridge they had been mounting. Here they saw a small valley, treeless, grass-covered, and with a spring of water at its lower part.

Oriole uttered a cry of dismay. Here was the basket phaeton that had been brought up from the ranch house. Nurse Brown was with it, and Marian sat in the seat beside her. But Myron, the boy twin, was some rods away from his companions, picking flowers.

The shadow of the plunging eagle covered Myron Langdon as Oriole and Teddy Ford came into sight.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A NEW DEAL

The sky was so blue and fleckless, the air so clear, the spring grass so green, and all nature so tranquil at this moment that there was little wonder Nurse Brown and little Marian, as well as Myron himself, suspected no threatening danger. The shadow of the descending eagle might have been that of a cloud crossing the face of the sun.

But Oriole and Teddy Ford, on the summit of the low ridge overlooking the glade where the nurse and the twins were, saw Myron's peril plainly. The great bird of prey was swooping directly upon the little boy. Its shadow completely mantled Myron, who was stooping with his back to the direction from which the bird was coming.

"He'll be killed!" shouted Teddy Ford. "That eagle's a killer!"

"Oh, Teddy, save him!" cried Oriole in return.

She knew little about the ferocity of a hungry eagle, or one with a nestful of eaglets to supply with food. Sheep and even young calves have been killed or carried away by the Rocky Mountain eagle—the largest of its tribe in North America. In addition to its strength and savageness, the eagle knows no fear.

Quite involuntarily Oriole herself started to help Myron. She did not know what she could do, but she started Molly, the pony, forward and rode smartly down the slope toward the unsuspecting Myron.

"Why, Oriole Putnam! where did you come from?" was Nurse Brown's greeting, as she saw the girl flying toward them. "And who is that with you?"

Oriole could not stop to reply. Molly carried her past the pony phaeton, and then the horse swerved and snorted. The beat of the eagle's pinions startled Molly, and she shied.

Oriole, however, kept her seat pluckily. Had she only been able to stoop from her saddle and whisk Myron out of danger—as one of the cowboys could have done!

But that feat was quite beyond her power. Indeed, the girl was so frightened—frightened for Myron—that she scarcely thought of any plan of action. She merely urged Molly on, hoping that her coming would drive the great bird away. For she did not understand the courage and savageness of this, the king of the feathered tribes.

However, her appearance on horseback so near the stooping child made the eagle swerve. It mounted again, wheeled, and with a hoarse cry swooped again. At this Myron was startled and stood up to see what was happening, while Nurse Brown and Marian began to scream.

"Oh! Oh! Shoo that naughty bird away, Oriole!" shrieked little Marian. "It'll eat up Mywon."

"Use your quirt, child!" commanded Sadie Brown earnestly.

But Oriole had no quirt with her. She had found Molly so gentle and kind that she had seen no reason for carrying the heavy whip which the punchers seemed to consider a necessary part of their equipment when riding.

Now she found out why this was so. Not always was the quirt needed to discipline the mount. Had she possessed the heavy whip Oriole could have beaten off the eagle in its second swoop upon the frightened twin.

As it was, Molly leaped aside again, snorting, and the pinions of the frantic eagle almost swept Oriole from her seat in the saddle. Myron looked up to see the distended talons of the great bird and its fierce eyes just overhead. The little boy did not shriek aloud, but he cast himself face down on the grass.

It was the wisest move he could have made, although without doubt Myron did it quite involuntarily. The great eagle came down with its legs so widely astride that it straddled the little blue-clad body of the boy, with its talons not even touching Myron's clothing!

To Oriole, whirling her pony at a distance of only a few yards to charge back bravely at the fierce bird, the landing of the latter was like the landing

of an aeroplane. The eagle seemed to rebound from the force of its contact with the sword. But it stopped directly over the prostrate Myron.

"Hit him! Oh, if I only had a gun!" screamed Nurse Brown.

But nobody had a weapon—that is, nobody on the spot. And even the cowpunchers on the Three-bar and the neighboring ranches seldom carried six-shooters in their belts save on night-watch when wolves or big cats were likely to come down from the mountains to prey upon the herds.

In any case, there was no chance of killing the eagle right at this moment, and to drive it away from its prey seemed impossible. But Oriole urged her pony toward the huge bird, crying out as well for Myron to lie still. Oriole realized that if the child remained quiet the bird would be less savage. Somewhere she had heard or read that these huge birds of prey did not care for dead game—although the idea has often been exploded in fact. However, Myron's struggles would have excited the eagle to greater rage.

Molly swerved sharply again. The pony was afraid of the huge bird—and well she might be! Nor could Oriole do anything in reality to beat off the eagle.

It was Teddy Ford who not only had it in his power to aid Myron, but had the self-possession and bravery necessary to do so. He came running down the slope of the ridge, and as he ran he whirled the loop of Oriole's lariat about his head.

"Get away, Oriole!" he shouted. "Look out!"

Molly carried Oriole out of the way with no effort on the latter's part. The coils of the lariat whisked through the air, the loop hovering for an instant over the big bird. Then the loop settled and Teddy flung himself backward on the ground, his bootheels digging into the sod.

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### **THE COIL OF THE LARIAT WHISKED THROUGH THE AIR.**

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The eagle vented a scream that fairly made Oriole's blood run cold. She had no idea that the bird could utter such a savage challenge.

The loop encircled the bird's neck and one of its great wings. Teddy began pulling in on the rope, and the loop tightened. The eagle was dragged away from the prostrate Myron, and hopped most awkwardly over the ground.

Teddy scrambled to his feet, jumping on the slack of the rope. He shouted again to Oriole:

"Get that kid out of the way! Hurry, now!"

Oriole obeyed eagerly. She got down from the saddle and let Molly run away if she would—although the pony did not run far—while she gathered the frightened Myron in her arms.

She ran toward Nurse Brown and the phaeton. She thought they all might drive away from the vicinity of the huge and angry bird. But Myron struggled to be put down.

"I'm not going to be carried by a girl!" gasped the little fellow. "Haven't I got legs of my own?"

His pride was greater than his fear of the eagle, and he would not even take Oriole's hand as he ran toward his sister and the nurse.

"Look at that crazy boy!" cried Sadie Brown.

She referred to Teddy Ford, not to little Myron Langdon. The boy who had so promptly come to Myron's aid was playing the great eagle just as though it were a fish. When it sought to leap into the air, Teddy dragged hard on the rope and pulled the eagle down. The latter would gladly have escaped now; but Teddy would not loosen the noose.

The struggle between boy and bird continued for several minutes. Once the eagle rose so far that he fairly yanked Teddy from the ground. But either the boy's weight was too great or the entangling rope crippled the bird's flight too seriously for the flight to be successful.

Altogether it was a strange and threatening struggle to observe. Oriole and Sadie Brown were thrilled by it, although the twins were too frightened to feel much admiration for Teddy Ford in his novel act as eagle tamer.

They were all so interested, however, that at first they did not observe the approach of another actor on the scene. But down from the range on which the cattle grazed came a great black horse with a rider that urged him on with whip and spur when he saw what was happening in the little valley. Myron spied this riding figure first.

"Here comes daddy! Now that old eagle will get his!" cried the little boy, with perfect confidence in his father's might and wisdom.

Teddy Ford had too much to do just then to notice the approach of the ranchman. But Oriole and the nurse were glad indeed to see Mr. Langdon.

The owner of the Three-bar Ranch drew in the black stallion and spun him around with a skillful manipulation of the reins. He leaped from his saddle and started for the struggling eagle, quirt in hand, shouting to Teddy:

"Let her loose, boy! You'll cut the bird to pieces if you drag on the rope that way. Loosen up!"

"Well, of all things!" ejaculated the plain-speaking Sadie Brown. "Don't you suppose, Harvey Langdon, that we want to kill that horrid thing?"

But Teddy Ford had instinctively obeyed the ranchman's command. The noose once loosened, the eagle hopped away awkwardly. Mr. Langdon, who wore heavy gauntlets, rushed in, avoided a stroke of the eagle's right wing, and seized the ruffled neck of the bird.

"Oh, Mr. Langdon, he'll bite you!" cried Oriole.

The ranchman merely laughed, loosened the noose of the lariat, and threw the rope entirely off the eagle. Then he leaped back, letting the monster bird go free.

"Oh, Daddy, I wanted that bird!" shrieked Myron, although his little sister was still hiding her eyes and sobbing with fright.

"I guess not. We don't kill or maim eagles if we can help it," said Harvey Langdon promptly. "Don't you realize that is an American eagle—the noblest bird that flies? And the salmon fishers along the West Coast have all but exterminated them. That sort of people have no patriotism——"

"Patriotism!" scoffed Sadie Brown. "A little more and that eagle would have carried away Myron and you would never have seen the poor child again."

"What's that?" exclaimed the ranchman, sharply.

"That's what I'm telling you, Harvey Langdon. If it hadn't been for this boy—Well, I declare, if it isn't Teddy Ford."

For the first time the nurse looked at Teddy long enough to recognize him. Mr. Langdon turned, too, and stared at the boy now quietly coiling Oriole's lariat.

"Hullo, Ted," the ranchman said, after a moment. "Tell us about this. What's going on here?"

Teddy had been watching the heavy flight of the eagle with something like disappointment. He dragged his gaze back from the mounting eagle and looked at Mr. Langdon. Color rose in his tanned cheeks.

But before he could speak Oriole broke in. It was she who explained to Mr. Langdon the attack of the eagle on Myron and what had followed. And the girl saw to it that the story lacked nothing in the telling. She "played up" Teddy Ford's victory over the eagle in a masterly fashion, and as she talked Mr. Langdon's eyes began to twinkle and a smile wreathed his lips.

"I see very well, Ted," he finally observed, "that you are bound to be a good angel to my children. I have just got to look on you in an entirely different light from that in which I saw you when we met the last time. We'll let that old trouble slide, if you say so, Ted. This is a new deal."

He strode forward and offered his hand to the abashed boy.

"This is a new deal," he repeated. "Bygones are bygones. I am very thankful to you for what you have been able to do for me and mine on these two occasions. And I am sorry that in the heat of anger I accused you as I did last fall and drove you away from the Three-bar."

"My goodness!" whispered Sadie Brown to Oriole, who had ridden near to the phaeton on Molly. "My goodness! I never heard Harvey Langdon own up he was wrong before."

The ranchman's frank avowal of his mistake impressed Teddy Ford as well. The boy took the man's hand modestly.

"That's all right, sir," he said gruffly. "Mebbe you ain't so much to blame. You didn't know me very well. Is—is there a job here for me now?"

"Surest thing you know!" declared the father of the twins. "You go to Sol Perkins. I have already spoken to him about you, for Oriole, here, said you were surely coming."

He chuckled, and his eyes twinkled again with mischief. "That girl has got a lot of faith in you, boy, if nobody else has."

## CHAPTER XIX

### AN EXCITING FISHING PARTY

"That's all right, Oriole. He's mighty nice about it, and treats me fine, I must say. But right down deep in his heart he still suspects I know something I haven't told about that lost chest of silver plate. *That* is what gets my goat."

"Dear me," sighed Oriole, "I really wish you weren't so slangy, Teddy Ford. It sounds so——"

"Well?" exclaimed Teddy Ford. "Sounds so *what*?"

"So sort of—er—*rough*. And you know you're not rough—not really, Teddy. You're awfully nice."

He grinned at her quizzically. This was the day after he had arrived at the branding camps and had had the adventure with the eagle. Teddy Ford had gone right to work with the Three-bar outfit, and the older boys had welcomed him without any reference to his past trouble at the ranch house. But Teddy felt, as he said, that suspicion still clung to him.

"You are a great little jollier, Oriole," he said. "But I know how Harvey Langdon feels. When once he makes up his mind, it's made up for fair! Don't tell me. I happened to save his kids when they were in trouble. But he's still got it in his mind that I know about his silver dishes and such. Yes, sir!"

"Well then, all the more reason why you should try to find out just who did steal that chest," declared Oriole.

"Easy said. Not so easy done. Those fellers——"

"Those fellows," admonished Oriole.

"Huh! that isn't slangy."

"But it's not good English. And you can talk better if you like."

"Gee! I mean—er—well, anyway, you are particular, Oriole. I can't talk when I have to stop and think about every word—whether it's right or not. Now, look here, those fellows—Ridley, Shaffer and Mudd—are still hanging around. And maybe they didn't steal that silver after all."

"Oh, Teddy! There's something I didn't tell you yet."

"Huh! is that superfine English?" he asked, grinning again.

"Never mind," she returned hastily. "This will interest you. I heard Hank Ridley and his friends talking once. They didn't see me. Listen!"

She told him in detail about her ride on Molly through the scrub and how she had met and listened to the three "bad men" discussing their affairs. Not that she really understood much of what Ridley and his two companions had said; but the mystery of the prospect hole and the Three Sisters had continued to puzzle her since that day.

And it puzzled Teddy as well. He acknowledged it.

"If those chaps stole the silver chest, then they have hidden it somewhere, waiting for a chance to take it out of the country. If Hank and those others are guilty, they have the stuff hidden. If they could have got it turned into money, they would never be here yet, punching cows. That's sure."

"I guess you are right, Teddy," admitted Oriole. "Then they have the chest hidden somewhere up there by those three hills," and from where they chanced to stand she could point them out to the boy.

"Humph! Maybe. I'd like to get over there and look for an old mine shaft. Sure, the hills are pockmarked with 'em. My father used to prospect around there, I don't doubt."

Oriole sighed. "I wish I knew what my father and my mother were doing, Teddy. You know that your poor father is dead——"

"Well, I suppose I do. He would have come back from that last prospecting trip of his if he had lived. I'm sure of that."

"But my mother and father——"

"Shucks! don't worry, Oriole. They will turn up," the boy urged sympathetically. "You might hear about them almost any time."

"But it has been a year now—more than that," and the girl's eyes filled with tears. "If only I *knew* they were safe."

The uncertainty of the fate of Mr. and Mrs. Putnam often depressed Oriole. Teddy tried his best to counteract her worriment of mind. But he had a good deal to worry about himself. To feel that one is suspected of being a thief is not a pleasant experience—not at all! Naturally the boy was more interested in the possible connection of Ridley, Shaffer and Mudd with the robbery of the Langdon ranch than he was in Oriole's trouble.

"If I ever get a chance, I'm going to ride over there to the Three Sisters and see what the neighborhood looks like," Teddy observed, after a little silence.

"Oh, Teddy, take me with you?" the girl cried eagerly.

"Yep. If they'll let you go. But it can't be done until after this branding business is all cleared up."

The idea of searching for the old prospect hole and possibly finding the depository of the stolen plate charmed both young people. Ted was quite as confident that something could be discovered of moment up there near the Three Sisters as was Oriole. Yet, childlike, they shrank from taking any grown person into their confidence. Young folks shrink from the possibility of ridicule.

"It would just be great," the boy declared, "if we did find what Mr. Langdon had stolen from him. It does seem sometimes, Oriole, as though I can't ever feel right or be content to hang around here if that silver isn't found."

"Oh, Teddy! don't say that," she urged.

Yet she understood just how he felt. Had she not gone all through it when she had been accused of taking Mrs. Joy's casket?

It was another week before the great herds were separated and driven in different directions to fresh pasturage. Before the final day Nurse Brown with the twins and Oriole had gone back to the ranch house. But soon Mr. Langdon and even Teddy Ford appeared at headquarters. The boy, however, was not made to aid Ching Foo again. A "kitchen police" job was not what Teddy had been looking for.

The boy loved horses, and he had "a way with them," as even George Belden and the horse wranglers acknowledged. So Teddy was busy around the corrals, or aided the wranglers in driving fresh riding stock up into the hills where the various herds belonging to the Three-bar grazed.

It was some time before Teddy and Oriole managed to attempt a venture into the hills. And then it was in the nature of a picnic party, of which Nurse Brown, George Belden, and the twins were members.

Sadie Brown did not much approve of the foreman going along. But at the last moment Mr. Langdon himself was called away, and he told George to accompany the children and the woman who considered the big foreman merely a silly person.

"I do wish you children would not be so determined to go fishing over there in Squaw Canyon," Miss Brown stated. "And right this very day. Harvey Langdon could go next week."

"But we do so want to go now, Brownie!" begged Oriole.

"Oh, we do, Brownie!" cried Myron and Marian in chorus.

"Then it means that George Belden will have to go along," groaned the nurse. "And the goodness knows he's too silly to be good company. It's hot, too. I'd rather sit right here and turn on the electric fan and rock while I knit. I never did think much of fishing."

Even the twins paid no more than slight attention to her complaining. They all knew that Miss Sadie Brown did not so much object to picnicking—and over-night at that—in the foothills, as she objected to George Belden being one of the party. Or, did she? Oriole was beginning to wonder if Miss Brown's objections to the lanky trail foreman were not a good deal "put on."

Marian, watching the whizzing fan, at last voiced a question not at all pertinent to Nurse Brown's complaint:

"Where does the wind go when you turn the 'lectric fan off, Nursie?"

But the nurse did not hear, or did not want to hear. She confessed that sometimes "those children's questions were too much" for her. So Marian repeated the query. It was her twin who came to the rescue and furnished the required answer—and who could have done better?

"Why, Marian," he said, "don't you know? It goes where the light goes when you turn the 'lectric light off."

"Oh!" murmured Marian, but plainly she knew no more than she did before, and somehow felt cheated.

But in the bustle of departure for the fishing trip up Squaw Canyon both twins had something besides scientific facts to interest their inquiring minds. Squaw Canyon was in the direction of the Three Sisters. In fact, Teddy confided to Oriole that if they went far enough up the canyon there was a side trail that would lead one directly to the basin surrounded by the trio of rounded hills in which both he and the girl were so much interested.

Although Sadie Brown stated her disapproval of the trip, she did everything she could think of to supply comforts for the venture. And as for Ching Foo, he packed so many eatables in the hampers slung on either side of the gray burro that it did seem he expected a famine was threatening the party.

It was still early when the party started away from the ranch house. Teddy had to prod the burro along, so he rode slowly on what Belden called a flea-bitten gray—a gray roan—pony. Oriole tried to ride beside her boy friend. But there was a lot of "tickle" in Molly's heels, and she really had to cut up and show off at first; so Oriole let her out and scampered away along the trail, far ahead of even Belden.

The latter rode beside the pony phaeton which Sadie Brown drove; but the woman's tongue was so caustic that before long Belden confessed to Oriole that he felt as though he had herded sheep. To a cattle man that occupation is the most despised, so Belden must have felt pretty bad.

However, the young folks had a lot of fun on the journey to Squaw Canyon. For when Molly felt less eager, Oriole rode back and trotted sedately beside Teddy and the pack burro.

They camped for an hour or so at noon—just for a bite. Then they pushed on into the canyon. The shadows in its mouth had looked blue when they were miles away; but once within its walls the shade was not blue at all. And they were all glad to be sheltered from the sun.

A coyote stood on an out-thrust rock and eyed them, then slunk away into the dark. Nothing else of a wild nature save birds was seen by the party that afternoon. The canyon seemed just as safe as the ranch house itself.

They came to the mountain stream at last in which it had been reported that trout were plentiful. This was not more than two hours from sunset—and sunset came early in the canyon. Beside the stream, which came tumbling out of a side gulch to flow more placidly through the canyon to the north, was built a comfortable shack. The woman and children would be sheltered in this structure; but both the trail foreman and Teddy Ford had brought their bed rolls.

Oriole and Teddy were eager to see if there really were fish in that cloudy stream. Oriole had plenty of experience fishing in salt water; but this was something new. She had to learn how to handle the pole and reel with which she was furnished.

"Not much like fishing from Uncle Nat's dory, the *Fishhawk*," she said to Teddy. "And do you really use these funny looking things—*flies*, do you call them? Why, they are not even meat! The trout must be awfully hungry to bite at a little bunch of feathers and hair like that."

"They won't do much biting to-night. It's too near sunset," returned her boy friend. "But maybe we'll get a mess for supper."

This proved to be the case. Oriole was as sharply interested in the catching of the trout as were the twins—although she did not dance up and down at every strike and do what Belden, chuckling, called an "Injun walk-around" when the struggling fish was landed.

The foreman cleaned and prepared the trout for baking and got a fresh fire blazing between two rocks. Sadie Brown cooked the supper, and that brought her into closer contact with the foreman, it seemed, than she liked, for the young folks heard her scolding him unmercifully.

"I don't see," whispered Oriole to Teddy, "why Mr. Belden really wants to marry Brownie. She treats him awfully harsh."

"Does he?"

"So she says. Says he is always talking about marrying, and wanting her to go to the parson with him."

"Gee!" murmured Teddy, "I thought he had more sense than that."

However, marriage and giving in marriage was not the principal topic in the minds of Oriole and her boy friend. She did not have much luck fishing that

evening; but she was deeply interested in Teddy's success and in all the new things she saw about the camping place. Very near was the branch gulch, or canyon, from which the mountain torrent poured. And Teddy assured her that by following that side-gulch they might reach the basin guarded by the Three Sisters.

"It looks awfully rough up that path," murmured Oriole.

"Maybe you couldn't make it, but I can," declared Teddy. "And if I can get away to-morrow I am going to try."

"Oh, Teddy Ford! you would not go without me, would you?"

"What you told me about Ridley and those others being interested in a prospector's hole up there by the Three Sisters, makes me want to see the place," complained Teddy. "I've got to go up there—if I can."

Oriole did not like the idea of his going without her. She was just as eager to solve the mystery of the three "bad men" as Teddy was—or, so she said. She neglected her pole and line to stare up the rugged side-gully, in the bed of which the stream foamed and fretted. It was growing dark up there—much darker than in the bottom of the more open canyon. But suddenly Oriole saw something moving—some object half hidden by an outcropping boulder.

"Oh, Teddy! See there! Is it a man?" she murmured, clutching at his jacket sleeve.

"Shucks! Don't joggle me so!" whispered Teddy. "I almost had a bite then. There! It's nibbling again."

"But look up yonder, Teddy," urged Oriole.

"It's—it's watching us—behind that rock. See!"

"Aw, that's like a girl! Maybe it's a bear—and we can't catch a bear on a fishline," and Teddy suddenly laughed.

"A bear!" gasped Oriole.

"Why not? Didn't you see that George Belden brought his gun along? Might be a bear. Sure thing, it isn't a man up there. I don't see anything, anyway."

Neither did Oriole then. The object that had caused her excitement had disappeared in the shadows. But the idea that a bear might be in the vicinity gave her a feeling of insecurity that she could not forget all during supper.

## CHAPTER XX

### BRUIN ON THE LINE

Belden dropped a few words at supper time that held the attention of Oriole and Teddy Ford—and they looked covertly at each other, with understanding nods.

"You children want to make the most of this picnic," he said soberly, "because it ain't going to be easy for me, nor mebbe not for Harvey Langdon either, to get away from work to beau you about on such didoes as this—not for a spell. Several of the boys have got through, or will get through, come the end of the month. And hands are hard to get this time of year."

"We ain't going to worry about your not going picnicking with us, George Belden," rejoined Sadie Brown promptly, her nose in the air.

"Who's got through?" asked Teddy Ford, trying to cover the woman's sharpness.

"Them hombres Ridley brought down with him last summer—Shaffer and Mudd—and Hank himself is leaving. They asked for their time. Besides some others."

"Ridley, Shaffer and Mudd?" cried Teddy anxiously.

"Yep. And others. The crews will all be short handed. That is what took Harvey Langdon away to-day. He's gone to town to see if he can pick up any stray help."

Oriole and Teddy whispered about this a good deal after supper. Nurse Brown took the twins into the cabin and put them to bed, while the boy and girl washed the dishes and cleared up the camp. Belden smoked his pipe by the water's edge.

"I bet those fellows will try to get the silver—if they *did* hide it away somewhere," Teddy said, as he and Oriole wiped the dishes. "They are ready to beat it away from the Three-bar."

"Oh, dear me, can't we stop them somehow?" Oriole said.

"How can we?"

"Let's tell Mr. Langdon."

"And he'd thank us for that, wouldn't he?" scoffed Teddy. "We don't really *know* that Hank Ridley and those others are the thieves."

"Well——"

"It would be just as bad for him to pounce on them without any evidence as it was for him to jump me that time," complained Teddy. "No, it won't do."

"But we just *can't* let them get away with Mr. Langdon's silver."

"We've got to be sure first that they stole it," grumbled Teddy. "That's all there is to that."

This did not satisfy Oriole at all. She seemed even more eager to discover the real thieves than Teddy himself. But the boy had less hope of making the discovery in question than Oriole had, that was all. He was by no means of so sanguine a temperament.

They had ridden a long way and were really tired on this evening, and both Oriole and Teddy were willing to retire early. But before Oriole retreated to the shack and her boy friend rolled up in his blanket, feet to the fire (for the air was chill in these upland places), they enjoyed a novel sight which increased Oriole's doubt at least of Sadie Brown's sincerity when she so cruelly criticized George Belden.

The twins being safely disposed of, their nurse had reappeared from the shack. Oriole and Teddy were out of sight at the moment, and feeling that she was unobserved "Brownie," as the woman liked to be called by her friends, deliberately approached the foreman smoking on his lonely boulder by the stream.

She stood for some moments behind the man, unobserved. Then she deliberately cleared her throat to call his attention to her presence!

"Shucks!" muttered Teddy in Oriole's ear, "I thought she had it in for poor George. And look at her now."

Belden had turned sharply, almost letting his pipe fall in his surprise. He got up awkwardly, but Miss Brown put out a hand and gestured for him to be seated again.

"Lovely evening, George," she observed in a voice so honeyed that there was some doubt if George recognized it as belonging to the nurse.

"Oh—ah—yes, 'tis so," the foreman stammeringly agreed.

"Do sit down, George," said Nurse Brown, edging nearer. "But you might scrouge over a little. That rock's big enough for two to sit on, ain't it?"

"Gee!" gasped Teddy, "did you get that? And there isn't any scarcity of bowlders along that river bank. What do you know about that, Oriole?"

"It's awfully funny, *I* think," giggled the girl.

"Either she hasn't meant this talk she's been giving him right along or for some reason she's had a sudden change of heart," grimly said the boy.

"Maybe it's the moon," whispered Oriole shyly. "Did you ever see such a beautiful moon, Teddy?"

"Shucks! what's a moon? Just the same as it always is this time of year," observed the quite unsentimental boy; and *that* closed Oriole's lips.

The young friends separated, and Oriole was not long in falling asleep in a bunk in the shack, over the twins. She would have slept straight through until daybreak at least, had it not been for a most astonishing thing that happened before midnight—indeed, long before the trail foreman and Sadie Brown were ready to give up their seats on the boulder and retire for the night.

Oriole, perhaps, heard the pounding of approaching hoofs as soon as Belden and his companion noticed the sound. Horses—at least a pair—were coming furiously up the canyon. The trail was plain, and the horses were galloping as though their riders gave little heed to safety.

Oriole sat up in her bunk and bumped her head. Myron and Marian did not awake, however, so she slipped down to the floor, wrapped a blanket about her, and ran to the door.

She saw Teddy rise by the fire, and heard George Belden shout as he ran for his gun:

"Get down, kid! We don't know who these fellers may be. Stoop!"

Sadie Brown came swiftly to the shade and, finding Oriole at the door, pushed in beside her.

"What is it, Brownie?" asked the girl.

"Got me. Maybe just a couple of punchers looking for strays. But then, you can't always tell."

George Belden's voice rose sonorously on the still night air:

"Hold your horses! Back up! D'you hear me?"

"Ya-hoo!" yelled one of the riders. "Who's there?"

"That ain't you, is it, Shaffer?" demanded a second voice.

"That's Hank Ridley!" cried Teddy Ford. "I know his voice!"

"Is that you, Ridley?" demanded Belden. "What are you and Mudd riding this way for? I come nigh to puncturing you. Come on in."

"I declare if it ain't George!" exclaimed the relieved voice of Hank Ridley. "What you doing up here, George?"

"I'll hand that back to you," said the trail foreman grimly. "What are *you* doing up this way? I thought you three fellers was for lighting out for the south when you got your time from Harvey Langdon."

"You're right as rain," agreed Ridley, riding into the circle of light cast by the fire on which Teddy had thrown an armful of brush which burned fiercely. "Hullo! The kids, eh? I didn't know you folks had come up this way on your picnic."

"Tell us about it," advised the foreman, still with suspicion.

"It's that darned Shaffer," explained Ridley.

"Ain't seen him, have you, George?"

"Not for a couple of days."

"That's what I told you, Mudd," said Ridley, turning to his companion. "There is something dead wrong with poor Shaffer. Nobody ain't seen him for a couple of days."

"What's the matter with him?" Belden asked.

"He's queer. Always has been. You know that, George. You know how he's acted, off an' on."

"I know he's as lazy a hound as ever rode after the cows on this ranch, if that's what you mean," said the foreman, with disgust.

"Oh, it's more than laziness made him act so funny," Ridley urged. "He has spells."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Belden.

"And now he's rid away alone somewhere, and we're afraid something's happened to him. You ain't seen him up this way, have you?"

"Not a bit of it."

"No sign of any trail—fresh trail—in this canyon?"

"Not any."

"Then it must have been your trail we follered into Squaw Canyon," said Ridley thoughtfully. "He couldn't have come this way, Mudd. No, he couldn't."

"Well," said George Belden, "going to 'light and make a night of it?"

"No. We'll be goin' back. Poor Shaffer! He must have taken another trail."

Hank Ridley pulled his horse around, and Mudd at once did the same. They bade the puzzled party a gay good-night and rode swiftly back down the canyon.

"Now, what do you know about that?" grumbled George Belden.

"Crazy critters," sniffed Miss Brown.

"Don't know about that," rejoined the foreman. "Maybe not so crazy. I just don't get what they are at. That's what!"

Discussing the matter evolved no solution, however, and Nurse Brown tartly suggested they had all better go to bed. But Oriole felt sure the next morning when she came out of the shack that the foreman had not slept at all. The visit of the two doubtful characters had troubled him so much that

he had kept watch—she was confident—by the look of his eyes and by his mighty yawns as he set about getting breakfast.

Teddy was already making a cast—and he did it very prettily—into a deep pool near the foaming falls where the stream poured out of the side canyon. When Oriole ran over there to wash her face in the stream he shooed her away.

"Want to frighten every trout in this old stream?" he demanded. "I just saw the biggest one jump that I ever laid eyes on."

"How much would it weigh—a ton?" asked Oriole roguishly.

"Never you mind. Wait till I catch him," rejoined the boy, grinning. "He's a big fellow all right."

But after Oriole had made her toilet in a more distant spot and came herself with pole and reel to try her luck, Teddy had caught only three finger-length trout. The big fellow seemed to be shy.

Oriole grew interested herself directly, for one of the trout in the pool jumped at least eighteen inches above the surface in chase of a wandering fly dancing in the morning sunshine.

"Oh, I must get it!" she cried, and tried to make a cast as she had been taught the evening before.

The line spun out and the reel whirled smartly. But the wind carried the feather-trimmed lure around a big boulder that hid a pool on the other side of the stream.

"What was that?" cried the girl, in a low voice.

"Didn't hear anything," Teddy replied. "What was it?"

"A kind of a grunt," the girl replied.

Then the fly came floating lightly around the boulder and danced away on the rather swift water. There was a rush, a flash of fire and silver (so it seemed) and the lure disappeared, while there came a mighty tug on Oriole's line.

"Let it go! Let him have it! You'll break your line!" shouted Teddy, in sharp staccato.

But Oriole, knowing a big trout had struck on, forgot all the cautions and advice she had received the night before, and endeavored to jerk the fish out of the water as though it were no more game than a codfish.

She did get it out of the water, too. It looked to be more than a foot in length—a big fellow indeed!

"See it! My mercy!" yelled Teddy. "You'll lose it, you foolish girl."

Naturally the fish, struggling in the air, swung far across the stream and for a moment was hidden by the out-thrust boulder before mentioned. This time there was a positive grunt from over there—then a splashing in the stream.

"Oh, dear me! what is it?" shrieked Oriole, but hanging on manfully to the rod.

The hook and fish did not swing back into view. But around the boulder, along the narrow beach of the stream, marched a great brown bear, walking erect and pawing at his head in a most ridiculous way. As Oriole drew back from the stream, frightened by bruin's appearance, she seemed to drag the bear from his covert!

"Look there! Look there!" yelled Teddy. "That old bear has swallowed that trout—hook, line and sinker! It takes a girl to catch a bear with a trout fly, after all!"

## CHAPTER XXI

### NEWS OF MOMENT

Oriole was so excited that she did not even scream. Not that she did not feel like screaming. But her tongue seemed fairly to stick to the roof of her mouth.

She had never seen a bear at close range before. And to her mind this was a very savage looking one indeed. She could not, in truth, understand how a bear could look anything but savage. She had no idea that, among all the beasts of the fields and woods, the brown bear is the clown, *par excellence*.

Just as though he had been trained to stand upon his hind legs and perform certain tricks, bruin continued to march along the edge of the stream, pawing the air clumsily and uttering as he walked a sort of whining grunt which Oriole at another time might have thought very funny indeed.

Naturally a big brown bear could not be played for long on a silk line and catgut leader. The big beast followed the tug of the line as Oriole moved backward only for a little way. Then he uttered a loud "Wuff!" dropped to all four paws, and the line snapped.

He turned to depart in haste, having evidently swallowed the trout, hook, fly and all. But the cries of Teddy and Oriole had brought the others to the scene. Sadie Brown appeared, a twin dragging from each hand. George Belden caught up his rifle as he ran from behind the shack.

The bear galloped up the opposite bank. The shot the foreman made was a perfect one—for it broke the bear's neck and he came tumbling back again into the shallow water.

"Well, of all things!" gasped Nurse Brown. "What kind of actions is this? Are you children fishing or bear hunting? I'd really like to know."

The trout were forgotten. The capture of the bear was a much more interesting incident than mere trout fishing. The twins were delighted by the

event, and even Oriole took some pride in the thought that she had been the means of the bear's capture.

Teddy roped the dead animal quite skillfully, and then dragged it across the stream and out on the near bank with the aid of his own horse. The horses did not like the scent of the animal, and they had to be finally picketed to keep them from running away.

Breakfast was postponed until the foreman and Teddy had skinned the big and fat carcass. Some of the tenderer parts of the animal were cut out and broiled for breakfast. They all made a hearty meal, and the lack of trout did not so much matter.

"Tisn't everybody that can go fishing and bring home a bear," declared Sadie Brown. "You see that you cut it up nice, George. Don't make a mess of it if you can help it."

"Yes, ma'am," murmured the foreman.

"What's that?"

"I mean 'No, ma'am,'" he hastened to reply.

There was no moonlight to affect the brusque Miss Brown on this morning, and she seemed to be quite as sharp with Belden as ever.

Oriole had something to say to Teddy in private—and she was very serious about it after breakfast when they were alone again.

"Such an idea, Teddy! But I can't get it out of my head."

"All right, Miss Jaybird. Tell it to me if you think it will relieve your mind."

"I wish you wouldn't call me all kinds of birds. I'm just one kind—Oriole. Now listen," she said.

"I've got my ears as wide open as a mine-shaft," he chuckled.

"Now, don't! It's just about that mine-shaft—maybe."

"What do you mean?" he wanted to know, startled.

"Well, those two men didn't ride up here last night for just nothing."

"Wow! You mean Ridley and Mudd?"

"That is just who I mean," Oriole said seriously.

"Of course they didn't. They were looking for Shaffer all right. And I wonder if he is crazy."

"Dear me, Teddy! don't you remember what I told you they said that time I overheard them?"

"What are you getting at?" he asked curiously.

"Don't you remember that I told you that Shaffer man was unwilling to wait around any longer—he said so? He wanted to go to that prospect-hole right away and not wait for the other two. And they got mad and threatened him. You know I told you!"

"Shucks! So I do remember. Well?"

"I guess that that is what has happened. Hank Ridley and that Mudd person were hunting for Mr. Shaffer last night. They thought he had come up this way. Don't you see?"

"I bet!" cried Teddy in sudden excitement. "They think Shaffer has double-crossed them. Jiminy! I see."

"But there is something more I wanted to speak about," Oriole hastened to say.

"Go on. Let's hear," Teddy returned.

"I saw something up that cross gulch last evening—don't you remember? It was something moving—something big——"

"That old bear!" exclaimed Teddy, laughing.

"*Was* it?" questioned Oriole. "It looked like a man. It was as tall as a man. I don't know. Suppose Shaffer is up in these hills?"

"Shucks! you get me all stirred up, Oriole," the boy complained. "If—if Shaffer is up there," he turned toward the Three Sisters, their tops quite visible even from the bed of the canyon, "we ought to know about it."

"Let's tell George Belden," she suggested slowly.

"And he'll tell Brownie," returned Teddy with disgust. "He's just that soft."

"Oh, Teddy!"

"Well, isn't he?" the boy demanded warmly. "See how she wound him around her finger last night, and now this morning she's as prickly with him as a porcupine."

Oriole had to giggle at that. It was true. But she was just as much in earnest about the affair of the three bad men as Teddy was.

"I tell you that they didn't ride up here last night just for fun."

"No," agreed Teddy, "of course not. But Shaffer must have been ahead of us then, if you saw him flitting up that gulch. Our trail must have erased his trail."

"He did not come this way—not on horseback," said Oriole positively. "George Belden told Ridley he didn't see any trail—and he wouldn't have told a story about it."

"I suppose not. And I didn't see any myself," admitted Teddy. "So it must have been the bear you saw, after all, Oriole," and he laughed again.

However that might be—bear or man—the two friends had no opportunity of searching the branch canyon, down which the brook tumbled, on this occasion. They did not take back to the ranch many trout, either; for it took so long to cut up the bear's carcass and pack it on the excited horses and the burro that little time could be spent in fishing.

They left the shack at noon and arrived at the ranch house just at dark, being welcomed by Ching Foo with acclaim. The bear meat made a change from "bull beef" which change the Chinese cook welcomed.

Mr. Langdon returned from town that evening. He had found several new hands; but it was not the scarcity of help that made his face so grave as he joined his little family at the supper table. It was the way he looked at Oriole that warned Sadie Brown of the possible nature of his trouble.

"Has something turned up about our Oriole?" the nurse asked the ranch owner after the children had been excused from the table.

"That's just it. Something seems to have become known at last about the fate of Mr. and Mrs. Putnam," said Mr. Langdon quietly. "I don't know how to tell the girl. Nat Jardin warned me it would be mighty hard to take from the child all hope of her ever seeing her parents again."

"Oh, Harvey Langdon! that isn't the way of it, I hope? *All* hope gone?"

"Well, I told you what that old sailor in the East Boston Hospital told me. He was pretty sure Mr. Putnam was lost. And my agent in Boston writes me that, without doubt, that was true. Mr. Putnam was knocked out of one of the boats and drowned at the time the *Helvetia* sunk, after the collision."

"Poor, poor Oriole!" murmured the good-hearted nurse.

"Well, there it is. How can I tell her? And with such uncertain news of her mother——"

"There is something you have not told me!" cried the nurse.

"It is about Mrs. Putnam. My agent found another seaman of the *Helvetia* that is sure the woman was taken aboard the ship that collided with the *Helvetia*—a three-masted sailing vessel named *Edgerton*, or *Ellerton*."

"Mercy's sake! can't you get the name of it right?"

"Chapman writes me that he will search Lloyd's records and the maritime registers for the record of any three-master of either name. It is a chance \_\_\_\_\_"

"But for goodness' sake!" interrupted Nurse Brown, "where was the ship sailing to that she hasn't been heard of in all this time?"

"Strange things happen at sea, and about ships," said Mr. Langdon, shaking his head. "You ought to realize that, Sadie Brown, after what happened to you and the twins. Evidently the *Ellerton*, if that was the name of the ship, had a small crew—less than fifty aboard. Otherwise she would have been obliged to carry a wireless outfit. Not having a wireless, her movements subsequent to the collision were not recorded."

"It seems terrible," murmured the nurse. "How shall we tell Oriole?"

"Do you think we had better tell her at all until we know more?" asked the ranchman hastily.

"Perhaps not. Wait, at least, till your friend in Boston can tell you something definite about that sailing ship. Dear me! I hate to stir the child all up again with worriment."

## CHAPTER XXII

### SOMETHING GOING ON

Oriole did not suspect that Mr. Langdon's anxiety of mind was caused by her own affairs. She never forgot the uncertainty of her mother's and father's fate; but the matter was of such long standing now that it was in the background of her thought. The trouble was not, in fact, so keen as it at first had been.

This does not reflect upon the girl's love for her parents. Life was full of interest for her and she was surrounded by those who loved her.

She often climbed into Mr. Langdon's lap after the twins had been put to bed and snuggled against him and hugged him tight about the neck. The ranchman had promised to be a father to her, now that it was almost sure that her own father had been drowned; and he seemed to like very much to have Oriole show a daughterly affection for him.

"And why shouldn't I love him?" Oriole said to Nurse Brown. "He is so kind to me, and so thoughtful. I guess if my own father had lived he couldn't have done more for me than Myron and Marian's papa does.

"Of course, when my mother comes back to me I don't know that she will want to stay here at the Three-bar Ranch. But Mr. Langdon is so kind maybe he will let her stay. Then I can stay too, and he can still be my father."

"Humph! I guess so," admitted the nurse, reflectively.

She refrained from hinting at the possibility of Mrs. Putnam having been lost at sea with her husband. But like Mr. Langdon, the nurse worried about Oriole and the effect upon her finally if the death of her mother was proved beyond any doubt. The girl had loved her mother very dearly.

With so much of interest in and about the ranch house, however, Oriole could not actually be morose or despondent even about her dear, dear mother. And the very day after the party had returned from the fishing trip

something happened that gave Oriole and Teddy, as well as others on the Three-bar Ranch, much food for reflection.

Rather, the happening was that night—the very night on which Mr. Langdon had seemed so despondent after his return from town and the children from the fishing excursion. Early in the morning there was a great noise and excitement about the ranch house when Oriole came out of doors. Sol Perkins, the ranch manager, was excitedly questioning the chief wrangler and one of the punchers who had been in charge of the horse herd at a place called Freeman's Sink.

"What sort of doings do you-all call this?" demanded the manager, who had originally come from Louisiana and had a Southern drawl to his speech. "You ain't babies, as I know of. Mean to tell me you-all let them horses drift away from here and you can't find 'em?"

"They didn't drift. They was stole," declared the horse wrangler with emphasis.

"What was you doing?" demanded Sol Perkins, pointing a finger at the abashed puncher.

"We herded 'em into a pocket in the hills there by the Sink, and run a couple of ropes across the mouth of it to hold 'em. Didn't need no watchin'——"

"Oh! they didn't? *This* looks like it," scoffed the manager.

"Well, anyhow, we made camp right there at the mouth of the pocket. But this morning there wasn't a head of 'em in the pocket."

"They flew out, I s'pose?"

"Now, listen. We didn't suppose they could climb out. And they wouldn't of, if they'd been left to themselves. But they was drove out."

"Drove out? Who by?"

"We don't know. I left Charley and Big Ike to trail 'em if they could. There was a trail up the steep end of the pocket and then it come to a sure-'nough path through the hills we didn't know was there. She's aimin' toward the Three Sisters."

"Take it from me," remarked the foreman with vast disdain, "you fellers take the sugar-coated bun for being the most useless two-legged human

beings that ever wore boots and pants. My mercy! I wonder you've lived to grow up as far as you have. I could run this ranch better with two-year-old kids."

"*You* run this ranch?" flashed back the wrangler in a rage. "You couldn't run nothin'. I thank my stars that Harvey Langdon pays me my money."

"He don't pay you none," sighed the foreman. "He gives it to you 'cause he pities you. That's flat!"

The alarm over the lost herd of riding stock spread swiftly about the ranch. And nobody was more interested in the matter than Teddy and Oriole. For they felt that their guess as to the identity of the horse thieves was as good as anybody's.

"Shaffer hasn't shown up," whispered the boy to Oriole eagerly, when they met after breakfast. "Nobody knows where he went to. Didn't even get his pay. But Hank Ridley and Mudd got their pay last night of Sol Perkins and beat it away from the ranch—riding south. But did they ride south far?"

"Oh, Teddy! what shall we do?" cried Oriole. "Tell Mr. Langdon?"

"What have we got to tell him? The men are going to follow the stolen horses in any case. They didn't drift away, that is sure. I don't believe Shaffer and his old friends are working together, either. Bet Ridley and Mudd have got the horses, and are going up there to the Three Sisters with 'em, looking for Shaffer on the way."

"And maybe they are going to recover the stolen silver plate and carry it off with them," whispered Oriole.

"I don't know. I'm all mixed up about those fellers—fellows," admitted Teddy. "Anyway, I'm for waiting until we've got more evidence before we say anything to Harvey Langdon. There's been enough false accusing already. Much as I hate Ridley and his crew, I wouldn't wish my worst enemy to be up against what I've been unfairly accused of."

"Oh, Teddy!"

"That's right. So wait a while. The boys will chase those horse thieves, whoever they are, to a fare-ye-well. I wish I could go with the posse."

"Couldn't we ride up that canyon again and see if we could overtake them?" urged Oriole.

"Shucks! they didn't go that way. And I couldn't go. I wouldn't be let. I have to stay here at the corrals and 'tend to business. I never do have any chance to do anything," complained the boy.

Oriole was not held in leash as Teddy seemed to be. She was of so independent a character, and so courageous, that she did not fear to ride alone anywhere. Her life on Harbor Light Island had been so free and untrammelled that she did not realize that, under certain circumstances, she might be in peril riding alone about the wild country to the north of the ranch house.

Besides, had not Mr. Langdon insisted that the West was much safer than the seacoast? She had accepted this statement at its face value. Even the bear she had caught on a fishline had not much frightened her. And surely it had been much more in fear of her than Oriole was of it!

So, while everybody about the ranch house was so excited over the stealing of twenty-two of the choicest riding stock of the Three-bar brand, little attention was paid to Oriole, who saddled Molly at the gate of the home corral and rode calmly away on the trail which she knew led to Squaw Canyon.

Of course she did not expect to meet and have trouble with Hank Ridley and his gang. She was just curious about the person (she felt sure it was a human being) whom she had seen at dusk in the branch canyon from which the mountain torrent poured.

She rode to the canyon without seeing any one. As Teddy had prophesied, the posse of searchers after the horse thieves had gone another way into the hills. But what puzzled Oriole was the mystery lying up the branch canyon. She rode Molly directly past the hut where she and the others had spent the night and pursued the rough path Teddy had pointed out along the edge of the brawling stream.

Had a horse been ridden this way before her, she could scarcely have distinguished the marks of its hoofs, the path was so like adamant. Molly's shoes rang on the stones so loudly that it annoyed Oriole. She feared that if

anybody—the man, Shaffer, for instance—were hidden here he would be warned of her approach.

Bad as Ridley and his mates were supposed to be, the girl from the East had no thought of danger. Even if the three "bad men" were thieves, she did not presume they would hurt her. And of course, so she considered, they would not know that she was looking for them—or for the silver stolen from the Langdon house.

However, were it human being or wild animal that she had seen two nights before in this locality, Molly made so much noise that the unknown got out of the way. At the big boulder, beside which she had seen the shadowy figure, Oriole saw that a scant patch of grass had been torn up—and that recently. But it might have been done by the bear they had later killed or by some other creature rather than by man.

She pursued the rough path for some distance farther. The boisterous voice of the cataract drowned Molly's hoof-beats at last—and drowned, as well, all other sounds. Oriole was very alert. She had brought her quirt on this occasion and believed that she would see nothing that could not be beaten off with the whip.

In fact she saw nothing but birds in this branch canyon; but she finally found the unmistakable trace of a human being. It consisted of the ashes of a campfire between two stones.

"He was here!" cried Oriole confidently, speaking aloud because of the noise of the falling waters. "It *was* that Mr. Shaffer, I do believe."

She began to feel a little doubtful when she found that without any question a man had recently been along this way—had even camped here. If it were one of the three "bad men" he might not care to be spied upon. And Oriole was doing just that.

Yet she wanted to know more. Where did the gulch lead to? Teddy said it extended right to the basin between the Three Sisters. It might be that a little search would reveal the prospect-hole the three men had once talked about in Oriole's hearing.

"And if they did steal Mr. Langdon's silver plate," she thought, "I am sure they have hidden it in that hole. And Shaffer wants to steal it from the other two. That is just what I believe."

In her simplicity she did not realize that were this so Shaffer would scarcely welcome the presence of anybody in the vicinity—even a young girl.

She urged Molly on and cheerfully pursued a course that an older person would certainly have considered very carefully before venturing upon. Curiosity—and something else—urged the girl on. She wanted to free her friend Teddy from the stigma that rested on his name. Because she had gone through the bitter waters of suspicion herself when equally innocent, Oriole was all the more eager to help her friend.

"I don't really believe Mr. Harvey Langdon believes now that Teddy helped steal the plate chest. Just the same, it must be proved that he didn't," thought Oriole. "He will never be satisfied otherwise—and perhaps Mr. Langdon won't be sure, either, that Teddy is innocent.

"Oh, dear me, if I could only find that prospect-hole and whatever those three men have got hidden in it!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### SUSPICION IS RIFE

Teddy Ford and Oriole were not the only two persons about the ranch who suspected that Hank Ridley and his mates were at the bottom of the loss of the twenty-two horses driven away the night before.

There was another couple that began to question—themselves and each other. At last there was something in common between the brusque Sadie Brown and the generous-hearted George Belden.

"Tell you what it is, man," said the nurse, for once not trying to drive the foreman out of her presence when he first appeared, "there was something funny about those two fellows riding so hard up that canyon the other night. I felt it then, and I know it now."

"I was thinking of that. Ridley has a bad reputation. So has Mudd. We know about some doings of theirs up in Shoshone Gap a year ago. It leaked through lately that they were suspected of rustling."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Nurse Brown. "And that Shaffer is no better. He ain't crazy none, either. Bet he has been trying to double-cross his friends in something."

"Sounds right sensible to me, Sadie."

"I hope so," she said scornfully. "It's lucky somebody has some horse sense about this ranch."

Belden nodded cheerful agreement. His opinion of the woman was very high indeed, and he was always ready to admit it.

"Now, see here," Miss Brown continued. "Harvey Langdon and Sol and the other fellows have all gone pirooting off on the trail of those horses. Good enough, that is. But the horse thieves have got more than twelve hours' start like enough. How about heading them off?"

"I can take a bunch and do it," said Belden promptly. "You say which way they are headin', that's all."

"The way Hank and Mudd were heading the other night. Through Squaw Canyon. And I bet Shaffer had gone on ahead of them, even if we didn't notice his trail."

"Sounds reasonable," agreed Belden. "I'll find some of the boys and get a move on."

"And I'm going to go over that way myself and see what comes of it," said the energetic woman. "I'll take the twins along in the cart, and that Teddy Ford to drive them. But I want to be astride a horse myself."

Sadie Brown rode anything on four legs (so she said herself), and the horses she chose were not like Molly or old Blooey, the pony which drew the twins in the cart. It rankled in Teddy Ford's mind that she should be so well mounted when they set forth from the ranch house, while he had to drive "a dead and alive pony" as he disrespectfully spoke of Blooey.

Belden and the men he had picked up around the bunk houses and corrals had already ridden out of sight when the pony phaeton started with Nurse Brown riding beside it. Where Oriole had disappeared to neither the twins nor their nurse thought to ask. Teddy refrained from saying anything about her, for she had ridden away without explaining a word to him of her intentions.

He had no expectation of his slow party getting anywhere near the goal. George Belden and his men were out of sight long before the slow Blooey and Miss Brown's fretting steed had come to the mouth of Squaw Canyon. Indeed, by watching the trail, Teddy knew that Belden's party had not come this way at all. The foreman evidently considered some other way into the hills as more feasible if they were really to overtake the horse thieves.

Not for a moment did anybody embarked upon this hunt for the outlaws suspect that Oriole was calmly riding into the grave danger of meeting at least one of the men suspected. The girl was so eager to help Teddy and discover the criminals who had stolen the ranchman's plate that she suspected no danger before her. She rode calmly on into the wilderness.

It was long after noon when she first halted up in the hills far above the bed of Squaw Canyon where she had been with the fishing party two days

before. Because she was not retarded by the slow-moving phaeton, she had come much faster than before.

Indeed, she had pushed Molly to the brim of the basin, about which the wooded tops of the Three Sisters loomed quite majestically. Here Oriole allowed her horse to graze. She had no lunch herself and really was not hungry, her interest in what she saw was so intense.

She observed no sign of the man who she was sure had camped so recently beside the stream she had followed. But while she sat searching the great valley with her eyes, a number of moving objects wheeling out of a ravine some miles away stirred the girl's imagination.

Were they cattle—a herd strayed from some greater band from the distant range? Oriole narrowed her lids that her half-dazzled eyes might the better mark the moving figures.

Then suddenly, by their tossing heads and their gait, she realized that it was a band of horses trotting out into the open plain. Behind them spurred two riders.

It needed no diagram to convince Oriole that she was looking at the stolen twenty-two horses; and evidently the men who had stolen them numbered two. Teddy and she had been right in their suspicions. She was sure now that Ridley and Mudd were the two thieves. Shaffer could not be with them. Indeed, that individual, whether he were out of his mind or not, she was confident was on her side of this great valley.

She looked to see that Molly could not be observed where she was grazing. Oriole knew that her own location must be hidden from the men driving the horse herd. She felt no fear, for they were many miles away.

Suddenly, as she saw the two riders drive the herd rapidly across the plain, there came several spurts of smoke from the mouth of that ravine out of which the herd had come. The two men with the horses began to fire their pistols as well. There came into view more than half a dozen swift riders, and the pistol battle became general.

"Oh, they are Mr. Langdon and the boys!" gasped the frightened Oriole. "It must be them! And somebody will be hurt!"

The antagonists were too far away at the time, however, for certain pistol shooting. There was a good deal of powder burned during the next few minutes, but nobody appeared to be hurt.

However, the Three-bar men rode more swiftly than the outlaws could drive the stolen horses. They caught up to the terrified steeds. Meanwhile the two evident thieves (whether they were Ridley and Mudd or not) were driven off. They spurred their mounts, lying close along their necks, and left the recovered horses and the posse behind.

"Oh, dear me! are they going to get away?" gasped Oriole, staring from her hiding place behind a hedge of thorny scrub oak. "Why doesn't Mr. Langdon stop them?"

She did not wish to see the escaping men shot down. That was too terrible a thought. But she felt that they should be overtaken and punished in some way.

The men from the Three-bar Ranch, however, were much too interested at the moment in securing the scattered horses. They had to be ridden down and roped in some cases, and then driven to a central place. The first thought of the ranchman and his aids, of course, was the value of the twenty-two mounts.

Before the horses were all secured the two thieves were far across the basin. And they were riding in a direction that brought them toward Oriole. The girl did not at first realize that. When she did, it was too late for her to mount Molly and try to run away.

Instead, she crept on her hands and knees as swiftly as she could travel in that posture along the hedge to the place where Molly grazed. She secured the reins, put the bit again in the pony's mouth, and almost dragged her into a thicket where they both might be hidden from the approaching outlaws.

The two men came at a pounding gallop, evidently knowing well the branch canyon up which Oriole had so recently climbed. Before they were very near the girl realized that her suspicion as to their identity had not been false.

Hank Ridley, the black-mustached and red-faced fellow, and his comrade named Mudd were the identical men who had tried to run off Mr. Langdon's horses. If they would steal horses, they surely would steal silver plate!

Oriole wished Mr. Langdon was at hand so that she might point out this fact to him.

But she believed he was with the posse miles across the green basin. The men there had gathered together the frightened herd. They were conferring. Finally she saw that they intended to drive back the stolen horses by the way they had come and would not follow the two rascals at all.

This fact surprised Ridley and Mudd as much as it did the watching girl. But they were more keenly apprehensive than was Oriole of what probably was the fact.

"No, Mudd. No chance of them giving us freedom. They are just foolin' about this."

"How do you mean, foolin'?" demanded the other man, likewise pulling in his horse and staring back.

They were within earshot of Oriole. She eagerly listened.

"Mercy, what very bad men they are," murmured the girl to herself. "Why, I never knew people could be so wicked!"

It really was Oriole's first contact with real wickedness in any form, for the behavior of Shedder Crabbe, and even of his father, from which she had suffered during her stay in and near Littleport, was brought about by pettiness of character and lack of goodness rather than by active wickedness.

"I—I would like to run away," Oriole's thoughts ran on. "Only, on Teddy's account, I must stay to see if I cannot find out something."

"They ain't no idee of letting us go scot-free, I tell you," declared Hank Ridley. "That idee of yours was all right—going off with them horses. Only we couldn't hide our trail on that soft ground. But we ain't going to be let to stay free and easy up here. No, sir."

"I want to get at that old hole, Hank. I'm sick o' this delay—mighty sick. I don't know as I much blame Shaffer—if he did come up here alone."

"Well, believe me," snarled Ridley, "if he did or if he didn't, it ain't done him no good. He couldn't get into that shaft—no, sir."

"Why couldn't he?"

"'Cause after you fellers went that time, I pulled up the rope and hid it. And no man of your heft or Shaffer's would risk his neck on a lariat down that dog-awful hole," and Ridley chuckled.

"I declare!" exclaimed Mudd with admiration.

"When your Uncle Hank loses a point in the game, he's asleep or smothered or something. Shaffer may be up here; but he ain't got down that hole, you may be sure."

"Well, then——"

"And this ain't no place for us right now. Them fellers will be waiting back in that ravine, ready to ride out and get us if we durst to come back. We got to light out this way, make a big detour, and if things shape up right we'll sneak back to the basin here from the other side. That's all we can do. Come on, Mudd."

He jerked around his lathered horse and headed him right into the gulch through which Oriole had come in reaching the brim of the great basin. The outlaws were between her and the home trail!

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE TWINS IN TROUBLE

What should Oriole do? The question fretted her not a little.

Across the basin between the three rounded hilltops were the party from the Three-bar Ranch—Mr. Langdon of their number she was sure. They waited for the two outlaws to return and hoped to catch them. At least, that was what Hank Ridley and his partner believed.

Instead of remaining anywhere near the Three Sisters, however, the two bad men were pushing their wearied horses down the side canyon toward the lower plains—indeed they were heading back toward the Langdon Ranch and by a much shorter route than that by which they had reached this point in the foothills.

Of course it was not really their intention to return to the ranch. Oriole was sure of that. Why, they had been recognized and fired at and the Three-bar boys would apprehend them on sight as horse thieves! The girl had heard enough since coming West to know that the stealing of horses was a crime all but unforgiveable by the ranch people.

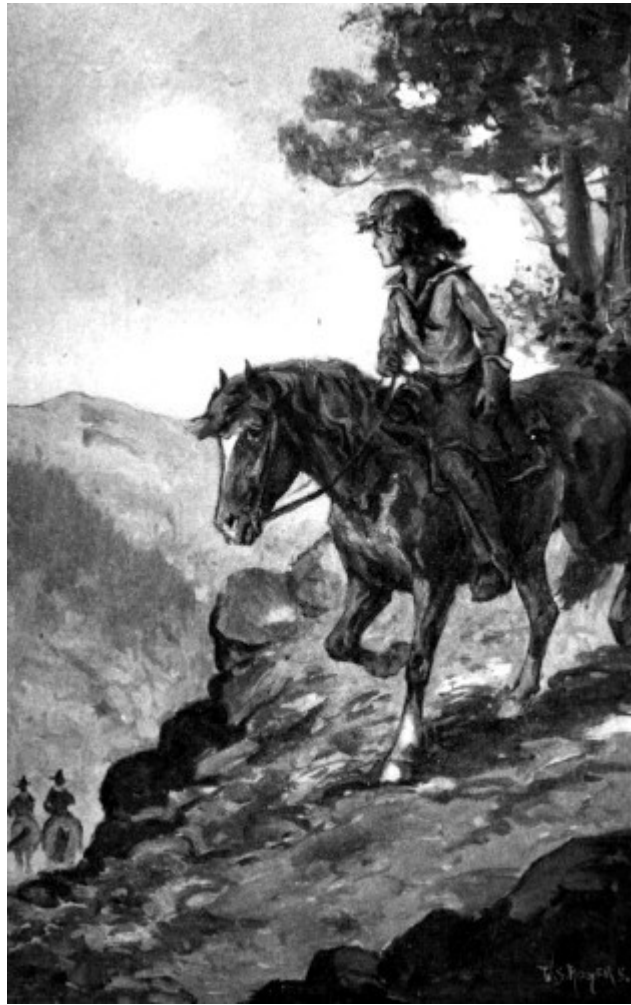
But she was very curious to know what the two would do—where they intended to go. It was plain that they had given up looking for Shaffer at this time. And she, herself, had almost forgotten him because of this greater excitement.

She climbed into Molly's saddle after a few moments and started after the two men. She had come up this path beside the boisterous water-course and on the stones and hard ground she knew Molly had left scarcely a mark. So she did not believe Ridley and Mudd would suspect her presence.

As for the noise Molly made—the clatter of her little hoofs—as Oriole could not hear the hoofs of the outlaws' horses, she knew the men could not know that she was following them.

Fascinated by the adventure, the girl pushed on. She really followed the two men by sight, every now and then catching a glimpse of them below her. As they had no suspicion of her presence they did not look back; so she got down into the bottom of Squaw Canyon behind them without revealing her presence.

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### **ORIOLE FOLLOWED THE TWO OUTLAWS.**

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Once away from the noisy stream, however, the girl was wise enough to follow much farther behind the two outlaws than before. Although their

mounts appeared to be pretty well winded from their hard gallop through the upland basin, she did not wish to run a race with them on Molly. Molly was spirited, but she was no racehorse.

As the canyon bed sloped to the south, Oriole was riding above the outlaws all the way, and glimpsed them often, when even half a mile ahead. Thus they came to the mouth of Squaw Canyon—at least, Hank Ridley and Mudd came to the place where it debouched upon the plain. Oriole saw them pull up their mounts sharply, and she stopped Molly.

She was hidden behind a clump of brush, if the men looked back. If they were so frightened by what they saw out on the plain that they rode back, *that* was a different matter. She looked about quickly for some more secure hiding place if need arose.

She discovered this easily. The chaparral could hide Molly and her rider very nicely indeed. All the girl had to do was to back the pony into the brush until the outer fringe of the herbage closed before them both.

Oriole continued to sit in the saddle and peer through at the two men. They did not make a move that the girl did not mark. She was on the *qui vive* every moment.

Hank Ridley and his companion, however, did not turn back. They had halted it seemed for discussion only. Oriole saw them peering ahead and gesticulating excitedly. Then they set spurs to their horses and, jaded as they were, the animals sprang ahead and the two swept quickly out of sight.

Oriole did not hesitate. There was something down there that she wanted to see. Some strange happening was afoot in which she felt a keen interest.

"Go on, Molly! Go on!" she urged her pony. "I want to know what those bad men are doing. I feel sure they cannot be up to anything good."

Just what the two "bad man" had seen beyond the confines of the canyon walls certainly would have astonished Oriole quite as much as it had at first surprised Hank Ridley and his mate.

Urged by the fretting Teddy Ford, the lazy old pony, Blooey, was drawing the phaeton toward the canyon at a more than ordinary brisk pace, while Sadie Brown on a fiery little mustang was riding round and around the phaeton to keep from getting too far ahead of the twins and their driver.

Teddy's repugnance at being commandeered for this job was plainly visible in the expression of his freckled face.

George Belden and his party had disappeared in some direction—Teddy and Nurse Brown did not know where. The twins were enjoying the ride immensely, for Teddy got more speed out of old Blooey than ever Oriole had. But sitting in the jouncing phaeton did not suit the fancy of the older boy in the least.

At the sudden appearance of Hank Ridley and Mudd at the head of the canyon trail, Teddy awoke. The very men they thought were the horse thieves, and whom they had set out to head off! They certainly had headed them off, all right. But what to do about it, now they were face to face with the two rascals?

Perhaps Sadie Brown was equally disturbed by this question. But she did not confer with Teddy. She spurred forward to meet the two men. She had a pistol in her saddle holster, and although she did not draw it, its presence perhaps gave her confidence.

"Hey! where are you two men going?" demanded the woman, drawing her restive mustang suddenly across the path of Ridley and his mate.

"Howdy, Sis' Brown," grinned Ridley. "You anxious about our healths, I don't doubt. Well, we're on our way——"

"To jail. I know that," snapped the vigorous young woman. "But I want to know what you are headin' for directly?"

Hank had not stopped his horse. He rode close to the woman, still grinning. Suddenly his free hand shot out and he snatched from her saddle holster the pistol in which she had placed so much confidence.

"Give me that!"

She fought him for a moment, trying to tear the weapon out of his hand. Ridley laughed, wrenched himself free, and spurred his horse aside. Sadie Brown almost tumbled from her saddle. Both men roared with laughter.

"You always was a reg'lar wildcat, Sis' Brown," declared Ridley. "But I reckon I done pared your claws this time."

"I—I'll——"

"Save your breath to cool your soup," said Ridley rudely. "That'll be about all from you."

"When Harvey Langdon and the boys hear about this——"

"He'll have something else to think of, Sis' Brown, when he does hear," snarled Ridley.

"What do you mean?" cried the woman.

Ridley said over his shoulder to Mudd: "Go get 'em! Knock that kid on the head if he tries to interfere. Git!"

Mudd spurred his horse toward the pony phaeton. Sadie Brown suddenly shrieked:

"Look out, Teddy Ford! They mean to hurt the twins! Run!"

Run with Blooey! Not a chance—and Teddy knew it. Mudd reached the phaeton in half a minute. Sadie Brown tried to wheel her horse and follow.

"No, you don't! You'll take a word to Harvey Langdon from me. If he knows what's best for him he'll call all hands off Mudd and me. We won't hurt the kids if he takes his men out of the hills back yonder and gives us four days free. Then he'll find the twins all right. I'll leave word at that old shack where you was fishing. The twins will be safe, but he'll never find 'em if he don't do as he's told. Get me?"

"He'll put you both in jail, Hank Ridley!" cried Miss Brown wildly.

"You do like I say!" commanded the man in a most ugly fashion.

He had caught the bridle of her horse in one hand. Now he gave the fiery animal a cut with his quirt. The creature began to buck and sunfish in a fashion to unseat the most nimble rider.

"Now look out for yourself!" cried Ridley, and let the bridle free. Sadie Brown was pitched over the mustang's head and came down on all fours. The pony ran snorting from the scene.

Laughing cruelly, the outlaw rode after his mate. Mudd had reached the phaeton. Teddy had no warning of his intention. Mudd rode close to the carriage and, suddenly seizing the boy, toppled him off the seat.

Myron and Marian screamed. Teddy was too angry to say anything. He had no means of defense but his fists, and he picked himself up hastily, determined to use them.

He was given no chance. Having seen to Sadie Brown's disaster, Hank Ridley rode after his partner in crime.

"Grab one of the kids, Mudd!" he shouted. "I'll take the other."

Almost as he spoke each outlaw swept a child from the phaeton and spurred their mounts off to the east, each holding a twin before him on the saddle. Myron and Marian shrieked their alarm. But they were out of earshot before either Sadie Brown or Teddy Ford were fairly upon their feet again.

The nurse and the boy ran together in panic and clung to each other, watching the outlaws ride away with the twins.

"Oh! what will become of them?" gasped the woman, quite losing her usual confidence.

"That Ridley won't dare really to hurt 'em," declared Teddy, but his voice was very shaky.

"I don't know. See what he did to me. He is a dangerous man."

"He will get into awful trouble if he hurts Myron or Marian. He knows that. Harvey Langdon is a bad one to have get after you."

"I guess *you* know that, poor fellow," said the nurse, with some sympathy. "And I wish Harvey was right here."

"Ain't nobody here—nor back at the house," said Teddy, shakingly.

"Not even that George Belden," added Sadie Brown vigorously. "That fellow never *is* around when he's wanted."

"Well, it isn't the foreman's fault this time," said the boy. "I wonder where those scoundrels intend to carry the twins?"

"I don't know," returned Miss Brown, limping. "And I can't catch my pony. I've twisted my ankle somehow falling off. Just think of that fellow making me pull leather that way!"

She seemed as angry about her unseating as about anything else. She stared after the disappearing outlaws, and shook her gloved fist at them.

It was just at this point that Oriole rode out of the mouth of the Squaw Canyon and spurred Molly down upon the stationary phaeton and the bereft nurse and Teddy. At first she did not miss the twins at all.

"What is the matter with you?" cried the girl, excitedly. "Did you see that horrid Ridley and Mudd? Did they ride this way?"

## CHAPTER XXV

### NATURE'S WONDERS

Teddy Ford did not stop to answer Oriole. He was running to head off the mustang that had thrown Miss Brown. It was left to the latter to explain to the excited girl what had happened.

"The twins?" gasped Oriole. "They've stolen Myron and Marian?"

"Those fellows will wish they had been hung before they did it," groaned Nurse Brown, limping to the phaeton to sit down. "And now I can't ride—nor anything!" she added with much emphasis.

Oriole was horrified. She saw the two men in the distance, and the thought that they were carrying off the Langdon twins almost overpowered her. What had already happened to the twins in the East when Sadie Brown was taking them to visit their grandparents had made Mr. Langdon very fearful for their safety. With these two scoundrels deliberately running off with Myron and Marian, the girl knew that their father would be alarmed to the point of desperation.

There was no use in saying Hank Ridley and his mate would not dare injure the children. No knowing what two such thorough-going villains would do. They were using the twins as a means to keep Langdon and his punchers out of the hills for a certain time. And Oriole instantly realized what that was for.

In four days Ridley hoped to get to the old prospect-hole, so often mentioned, bring up from its depths whatever was hidden there, and then make his escape, with Mudd, out of the country. Just what had become of Shaffer was a matter for supposition. But Oriole had heard Ridley's speech about the third "bad man," and she believed that Shaffer would be unable to get possession of the chest of silver alone—if that really was what the men had hidden up there near the Three Sisters.

"My dear!" cried Oriole at last, "we can't let them run away with the children. Poor Marian and Myron! They——"

"How you going to stop them, you foolish girl?" snapped Sadie Brown, nursing her ankle that now pained her exceedingly. "*I can't go after them.*"

"But I can," Oriole cried.

"I think not! They'd shoot you or something."

"Oh, no! I'm sure they would only try to frighten me. And maybe they will only frighten Marian and Myron."

"That boy's caught that little rascal of a horse. But I can't ride him now," groaned Miss Brown.

Oriole turned to see Teddy scrambling into the saddle, and at once he urged the pony toward the phaeton. Oriole shouted to him as he approached:

"What are you going to do, Teddy?"

"I'm going after Hank Ridley. The scoundrel! Maybe he will hurt those poor little kids."

"Never, Teddy! You don't believe that?" cried Oriole, and started Molly at a canter to keep up with the horse Teddy rode.

"Don't know what they'll do. We want to know where they go, anyway, so as to tell Harvey Langdon."

"I'm—I'm afraid of what they may do to us if they know we are chasing them," gasped Oriole.

"Huh! So'm I," rejoined Teddy with his usual grin. "Don't think you've got all the fright in the world inside you. I'm just as scared of those fellows as I can be. But I've got to know what they do with the twins."

"You are braver than I am," confessed Oriole.

"Not much I ain't. But Harvey Langdon will want to know—and the twins were with me in that cart when Hank and Mudd grabbed them."

"That doesn't make you to blame," declared the girl. "Brownie, of course, was in charge."

"She is only a woman," said Teddy, with some scorn. "Grown-up women often have hysterics or something when anything like this happens. I'm glad you're not grown up, Oriole."

"What would you do if I were?" she asked curiously.

"I'd send you back, quick enough," replied Teddy with conviction. "Girls aren't as bad as women—at least, you are not, Oriole. But don't you squeal and take on if anything happens."

"I'll try not," she returned meekly. "But you are not going to come to close quarters with those bad men, are you?"

"How can I tell what we'll have to do? Anyway, you keep back. If they grab me, you turn around and beat it back to the ranch and tell all about it—and where we followed them to. You understand?"

"Oh, yes, Teddy. But I hope you won't get into any danger—not right up close to those men."

"You needn't fret. I'm not looking for trouble," he declared. "And as you ride keep your eyes peeled for them."

Oriole was too excited to take him to task for his slang on this occasion. The situation was fraught with too much peril for the girl to think of anything but the twins' abduction and their own attempt to follow the kidnapers. All the time Molly was carrying her over the plain she was imagining the most awful accidents happening to little Myron and Marian.

They might easily be dropped by the kidnapers—maybe fall under the hoofs of the men's horses! That Ridley and Mudd would actually beat the children or maltreat them, did not seem so probable. It would do the outlaws no good to be cruel to the children. But an accident to one or both of the twins would be quite possible while the men were riding away so recklessly.

Ridley and his mate were long since out of sight. But Teddy had taken careful note of the direction the abductors had followed. Nor could the trail of their mounts be easily missed. He and Oriole did not swerve from the direct course to that gap in the foothills beyond which the two men had urged their wearied steeds.

The mounts ridden by Teddy and Oriole were much fresher than those of Ridley and Mudd. Undoubtedly the latter had been in the saddle most of the night, and it was now past noon. The pony Sadie Brown had ridden was quite as spirited as Molly. The friends were surely making better time on the trail, and with less effort, than the outlaws.

In half an hour, or even less, they had lost sight of Sadie Brown and the pony phaeton. They knew the nurse was urging old Blooey toward the ranch house.

"And I'd lots rather have her driving the old beast than me," declared Teddy. "He'd out-try the patience of Job, that horse would."

They reached the gap in the hills. Neither Teddy nor Oriole had ever been so far in this direction before. It was all of five miles beyond the mouth of Squaw Canyon, and while that place was a familiar picnicking ground to the people of the Langdon Ranch, this valley into which Teddy and Oriole now ventured was quite out of their familiar ken.

"But it goes right up into the hills toward the Three Sisters, just like the Squaw," the boy declared. "I bet, as I said, Ridley and Mudd are going back to the basin. You don't know much about the territory up there——"

"Oh, yes, I do," Oriole interrupted. "I have been up to that place this very morning."

"You don't mean it?"

She told him in detail of her trip up the side-canyon and what she had seen in the upland plain. Teddy was deeply interested.

"Then we know just what to expect of Ridley and Mudd. They *are* horse thieves."

"I guess they are worse than that. Stealing children is worse," said Oriole with vigor.

"I suppose so. And they are desperate. We want to look out," said Teddy, with caution. "I don't see what they are really after, stealing the twins. Why, the whole country will be aroused. They won't have a chance to get away."

"They will use little Myron and Marian to buy Mr. Langdon and the other ranchmen off."

"I suppose that's so. And Ridley hinted as much when he threw Brownie out of her saddle. I heard him tell her to tell Mr. Langdon that he would communicate with him about the twins at that cabin we were in the other night."

"It is plain enough that the man means to win a chance to get at that prospect-hole, where I am sure he has hidden the silver stolen from the ranch. Oh, Teddy, if we could only catch them at it!"

"Getting back those twins is the more important job," sighed Teddy. "Now take great care, Oriole. This is a covert we are riding through and maybe they are lying in wait for us. You keep back. Don't follow me too close. And if they grab me, *you* run!"

Oriole promised with meekness. She felt that Teddy knew more about such ventures as this than she did, although she did not like the idea of running away to leave him to the mercy of the kidnapers. Still, he had not been caught as yet—which was a comfort.

She noticed at once that a deep stream flowed out of this valley into which they ventured. It did not flow in the direction of the ranch house, so she had never chanced to see it before. But Teddy said it was Byson's Creek and that it joined other streams to make the river they had crossed in coming from Timmins Station.

This creek was deep and strong, and as they advanced along its bank by a well cleared trail they began to hear the thunder of a heavy fall. By and by, looking up and ahead as the horses climbed, Oriole beheld the sun shining through a cloud of spray. Indeed, she exclaimed aloud that she saw a rainbow.

"Never mind. It won't bite you," growled Teddy. "You look out. Those fellows will hear you yet."

The way was rough and great trees bordered the stream. In half an hour they came in full sight of the falls. It was quite fifty feet high—a wide, foam-fretted stream of water flowing over the edge of a cliff and dropping sheer, and with a thunderous sound, into the pool beside which Oriole and Teddy stood.

"Gee!" ejaculated the boy suddenly, "where do we go from here?"

They had actually come to what appeared to be a wall, too steep and too rugged to be climbed either by man or beast. They must have passed the two men and the twins. Or, had they?

Above the sound of the falling water Oriole suddenly heard a faint scream. She looked across the creek, and upward. She knew it to be Myron Langdon who had called to her:

"Oriole! Oriole! Come!"

"Do you hear that?" demanded Teddy, greatly excited.

"Oh, see!" gasped the girl, pointing.

He understood her gesture although her voice was drowned by the waters. On the other side of the river, and far up toward the head of the falls, the two horsemen were climbing by a rocky and steep trail. Myron was reaching over Hank Ridley's shoulder and screaming at the top of his voice to his friends below—to Oriole in particular.

In another minute both of the kidnapers were out of sight and the boy and girl could no longer hear Myron's voice. They stared at each other in amazement and alarm.

"How did they get there?" demanded Oriole.

"I give it up. I never saw any chance to cross the creek—not even on horseback," Teddy declared. "And I've been watching for just such a place all the way up."

"My!" gasped Oriole in wonder, looking again across the deep and angry flood, "do you suppose they could have flown over?"

## CHAPTER XXVI

### AT CLOSE QUARTERS

"I do wish you wouldn't talk like a silly," Teddy said with much disgust. "Who ever heard the like? How could they fly over that creek—horses and all?"

Oriole was quite embarrassed. Of course the men could not have flown over the stream, horses, and twins, and all. But it was a puzzling thing, to say the least.

"How did they do it, Teddy?" she asked.

"There must be some way across that we missed. You wait here. I will go back and look," he declared.

He wheeled his mount and quickly disappeared beyond the first screen of brush. Oriole climbed down to ease Molly's cinches and to let the pony graze. She looked all about carefully. Right here at the deep pool, at least, there was no possible ford across the stream. It was a perfect mystery how the men with the stolen twins had escaped to the other side of the river.

On this side it was plain that only a very small animal or an insect could mount the rocky wall down which the stream tumbled. There must be a way of crossing the stream, or else the kidnapers would not have come this way. The ravine and its wonderful waterfall was familiar to them at least.

Teddy was out of sight. Indeed, he was a long time gone it seemed to Oriole. At any moment she expected to see him appear riding up the other bank of the creek.

She began to wonder where he was. Had something happened to him? He could not be lost, of course—not on such a plain trail as that they had followed through this ravine. Only, so much had happened during the last few hours that she thought she might expect almost anything to occur!

While Molly gnawed the short grass in mild contentment, the girl went closer to the waterfall. Here was a broad flat stone—oh, many yards across!

—which bordered the falls and was some twelve feet above the surface of the pool into which the great volume of water poured. A fine spray sprinkled this stone platform all of the time and—yes!—what was this? These marks made by tiny muddy rivulets on the stone?

"Goodness me!" gasped Oriole. "They look just like horses' hoofs. They are! What can they mean? Molly hasn't been here. Or that creature Teddy is riding. Surely——"

She raised her eyes and stared up into the dancing rainbow in the mist. Beyond it they had seen the two men and the twins riding out of sight on the opposite side of the falls.

"Goodness me!" gasped Oriole again. "It can't be!"

Yet she was positive it was. She had made a most wonderful discovery. There could be no doubt of it.

In this wonderful country she knew there must be many marvels like this she had come upon and which the outlaws evidently knew and had often taken advantage of in traveling through the hills. But to the casual observer there was no sign—absolutely none—to reveal the secret.

Quickly scrambling across the wet surface of the stone platform until she was close to the roaring stream of falling water, she pushed through a green brush-clump—bushes that were continually wet by the spray of the falls—and so got behind the curtain of water.

There was the path!

Oriole had read of the wonderful Falls Of Niagara, and she knew that there was such a path as this behind one of those great curtains of mist and water. This was a smaller wonder; but it was quite as effective. Without any doubt the two outlaws, carrying the twins with them and riding their horses, had passed behind the waterfall and so crossed to the other side of the creek.

Oriole went far enough afoot to see that the passage was perfectly feasible. The sun shone through the curtain of falling water and illuminated the shallow cavern sufficiently. She was delighted with her discovery.

Running back to the mildly startled Molly, she pulled up her cinches and bitted the pony once more. Then leaping into her saddle she headed Molly directly into the cloud of spray.

The pony shook her head and snorted; but Oriole touched her with the whip and made the animal proceed. They came safely into the shallow cavern behind the falling water. Oriole urged Molly on. The path was smooth enough and certainly there was no mistaking the right direction!

The stream was only ten yards across. Oriole and her pony came out upon a mossy rock that was marked deeply by the hoofs of the horses that had gone before. She urged Molly a little to make her climb the heights. She stood at last just where the two outlaws had stood—at the point from which little Myron had screamed to her to come and get him.

She looked back in great glee now, when she heard Teddy's sharp voice shouting:

"Oriole! Oriole Putnam! Where have you gone now?"

She "hoo-hooed" to him, and finally the boy, who had come riding back in discouragement, saw her. He halted his mount in amazement and for a minute could not utter a word.

"Oh, Teddy! can't you fly across the creek—like me?" she called to him.

"Oriole Putnam, you're a story-teller—that's what you are," he declared confidently. "You know you didn't fly over there."

"Do you think Molly waded over?" she demanded, pleased at the idea of teasing Teddy, who so often teased her.

"You'd better tell me the truth," he cried. "Hank Ridley might come back 'most any time. Then you wouldn't want to be over there alone."

"You can come right over behind the waterfall," she told him hastily, moved somewhat, perhaps, by his threat. "Just try it. It don't wet you much."

"For a nickel I'd kick myself for not guessing it," shouted Teddy, and pushed his agitated mount right in behind the bushes and so under the falling water. In five minutes he was at Oriole's side. They pushed on up the steep path which they had seen the kidnapers follow.

"That does beat all!" Teddy declared. "Ridley and his gang must know this country pretty well. Better than Harvey Langdon's punchers do, maybe. I wonder where George Belden and his bunch went. They must be up here

somewhere, but not just around here I guess. Otherwise we would have heard something of them."

There was no indication of the presence of anybody at this time. Even the two outlaws and the stolen children had got so far in advance that after an hour, and after Teddy and Oriole were quite to the rim of the interior basin guarded by the Three Sisters, they came neither in sight nor sound of Ridley and his party.

"We must have lost 'em," complained the boy, stopping his horse where they would be well screened by bushes. "What do you think, Oriole?"

It was quite nice of him to confer with her, the girl felt. "Teddy considers that I have some judgment at least," she told herself.

"We may get into trouble if they see us," the girl declared. "But, oh! I do want to find Myron and Marian. What will Mr. Langdon say if we cannot tell him just where that horrid Hank Ridley has taken the twins?"

"I'd like better to come across George Belden and his men," the boy returned. "He must be somewhere in this neighborhood. That is sure. And perhaps Hank and Mudd don't know a thing about Belden's bunch. Hey! who's that?"

He pointed off to the west of their standing-place. Something—or somebody—was moving in a patch of brush. It was not a horseman, or the rider's torso would have shown plainly above the low bushes.

"Bet it's another bear," suggested Teddy Ford.

"Oh, don't!" gasped Oriole. "I don't want to see another one—so close as this."

"Ssh! Let's wait. There he is!"

But it was not a bear that appeared at the edge of the bushes. It was a man, and he pushed aside the fringe of brush carefully and leaned forward to look down into a hollow that the boy and girl farther up the rim of the basin could not observe.

"Look at that!" ejaculated Teddy, in great excitement. "It's Shaffer! Don't you see it is?"

"Oh, surely not!" murmured Oriole.

"Can't be mistaken," said the boy, with great confidence. "I'd know his mouse-colored hair and that brown coat he wears. Sure, it's Shaffer. Wonder where his horse is."

"I wonder what he is looking at," said Oriole. "It must be——"

"Come on! Leave your horse here and let's slip down behind that boulder," said Teddy quickly. "Then we can see too."

"Oh, Teddy!"

"Pooh! What you afraid of?" demanded the boy. "They will never see us in the world."

"Who else do you suppose is there?" whispered Oriole, obeying her friend's suggestion, but in no little trepidation.

"We'll find out. Shaffer knows who it is, I bet. Wonder what's happened to the horse he rode away from the ranch on."

There was nobody to answer this question. Teddy and Oriole left their steeds to graze behind the summit of the ridge and crept down the slope to the back of the big boulder previously pointed out by the boy.

Shaffer was now out of sight. Suddenly they heard harsh voices, the pop of a pistol, and next were electrified by the screaming of Myron and Marian. There was no mistake to be made in the voices of the twins.

"Something is happening!" cried Oriole and started to run around the boulder.

But Teddy grabbed her and held her tight.

"Say! have a bit of sense, will you?" he demanded. "Do you want to run right into trouble? Go easy. They are not hurting the kids. Myron and Marian are only frightened."

"How do you know?" demanded Oriole fiercely. "Oh! Hear that!"

They could scarcely help but hear it, for it was the clash of men's voices raised in anger. Although Teddy clung to her, Oriole insisted upon going around the big rock and into sight of the "rumpus."

Ridley and Mudd had stopped here with the stolen children, evidently to rest their steeds. At the first appearance of Shaffer, trouble had commenced.

The third outlaw had evidently tried to hold his former friends up, but the weapon had been knocked out of his hand by Mudd, who was now struggling with Shaffer most desperately.

Hank Ridley was circling around and around the two fighting men, pistol in hand, evidently trying to help Mudd but afraid of shooting him if he attempted to shoot Shaffer. It was a desperate and wicked struggle, and at another time—when she was under less excitement—Oriole would have been so horror-stricken that she could not have moved.

But there by a small campfire, over which a pan of bacon was burning, were little Myron and Marian, and their danger almost wiped other thoughts from the bigger girl's mind. With a scream she ran out of cover and dashed toward the twins, who were clinging together near the outlaws' saddles.

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**WITH A SCREAM ORIOLE DASHED TOWARD THE TWINS.**

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"Oh, Oriole! Oriole!" shrieked Myron, seeing her coming. "Take us away! Take us home to Brownie and papa!"

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE WRIST WATCH

Teddy Ford had no idea of letting Oriole get into danger alone. When she ran out of the covert to seize the Langdon twins, he followed her, brandishing the quirt he had brought along and which was his only weapon of defense. He was really prepared to attack Ridley with this whip if it was necessary; but at first the outlaw did not even seem to see the boy and girl who had followed him from the lowlands.

Mudd and Shaffer were locked in a desperate embrace, staggering and falling, getting up again still with their arms wrapped about each other—altogether displaying a hatred for each other that boded nothing but tragedy. Fortunately neither of the antagonists was now armed.

Oriole ran down to the twins and they clung to her. Teddy placed himself bravely between that group and the outlaws, gripping the handle of the quirt so hard that his knuckles were white, and ready to spring at Ridley if the latter turned on Oriole and the children.

"Beat it!" the boy shrilled to his friend. "Get 'em back of the rock. Hurry!"

But Oriole did not need this advice. She realized that she must get Myron and Marian out of sight as quickly as possible. She seized the twins by their hands and ran with them to the huge boulder.

It was just before they reached its protection that Ridley turned and saw them. He shouted a threat and raised the weapon in his hand as though he intended to fire after the children.

Teddy Ford "saw red." That was too much for him to see done without effort to defend Oriole and the twins.

"You old scoundrel!" he shouted, "don't you dare shoot them. If you do Harvey Langdon will get you, sure as you live! Put it down!"

Perhaps the reminder of the ranchman's wrath stayed the rascal's hand. But he swung on the boy and started toward Teddy as though he intended

attacking him.

The latter was not cowardly in his own behalf. He faced Ridley and raised the quirt.

"You hit me and I'll give you a taste of this," Teddy declared. He knew that the longer he stayed the man, the safer Oriole and the twins would be. They might even reach the horses beyond the hill. "I'll give you a taste of this old quirt—sure as you live, Hank Ridley!"

"Hear the bantam crow!" sneered the man. "I ought to slam you a few just to teach you your place—Hey! Look out for him, Mudd!"

He turned to see what the other men were doing. Shaffer had forced Mudd back against a rock. They fell over it together and their hold was broken. Both men scrambled to their feet, and Ridley darted forward, his pistol extended.

Teddy thought the man, Shaffer, was about to be shot. It was an awful thought, and although he had no more use for Shaffer than he had for the other outlaws, to see such a tragedy was a terrible thing. He shrieked as loud as he could:

"Don't shoot him! Don't you do it!"

Teddy's influence would have been slight indeed; but just as he shouted his warning there appeared from the brush across the glade several charging horsemen, George Belden at their head.

Shaffer and Mudd came together again, and Ridley lost his chance of firing at the former. The struggling men did not see the foreman and his party approaching. But Hank Ridley saw them and acted instantly.

Deserting his two mates, Ridley shot away across the open space and grabbed up his saddle as he passed the fire. The posse from the Langdon Ranch was some distance away. The outlaw had time to throw his saddle on his mount, cinch up, and climb on the horse before Belden or his men could get him.

Had they been of Ridley's own wicked mind, they might easily have shot him. Had they known, even, that he had tried to kidnap the Langdon twins they might have used their weapons in bringing the leader of the three outlaws to earth. But they contented themselves in capturing Shaffer and

Mudd, while Ridley disappeared into the forest farther down the basin, evidently aiming for the more easterly of the Three Sisters.

Belden threw himself from his saddle and tore Mudd and Shaffer apart. He flung them both to the ground, and the desperadoes were so weary from their battle that, realizing that they were captured and helpless, they lay there panting.

"Well, here's two of the rascals," said the foreman with satisfaction. "Never mind Hank. We'll get him later. What was you-all fightin' about?"

Neither Shaffer nor Mudd seemed ready to answer. Belden turned to look at Teddy, his face breaking into a quizzical smile.

"And here's the kid. I would like to know what under the canopy of the wide blue sky brought you up here?"

"There's a good deal to tell, Mr. Belden," said the boy seriously. "But let me go after Oriole and the twins first——"

"Huh? Oriole Putnam and Harvey Langdon's children?"

"Yes. We are all up here. Mudd and Ridley ran away with the twins and Oriole and I followed them."

"Peep o' day!" ejaculated Belden. "What you talkin' about?"

Teddy did not stop then to explain. He ran around the boulder, found the terrified twins and Oriole, and brought them back to prove his statement. The punchers gathered around, amazed and interested to say the least. They paid little attention for the time being to Shaffer and Mudd; but those two rascals knew better than to try to escape.

When the story was told there was a chorus of praise for Oriole and Teddy from the punchers, as well as an expression of their amazement. A hunt for horse thieves had turned out to be the capture of at least one kidnaper. Shaffer was evidently at outs with the other two desperadoes. And even Mudd was not the principal in the abduction plot.

"Just the same," decided George Belden, "we'll let Hank go for now. I bet he won't get far on that tired-out horse of his—no, sir! But it is our duty to take these children—all of 'em—back to the ranch. Sadie Brown will be near about worried to death over these here twins—no doubt of that. And if

Harvey Langdon gets back to headquarters and finds his twins stole, he'll near about have a fit."

"What'll we do with these two fellers, George?" demanded one of the punchers, looking scornfully down upon Shaffer and Mudd.

"Bring 'em along. We can't judge 'em. Let Harvey Langdon do that."

"They ought to stretch hemp," growled another.

"Never mind that now!" commanded the foreman. "We are law-abidin' citizens, I hope. These fellers will be punished by the courts, no doubt. Get busy now. Where's your horses, boy?"

Teddy ran and secured both Oriole's pony and the one he had been riding. One thing he had refrained from speaking of before Belden and the others. That was the strange path, including the one under the waterfall, by which they had reached the uplands. And now he warned Oriole to say nothing about it.

"No use everybody knowing that trick. George and these fellows came by another way. Only those outlaws and we know the waterfall path, Oriole."

"Oh, Teddy! It shall be a secret—yes? I don't believe the children will ever remember it."

"If they do they won't make anybody understand unless we chip in and explain," said the boy cheerfully.

A secret of any kind delighted Oriole. Why not? With often only her own thoughts for company, the girl had become more imaginative and fanciful than many children of her age. She had few playthings, too—that is, playthings like dolls and baby-houses and such toys, which other girls of her age enjoyed. A veritable secret between Teddy and her was delightful.

And especially because it was Teddy with whom she shared it. To her mind Teddy Ford was quite a wonderful creature. Of course, Oriole Putnam would not for the world have admitted it to Teddy; but she believed him to be the most remarkable boy alive!

So it was agreed between them. The path behind the curtain of falling water was to remain a secret—as far as Oriole and Teddy were concerned. And surely the captured Shaffer and Mudd would be unlikely to speak of it.

Myron and Marian did not mention the wonder. When the party regained the ranch-house, where Sadie Brown and Mr. Langdon were just talking over the twins' abduction, it was dusk, the children were tired and sleepy, and they were put to bed without recounting to their nurse and father many particulars of the adventure.

It was Oriole who, before she went to bed that night, made a discovery that was quite startling, to her at least, if not to the ranch family. When she came to undress and make ready for bed she discovered that her wrist-watch was gone.

"Oh, my dear!" she cried, running to Sadie Brown, "I've lost it—that dear watch that Myron gave me last New Year's eve."

"Why, Oriole, don't you think you may have mislaid it?" asked Nurse Brown.

"No, no! I lost it up there in the hills—I know I did. I know just where I looked at it last. I am sure. It was while we stood behind that big boulder and George Belden and the other men rode up and captured those two bad men. Yes! I remember looking at it then."

"But you don't really know you left it there," said the nurse.

"Well, I'm sure it was gone when I reached home. Yes! right up there it was lost, for Teddy and I washed our hands in a pool of water before we rode away from that spot. My watch was gone then, or I would have noticed it on my wrist and taken it off before washing my hands. I always do."

"Well, it is too bad. But it is too far away for you to go back and look for it."

"Oh! I don't want to lose that pretty watch," complained the girl.

"Nothing can be done about it to-night, child," said the woman. "We'll see to-morrow."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### SHALL ORIOLE BE TOLD?

The pretty gold wrist watch that Oriole had lost was of course a more important subject of thought to her than to anybody else around the Three-bar Ranch. Naturally Nurse Brown and the father of the twins considered the loss and recovery of Myron and Marian much more important than the matter of Oriole's watch.

Mr. Langdon did not overlook the part Oriole and Teddy had played in the recovery of the twins. Although they might not have been able alone to have captured Myron and Marian from the desperadoes, the fact remained that the young folks had bravely followed the abductors of the children, thereby showing good sense and great bravery.

"Such a plucky girl I never did see," Nurse Brown remarked, of Oriole.

"We could look for something like that from her," declared the ranchman, with enthusiasm. He knew Oriole of old. "And I want to state as my opinion that that boy Ted Ford deserves commendation."

"I've been telling you that, Harvey Langdon," said the plain-spoken nurse. "He ain't anything like what you used to say he was. Maybe he came here like an outcast; but just because he hadn't any friends didn't make him a thief."

"Well, I have admitted I might have been mistaken in the first place," rejoined the man. "You needn't keep rubbing it in, Sadie Brown."

"I don't believe he had anything to do with the stealing of your silverware," she declared.

"Neither does Oriole. And from something Ching Foo let drop, I think he thinks Teddy never did it. But whoever it was——"

"Why don't you put these two rascals you have in the pen to the question?" demanded Sadie Brown.

"Who do you mean—Mudd and Shaffer?"

"Yes. Oriole said to me once that she believed Hank Ridley and his chums knew about the silverware. Hank would never tell; but these other two are weaklings."

"Good idea," agreed Harvey Langdon.

That was in the evening of this exciting day. By morning other things occurred that for the time put the matter of the stolen silver plate out of Mr. Langdon's mind. And naturally the loss of Oriole's wrist watch seemed to the ranchman's mind a very small thing indeed.

One of the boys rode in from town and brought the mail bag. Ching Foo brought it into the breakfast room after Oriole and the twins had been excused from the table and had run out to the corral to discuss the adventures of the day previous with Teddy.

The first letter that the ranchman drew from the mail-bag occasioned him more excitement than Sadie Brown had seen him express over a missive for some time. She neglected her egg to watch him open the letter. He scanned it in a moment, then looked at her across the table.

"It was the *Ellerton*!" he exclaimed.

"Yes? So glad to know it. But I don't get you, Harvey Langdon. *What* was the *Ellerton*—and what *is* the *Ellerton*?" demanded the brusque nurse.

"That was the name of the ship that collided with the *Helvetia*. The name of the sailing ship they think picked up Oriole's mother."

"Oh! My good land!" ejaculated Nurse Brown.

"Yes. Chapman says here it is positively the three-masted ship *Ellerton*. She is a trading ship and was bound for the South Seas by the way of the Cape of Good Hope. He has traced her as far as Papiette. She was reported from there. And listen! She may now be somewhere between Honolulu and San Francisco."

"Gracious!" murmured the nurse again.

"Of course," said the ranchman, much perturbed, "we don't know that Mrs. Putnam is even aboard that ship. But we have reason to believe that at one

time she was on board of the *Ellerton*. Chapman says here——" and he looked at the letter again and read aloud:

"Owner and commander, Captain Nathan Grimsby. Mrs. Grimsby sailed with him. They are New Jersey people—hail from Barnegat. If Mrs. Putnam was picked up by the *Ellerton*, and none of the other passengers of the *Helvetia* was saved by the sailing vessel, the Grimsbys might have kept her with them."

"That is what Chapman says. It sounds reasonable."

"But shall we tell Oriole?" gasped Nurse Brown, going right at the root of the matter in her usual confident way.

The ranchman looked almost frightened. He shook his head hastily.

"I do not dare," he said in a low tone. "Not I! Would *you* want to take the chance of raising her hopes about her mother, then, perhaps, have them prove to be unfounded?"

"Now, Harvey Langdon!" cried Sadie Brown, "you are not going to drag me into any such mess. No, sir. I won't decide for you. And I won't say a word to Oriole."

"I guess you've answered your own question," sighed Mr. Langdon. "Just as you shrink from speaking to Oriole about it, so do I. And I go beyond that."

"What's that?" queried the nurse in curiosity.

"I don't know that I want to tell her at all. She is happy here. And the twins love her. I don't know what I should do without her myself now. Don't you see, Sadie, if her mother does appear we are likely to lose our Oriole?"

"The land's sake! I suppose so," agreed the nurse, nodding.

"Well!"

"Well?" returned the woman.

"It isn't well at all!" burst out Mr. Langdon. "At any rate, I won't tell Oriole until we are sure about her mother. The poor woman may not be alive after all. But I will get somebody in 'Frisco to keep in touch with the water-front

news, and learn all about the *Ellerton* and her company the moment she arrives."

"I don't see what else you can do, Harvey," rejoined the woman. "It'll be a wrench, I will say, to have Oriole taken from us. She is the smartest girl I ever saw—and as brave as she can be. See how she went after Ridley yesterday when he carried off Myron and Marian."

"That was foolhardiness," declared the man. "But it shows the sort of heart the child has. No. We'll not tell her now. Not until we are sure. And then \_\_\_\_\_"

He shook his head and returned to the letter from Boston. That he was deeply troubled he plainly showed. But Oriole did not notice this, or Nurse Brown's sharp glances at her, when she returned from the corral. She was eager to know what was going to be done about Hank Ridley, the remaining kidnaper who had not been caught.

"I tell you what, child," said Nurse Brown, "Harvey Langdon can't send half his help—'specially when the ranch is short-handed—after that miserable cur. No, sir. But he will send word across the hills for the sheriff of Pontette to be on the watch for Hank. And of course we will all look out for him down here. He won't dare go back Shoshone Gap way, for they know him there, and Mr. Belden's heard tell that he's wanted there for a hold-up."

"He is the one who stole Mr. Langdon's silver plate—and those other two men helped him," declared the girl positively.

"Mebbe so. But Shaffer and Mudd won't admit it. They are sore on each other a pile—no doubt of that. I suppose Shaffer tried to double-cross Mudd and Ridley in some way."

"He went up there alone trying to get at the silver chest they hid. And he couldn't do it because Ridley had taken and hid the rope they used to lower themselves into the prospect-hole where the silver is."

"For the land's sake!"

"Yes," Oriole said positively. "Teddy Ford and I have figured it all out. I am going to tell Mr. Langdon. I am sure his silver is up there somewhere near the Three Sisters."

But although she and her boy friend were so very sure of this, Oriole could not entirely convince the grown folks of the Langdon ranch that the Ridley gang had been the thieves who, the fall before, had removed the chest of silver from the house. Even Ching Foo, if he suspected the guilt of Hank and his mates, was not willing to state this as a fact and with confidence.

"Guess the truth never will be brought to light, Oriole," sighed Teddy, when they were talking it over. "And Hank Ridley will get clean away—sure. I don't care what Brownie says."

"Well, it is a fact, I suppose," agreed Oriole, "that Mr. Langdon can't give the time necessary to it now, nor let Mr. Belden or Sol Perkins go after that bad man. But you'd think, seeing the silver was worth so much money, he'd show more interest."

"Shucks!" grumbled Teddy, "that's easy to see. If he really believed what you told him about the silver he'd find time to chase Hank Ridley all right. He isn't convinced—that's what is the matter," and the boy seemed quite gloomy about it.

"I really don't think you do Mr. Langdon justice, Teddy," murmured Oriole, shaking her curls.

"Oh, yes, I do!"

"I am quite sure you don't," repeated the girl.

"Huh! I'd like to know why not?"

"You don't consider that he is much more interested in the safety of the twins than in anything else."

"Gee! Er—I mean—well, whatever it *is* I mean," stammered Teddy finally, grinning. "Anyhow, I see your point, Oriole."

"Well, then?"

"But just the same, if he believed the silver was there somewhere and that I hadn't anything to do with his losing it, he'd stir up things a little faster. Oh, yes, he would!"

Of course, as Oriole very well knew, Teddy was particularly sensitive on this point. But she really wished with all her heart that Mr. Langdon would

head a searching party, the object of which was to find the stolen silver plate.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### OF COURSE!

It was true that these were very busy times around the Langdon Ranch. The two horse thieves who had been captured, partly by the aid of Oriole and Teddy, had been sent to town to be held for the sitting of the court. Whether Hank Ridley, the chief outlaw, would ever be captured or not was a question. At this time of year all the ranchmen were engaged in much more necessary work even than the running down of desperadoes.

Oriole was vastly disappointed that circumstances had not proved her own and Teddy's contention correct—that Ridley and his companions were the ones who had robbed the ranch house of the chest of silver. But she had other important matters to think of too; and one of these topics of thought was the loss of her wrist watch. She considered that watch, which Myron had given her at the New Year's Eve party, her most valuable possession. The gold heart-shaped locket and chain that had been Marian's present at the same time, Oriole only wore on very especial occasions, but the watch had been her constant companion while riding over the ranch.

As nobody seemed to consider its loss of much importance save Oriole herself, she soon stopped talking about it. But the determination grew in her mind to make an effort to recover the watch. Why not? She knew the way to the spot where it had been dropped—knew the way perfectly. Ridley had dashed away from that place at top speed. Indeed, if he was still in the basin he would not likely be anywhere near the place where his friends had been captured.

The girl was viewing the problem quite calmly. Should she risk continuing what she had begun? or should she retreat without accomplishing anything? It needed some courage to decide as Oriole did decide, after all.

"There's nothing to be afraid of in the daytime," thought Oriole.

She repeated this to herself a score of times. There might be other bears in the foothills besides the one George Belden had killed; but Oriole knew

now that bruin was a timid beast—more timid, indeed, than the trout she and Teddy had caught.

It was true, however, that the girl did not say anything to her friends about her intention. She still rode about the ranges without molestation; and if she could push Molly to the confines of the Langdon's pastures, why could she not climb to the heights by one of the wild paths she knew of?

Therefore, only two days after the twins were brought home in triumph, Oriole saddled Molly soon after their early breakfast and cantered away across the range without saying a word even to Teddy about her destination.

"Of course he'd try to stop me," she told herself, in some glee, feeling that she was being quite independent for once. "They all think that a girl is sort of *tame*."

However that might be, Oriole was confident that she could take care of herself. She knew the way to the heights where Shaffer and Mudd had been captured. And, indeed, she was eager to follow that secret trail again—the path that led behind the curtain of falling water in the little known ravine.

Molly was two hours in bringing her to this spot. The girl was assured of the way, and found no obstruction to her course when she ventured behind the falling water. Molly snorted and shied a little; but Oriole forced the pony on and was soon climbing the wet rocks on the far side of the falling stream.

"I'm sure *that* was no trouble," she told the pony. "You needn't snort so and shake your head. Maybe I won't make you go back the same way. It is shorter, but the path Mr. Belden showed us is safer, I s'pose."

In half an hour Oriole arrived at the rim of the huge basin in which thousands of cattle might have grazed (and it was free grass) had the paths to the height not been so treacherous. Horses might be driven here in the summer, but never steers in any number. Horses are more surefooted than heavy cattle.

There was the big rock beside which Oriole remembered standing with the Langdon twins and looking at her watch. Off to the left was the spot where Shaffer and Mudd had wrestled until the Langdon ranch cowboys made their appearance and captured them. She urged Molly to descend the slope to the boulder.

There she jumped off and began to search in the grass for the lost watch. It had not rained since her former visit, and surely nobody would have found the watch. Who, indeed, would have been in this vicinity since the hour Oriole had last seen the place?

She had been convinced that the escaping Hank Ridley would not linger near this side of the basin. Oriole did not dream that the prospect-hole she had heard mentioned on two occasions by the desperadoes was near this spot where she now stood.

She knelt down and searched to the very roots of the grass for the pretty wrist-watch which she had so much prized. It *must* have been dropped here—or near here. Over yonder was the pool of water where she had washed her hands before mounting again for the journey back to the ranch. She trailed across the meadow to that pool, searching for the dropped trinket all the way.

When she had washed her hands the watch was gone. Of course it was, or she would have carefully removed it. And she knew that she did not take it off her wrist and carelessly lay the watch down.

While she stood marveling beside the pool Molly suddenly snorted, and Oriole turned to see the pony jump aside.

"What *is* the matter with her?" thought the girl. "Can it be a snake?"

Oriole shivered at the thought. Once she had heard the whir of a rattle-snake's warning, and she knew that the sting of the creature was usually deadly. Horses, cattle and sheep, as well as mankind, were fearful of the rattler.

Nevertheless the girl ran toward her mount. She carried her quirt in readiness. If there was a snake coiled there she meant to strike at it with the whip. Teddy had often told her what to do when she saw one of the reptiles.

But she saw nothing on the ground to frighten the pony. Indeed, Molly was looking up, not down, and backing away from the huge boulder that was fringed all about its top like an Indian's head-dress with bushes that were rooted in crevices in the rock.

"Goodness!" gasped Oriole suddenly, and she backed away too.

No wonder Molly was frightened! If that was a snake, it was a monster. Down the gray rock was creeping a gyrating body possibly a couple of inches in diameter, and goodness knew how many feet long!

"For the land's sake!" ejaculated Oriole, repeating one of Sadie Brown's favorite expressions. "It isn't a snake. *It's a rope.*"

And that is exactly what it was. Down from the summit of the boulder, through the fringe of bushes which surrounded its bald top, was being lowered a strong rope. Of course, there was little mysterious about it—even to Oriole's mind.

There was somebody up there letting down the rope. That the hidden summit of the huge rock made an excellent hiding place there could be no doubt. The girl jumped to the most natural conclusion without any hesitation.

"It's that Ridley!" she whispered. "That is where he hid the rope from Mudd and Shaffer! And he's dared come back to this side of the basin to get it. Oh, dear! if somebody was only here—even Teddy! What shall I do?"

There was still time for the girl to get away without Ridley being aware of her presence. But she could never ride to the ranch house for help, and bring a party here before the outlaw got away with the rope. No, indeed!

"He is going right to that prospect-hole to get the chest of silver, that is what he is going to do!" she decided. "And I can't stop him. Oh! I don't dare let him know I have spied on him."

She seized Molly's reins and hurried the pony to the nearest thicket that offered shelter for both her and the pony. From this spot she peered out at the descending rope. It coiled itself roughly at the foot of the rock—almost on the spot where Oriole had hoped to find her wrist watch.

"And maybe that mean old Ridley will find my watch," she thought anxiously. "Then I'll never see it again."

But now her interest in the watch was less than that she felt in the rope and its manipulator. For in a very few moments she saw that her suspicions were correct. It was Hank Ridley who had lowered the rope from the crown of the boulder.

He appeared between the low brush hedge up there, and allowed the end of the rope to fall. Then, backing around, he came down the boulder with great care. It was no easy descent.

Oriole wished she had some means of holding him prisoner up there. But there was no possibility of her doing that. She had no weapon with which to frighten Ridley. And, even if she had had a pistol, what would the outlaw be doing with his own firearm which she could very plainly see was in its holster at the back of his belt?

She wondered, too, where the rascal had left his horse. And where was the prospect-hole to which she believed the outlaw would take the long rope he had now secured?

"But I mean to find that out," thought Oriole with confidence. "I don't care how far it is away."

Ridley scrambled finally to the ground. From a clump of bushes he picked up his hat and coat. Then he coiled the heavy rope into a neat skein, tying it about the middle. When he shouldered it the rope dragged on the ground, and it seemed about all that he could carry.

"How will he ever make his horse carry such a weight?" murmured the girl, who knew something of the nature of cow ponies by this time. They do not like to be made beasts of burden. "I just wonder if that old mine *is* so very far away. That's where he is going, for sure."

Ridley started away toward the north. He did not seem, after all, to be looking for his horse. Oriole tied Molly in the scrub patch and followed Ridley. She could do this safely, for the outlaw would not be likely to look over his shoulder while he was dragging that heavy rope.

He entered a piece of wood that covered the easterly slope of the basin. When he was out of sight Oriole ran forward and entered the covert at the same place.

The dragged coil of rope made a plain trail for the girl to follow. In five minutes she came to a tiny clearing where the sod had been scraped off down to the subsoil of coarse sand and gravel. There were great mounds, too, of soil and splintered rocks that, she saw at once, had been brought out of a shaft that gaped in the middle of the patch of open.

The old prospect-hole!

Of course, she now understood, the shaft would be near by. That was why Shaffer was lurking in the vicinity when Ridley and Mudd had appeared with the Langdon twins. Ridley would not have hidden the rope far away from the old mine, for it was too heavy to carry.

And now what was the man about to do? The troubled Oriole watched anxiously, wondering all the time if she might not do something to make it impossible for him to recover the treasure which she believed was hidden in the bottom of the deep well.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE PROMISE OF THE FUTURE

Oriole was actually in a situation of extreme danger, as well as in uncertainty of mind. If Hank Ridley found that she was spying on him the girl knew quite well that the desperado would punish her. He was a bad man, and he had shown by his attempt to abduct the Langdon twins that he feared neither the law nor the ranchmen of the vicinity.

Oriole was quite sure that she knew why the fellow was such a menace to society and why he was taking such chances with the law. She believed, as did Teddy Ford, that Ridley and his gang had robbed Harvey Langdon of the chest of silver and that Ridley was willing to take almost any chance to get the silver out of the country. It was very valuable, and, now that his companions had been captured, what was to prevent Ridley from getting all the benefit of the robbery of the ranch house for himself?

This was enough. Oriole had not to go beyond these facts to be sure that the man was desperate and that she was in peril.

She might have crept back through the wood, got her pony, and ridden away at once. She could reach the ranch before nightfall if she had any kind of luck at all. But, so doing, she knew she would be unable to get anybody to come up from the ranch until the next morning.

"Meanwhile," the girl told herself with good sense, "this fellow will drag out the treasure chest and hide it somewhere else, or else get clear away with it. Maybe he has got pack mules, or something, waiting for him. No! I just can't leave here till I know what he does with Mr. Langdon's silver plate."

Being quite unsuspecting of her watchfulness, or of being spied upon at all, Ridley proceeded to let the rope down into the shaft. Near by were the rotted timbers of an arrangement by which the original miners here had raised the dirt and rocks excavated in the prospect-hole. But across the mouth of the hole was now a comparatively green timber—one quite

probably set here by Ridley and his mates the fall before. Ridley tied the end of the rope securely to this timber.

Although the rope was not knotted for hand- and foot-holds, Ridley seemed quite assured of his job when he let himself over the edge of the shaft. He did not even remove his boots, but braced his feet against the sides of the well as he went down.

The timber creaked more and more as he descended. Oriole waited and watched—desiring to go and peer down into the depths, and yet not daring to. At least, she did not dare until the timber stopped creaking and the rope gyrating.

"He's down there!" murmured the girl. "Oh! what shall I do now?"

Carefully she crept from the brush and across the opening to the edge of the deep well. She was wise enough not to thrust her head over the edge in a way to allow Ridley to observe her from below. Indeed, she was so much afraid of the man that at first she did not realize that he was quite in her power.

She was sure Ridley would attach the chest of silver (if it was down there) to the end of the rope. Then he would climb up and draw the chest up after him.

"And not a thing can I do then to stop him!" murmured Oriole Putnam. "If I could only keep him here till I hurried home and told Mr. Langdon and Teddy——"

"Why! that's exactly what I *can* do," and she uttered this last statement of fact aloud.

Indeed, she was so suddenly positive of her security that she almost laughed. She had seen Ridley tie the rope to the strong timber; and while it was a knot that would not slip, it was one that she could easily untie!

When she saw this to be the fact she made no delay, but went at the knot with nimble fingers. Almost instantly a hollow-sounding voice came from the bottom of the hole:

"Hey! What's doing up there? Get away from that rope!"

A pistol shot followed, and the bullet buried itself in the timber. Oriole screamed and jumped back. She was dreadfully frightened; but the knot was only half untied. Should she let the rope alone—let Ridley climb up by it and escape?

The rope began to shake again. The frightened girl knew that the outlaw was about to climb up.

But, if he was coming up the rope, he could not use his pistol! The thought inspired her with sudden courage. She sprang forward again and fumbled at the knot.

Again the man shouted from the bottom of the hole. His threats did not achieve their purpose this time, for Oriole succeeded in loosening the rope. She let it slip through her fingers, and the yell that came up from Ridley assured her that the coils had fallen upon him with all their weight.

"There!" gasped Oriole, feeling a confidence and delight that she had not known before, "I have got that bad man just where he ought to be. He can't get out, and he can't get the stolen silver out—if it *is* down there. Now I guess I'll ride home and tell them all what I've done."

Oriole may have other and quite as thrilling adventures as this here narrated; for we expect to meet her again in a third volume of this series entitled, "When Oriole Went to Boarding School." Nevertheless, she is not likely to feel any greater satisfaction over any accomplishment than she did when she rode the tired Molly to the corral gate that evening.

"Where you been all day, Oriole Putnam?" demanded Teddy, running up to unsaddle the pony. "I bet you'll get it from Harvey Langdon. He and Brownie don't think you ought to be chasing all over the turnip-patch alone."

"They aren't going to scold me this time," declared Oriole gleefully. "Wait till you hear what I've done."

And she was right in this premise. Instead of being scolded she was highly praised by the ranchman and the nurse—not to say everybody else about the ranch house. The men were as enthusiastic over Oriole's feat in capturing Hank Ridley as Teddy was himself.

"And as for that silly George Belden," Nurse Brown said, with apparent disapproval, "he'd be willing to adopt Oriole right now—if I'd let him."

It was thus that the brusque Miss Brown let it be known that the foreman had finally been accepted. Later the twins and Teddy and Oriole were all guests at the wedding of the nurse and Belden.

Before this happened, however, a posse rode to the basin up by the Three Sisters and rescued Hank Ridley from the prospect-hole. In addition, Teddy Ford was lowered into the hole and found there, wrapped in an old horse-blanket, the chest of table-silver that had been stolen the autumn before from the Langdon ranch. This recovery not only proved the case against Ridley and his mates, but it disproved the accusation that had hung over Teddy for so long.

"That boy has proved his worth around here anyway," Mr. Langdon said. "I shall be glad to do something for him, and for more reasons than one. It is not alone my duty, but it will be a pleasure to make it possible for Teddy to have a fair chance in the world."

Oriole knew that he would not forget this promise, and even Teddy agreed that Harvey Langdon was "lots better than I thought he was."

There was another thing—a most wonderful thing—that came into Oriole Putnam's life about this time. Mr. Langdon had not forgotten his decision to put the case of the *Ellerton* trading vessel into the hands of a competent person at San Francisco.

A lawyer's letter came from that city one summer day stating that the ship from the South Seas had arrived, and that she brought a passenger—a lady whom the long sea voyage and the care of the captain's wife had brought back to health almost from the verge of the grave.

Mrs. Putnam, having seen her husband drowned and believing her little daughter had shared a similar fate, had been quite a helpless invalid in the cabin of the *Ellerton* for months. Mrs. Grimsby, the captain's wife, had nursed her as though the unfortunate woman were her own sister. It was so long after the sinking of the *Helvetia* before the *Ellerton* had touched at even a semi-civilized port that her master did not consider it of any moment to send word to Europe or America of the salvation of a single passenger from the sunken vessel.

Joy never kills, it is said; and perhaps that is so. At least the message sent to Mrs. Putnam from the Montana ranch was not likely to injure the health of Oriole's mother. Two days after the receipt of the lawyer's letter of explanation a telegram came for Oriole, saying:

"Leave by overland special to-day for the ranch. Meet me at Timmins Station.—Mother."

Oriole laughed and cried alternately at the news. It was dreadful to know that she would never see her father again. But the thought that her mother was coming—that dear mother who had always been her constant companion in years past—filled her heart with a joy that nothing could dim.

"Poor, poor papa!" she murmured. "I'll surely miss him. But if one of them had to—to go I'm glad it wasn't mamma."

Oriole could scarcely wait for the hour to arrive when she should start on Molly for the train. The twins could not go on such a long drive; but Teddy was to accompany her. And when the girl rode out of the home acres and took the trail to the railroad everybody about the place waved or shouted their good wishes—even Ching Foo from the door of his kitchen.

"Gee! but you are a popular girl, Oriole," said Teddy, "folks like you around here just about as they did back East, don't they?"

"Folks are awfully good to me," returned the girl, her eyes shining. "And everything always turns out good for me, too. Just think! I'm going to see my mother again. I'm going to see *my mother!*"

"Ye-es," chuckled Teddy suddenly. "But you never did find your wrist-watch."

"That's so. But I don't care. Mr. Langdon has promised me another one just like it," answered Oriole with a bright smile.

THE END

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[Transcriber's Note: Inconsistent hyphenation left as printed.]

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