

Vandercook Margaret

The Ranch Girls in Europe



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CHAPTER I

BIRDS OF PASSAGE

"IT seems incredible, girls, but I simply can't find her."

The young woman who made this remark was standing on the deck of an out-going ocean steamer. The great boat was ploughing its way through the Ambrose channel, leaving the long nose of Sandy Hook a thin line of white on one side. Fading away into the background like dim gray ghosts were the giant towers of New York City. The speaker was wearing a long, gray traveling coat with a blue lining, and a felt hat of the same colors rested close against her ash-brown hair.

Immediately three girls turned to face her. The minute before they had been leaning against the ship's railing. One of them revealed a suspicion of tears in her curiously dark eyes; the second had her lips shut unnecessarily tight to hide her emotion; while the third showed only rejoicing.

"Dear me, Ruth Drew," this girl now began in mock tragic tones, "you don't suppose that our infant has fallen overboard already, do you? Or do you suspect some one of having run

away with her? At this present moment I presume that Frieda Ralston is in our stateroom. But it is possible that she is engaged in making the acquaintance of some one on shipboard whom she has decided she is crazy to know. The most probable supposition, however, is that she is trying to persuade a steward to give her something to eat. For over an hour ago she informed me that she was starving to death and wished to open one of her boxes of candy before leaving the New York pier. She is sure to turn up in a moment or so. Do please stay here with us and help Jack and Olive mourn. They are shedding tears over having to say farewell to the 'Stars and Stripes,' and incidentally to our best-beloved friends. But I can't even show a polite amount of emotion I am so happy over starting off on our trip at last."

Here Jean Bruce, one of the four Ranch girls from the Rainbow Lodge, abruptly ceased talking. She had been noticing for the past few minutes that a stranger had been listening to her conversation with a kind of well-bred amusement. And as she happened to be the person whom Jean had most admired since coming aboard the Martha Washington, it seeming annoying to be the subject of her smiles. However, Jean should not have been offended, for her sallies had awakened the first animation in the young woman's face since the hour of their sailing. Until recently she had been standing in a listless attitude within a few feet of the Ranch girls, apparently uninterested in anything in the world. In her slender arms she carried what looked like an entire tree of American Beauty roses. And now and then she had pressed

her face against them. The traveler's costume had first attracted Jean's attention – it was so beautiful and fashionable. The coat was of dull blue silk; the small hat emphasized the classic outline of the young woman's haughtily poised head with its crown of pale-gold hair, and at a respectful distance a maid and a courier waited in attendance upon her.

Jack and Olive, even in the midst of their absorption, had been brought to admit that the stranger's appearance was fascinating. While to Jean's more romantic fancy she suggested no less a heroine than the Princess Flavia in "The Prisoner of Zenda."

In the moment of Jean's silence Jacqueline Ralston drew their chaperon's arm through hers, giving it a reproachful squeeze.

"If you are going to begin worrying over us, Ruth, in the very first hour of what Aunt Ellen called 'Our tower,' whatever is to become of you before we are through? I am sure Frieda is all right. And this time Jean is telling the truth. Olive and I have been feeling low in our minds over saying good-bye to Jim and Ralph and Miss Winthrop and Peter and Jessica and a few others. But just the same we are as happy over the prospect of our trip as Jean Bruce is, every single bit!"

During this moment Ruth had again allowed herself to be silenced, but now she moved determinedly back from Jacqueline's detaining grasp.

"I don't think you girls understand the situation," Ruth argued a trifle impatiently. "Of course I have already searched for Frieda in every probable place on the ship and have had the

stewardess helping me. She simply is not to be found! I don't like Frieda's running off from the rest of us in this fashion and I don't understand it. Where did you leave her, Jean, when you came on board the second time after going ashore for another farewell to Mr. Colter? I was so busy having our steamer trunks put into our staterooms that I could not join you." And for an instant, remembering that there were other reasons why she did not wish to be present at this final parting with Jim Colter, Ruth Drew hesitated and flushed. Would her New England conscience never allow her to be satisfied with telling only half the truth?

But Jean, forgetting the presence of her embarrassing audience, shook her head in protest.

"Frieda didn't come on board with me. I came on alone. Why, Jim and Ralph had fairly to shove me up the gang-plank before the last 'all aboard' was sung out! Frieda came on with Jack and Olive several minutes before. That is, I thought so. Surely you can't mean – "

In this same instant Olive Van Mater's arm slipped around Jacqueline Ralston's waist. For although almost a year had passed since Jack's recovery from her long illness and operation, she was not yet entirely strong. Frequently she had to use a cane in walking. Today, however, she had insisted that she was able to get along without it. So Olive feared that this sudden and surprising news of her little sister might prove too much for her. It was characteristic of the two friends' relations that Olive's first thought in this crisis was not so much for Frieda as for Jack.

Nevertheless her friend did not yet require her aid. Although at Jean's surprising words Jacqueline Ralston had turned pale, she was perhaps not more so than Ruth and the other two girls. However, she was evidently doing her best to hold on to her self-control and not to allow the moment's bewilderment and fright to overwhelm her.

"No, Frieda did not come on the ship with us the second time, Ruth," she explained, turning quietly toward their chaperon. "But please do not let us be alarmed. She must have come aboard by herself beforehand. For I can remember hearing her say her last good-bye to Jim while I was still talking to Peter. Frieda is nearly seventeen; why, it is ridiculous to suppose that she would be so foolish as to let the steamer sail off without her! Besides, wasn't Jim right there! And isn't he always possessed of the idea that we will be late for things and that unknown catastrophes will overtake us? If necessary he would have put Frieda on board by main force. So let's go find her."

Very quickly, then, the little party of four turned from their former places. And Jean's face, which had been the gayest in the group at the beginning of this conversation, was now the most terrified.

"If Frieda Ralston isn't on board the Martha Washington with us, she most certainly is not on land with any of our friends," Jean insisted, "for I know that Frieda left them on the pier before I did. So if she isn't on this ship something dreadful must have happened to her; some one must have stolen her away. Oh, what

on earth shall we do?"

Jean was following the others in such a complete state of panic that she hardly knew what she was saying. So at first she scarcely heard the low voice sounding close to her ears. Only one thought occupied her mind. Frieda was lost before they had fairly started on their journey. If she could not be found on the ship, what were they to do? Of course they could send Marconigrams back to Jim Colter and Ralph Merrit, who had come all the way from the ranch to New York City to say farewell to them. But if Frieda should happen not to be with them or with any of their other friends, must there not be days and days of horrible waiting and anxiety before they could return home? Each moment the great steamer was carrying them farther and farther away from the United States and not all the gold in the Rainbow Mine could persuade her to alter her course or to stop until they reached Gibraltar.

The voice spoke again. Evidently its owner must have pursued Ruth and the three girls.

"I am afraid you are in some difficulty. If my maid or courier can be of any service to you I shall be most happy. Evidently you have not crossed before."

This final suggestion, even in the midst of her anxiety, made Jean flush uncomfortably. Immediately she stopped and turned around, recognizing the young woman who had previously both attracted and annoyed her. Something in Jean's expression must have betrayed her irritation, for the stranger smiled again.

"I hope I haven't offended you," she apologized. "I only wished to be useful. You *are* in trouble, so you must let me try to serve you."

In their overwhelming anxiety Ruth, Olive and Jack had continued on the way to their staterooms, leaving Jean to answer for all of them. Now, to her chagrin, the tears began overflowing her eyes like a frightened baby's.

And only a few moments before had she not secretly hoped to make a favorable impression upon this most interesting of their fellow voyagers?

Jean had believed that she was looking unusually well herself. For her blue silk dress with its touches of red embroidery, her blue chinchilla coat with its scarlet lining and her hat with the single red wing in it had been considered the most effective of the Ranch party's going-away costumes.

So why should she be making herself so ridiculous before a total stranger?

Jean did not realize that the emotion of parting with her friends and of leaving her own country had been greater than she cared to admit even to herself. Then this sudden overwhelming worry about Frieda had left her nerves completely unstrung.

Therefore she was extremely grateful when the older woman led her to a more secluded part of the promenade deck. New York was now out of sight, and most of the passengers were hurrying off to their rooms. Jean and her companion were almost entirely alone.

"We – we have lost our little sister," the young girl began incoherently. "Or at least we have been unable to find her and do not feel altogether sure that she came aboard with the rest of us. Oh, I realize that this must sound absurd and impossible to you. It does to all of us. But what can have become of her?"

With a slight but imperious nod of her head, which, even in her excitement, Jean did not fail to observe, her new acquaintance summoned her courier. And although she spoke to him in Italian the girl was able to understand. The man was told to await their return. Then if ordered he was to see that the ship was thoroughly searched for a missing passenger without unnecessary notoriety.

A little later the young woman moved away with Jean. "Your sister is probably in her own stateroom by this time. However, if she is not and is on the ship we shall find her in a few moments." Her tone was that of absolute authority, as though the great vessel were her private yacht. Jean wondered how any woman not more than twenty-eight could give such an impression of poise and experience.

Notwithstanding Frieda had not yet been discovered in any one of the staterooms. She had been expected to occupy a room with Jean. Olive and Jack were to be together and Ruth to sleep alone. However, in Ruth's stateroom, which the girls had chosen as being specially attractive, Jean and her new friend found Jacqueline Ralston waiting alone.

"I have promised to remain here while Miss Drew and Olive have gone to speak to the proper authorities," Jack explained,

with the curious self-control which she was almost always able to summon under special strain. "We hope my sister has simply mistaken her stateroom and may come to us at any moment. But if you will be so kind as to have your man assist us in our search, why we shall be deeply grateful. You see, we are rather too frightened to be sensible, besides being inexperienced travelers. And Frieda is so much the younger!" Here, with a break in her self-command, Jack dropped unexpectedly into the nearest chair. She had forgotten even to ask their visitor to be seated, nor did she have the faintest idea of her name, nor the reason for her interest in their predicament.

An hour later and the Martha Washington had been thoroughly and quietly searched for the missing Frieda Ralston. Yet there appeared to be absolutely no trace of her. Of course her baggage had been brought aboard the ship with the other girls'. Even her silver toilet bag, Jim's parting gift, was safely stored in her stateroom. Frieda had been last seen ashore with nothing in her hands except a small gold link purse.

Finally when the news reached the Ranch party that Frieda was positively not to be found on the steamer, for the first time in her career Ruth Drew collapsed.

Not that she was more wretched than the girls over Frieda's disappearance, but because of her greater sense of responsibility. For almost a year, ever since their return from boarding school to the Rainbow Ranch, Ruth had been separated from the Ranch girls and living quietly in her old home in Vermont. In that

time she had never heard from Jim Colter nor of him, except what the girls had written in their letters. Their meeting in New York had been entirely formal and without a word of private conversation. Yet now it was the thought of Jim's sorrow and indignation, should anything have happened to his baby, Frieda, that Ruth found the hardest thing she had to bear. For had she not once acted as Jim Colter's upright judge? What now must be his judgment of her?

Several hours of this interminable afternoon were spent by Jack and Olive waiting in the ship's office for answers to their Marconigrams. But, when the answers finally did arrive, the news was only discouraging: "Frieda had not been seen by either Jim or Ralph or by any one of their acquaintances since the sailing of the Martha Washington."

Yet, notwithstanding the many hours of searching and distress, Jean's new friend had never deserted them. She had not even gone to her own room to remove her coat and hat. Indeed, her whole time had been spent in encouraging Ruth, in making suggestions to the three girls, and in having her maid and man do whatever was necessary toward assisting them. Still no one of the Ranch party even knew her name.

Twilight had come and the lights were shining brilliantly everywhere over the big ship. A fog horn had sounded and suddenly Jean felt that she could bear the suspense no longer. She must break down, yet no one of the others must see or hear her. Slipping out into a dark passageway, she hid herself and cried for

half an hour. Then making up her mind that since nothing more could be done toward finding Frieda, she might at least devote herself to comforting Ruth, she walked quietly back into Ruth's stateroom. There she found their new friend just in the act of leaving.

"You will be better by yourselves for a little while," she was saying, holding Jack's hand in one of her own and Olive's in the other, while looking sympathetically at Ruth. "My man will see that dinner is served in your room, and by and by I will come again to say good-night. You must not lose courage. The American girl never loses courage or ceases to fight while there is still work to be done."

Having for the moment forgotten herself and her own sorrow, Jean became more aware of their new acquaintance's unusual sympathy and kindness.

"You have been wonderfully good to us," she began chokingly, "and perhaps at some time we may be able to show you our great appreciation. But tonight, tonight – " and Jean could get no further. Then, summoning more strength of character, she continued, "I wonder if you would mind telling us your name? You must already know most of our history, as we have talked so much of ourselves in speaking of Frieda."

For a moment Jean's friend appeared to be hesitating. Perhaps she did not wish to talk of herself, for she was now looking as weary as Ruth and the Ranch girls.

"You must not think I am not a fellow countrywoman when

I tell you my name," she replied slowly, and with the slightly foreign accent which the girls had neglected to notice in their distress. "I was once a western girl myself, oh, many years ago, in a little mining town. So I was able to recognize you as soon as I saw and heard you talking. Now I am an Italian, however, or at least my husband is. My name is Beatrice, the Princess Beatrice Colonna."

Jean actually gasped out loud. Here she had been talking to a real live Princess without knowing it, when in her most romantic moments she had only conceived of a literary one.

If they had not been in such great trouble over Frieda, how thrilling this meeting would have seemed! Yet, except for their sorrow, they might never have spoken to the Princess. And now here she was standing right in their midst talking just like any one else!

A moment later and she had vanished with these parting words:

"Promise me not to be too unhappy while I am gone. And perhaps when I return we may have devised some better scheme for finding your little Frieda."

CHAPTER II

SALVE!

FOR several moments after the Princess' withdrawal no one moved or spoke in Ruth Drew's stateroom. Ruth was lying on her berth, almost in a state of prostration, with Jean kneeling on the floor by her, resting her head upon the same pillow. On the divan Olive and Jack sat close together, Olive trying her best to think of some new consolation to offer her friend. For although the four Ranch girls loved one another with almost equal affection, after all Jack and Frieda were own sisters.

For the past year the girls and Ruth had been planning this trip to Europe. When the school year at Miss Winthrop's had closed and Jack had concluded her trying experience at the New York hospital, the girls, escorted by Jim Colter, had gone home to the Rainbow Ranch. In the autumn they then intended to join Ruth again in the east and set sail. However, when the fall came around, Jack was not so well, affairs at the mine were in a kind of a tangle and Olive's grandmother desired her to spend another school term at Primrose Hall. So the European journey had been postponed until the following spring. Now it was early March and the Rainbow Ranch party was starting forth upon the Mediterranean trip. Their plan had been to stop over for a day in Gibraltar and afterwards to see Italy thoroughly before entering

any other country.

However, on this, their first evening at sea, when they had anticipated so much happiness, there was but one question and one desire in the hearts of Ruth, Jack, Olive and Jean.

How could they bear the ten unendurable days before their ship reached Gibraltar and the second ten of their return journey to New York?

For Ruth and the girls had finally concluded that Frieda had never sailed on the Martha Washington. Of course a few passengers had been discovered who claimed to have seen a young girl answering Frieda's description. However, no one would swear to it. And even if Frieda had fallen overboard, surely some one would have seen or heard her. Her disappearance had taken place among a crowd of apparently well-dressed and well-behaved people. It hardly seemed possible that she could have been kidnapped. Nevertheless the steerage had been quietly investigated without the slightest clue having been established.

It was the old story that was once more repeating itself. Nothing seems more improbable than that any one whom we know and love can suddenly vanish without leaving a trace of his or her whereabouts. Yet when this actually does take place, no one has a sensible suggestion to make. All is confusion, uncertainty and at last despair.

However, neither Ruth nor any one of the three Ranch girls were making any noise, so that they suddenly became aware of a movement down the short hall leading to Ruth's room. And then

followed a knock at the door.

Ruth turned over, facing the wall. "The steward is bringing our dinner. Do please do your best to eat something, girls, for we shall need all our strength," she pleaded.

Jacqueline shook her head. "Not tonight. If you will let me get away to myself for a few hours I shall be stronger by tomorrow."

For the first time there was something in Jack's voice that brought her chaperon, cousin and friend to a quick realization of their own weakness. For, although Jack's right to sorrow was certainly greater than theirs, until now, had she not been the strongest and most hopeful of them all? And this when two long years of illness had left her far from strong. Possibly through suffering she had learned a finer self-control.

As she moved toward the closed door with her face white as a sheet, suddenly Jean flung herself in her cousin's path.

"Don't go until you have tried eating something," she begged. "We can't bear to have you ill again besides our anxiety about Frieda."

Jean flung open the stateroom door, but stumbled back and was actually caught by Jack.

For there on their threshold stood the Princess, holding by the hand a young girl with a quantity of light hair tumbled loosely about a flushed face. Her blue eyes with their long lashes were looking indescribably sleepy and injured and in her other hand she held a small, gold-linked purse.

Jean sank down on the floor as Jack released her hold on

her. Ruth started up with a cry; Olive rose quickly to her feet, only to drop back into her old place again. Therefore it was Jack who reached the figures at the door first. And there her long-controlled self-restraint gave way, as she flung her arms about the newcomer's neck.

"Oh, Frieda, Frieda Ralston," she sobbed. "Where have you been and what has happened to you? Who could have kept you away from us for all these hours. Hours – why you must have been away years!"

But Frieda had now come into the stateroom, with the Princess following her. And though she had kissed Jack dutifully and affectionately enough, she gazed with astonishment and some resentment from one white face to the other.

"I – I haven't been anywhere," she protested. "At least, I have just been asleep."

"Asleep!" Jean whispered the single word over several times. "Asleep!" Yet certainly everything in Frieda's appearance suggested this to be the truth. Her face was as calm and untroubled as a big wax doll's, her color and eyes as serene.

"But how, when, where?" Ruth Drew inquired, struggling between the hysterical desire to burst into laughter and tears at the same moment.

"I made a mistake in our stateroom," Frieda explained with that offended and yet apologetic air which the other girls knew so well. "You see, I came on the ship a little after Olive and Jack did and saw them standing together waving to people. I knew they

would never stop until we got clear out of sight of New York. And I – I was so dreadfully tired! You remember we had been out to the theater two nights in succession and had just had the long trip from Wyoming to New York; so I thought I would lie down for a few minutes' rest. I couldn't find Ruth in our stateroom or in hers, but I supposed that she had gone up on deck. So I took off my hat and coat and lay down – and – that's all there is to it."

Olive started the laughter. The nervous tension of the past few hours had been too great for everybody. Now Frieda's voice, her manner, her explanation, had turned what had seemed a tragedy but a few minutes before into a ridiculous farce.

"Would you mind telling me, Frieda," (Olive struggled to be as serious as Frieda might consider proper), "how you could find a stateroom in which you could sleep for five or six hours undisturbed, when every single room, every spot aboard this big ship has been ransacked to find you?"

But here Jean's Princess, who had not spoken before, laughed gaily.

"Please, this is where I come in. Isn't that the American slang?" she queried. "I found Goldilocks asleep in my bed just as the little bear did in the old fairy story. Remember, my stateroom is the only one that has never been investigated, since I have spent the entire time with you. It is true that my maid and courier have been into my sitting room, which adjoins my bedroom, several times. But they have also been too worried over your loss even to have unpacked my trunks. Imagine what an odd sensation it

was for me to discover two big, blue eyes staring at me from my very own pillow!"

And the Princess laughed as naturally and cheerfully as an ordinary American girl.

"I wasn't asleep *then!*" Frieda defended. Catching the expression of her cousin Jean Bruce's face, she realized that she would never hear the last of this escapade.

"Then why, baby mine, when you came back from dreamland did you not struggle into the hall and find out what had become of your family?" Jean demanded.

"Because I was cross," Frieda whispered. "You see, I thought it hateful of you to have let me stay such a long time by myself. And I meant never to get up until you came and found me, even if I starved!"

"And speaking of starving!" Jean exclaimed, clasping her hands together in a dramatic fashion and gazing at Frieda who now appeared as hungry as she had been sleepy a few moments before.

But although Ruth and the three Ranch girls had done their best to make her remain so, Frieda was not a baby. She turned to their new-found acquaintance. Something in her sister's face showed at least a part of the strain which her family had been under.

"I am afraid I hardly know how to thank you, Mrs. – Miss –" she hesitated.

"She isn't a Miss or a Mrs. either; she is a Princess!" Jean

whispered, supposing that no one else could overhear her. However, seeing Frieda shake her head with indignation over her cousin's continued teasing, the four women, including the Princess, laughed in chorus.

"I am a Princess, really, Frieda, but my title does not mean anything serious in Italy. And I hope you may not like me any the less well for it."

The girls noticed that the Princess had spoken as informally to Frieda as though she were one of them, but now as she turned toward Ruth again her manner changed.

"For the second time let me bid you good-night and offer my congratulations," she said.

And there again was the coldness, the hauteur and the superiority, which Jean had resented before their misfortune had awakened the young woman's sympathy.

In the midst of a murmur of thanks from every one else in the room, Jean quietly opened the door for their visitor. But it was hardly possible for the Princess successfully to pass two large men bearing enormous trays of dishes in their outstretched arms.

"Dinner!" Jean murmured soulfully, forgetting her new-found dignity.

And the Princess' tired-looking, big blue eyes were immediately turned wistfully toward the food.

"I am dreadfully hungry too," she announced, speaking like a girl again. "I wonder if you would let me have some of your dinner. You see, it is too late to dress now and I shall be all alone."

Five voices answered and several hands reached forward to draw their guest down into the most comfortable chair. A little later the table was laid with a bunch of roses, which Ruth had received anonymously, to serve as the centerpiece. And seated between Jean and Frieda was a real live Princess; when in their fondest dreams the Ranch girls had only hoped to see one drive past some day in a coach and four.

CHAPTER III

NEW ACQUAINTANCES

AMBITION in this world is often gratified in a most unexpected fashion, and so it happened with Frieda Ralston!

For weeks before leaving the Rainbow Ranch she had discussed with Jim, with Ralph Merrit, who was still engineer at the mine, and with her sister Jack, whether or not they believed she would be able to make agreeable acquaintances aboard ship or during the months of their travel on the other side. For Frieda was certain that she should soon grow weary with nothing to entertain her but miles of salt water, hundreds of art galleries, thousands of pictures and statues. It was all very well for Jack and Olive to enthuse over these possibilities and for Jean to pretend to feel the same way. She wanted *people* for her diversion and hoped to be able to make a few friends in the course of their ocean crossing. Though how this was to be accomplished without a single introduction Frieda did not know. However, on the morning of the second day of their voyage the youngest Ranch girl made the discovery.

In a state of blissful unconsciousness and without reflecting on the events of the day before, she started down to breakfast with Jean and Olive. Jack and Ruth were a little too weary to care about making early appearances.

The morning was a perfect one, with a smooth sea, and the dining room was crowded with passengers. One would hardly have expected that the quiet appearance of three young girls could have attracted any special attention. For a few moments they waited for the head steward to be found, and were then led to their seats at the First Officer's table. It was all very quickly done, yet Jean and Olive were distinctly aware that a subdued murmur followed them; then that an entirely unnecessarily large number of heads were turned in their direction. Of course Frieda noticed this, too, but she merely presumed that their fellow travelers were curious and had not the good manners that they should have had. The idea that she or Jean or Olive could be exciting any particular attention never occurred to her at first, so deeply did the scene hold her attention.

Then, without warning, something took place which made Frieda flush and tremble. Except that she was holding a *ménu* card in her hand at the moment the tears would have shown in her eyes.

Seated just across the table opposite her was a large, middle-aged woman, dressed in black and wearing a quantity of handsome jewelry. She stared hard at Frieda for the first few moments after her arrival. Then, turning to the young fellow who sat next her, she announced in a loud enough voice to be heard from one end of the table to the other, "It was the plump, yellow-haired one, wasn't it, created such a stir? Seems like it ain't possible she could have been asleep in some one's stateroom.

Much more likely she was in some kind of mischief! I am going to ask her what she *really* was doing?" Then she leaned half-way across the cloth and, except for the young man's agonized protest, most assuredly would have asked her question of Frieda.

But in an instant Jean grasped the situation. She was quicker than any of the other girls to understand social matters, and now realized that something must be said and done at once. Not only must she cover up the awkwardness of the present moment, but save Frieda from further discussion later on. They had believed that their search yesterday had been conducted quietly, and yet questions must have been asked of many passengers aboard and the whole business of the lost girl thoroughly gone into. Frieda herself should speak now and right the whole matter. Of course this would have been the better way, Jean thought. And yet one glance at Frieda showed this possibility hopeless. Should the strange woman ask her a single question or say another word concerning her escapade, it was apparent that the youngest of the Ranch girls would burst into tears before the many strangers at the breakfast table!

Frieda was not feeling very well. Perhaps because she had slept so long in the afternoon, or, perhaps, for more sentimental reasons she had lain awake several hours during the night past worrying over the events of the afternoon. Not that she dreamed then that she might be talked about aboard ship, but because she was sorry for the girls' and Ruth's anxiety. Yet evidently persons had been commenting upon her! Moreover, had she not just

been called plump before everybody at their table? Frieda was extremely sensitive on this subject and no one of her family or friends dared mention it. It was because Jack and Olive were both so absurdly thin and because Jean had a remarkably beautiful figure for a girl of eighteen that Frieda might seem a little large in comparison. The real truth was that she had only a soft roundness of outline, which put attractive dimples, and curves in the places where you might have expected angularities.

Therefore, in the pause following the older woman's speech, Jean looked across the table with an air of quiet amusement. Immediately she held the attention of the persons nearest them and at the same time gave the embarrassed young man a reassuring smile.

He was not a young man, however. Jean decided from the weight of her eighteen years of masculine experience that he was a college boy probably in his Freshman year and certainly far more refined in his manner and appearance than his ordinary-looking mother.

"If you were kind enough to be interested in our difficulty of yesterday, I should be glad to explain to you how it had a happy ending," she began in a friendly voice. "I suppose it was foolish for us to have been so frightened."

And then in detail Jean went through the history of the entire occurrence, beginning with their discovery of Frieda's absence, closing with the moment of her appearance, and neglecting nothing to make her story a good one. This in spite of Frieda's hot

blushes and imploring although unuttered requests for silence. In the end, however, every member of the audience laughed, and Frieda determined never to forgive Jean's unkindness, while Jean and Olive were both silently congratulating themselves that any mystery surrounding her proceedings had been so soon and so easily cleared up. They were fully aware that their story would soon be circulated among a number of their fellow passengers.

Yet for a long time afterwards Frieda Ralston would always recall this first breakfast aboard the Martha Washington as one of the most uncomfortable meals of her whole lifetime. More than anything she hated being laughed at. And even the young man, whose mother had started the entire unpleasantness, had the impertinence to forget his own responsibility and to smile and exclaim "Great Scott" over her ability to sleep so long and well in the midst of such great excitement. Later in the meal he attempted smiling at Frieda once or twice, hoping that she might have come in time to regard the situation more humorously. But she had returned his glances with a reproachful coldness that apparently had reduced him to a proper state of silence and humility. One thought, however, upbore Frieda until she was able to withdraw from the dining room. At least, she need never again recognize the presence of the two objectionable persons across the table from her. For not only should she never speak to them, she would not even incline her head in recognition of their existence at meal times, although she had heard that this was a polite custom among even the most exclusive of ocean travelers.

Seated in her steamer chair next her sister Jacqueline half an hour later, with a veil tied close about her little scarlet velour hat, Frieda was dumfounded to observe this same objectionable young man stopping calmly before them.

Looked at closely he had a well-shaped head with almost too heavy a jaw, a bright color, brown eyes and hair that he was vainly trying to train into a correct pompadour. His shoulders were broad and athletic, of a kind the younger Miss Ralston had previously been known to admire.

First the young fellow bowed politely to Jack. Then he turned as directly toward Frieda as though they had already been properly introduced.

"I am awfully sorry my mother made you so uncomfortable this morning," he began bravely, and turned so crimson that Frieda felt her heart relenting.

"Mother is an awfully good sort, but she hasn't been around much and did not guess how you would feel. And – oh, well a fellow can't be expected to apologize for his mother! Only as she asked me to come and talk to you, I am trying to do my best."

Then, answering a nod of invitation from Jack, who had liked his straightforward manner, he sat down in the vacant chair next Frieda and pulling out a box of chocolates from his pocket began to tell her the story of his life. His name was Richard Grant. He and his mother came from Crawford, Indiana, where his father had been a candy manufacturer until his death a few months before. Richard was in his second year at Princeton when his

father had died, so, as his mother felt a trip abroad might help her, he had dropped behind his class for half a year in order to do what she wished.

He seemed so straightforward and so good-natured that by and by Frieda forgot to remain angry. So when he begged her to come and be introduced to his mother she hardly knew how to refuse.

Nevertheless Frieda found her first conclusion had been right. Mrs. Grant was as impossible as she had previously thought her. Could she ever endure the mother's acquaintance for the sake of the son's?

Still, Frieda continued walking the deck with her newest acquaintance until Ruth was obliged to send Olive and Jean to look for her. And a number of persons aboard had been watching the youngest of the Ranch girls with a good deal of pleasure. For Frieda had never looked more attractive than she did in her scarlet steamer coat and cap, with her blue eyes as wide open and as deeply interested in everything about her as a clever baby's and her cheeks, without exaggeration, as deeply pink as a La France rose.

CHAPTER IV

THINGS PRESENT AND THINGS TO COME

THE ensuing week at sea was one of the most delightful in the Ranch girls' lives and in many ways illustrative of their future history.

An ocean steamer filled with passengers is in itself a miniature world, so many different types of people are represented, there is such freedom of association, such a leveling of artificial barriers that often exist on land. Frequently a fellow traveler reveals more of his character and history to some stranger whom he may meet in crossing than ever he has confided to a life-long friend.

Until the present time the four Ranch girls and their chaperon, Ruth Drew, had lived singularly sheltered lives. First brought up almost like boys under the care of their overseer, Jim Colter, three of the girls had known only the few neighbors scattered within riding distance of their thousand-acre ranch. While Olive's acquaintance, owing to her curious childhood, had been even smaller and more primitive. Then had come the year for Jean, Olive and Frieda at Primrose Hall under Miss Katherine Winthrop's charge, when their horizon had broadened, admitting a number of girls and a few young men to be their friends. But this could hardly be called real contact with the world, since always

they were under Miss Winthrop's wise guidance. While as Jack had spent exactly the same length of time at a hospital she had had even less experience with people. The last ten months with three of the girls again at the Rainbow Ranch had meant a return to the same kind of quiet every-day existence, varied only by the interests of the working of the mine. Olive's six months apart from the others had simply been devoted to further study with Miss Winthrop with week-end visits to her grandmother at The Towers.

Then, although Ruth Drew was almost ten years older than any one of the Ranch girls, in many ways she was fully as ignorant of the world. It had never yet occurred to her that there were persons capable of misrepresenting themselves, nor of pretending to be what they were not and using innocent friendships for purposes of their own. Nor had it occurred to her that the reputation of the four girls for having suddenly acquired great wealth might place them in danger.

From the time Ruth had been a little girl she had never had the disposition for making many friends. Always she had been timid and retiring, devoting herself to her father until after his death. Except for the year spent at the Ranch and the winter at the hospital in New York with Jack, Ruth had never known anything outside the narrow circle of a Vermont village life. Not that a village does not furnish almost all there is to learn of human nature, but that she had shut herself in from most of it. The freedom of the wonderful ranch life, the contact and

friendship with Jim Colter, which for a while had looked like something more than friendship, had widened the little Vermont school teacher's horizon. Then had come the break with Jim, and the past winter at home she had shut herself up even more completely. During the many evenings alone in her small cottage there had been plenty of opportunity for Ruth Drew to regret her decision against Jim, but whatever passed in her mind she had kept to herself. Not even to Jacqueline Ralston, who at one time had been her confidante, had she made any confession.

So perhaps from the standpoint of worldly wisdom the Rainbow Ranch party was none too well equipped for a long journey or for the meeting with many different types of people and the making of friendships which might be of grave importance in after years.

And, notwithstanding the fact that Ruth and the four girls were singularly devoted to one another, there was no question but that they were five widely unlike characters, and that their interests must often lie in as many different directions now that their opportunities were to be so much broader.

For a disinterested observer (if ever there is such an one) it would have been difficult at this time in the Ranch girls' lives to have decided which one was the most attractive – beauty and charm are in themselves so much a matter of personal taste. But perhaps to older and more thoughtful persons it was now Jacqueline Ralston who would make the strongest appeal.

Jack was only a few months older than her friend, Olive Van

Mater, less than a year older than her cousin, Jean Bruce, and yet looked a good deal more mature and felt so. This was true, not only because after her father's death she had been in a measure the head of the Rainbow Ranch, but because her year of illness had given her more time for introspection than is allowed most girls of her age. Sometimes she believed that this whole year had been completely lost, and then again came the knowledge that she could have learned certain lessons in no other way. Yet now she was determined to waste no further time, but to get as much as possible out of each passing day and to live fully and completely.

Jacqueline Ralston did not look entirely like the brilliant, vigorous Ranch girl who three years before had ridden alone across the prairie to search for her lost cattle. She had less color in her cheeks, perhaps, except under the pressure of some unusual excitement, but her hair was a deeper bronze, her eyes a clearer gray, and her rather full lips a brighter crimson. There was something about her expression not always easy to understand. The old wilfulness was still there, the old habit of knowing her own mind and wishing to have her own way, but with it a greater power of self-control than most girls of nineteen have – and something else. What this other trait was neither Jack herself nor her friends yet knew. This trip abroad might mean more to her than to any one of the other four girls. In spite of her lameness, which was never apparent except when she was greatly fatigued, Jack was tall – five feet seven inches – and held her shoulders with the erectness of other days. Slender, Jack would always be,

but not thin, for sixteen years of outdoor life had given her too fine a beginning.

In each person's atmosphere or aura, if you prefer to call it so, there is usually a suggestion of some one distinctive quality, some characteristic that shows above all others. With Jacqueline Ralston it was purity. She was straightforward and unafraid, without cowardice and without suspicion. Having once believed in you, Jack would stand by you through thick and thin. More than anything in the world she hated a lie. For some reason she had always been and always would be what for want of a better word is called "a man's woman," meaning that men would understand and sympathize with her point of view and she with theirs.

Olive Van Mater was just the opposite of Jack. Although the story of her strange early life was now fully explained, she would never lose her shyness and look of gentle mystery. Nor would she ever be able to make friends among strangers so readily as the three other girls. Many persons there would always be who would explain her shyness as coldness and a lack of interest. Still she could reveal herself more easily to girls and to women than to men. And although her peculiar beauty and sweetness could not fail to win her admirers because of her sympathy and self-forgetfulness, all the days of her life her own sex would make the strongest appeal to her.

In Jean Bruce the two types were mingled. Jean wanted to attract people. She wanted to make everybody like her and she

always had and always would. It did not matter to her who the people were, whether they were young or old, girls or boys, she simply had the desire to be liked and went about accomplishing it on shipboard just as she had at Primrose Hall and everywhere else. This proved that Jean had the real social gift, but then her talent had never been disputed by any member of her family.

With Frieda Ralston, however, the question of type was at this time not important. She was two years younger not only in years but in a great many other things, and when it did not interfere with her pleasure she meant to keep so. There was only one thing at present that Frieda was interested in and that was having a good time, and certainly she was accomplishing it. When Dick Grant was not dancing attendance upon her, and very often when he was, there were a dozen other girls and young men of about Frieda's age aboard, by whom she was constantly surrounded. It worried Ruth a great deal, but then, unfortunately, Ruth was the only member of the Rainbow Ranch party who was seasick. And the three girls simply did not take the trouble to spend much time looking after Frieda.

Though neither of them wished her to know it, both Olive and Jean tried to be especially careful of Jack. And this was particularly hard since Jack resented any suggestion that she was not as strong as they were. She was under the impression that she could walk without difficulty in spite of the rolling and pitching of the ship. Nevertheless she did finally promise Ruth to remain in her steamer chair unless one of the girls could be with her,

and though she did not see any sense in her promise, meant to keep her word.

On the fourth afternoon out, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, the weather became unexpectedly heavy. Ruth had long ago given up and gone to her room. Frieda was playing games in the salon, but Jack, Olive and Jean were on deck watching the approach of the storm. Jack adored the water. She had wanted the ocean to look altogether different from her prairies, to bring a wholly new impression into her life. But until today the calm, gentle, even roll of the waves at a sufficient distance had not been so unlike the far-off rippling of the prairie fields. Now, with the approach of a storm, with the blackness, everything seemed different.

The three girls had been wrapped in their steamer rugs sitting quietly in their chairs, Jack supposing that Olive and Jean were as interested in the storm as she was.

Suddenly Jean sighed. "The face of the waters gets a bit tiresome after a while, don't you think so?" she asked. "Remember the Princess asked us to come and have tea with her some afternoon. Suppose we go now. Seems as though she is a chance that ought not to be neglected. Who knows if the Princess takes a truly fancy to us she may do something thrilling for us when we get to Rome. Ask us to a court ball perhaps!" Jean laughed at the absurdity of her suggestion.

But Jack frowned a little. She was grateful to the stranger for her interest and former kindness to them; yet she rather resented

the air of mystery and seclusion surrounding her and her haughty attitude toward the other passengers. A princess might of course be different from other human beings; Jack felt she had no way of knowing. Nevertheless the Princess Colonna had confessed that she was an American girl. Why should a marriage have made so great a change in her point of view? In a vague fashion Jack was a little resentful of the homage which Ruth and the three other girls offered their new acquaintance. Now she slowly shook her head.

"You and Olive go, Jean. Really I would prefer to stay by myself for a little while and watch the storm."

Five minutes afterwards the two girls had departed, leaving Jack comfortably wrapped up in her steamer chair, and insisting that they would return in time to take her down to her stateroom to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER V

A SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

JACK may have been asleep for a little while. She was not quite sure. Anyhow, when she opened her eyes, she was surprised to see how the storm had increased and how entirely the promenade deck had become deserted. There had been a few persons about when Jean and Olive had departed, but now she saw no one except a man walking quietly up and down as though the pitching of the ship in no way affected him. He was wearing an English mackintosh with the collar turned up past his ears, but neither his appearance nor his existence at present interested Jack. Her only thought was for the oncoming storm. As yet there was no rain falling, only a cold gray Atlantic mist enveloped the sky and the sea. The waves had curling borders of white foam as they rolled and broke. There was no relief in the sky. Once the thunder roared as though they were cannonading on the other side of the world and then a single flash of lightning split straight across the horizon. Jack had thrown aside her steamer rug and was sitting upright in her chair, her hands clasping both sides. The color had gone from her cheeks (the storm was so wonderful, almost it was taking her breath away), but her head was thrown back, showing the beautiful line of her throat, and her lips were parted with the intensity of her admiration. Then the boat dipped

and half the ocean picture became obscured.

It never occurred to Jack that she would be running any risk of falling by moving from her place. Never had she been able to think of herself as an invalid, even after her two years' experience. Besides, was she not well by this time and the railing of the deck but a few feet away?

When the ship had righted itself she stepped forward without any difficulty, laying her hand lightly on the rail for support.

Then she became wholly absorbed. The plunging and tossing of the great steamer was fairly regular, so that Jack found no especial trouble in keeping her footing.

So unconscious was she that she did not glance over her shoulder at the solitary passenger pacing the deck, although in the course of his march he must have passed her at least half a dozen times. Nevertheless the man had not been so unmindful of his fellow traveler. He was possibly twenty years or more her senior.

Unexpectedly the ship gave an uneven lurch, almost twisting herself about, and at the same instant an immense amount of spray struck Jack Ralston full in the face. With a little cry of surprise straightway she lost her clasp on the rail and would have gone down in a heap if an arm had not immediately steadied her.

"I beg your pardon; you might have fallen. At the moment I happened to be passing." The man spoke stiffly.

In Jack's position, after her long suffering from a fall, one might have expected her to be frightened. However, although she

was being kept on her feet by a perfect stranger with no one else in sight, while a storm raged around them, she was not even embarrassed.

Catching hold on her old support again, this time more firmly, Jack said "Thank you" in an even voice. And then, as though she must have sympathy in her enjoyment from some quarter: "Isn't this storm splendid? It seems to me that before I have seen nothing but land, land all my life! I thought I loved it, but somehow all this water gives one quite a different sensation. I feel as if I weren't a person, but just a pair of eyes and lungs!" Jack spoke these last words with little gaspings for breath. So hard was the wind blowing that it had wrapped her heavy coat close about her; her hat had slipped backward and her heavy yellow-brown hair whipped across her face.

Her courage and frankness made her companion smile. And, although until this moment Jack had not paid any special attention to her rescuer, she now observed that he had a skin so bronzed as to look almost like leather, that he had a closely clipped blonde moustache and equally light hair. Also, that his eyes were of the deep blue seen only with that complexion, and that his bearing was distinctly military.

"But the sea is after all not so unlike a distant view of your American prairies," he replied. And in answer to Jack's expression of surprise:

"I know your name, Miss Ralston. Among many other things I have tried running a ranch in the west, although none too

successfully."

Whatever the strange man's intentions, certainly his words succeeded in arousing Jack's attention. For at once, without liking to ask, she was curious to find out how he had discovered her name. Then she was always interested in any ranching experience. The people she had been meeting on board ship were most of them from cities and without any special outdoor knowledge. Only a few persons actually have kinship with nature, and they have usually spent their youth in the *real* country, in big, open, unpeopled spaces as Jacqueline Ralston had.

This time she smiled more shyly. "I thought you were an Englishman – a soldier." Jack hesitated. She did not think that a few words of conversation with a stranger, who had been kind to her, made any difference, but it would not do to talk on indefinitely.

Instantly, as though divining her thought, the man's hat was lifted, and he moved a few paces away.

But at this moment the storm broke. No rain had been falling up to this time, but now the clouds lightened, and from between two of them a heavy sheet of water descended, apparently straight on to the ship's deck.

Why did Jack not run to shelter? Still she stood clinging with both hands to the ship's rail, her head thrown back inhaling deep breaths of the salt spray air. She was enjoying the storm but actually was afraid to move. Surely now that the storm had fairly broken either Olive or Jean would come for her. Both girls had

made her promise not to return to her stateroom alone and at the present time it was impossible. The decks were soaking wet and slippery and she was tired from too long standing and opposing her strength to the fury of the wind.

Yet the sailors were rushing about, lashing the tarpaulins to the balustrade, and in a few seconds she would be obliged to move.

Jack set her teeth. It was absurd to be afraid of falling just because of a former weakness. She turned, took a few steps forward and then the ship gave another sudden lurch.

It was Jean Bruce, however, who made the outcry. She and Olive were running down the deck without hats or coats and regardless of the storm for their own sakes. They were not yet near enough to save Jack from slipping. However, there was no need for them.

When Captain Madden turned and left Jack he walked only a few steps away and then as the rain descended swung himself about to enter the door of the saloon about midway the promenade deck. Naturally he expected the girl with whom he had just been talking to have run on before him, she was even less well prepared for the downpour. But to his surprise he saw that Jack had remained fixed at her place.

This was carrying a love of nature a little too far. Not only would the young woman get a thorough soaking, she would be in positive danger in a few moments should a wave break over the deck. It was odd that no ship's officer had yet suggested that she go inside.

Captain Madden did not wish to offend Jack by officiousness. He had still no idea of her lameness, although he had been watching her more carefully than any one dreamed for the past few days. However, he did not wish to see her hurt and so put an end to his scarcely thought-out plan.

The second time that the stranger held her up on her feet Jack could only stammer and blush. It seemed rather absurd to have been rescued by the same person twice in ten minutes and yet she did not even now wish to confess her difficulty in walking alone.

Jean and Olive saved the situation.

"Thank you ever so much," Olive began, arriving first and a little out of breath.

"We never can be sufficiently grateful to you!" Jean exclaimed. "And oh, Jack, I suppose you can't imagine what had become of us? We sent the stewardess for you half an hour ago. Ruth is dreadfully worried."

But Jean was not in the habit of forgetting her manners and so stopped speaking of their private concerns. She and Frieda had both seen and spoken of the man who was now with her cousin. He had his place at a table across from theirs and, possibly because of his soldierly appearance, had seemed unlike the other men aboard.

"My cousin isn't very well, or at least she hasn't been," Jean announced, remembering Jack's sensitiveness. And then as Jack and Olive moved quickly away she added with a gracious condescension that made the older man smile: "Our chaperon,

Miss Drew, will express her appreciation to you in the morning." And fled out of the rain as though she had been eight instead of eighteen.

Notwithstanding, Captain Madden did not immediately leave the deck after the girls' withdrawal.

"Things have turned out rather better than I could have arranged them," he remarked thoughtfully, pulling at his moustache. "She is an uncommonly attractive girl. Lots of spirit, but I've an idea she has yet to learn a great deal about men and women. It's worth trying anyhow. It's jolly odd my having run across them in this fashion and recalling what I was once told."

CHAPTER VI

RUTH'S ATTITUDE

BY the next morning the storm had abated, and for the rest of that day and evening Captain Madden devoted the greater part of his time to making the acquaintance of the Ranch girls' chaperon. More than this he accomplished, for he inspired in Ruth Drew a genuine admiration and liking. And while she and the older man talked together Jack usually sat quietly by listening to everything that was said.

In all their lives Ruth and Jack had never known anyone like this Captain Madden. Here was a man who had traveled all over the world, who had fought in the Boer war and more recently in Mexico and had hunted big game in Africa. Indeed he had done most of the things and seen most of the people that had before appeared to them like events and figures to be known only through books. And yet he was modest, never once picturing himself as a hero or even a particularly important person, although there were times when both Ruth and Jack felt that he was being hardly fair to himself. And on those occasions, if the man observed any change in the young girl's face, there was no sign on his part. Captain Madden was not particularly good-looking, but had unusually charming manners and the soldierly carriage that can not fail to win admiration. Then, as he was forty

years old and had attracted considerable notice on board, it was something for the Rainbow Ranch party to be singled out for his attention.

Frankly, however, Frieda Ralston thought her sister's rescuer dreadfully elderly and a bore. Olive and Jean, although agreeing to her first conclusion, could not accept the second. Nevertheless neither of the two girls from the beginning of their association liked Captain Madden particularly well. They both wondered why Ruth and Jack should find him so agreeable. Then after the passing of another twenty-four hours, there was not so much a question of Ruth's liking, as of Jack's enjoying talking to a stranger for hours and hours.

Actually before the Martha Washington had sighted Gibraltar Jean had already complained to their chaperon of Jack's intimacy with a stranger, besides almost quarreling with her cousin.

It was true that Peter Drummond and Jack had been and were specially devoted friends and Peter was as old as their new ship acquaintance. But then Peter had always seemed different somehow, and his fancy for Jack had been largely explained by her likeness to Jessica Hunt. For while Jessica was still teaching at Primrose Hall and no word had been spoken of an engagement between her and Mr. Drummond, the Ranch girls were still convinced that something would develop between them later on.

To Jean's grumblings that Jack was making herself conspicuous by seeming to prefer Captain Madden to any other one of their new friends on the ship Ruth explained that it was

but natural. For while Jean and Olive and Frieda could walk endless miles with anybody who happened to please their fancy at the moment, Jack could only take short walks now and then and with some one who understood her difficulty. And while they danced every afternoon and evening in the saloon, or pitched quoits for hours on deck, Jack's only chance for amusement lay in conversation. It was only because Captain Madden knew more and talked better than their other new friends that Jack seemed to prefer his society. Since his discovery of her old accident he had shown her every consideration.

Of course if Captain Madden had had no introduction to the Ranch girls and their chaperon, save that of his having assisted Jack at a difficult moment, Ruth Drew would never have permitted their acquaintance to have taken so intimate a tone in a few days. However, half an hour after his first meeting with her, the mystery of his having appeared to guess Jacqueline Ralston's name in his first conversation with her had been explained.

In this world it is perfectly useless to marvel over the coming together of persons in the most unlikely places, who happen to know exactly the same people that we do, and yet we will always go on exclaiming and being tremendously surprised by this fact.

Not only was Captain Madden intimately acquainted with the Ranch girls' old friend, Frank Kent, but actually was a cousin of his. Although, as he confessed, he belonged to the Irish and therefore the poor branch of the Kent family. It was not until Frank had returned to England, after spending the winter at the

Norton place next the Rainbow Ranch, that Captain Madden had made up his mind to come to America and try his own fortune in the west.

And there could be no question of the truth of his history, since he chanced to have a photograph of the Kent house in Surrey which Frank had often in times past shown to Jack. Besides he knew the names and characters of every member of Frank's immediate family. Moreover, he had remembered Frank's description of the Rainbow Ranch, Jack's and Frieda's names and Jean Bruce's and a little something of their discovery of Olive. He had even heard of Jack's and Frank's finding of the first gold in Rainbow Creek. And on seeing a group of these same names printed together on the ship's sailing list, Frank's story had come back to him and he had then guessed that Jack was the oldest of the girls and must be Miss Ralston.

As a matter of course it then followed that this kinship with Frank Kent proved a bond between Captain Madden and the ranch party, but more especially with Jacqueline Ralston, who had been Frank's most intimate friend.

For nearly two years there had been no meeting between Frank and the girls, not since his sailing for home, when Jack was taken to the New York hospital.

Nevertheless their former intimacy had largely continued, Frank often writing to Ruth and the four girls. Perhaps Jack had heard oftener than the others because of her illness; shortly before their sailing Frank had written to ask if he might join the

Rainbow Ranch party in Italy. But to Jack's letter begging him to wait until their coming to England in May there had been no time as yet for a reply.

It was Olive's argument in the beginning that Jack's pleasure in Captain Madden's society was due to her past fondness for Frank. But from the first Jean's point of view was otherwise.

It may have been caused by the old temperamental differences between Jean and her cousin. Fond as they would always be of one another, never had they been able to agree on liking the same people or things. So to Jean's suggestion that she could see nothing in Captain Madden to make Jack like to talk to him so much, Jack had replied that she could see nothing in Jean's American-Italian princess to make Jean wish to follow after her like an admiring shadow. At least Captain Madden had had exciting experiences that must always interest a girl of Jacqueline Ralston's disposition. She did not mind his age, for how could he have known all that he did had he been younger? Jack, it must be remembered, had been brought up on a ranch, had ridden horseback, hunted, fished and done most things that usually appeal to a boy more than a girl. She could not help admiring physical bravery beyond anything else. If the time of her illness had taught her something of the value of spiritual courage, there was still a great deal that she had yet to learn. Captain Madden had fought with Lord Roberts in South Africa, and had lately been with the Mexicans under Madero. What more reasonable than that the stories he was able to tell should be

deeply entertaining to Jack, who, after two years of being shut up indoors, was more than ever in love with the thought of an active life?

And Jean's Princess would of course appeal to her, since her ideal of life and romance had always been of so different a kind.

To her it seemed wonderful almost past belief that a princess should have taken a fancy to four inconspicuous American girls. Jean did not say or even think that this liking was more for her than for the others, but this was plain enough to them. Every day the Princess invited Jean alone to her stateroom for a little talk, and sometimes would walk about for hours on the deck with her. Unlike Captain Madden in frankness, she had told Jean little of herself. Nevertheless in some unexplained fashion the young girl had guessed that in spite of wealth, beauty and position, her Princess Beatrice was not particularly happy. Perhaps her husband was the trouble! Only once or twice had she mentioned the Prince's name, and that in such a casual fashion that it was impossible to get any real notion of him. Jean was not without the hope of having her curiosity gratified later on, however, since in an idle moment (and perhaps without really meaning it) the Princess had asked Jean to come and bring her cousins and friends to see her when they reached Rome. Nobody except Olive, who was always sympathetic with one's wishes and dreams, believed that this invitation meant anything serious. Nevertheless Jean cherished the hope of being a guest in a real palace some day.

Although the Princess Colonna seemed to have nothing to do with anybody aboard the Martha Washington, by an odd coincidence she appeared to have previously met Captain Madden. Probably their acquaintance was a slight one, for they only bowed in passing and had never been seen talking to each other. Indeed, Jean's new friend was in a measure responsible for her prejudice against Jack's. She had hinted several times in a veiled fashion that the girls must remember not to become too intimate with strangers in traveling abroad. There was no direct reference to Captain Madden. So when Jean mentioned her own impression of the Princess' meaning to her cousin, Jack naturally suggested that the Princess was equally a stranger and so equally to be avoided.

However, it must not be supposed that this question of new friendships had become a really serious one during the early part of their ocean voyage. For after nine days, when the Martha Washington was to make her first stop at Gibraltar, the girls were equally delighted at the prospect of being shown over the great English fort by a British army officer. Also Captain Madden agreed to have any other friends that Ruth or the Ranch girls desired to join their party. And at Ruth's invitation the Princess Colonna consented to be one of them.

CHAPTER VII

GIBRALTAR

EARLY on the morning of their steamship's first landing during the voyage, Jack came up on deck. She had asked Olive to come with her, but she was at the moment engaged in writing to Miss Winthrop at Primrose Hall, who had become more like her mother than a friend. She promised to join her room-mate in a few moments.

It was an ideal morning, and Jack hoped to have a long look at the sea before the other passengers were about to distract her with conversation. In a short while their steamer was due to pass Cape Trafalgar, where Lord Nelson won his famous victory over the French and Spanish in 1805, and from then on every traveler aboard, except the ill ones, would be crowding about the ship's railing for the best views.

Jack felt wonderfully well. Only a few days more than a week at sea, and how much she had already improved! Not since the winter at the ranch when she was sixteen had she felt so vigorous and had such joy in living. Surely before their trip was over she would be her old self again. And if this part of their journey had been so unusually interesting, what would their trip through Italy mean, with Switzerland and England to follow in May?

"How much of my young heart, O Spain,
Went out to thee in days of yore,
What dreams romantic filled my brain
And summoned back to life again
The paladins of Charlemagne,
The Cid Campeador."

Jack laughed, recognizing the speaker's voice at once.

"I am the wrong person to be quoting poetry to, Captain Madden," she replied, scarcely turning her head. "I told you the other day that Jean and Olive are the literary members of our family. I hardly ever used to read a book, except now and then my school ones, until my accident. Then I took to reading from necessity. I am not in the least clever or romantic, and reading has so often seemed to me like finding out things second-hand. I am afraid I really want to *do* the exciting things myself."

Jack was hardly looking or thinking of her audience as she talked. One of the nicest things about their new acquaintance was that one was able to say almost anything to him and he would understand. She was feeling curiously gay this morning, as though something of unusual importance was about to happen to her. Of course it was the thought of their first leaving the steamer after nine days of ocean travel. Nevertheless, Jack had dressed with unusual care, not intending to make another toilet before going ashore. Instead of her usual brown steamer coat she was wearing a long, heavy white woolen one, with a soft white hat trimmed in a single feather curling close around the crown. And

under the brim her hair was pure bronze in the sunlight and all the old color of the ranch days had this morning come back into her cheeks.

"I am only quoting guide-book poetry," Captain Madden explained, after a moment's admiring glance at his young companion.

Suddenly Jack ceased gazing over the water to look at him. "Captain Madden," she asked with the directness which some persons liked and others disliked in her, "you told us once that you were a British army officer, didn't you? Then would you mind explaining why when you are to show us over the English fort at Gibraltar today, you are not wearing an English officer's uniform?"

If for the fraction of a second there was a slight hesitation before Captain Madden's reply Jack failed to notice it.

"I am very glad you asked me that question, Miss Ralston," he answered, coming to the edge of the ship's railing and leaning one arm upon it as he talked. "I am afraid I have been sailing under false colors with you and the other members of your little party. I simply meant you to understand that I was at one time a member of the British army. Several years ago I resigned my commission. Else, my dear young lady, how do you suppose I could have attempted to run a ranch in your west and been permitted to fight with the Mexicans on the losing side? I am a soldier of fortune or misfortune, whichever way you may choose to put it."

The older man spoke half in jest, but Jacqueline Ralston stared

at him in a more critical fashion than she ever had before. Could she have been making a hero in her mind of a man who was no hero at all?

"But I can't understand how a man who has once been in the army could stop being," she remarked slowly.

Her companion shook his head. "No, of course you rich Americans can't understand," he replied. "The fact of the matter was that I did not have money enough to keep up my position. Though I can hardly expect a young American girl with a gold mine at her disposal to realize what a lack of money means."

Jack moved her shoulders impatiently, letting her clear gray eyes rest for the moment upon her companion's profile. He looked a soldier every inch of him and a brave man. Yet what could his confession mean?

"I haven't been a rich American girl always, Captain Madden," she returned. "And I don't know why you think I am one now. But a lack of money would never have made me give up my profession if I cared for it."

It was perfectly self-evident that Jack was feeling a sense of disappointment in her companion. Although they had only known one another for a week, and Captain Madden was so much older, intimacies develop more rapidly aboard ship than anywhere else in the world, except perhaps on a desert island. Jack suddenly realized that she had been giving more thought to her companion's history than there was any reason for doing.

She looked back over her shoulder. Numbers of persons with

field glasses in their hands were coming on to the deck.

"Miss Drew and the girls will soon be joining us," she suggested, meaning for Captain Madden to understand that she no longer wished to discuss his personal affairs. "I must go and search for them if they don't come at once. I think I can already see the point of Cape Trafalgar. In a short time we must be entering the Straits of Gibraltar."

The next second Jack started to move away, but a glance from the man at her side held her. It was curious that she, who had never yielded to any one in her life except of her own will, should feel his influence.

"You are only a young girl and I am possibly twice your age," Captain Madden began, "yet our acquaintance aboard ship has been so pleasant that I do not wish to have you misunderstand me. There were other reasons for my leaving the British army, but you may believe this to be the chief one: I am not a good soldier in times of peace. When the Boer war was over, I wanted to be where there was still fighting to be done. My country was weary of war and so I joined the Russians in their war with Japan."

Jack shyly extended her hand. "That is all right, Captain Madden," she replied. "I know Ruth and Olive think it dreadful for me to be interested in fighting. Of course I hope there may never be any more great wars, but – " and here Jack laughed at herself, "to save my life I can't help being interested in battles and heroes who fight on against losing odds. I had a grandfather who was a general in the Confederate army."

And Jack, resting her chin on her hand with her elbow on the balustrade, gazed out to sea, apparently satisfied. Indeed, she was so vitally interested in the view before her that she hardly heard Captain Madden add:

"If your friend, Frank Kent, should ever offer you any other reason for my resignation – " But at this instant Ruth Drew and Olive appeared between them, and Ruth slipped her arm through Jack's. At once Captain Madden stepped aside, surrendering his place to Olive.

It was odd, but as Ruth approached Jack and her companion, for just a passing moment an uncomfortable impression entered her mind. Jack and Captain Madden did seem to be talking together like intimate friends. Perhaps Jean had been justified in her grumbling. Nevertheless, Captain Madden was twice Jack's age, and why should they not be friends? It was as absurd to feel uneasy over them as over Frieda and her chocolate-drop boy.

And hearing Frieda's laugh behind her, the next second, Ruth turned around with a smothered sigh of relief. Here came Frieda in her crimson coat and hat with Dick Grant at her side holding the inevitable box of candy in his hand. Following them were Jean and her Princess.

They were just in time, because the Martha Washington was at this moment entering the Straits of Gibraltar. To the right there loomed, like a gray mirage in the background, the Mountain of the Apes in Africa. And there, directly ahead, was the historic Rock of Gibraltar.

"Isn't it thrilling to have reached a foreign country at last!" Jack exclaimed, turning again to her first companion. But on her other side Frieda pulled at her coat sleeve impatiently.

"If you are going into raptures over everything you see while we are abroad, I don't know what is to become of you, Jacqueline Ralston!" she argued. "Of course the Rock of Gibraltar is fairly large, but I have seen almost as big stones in Wyoming. Have a piece of candy."

And when everybody in the little company laughed, Frieda would have been offended if she had not already grown accustomed to starting just such foolish attacks of laughter. What had she said that was in the least amusing, when she had just made a plain statement of fact? For how could she possibly have guessed how her point of view typified that of many American travelers?

CHAPTER VIII

A MORE IMPORTANT OBLIGATION

IT was in the late afternoon of the same day and over toward the west appeared the flaming colors of an African sunset.

Since mid-day hundreds of the Martha Washington's passengers had been landed at Gibraltar. They had been shown through the famous English stronghold, where guns and ammunition are so strangely stored for defense and had seen the town at the northwest foot of the rock protected by formidable batteries. Then, weary in mind and body, they had been again transferred to the special tender and put aboard their steamer.

Standing at the edge of the water and leaning on Olive's arm waiting her turn to be taken back, Jack wondered if among all their fellow passengers there was one half so fatigued as she? She had not mentioned it, but this was hardly worth while, for Jack's face, except for her lips and the shadows under her eyes, was perfectly colorless, yet that morning she had thought herself as strong as anyone else. However, Jack need not have felt discouraged, for every member of the Rainbow Ranch party looked almost equally used up. The truth is that, through Captain Madden's guidance, they had seen more of the great fort than the other ship's passengers. Then by accident they had lost their

return places in the tender, and so been obliged to wait until a later trip.

The celebrated Rock of Gibraltar runs north and south three miles and is about three-quarters of a mile in width. The entire rock is undermined with subterranean galleries containing cannon in great number. Some of the lower galleries that are not in use may be visited by travelers, but both Frieda and Jean assured Captain Madden that if there were any possible passages which they had not journeyed through, it was indeed hard to believe.

Each member of the expedition was cross. For there is nothing more trying to the nerves and disposition than too strenuous sight-seeing.

Ruth was worried at having permitted Jack to undertake a trip that was so plainly too much for her strength. Jean was annoyed because the Princess Colonna, who had been one of their party all day, had scarcely spoken to any of her friends. Even Captain Madden she had acknowledged only by the coldest greeting, while absolutely ignoring every one else. And although Dick Grant and his mother had been included in the Ranch girls' immediate party, solely on Frieda's account, she and the young man had been on the verge of quarreling at least half a dozen times. However, it was not altogether the young people's fault, because Mrs. Grant had been trying. Every once in a while Frieda had felt obliged to decide that in the future she must have nothing more to do with the son. If there was a possible stupid question

to be asked, always Mrs. Grant had asked it; if there was a place where the rules forbade her entrance, that was the particular place which she had insisted upon seeing. Indeed, if Frieda had been able to foretell how Mrs. Grant was to end the long day with them, she would have wished that their original uncomfortable acquaintance could have closed on the morning it begun.

Suddenly from the signal station on top the Rock of Gibraltar the little company in waiting on shore heard the loud report of the six o'clock gun. Six o'clock and yet here they were on land! The ship's officer had announced that the Martha Washington must steam away again promptly at six! Nevertheless there seemed no real danger of the Rainbow Ranch party's being left behind. For half a mile out at sea their ship still waited at anchor, while approaching within a few yards of the Spanish shore was the small boat known as the tender.

Watching it come toward them Jack swayed and might have fallen except that Olive kept a tight hold on her.

"Please help me up the gang-plank when we go on board, Olive dear?" Jack whispered, "I don't want any one to guess how wobbly I feel."

And Olive nodded reassuringly.

A little later and the tender had reached the big ship. Now, however, the transference of the passengers was not to be so easily made. The waves were no longer blue and quiet as they had been all day. From somewhere a high wind had blown up off the land and each time the smaller boat attempted anchoring

alongside the big one, a breaker drove it backward or forward. There was grave danger of the tender's being shattered against the great ship.

Nevertheless no one aboard either of the two boats seemed seriously frightened, excepting Mrs. Grant. Frieda was so scornful in watching the stout, elderly woman clutching at her son, asking dozens of hysterical questions that she quite forgot to be nervous herself. Indeed, she almost failed to appreciate the scene, so unique to her experience.

Ruth and the other three Ranch girls were not so oblivious. For the time being they were standing close together, having in the excitement forgotten all past weariness. The Spanish and English sailors, manning their small boat, were splendidly capable. Through a megaphone orders were called out to them from the big steamer, and instantly the men made ready to obey. But whatever the discipline and intelligence, the will of the sea was not to be soon conquered.

Had there been more time the smaller boat could have been finally brought alongside the larger one and her few remaining passengers safely put on board, but the night was coming down, and both the officers and travelers were growing impatient. A few moments afterward and the tender was brought to anchor within a safe distance of the Martha Washington. Then a life boat was lowered. When this came alongside the tender a ladder was dropped overboard and the Ranch party and their friends ordered to embark. The method appeared a simple enough one.

One had only to climb down the ladder and be lifted into the small boat. Nevertheless, five persons looked anxiously at Jacqueline Ralston, and Jack purposely refused to return any gaze. Not for worlds would she have Ruth or the girls guess that she felt any nervousness at having to do so easy a thing, with several persons at hand to help her.

During this period of waiting, Captain Madden had been standing not far away, talking in low tones to the Princess. Now he moved quietly forward. His face was flushed as though his conversation had not been agreeable. However, his manner toward Jack was extremely kind.

"If the climbing down the ladder will be too much for you, Miss Ralston, won't you allow me – "

Jack shook her head. Already Jean was descending the side of the boat, the Princess following soon after. And although the small tender plunged with the movement of the waves and the rowboat rocked unceasingly, half a dozen hands held the ladder firm.

There was no danger. Jack joined Frieda in frowning impatiently at Mrs. Grant, who was nervously protesting to her son that she could never make the necessary effort. Then her gray eyes lighted with amusement. With a slight inclination of the head she suggested that Captain Madden play knight errant to the only female in distress.

Olive and Frieda went down one after the other. Ruth, however, would not leave the tender until she saw Jack safely

through the climb overboard. And in the meantime the rowboat had made a journey to the steamer, put its occupants aboard and returned once more to the smaller ship.

But by this time the gorgeous sunset colors had faded and the twilight was fast closing down. And although Mrs. Grant, having at last mustered sufficient courage, insisted on being allowed to enter the rowboat first, Ruth Drew would not hear of it. She had waited, watching the other girls in order to see how difficult the climb might be for Jack. Now it was wiser to have no further delay.

If Jack had felt any nervousness previously it had now entirely passed. How absurd to be frightened by anything so simple! With a gesture to the man in the boat below she flung her heavy white coat down to him. Then she swung herself over the side of the boat and commenced descending the ladder with all the ease of her athletic days. The distance was not great. Although the boats were rocking and plunging the experience was exhilarating.

It happened during the few moments required for Jack's descent that Captain Madden and Dick Grant chanced to be standing on either side of Mrs. Grant. Therefore, what afterwards occurred could hardly have been prevented.

Of course Mrs. Grant was under the impression that Jack had reached the end of the ship's ladder. Some call from below or some mental hallucination must have given her the idea. For without a word she suddenly darted forward and before any one could speak or move seized hold of the top rung of the

overhanging rope ladder. It was only for an instant. Immediately the sailor standing alongside, grasped her firmly by the arm, but the single movement had been sufficiently disastrous.

Jack had nearly reached the end of her climb. So near was she to stepping into the rowboat that one of the men below had his arms outstretched to receive her. So possibly she had relaxed the firmness of her hold. For when the surprising jerk came from the top of the ladder the girl wavered half a second and then appeared to let go altogether. She fell not backwards but over to one side. And only her own family understood why she had happened to collapse in this fashion.

Instantly, however, before an other sound could be heard, there came the queer rushing noise of the water closing over her. And then followed a cry that seemed to come from a hundred throats at once. Above them all Ruth believed she heard Frieda on the deck of the big steamer.

Ruth did not utter a sound. Really there seemed not to be time. Almost instantaneously did Captain Madden's coat drop at her feet. Then followed his dive overboard. There were plenty of people nearby to have pulled Jack out of the water. Perhaps his action was unnecessary. However, Captain Madden had at once recognized Jack's grave danger. They were only half a mile from shore, where he suspected the undertow was dangerously strong. It was now almost dark so that her body might be drawn under one or the other of the two large boats. And his suspicion must have been true, because Jack did not come up near the spot

where she had gone down. There were half a dozen sailors ready to offer aid had it been necessary. But the moment after Captain Madden's dive, he rose again holding the girl easily with one hand and swimming. When they reached the side of the life-boat the sailors pulled them in, wet of course, but otherwise unhurt.

"I am exceedingly sorry and ashamed and grateful," Jack murmured in Captain Madden's ear later when, safely wrapped in his coat, she was being rowed back to the Martha Washington. "In the words of Mr. Peggoty, if it hadn't been for you I might have been 'drowndead.'"

Captain Madden shook his head. More than anything else he admired Jacqueline Ralston's courage. Indeed, he was beginning to think that the task which he had set for himself might not be so disagreeable to perform.

"Oh no, there were dozens of other men equally ready to do just what I did, only I managed to have the honor first," he returned lightly. And of course by his ignoring his own action, Jack was the more impressed by it.

For she looked at the older man gravely. "I can understand that you don't want to be thanked for what you have done. I know that from my own experience once. But just the same I shall always be grateful to you. And if ever there is a time when I can in any way show my gratitude – "

To do Captain Madden justice he felt uncomfortable over Jack's excessive gratitude, for whatever his other faults of character, he was a physically brave man.

Although insisting that she was perfectly well and that her wetting had not done her the least harm, Jack was straightway put to bed and dosed with warm drinks. So that Olive, in order to talk with the other girls and yet allow Jack to sleep, was obliged to slip into Ruth's stateroom soon after dinner.

There she found Ruth and Jean engaged in argument.

"Of course I am grateful to Captain Madden," Jean was saying in an irritated tone of voice, "but just the same, I don't see why he could not have waited for one of the sailors whose business it was to rescue Jack. We all of us know what a queer disposition Jack has and how if she once likes a person she sticks to him through thick and thin. And I – well, candidly, I don't want her to like this Captain Madden any too much. I don't trust him and I would write to old Jim tonight if I knew a single thing to say against him or any reason for saying it."

"But you are simply prejudiced, Jean dear. Anyhow we will be landing in Naples in a few days and after that see no more of our ship friends," Ruth argued. "So if I were you I would say and think nothing more about this. Really, such a casual acquaintance is not of so great importance."

And Ruth frowned, because Frieda was staring at her cousin with her big blue eyes wide open with the effort to guess what possible reason Jean could have for showing so much unnecessary feeling. For her own part, her anger was directed entirely against Mrs. Grant and her son. And she firmly made up her mind not to speak to either one of them again, no matter how

humble their apologies.

CHAPTER IX

REFLECTIONS

RUTH had her way. When the Martha Washington finally arrived in Naples, good-byes were said to all their ship's acquaintances and the Rainbow Ranch party had their first ten days in Italy to themselves. There was a little time of rest and then visits to the Island of Capri, to the ruins of Pompeii, to Mount Vesuvius. And before very long Ruth and the four girls found themselves yielding more than they had dreamed to the wonderful spell of southern Italy. Not that any one object or place made so great an impression beyond another, but because Italy seemed so different from their own land. It was as though they had one day been transported by an airship for a journey through the planet Jupiter or Mars.

The soft Italian voices with their tuneful cadences, the laziness and air of having all eternity for the performance of a task, the big, brown-eyed beauty of the women and children – it was all irresistible. Actually the girls felt their own characters changing. Where was their old energetic desire to take long walks, to rise up early and certainly never to waste a moment in a nap in the afternoon? Why in Naples one felt always drowsy, less inclined to talk, and wished only to drive and dream and feast one's eyes and ears and nose, all the senses at once. For here was beauty,

music and such fragrance, surely the three graces of nature! And the roses, they were everywhere in bloom, climbing over every ruined wall and broken gateway, covering whole hillsides, until at last Jack was obliged to admit that they were as abundant and even more beautiful than her own wild prairie roses.

But Naples was only to be the Ranch girls' first introduction to Italy, their first taste of her delights. Rome was really the central object of their pilgrimage, where the greater part of their time was to be spent.

And Rome Ruth had decided must be taken seriously.

In Naples she had let things drift, had even felt as inactive and pleasure-loving as her younger companions. But then she had been tired from her sea voyage. Many persons had said that it required a week or ten days for recovery if one had been seasick. Also this may have explained why so frequently of late she had caught herself thinking of Jim Colter. Why should the nights in Naples recall moonlit evenings on the ranch which they had spent together years before?

Almost the only suggestion that Jim had made to her before their sailing was that the girls should acquire enough culture on their European trip to compensate him for the loss of their society. And Ruth had conscientiously determined to do her best. All the winter past she had devoted to the study of Roman history. Indeed, it had helped her pass many a lonely evening, when otherwise the picture of the Rainbow Lodge living room, with the girls seated about the fire and the big figure of their

guardian stalking in and out half a dozen times within the hour, had a fashion of appearing before her eyes.

Ruth had begun her acquaintance with the Ranch girls as their teacher. So that now, although they were nearly grown, it was hard for her to give up all her old principles and practices. In their different ways the four girls were charming, and yet there was much Ruth felt that they should know. However, the past year had made more changes in their characters than she could ever have supposed. She had been surprised to find how much they now cared for people and society, and had been disappointed as well; for Ruth had not realized that the Ranch girls were yet old enough for these interests, in spite of the fact that Jack was nearly twenty and Olive and Jean not so far away. Jack in particular had been a revelation to Ruth, who had been making special plans for her intellectual development. For she was the oldest of the four girls and yet had never had the advantage of Primrose Hall and Miss Winthrop. After their trip abroad then, there would be time enough for society, their chaperon decided, actually believing that the natural experiences of life can be persuaded to wait for set times and set places.

So all the way along the road from Naples to Rome, Ruth was making her own plans for the four girls, little guessing what was occupying their minds. Nevertheless their thoughts were as eternal to youth as any symbol of eternity in the most wonderful of all cities.

"'Tis the center

To which all gravitates. One finds no rest
Elsewhere than here. There may be other cities
That please us for a while, but Rome alone
Completely satisfies."

Or at least this was Ruth Drew's idea, as she sat watching the landscape fly past her window, with these lines keeping time to the turning of the car wheels.

Notwithstanding that, Jean Bruce sat exactly opposite, with her eyes closed showing the length of her dark lashes against the clear pallor of her cheeks, Jean was not devoting all her energies to reflecting upon the historic curiosities of ancient Rome. She wanted to see everything of importance, of course, but she was also wondering if the Princess Colonna would keep the promise made in their farewells on the steamship. Would she call on them in Rome and afterwards invite them to meet her friends? The invitation might possibly be to an afternoon tea; yet even then there was a chance of meeting some member of the Italian nobility or other prominent person. And Jean did not think herself a snob because she wanted to meet big people as well as to see big things. Always they had led such a quiet life at the ranch, and boarding school had offered but few opportunities for making outside friends. Indeed, her only other chances for mingling with the world had been their summer trip through the Yellowstone and her week's visit to Margaret Belknap during the Christmas holidays at Primrose Hall. So Jean's social aspirations were possibly not unreasonable.

And, curiously enough, Olive Van Mater, for at least a portion of their pilgrimage to Rome, was considering certain friends whom she might possibly meet there, instead of the marvels of the city itself. For she was expecting that her cousins, Mrs. Harmon, Donald and Elizabeth, might make their appearance. And although Olive was fond of all three of them, she could not look forward to their meeting with pleasure. The truth is that Olive's grandmother, as we must know from the past volume in this series, was a self-willed, unwise old woman. No sooner had she seen Olive and Donald together half a dozen times and noticed the young fellow's liking for her granddaughter, than she had made up her mind the way she intended to escape her own difficulty. Why puzzle to decide whether she should leave her large fortune to the Harmons, as she had so long promised, or give it to the newly found granddaughter?

"Let the two young persons marry and share the money between them. Elizabeth could be comforted with a reasonable legacy." This decision Madame Van Mater had confided to Miss Winthrop almost as soon as the idea had come into her head. And then, in spite of Miss Winthrop's openly expressed disapproval, after Olive's return from the ranch for her second winter at Primrose Hall, her grandmother had made known her wishes to her.

"So that you may not get any other love nonsense into your head," Madame Van Mater explained to Olive, as though there could be no possibility of her desire being disobeyed. And this

in spite of the fact that Olive had insisted that Donald could never care for her or she for him, and that nothing would induce her to follow her grandmother's wishes. Indeed, except for Miss Winthrop, Olive might have been made extremely unhappy. But her friend had explained that Madame Van Mater was growing childish with age and would probably change her mind in regard to the willing of her wealth many times before her death. Also she assured her that Madame Van Mater had never mentioned her purpose to Donald Harmon, and if Miss Winthrop could influence her, never should. Nevertheless Olive's peace of mind and pleasure in her cousin's society had been successfully destroyed by her grandmother's suggestion. Actually the girl lived in a kind of shy dread of Don's ever finding it out or attempting to follow Madame Van Mater's wishes. She had always protested that the greater share of the family fortunes should be left to the Harmons. She herself would be content with very little and wanted no special favors, since her grandmother had never brought herself to care for her. Notwithstanding this, the old lady had seen that her granddaughter had an even larger sum than the three Ranch girls for her traveling expenses in Europe. And had said that she was to buy whatever she liked and to send for more money whenever it was necessary.

Yet Ruth and the girls were traveling in a far more expensive fashion and spending more money than they ever had before. For, in spite of the discovery of the Rainbow mine, they had continued to live simply. Nevertheless, in starting off on their European

trip, Jim had advised them to have a good time and not to worry, as he guessed the gold mine could do the rest.

So that Jack in the course of her journey from Naples rather wondered if Captain Madden had not received a wrong impression of the amount of their wealth. Or possibly Frank Kent had told him. In any case it was annoying for Frank to have mentioned their financial affairs to so complete a stranger as Captain Madden had then been. Jack was glad she had written asking Frank not to join them in Italy. Two years might have made a great change in his character, so that they could not be friends as they had once been. Besides, had she not guessed, without actually having been told, that Captain Madden and Frank, in spite of being cousins, were not particularly good friends? And as Captain Madden had mentioned that there was a bare chance of his spending the spring in Rome it might be awkward meeting them together. Of course Jack had not spoken of the chance of running across Captain Madden in Rome to any of her family. In the first place, Captain Madden had been by no means sure of his presence there, and in the second, Jack had the impression that Jean, Olive and Frieda did not like him. This was absurd, of course, with a man so much older! As he had traveled and spent other seasons in Rome, surely he would be an agreeable guide and help them to see the right things in the right way?

Only Frieda, besides Ruth, was not looking forward with either pleasure or dread to any persons whom she might happen to run across in Rome. Certainly Dick Grant and his mother

were to be there (Dick had told her every detail of their plans in the course of their early acquaintance), but whether they were in Rome or not was of no interest to Frieda. For the younger Miss Ralston had been true to her decision and not once in the two-day-and-a-half sail from Gibraltar to Naples had she acknowledged the existence of either Mrs. Grant or her son. And this in spite of their humble apologies to Jack, and her sister's ready acceptance of them.

However, this much justice must be accorded the Ranch girls that when, at sunset, they at last entered "the eternal city" all personal thoughts and considerations were swept from their minds. High in the distance they could see the tower of St. Peter's; in the midst of the town ran the muddy stream of the Tiber; and over all Rome's beauty and antiquity hovered the golden atmosphere for which the city is also justly famous.

CHAPTER X

ITALIAN VIOLETS

"DO make up your minds and let us go somewhere," Frieda pleaded. "I don't see that it is so important where we go first."

She was wearing a new lavender cloth frock trimmed in silk and a hat of the same shade, with a big bunch of violets resting against her yellow hair. From her hand dangled her adored gold-link pocketbook. So there was no question of Frieda's preparedness for beginning their first day's sight-seeing in Rome. Ruth and the other three girls showed no such signs of being ready for immediate departure.

They were together in their big sitting room, which overlooked a beautiful enclosed court, characteristic of Italian hotels and homes. And at least half an hour of their morning the girls had devoted to gazing out of their windows. In the center of the courtyard a fountain played continually – not a fountain of an ordinary kind, but the figure of a beautiful boy, with his arms high in the air, holding two great shells into which the water poured and then splashed down to the ground below. Around the enclosure were copies of famous statues and miniature orange and lemon trees.

Jack in a comfortable silk dressing gown was placidly gazing at this scene when Frieda's speech arrested her attention.

"Why be in such a hurry, Frieda mia?" she inquired. "You know we have firmly decided not to begin our labors too early. Besides, this morning we are tired and don't you see that Ruth, Jean and Olive are deeply engaged in laying out our plan of campaign? It has got to be arranged where we are to go, what we are to do on our arrival, what things we are to thrill over and what to pass by." And Jack laughed, letting her eyes rest for a moment on Ruth's face. Their chaperon's expression was so serious. Did Jack guess that her education was about to be solemnly taken in hand? Well, she felt very young this morning and very much in need of learning a great many things. Rome gave one such an overpowering sense of ignorance!

But Frieda was much displeased. "You told me you would be ready at half-past ten, Jacqueline Ralston, and let me go and dress. Now it is after eleven. And if nobody will come with me I shall just go out and walk up and down by myself."

From the pages of her Baedeker Ruth looked up quickly. It was not often that she was positive with the girls, but she had insisted that during their stay in Italy no one of them go anywhere alone.

Frieda blushed penitently. "I didn't mean it, Ruth, of course. Still, I think it's hateful for none of you even to start to get ready."

"Oh, do be quiet, Frieda, and sit down and wait, or, if not, go to your own room," Jack remarked impatiently. "I think you are forgetting our compact very soon. One more objection and you will kindly place your fine in Ruth's charge."

Without replying, Frieda marched haughtily out of the sitting room and into her own and Jean's bed room.

It was true that the night before leaving Naples the Rainbow Ranch party had made a kind of "Traveler's Agreement Society," setting down a number of rules for their mutual benefit and promising to follow them.

The suggestion had come from Olive who was always the peacemaker in all differences of opinion. For although the travelers had been only a few weeks upon their journey, already they had learned that there is nothing that is a surer test of one's amiability than constant sight-seeing, which entails a continuous moving from place to place of people who are expected to do the same things at the same time regardless of their personal tastes and inclination.

From the top of her suit-case Frieda drew forth a sheet of paper. Possibly Jack had been right, for the rules of their compact read:

First: In all questions pertaining to travel, such as the selection of places to be visited, choice of hotels, etc., the rule of the majority shall prevail.

Second: In all questions in which there is a moral issue at stake, a matter of right or wrong to be decided, the chaperon's judgment is to be followed.

Third: If any member of the party becomes weary during the course of the journey, all are to rest. (This rule was made for Jack's protection and was Olive's proposal, knowing that her

friend would never voluntarily give up, if she thought her fatigue might interfere with their pleasure.)

Fourth (and this was of Jack's recommendation): Each one shall try to be as agreeable as possible to the others' friends, since it is not to be expected that they could like the same people equally well.

Fifth: If any one of the five travelers shall make three cross speeches in the course of one day, the said traveler is to pay into the keeping of Ruth Drew a fine to the amount of fifty cents, United States money. For the fourth cross speech, one dollar, and so on, with the amount doubling. And at the end of the European trip, this sum, whatever the amount, is to be employed for the purchase of a gift for the girl against whose name there is the smallest number of bad counts.

And Frieda had rather expected that this prize would fall to her. Indeed, she had quite made up her mind to attain it. For certainly she was far more amiable than Jack or Jean, and Ruth was apt to grow nervous if things went wrong. For instance, take this question of her going out on the street alone. Ruth might have known that she had had no real intention of being disobedient. Indeed, Olive was the only member of their party whom Frieda believed she had reason to regard as her rival in amiability. And of course one opponent was necessary to make the contest interesting. Really, Frieda desired this prize more than most anything she could think of – not just for the prize itself, although there was no telling what its value might be, but

because it could be retained forever like a conqueror's flag to be waved over her family.

For ten minutes more, therefore, Frieda sat down in an upright chair, waiting patiently. Notwithstanding this, Jean did not even come in for her coat and hat, or with any suggestion that they ever intended leaving the hotel.

It was abominably stupid to continue loitering forever, so finally the young girl concluded to go down into the hotel lobby and watch the people moving in and out, until her family at last made up their minds to start. She would not go back into the sitting room again to argue the question with them, but leave a little note near Jean's hat explaining where she might be found.

In the corridor leading to the open front door Frieda discovered an inconspicuous place and was entirely happy observing the hotel guests and the small vista of the Roman street which she could see like a picture through the opening.

An Italian priest passed by, wearing a solemn, long black robe tied about his waist with a huge cord and a round, stiff black hat with a broad brim and a flat crown. Frieda stared at him curiously. Then a young fellow, evidently an artist from his costume, appeared, and, after hesitating a moment, entered the hotel corridor. A few moments afterwards he was joined by an older woman with two daughters in whom Frieda at once became deeply interested. They were English girls – she guessed this by a kind of instinct, they were so tall and fair and slender, with drooping shoulders and pink and white complexions. The little

party left the hotel together and then there was a short interval in which nothing happened to interest Frieda particularly, except the foreign look of the people moving past in the street.

Weary of waiting, she was glancing at a queer carved clock on the wall opposite her, when unexpectedly a fragrance enveloped her. Without understanding why, the young girl felt a sudden wave of homesick yearning for the Rainbow Ranch. Why should she think of home so suddenly? For a few seconds Frieda was unconscious of any special reason, and then, turning, she beheld standing in the doorway a small Italian boy, beautiful as one of Raphael's cherubs, with a great basket of Italian violets hanging on his arm.

Frieda smiled. No wonder she had recalled her home and the violet beds planted next the Lodge in the days when she had expected to add to the family fortunes by selling flowers. This was before there was ever a thought of a gold mine hidden in Rainbow Creek.

What fun to buy a lot of violets for Ruth and the girls and have great bunches of them to present, if ever they did decide to come down stairs!

A western girl, Frieda Ralston had always been accustomed to doing things for herself. So now it never occurred to her to call a "facchino" to accomplish her errand, although this Italian word for porter was one of the few words that Frieda had already acquired from her phrase book.

Besides, was the boy not standing right there by the door?

Quickly she moved toward him. But at the same moment another customer must have called from the street or else some servant in the hotel frightened the child, for he slipped away and in an instant was half down the block. And Frieda followed close behind, entirely oblivious of anything except her present purpose. The boy ran lightly along and danced around a corner like a sunbeam. There, where he made the turn, a fountain stood in the center of the square that Frieda noticed particularly so there might be no danger of her getting lost. Fortunately another customer stopped the lad when, quite out of breath, Frieda finally managed to catch up with him.

She didn't know the Italian words which should be employed in purchasing violets, but fortunately the sign language was the original one with all the peoples of the world. Very soon the basket of violets transferred from the child's arm was swinging on the young girl's. When, with a smile and a "buon giorno" (good morning) at the American Signorita's prettiness and amazing wealth, the lad vanished as abruptly as he had arrived.

Frieda glowed with pleasure. The violets were so exquisite, the sky so blue, and the air so sparkling. Surely by the time of her return to the hotel her family would be ready to begin their adventures. And there, just ahead, was the fountain that she had observed so as not to make any mistake about getting back safely.

Walking on in the direction of the fountain for a moment Frieda stood admiring its beauty. But not for long of course, because Ruth and the girls must never discover her absence.

Turning away from the fountain, straightway her puzzle began, for there were now half a dozen streets leading from this central square and the wanderer had no idea which one contained their hotel. Certainly Rome was very queer and unlike any other city she had ever seen before. Many of the streets seemed to twist and curve, winding in and out among the others. Nothing seemed to go straight ahead in any given direction. However, Frieda, having concluded that one of them looked a little more familiar than the others, tried it first. There was nothing within a block, however, that resembled the Hotel l'Italia and she was convinced of only having followed the boy for a single street. She had best return to the fountain and start forth again. But by the time one has followed this method of procedure three or four times without success the effect is apt to be disheartening.

CHAPTER XI

FONTANONE DELL'

ACQUA FELICE

SEVERAL tears watered the violets. Frieda Ralston was seated on one of a flight of stone steps bordering the antique fountain, with an immense stone lion on either side of her and in high eminence behind her the figures of the prophets. But Frieda was not in the slightest degree interested at this moment in Roman art. For one hour, recorded on the face of the small watch in her pocket, she had been engaged in wandering up and down likely looking streets in search of their hotel, only to return to her starting place again. And this when she had only gone a block and a half away in the first place.

Neither had the wayfarer trusted entirely to her own judgment. In spite of Ruth's repeated warnings against talking to strangers, she had once accosted a man in a queer uniform, thinking him a policeman. He wore a dark blue coat, blue-gray trousers, a white cap and belt, so how could a newcomer have known him to be a member of the Roman garrison? However, when once the soldier had discovered Frieda's desire, his directions were so explicit, so accompanied by much waving of his hand and statements of "destra" (right) and "sinistra" (left), that Frieda believed her way clear at last. Nevertheless, though doing exactly what she

believed she had been told, the result was the same. Frieda had again to return to her fountain, a now painfully familiar spot. In the course of this wandering, however, she had passed an ancient church with a high flight of steps, where she paused to gaze for a few moments in awe and wonder. A number of pilgrims were climbing the wooden steps on their knees and children were running about among them offering rosaries and small wooden images for sale. Frieda had purchased a St. Joseph and then regretted her investment, for at least half the crowd of children followed her back to her resting place. They were still whining about her begging for pennies, when some time ago she had given them all the change she had. Yet they would *not* leave her alone. Happening to glance down at her arm Frieda now made the painful discovery that her beloved gold-link purse had disappeared. Still the poor child had her violets!

They were no great comfort, however, for, sighing, she glanced through an opening among her persecutors to see if aid might be found anywhere. There not far away did she not behold the familiar figures of Richard Grant and his mother, the acquaintances who had been so scorned toward the close of their sea voyage.

With a little extra energy the lost girl might have called to them. For they were loitering and studying the pages of their guide-book, evidently on their way to visit the famous church which had previously attracted her attention. Once Frieda believed that she saw them glance in the direction of her fountain.

But their purpose must have changed, for the next instant they moved off toward the church.

Nevertheless, in spite of her need, the wanderer did not stir or call out. For how could she ask assistance of people to whom she had been so rude and overbearing but a short time before? And she was so near their hotel, surely Ruth would send some one to look for her or come herself in a few minutes. No, she must wait a while longer and perhaps, when rested, if no one had found her, try to discover her own way again. Often Jim Colter had told the Ranch girls to search for things first with their heads before beginning to explore with their hands and feet. Yet it was pretty difficult to think clearly, and when weary and discouraged to remember how one has managed to get lost. This habit of getting separated from her family was a trying one, and certainly this time Ruth and the girls would be angry as well as frightened.

Not long after Frieda was wishing sincerely that she had put her pride in her pocket and begged Dick's and Mrs. Grant's help in spite of all that had passed. She was frightened as well as tired. The children had run away on finding that the Signorita's purse had gone. But a few yards from her seat an Italian had been curling his black mustache for quite an extraordinary length of time, staring all the while at the little blonde girl on the fountain steps.

"If you don't mind speaking to me this once, Miss Frieda, would you explain just why you are ornamenting the steps of this particular fountain alone for so long a time?" a friendly voice

inquired.

Frieda jumped to her feet. There were the amused brown eyes, the square jaw and the athletic shoulders of Mr. Richard Grant. However, he was at the present moment engaged in holding his red Baedeker open and in slowly reading aloud: "This fountain is known, I believe, as 'Fontanone dell' Acqua Felice,' which, if I recall my Latin correctly, means 'water of happiness.'"

"Don't be funny, Dick, please," begged Frieda, forgetting titles and squeezing two left-over tears out of her eyes; "I'm lost again!"

"I rather supposed so," the young man replied, "so I left mother to moon among the Saints in the church nearby, while I came back to look after you. You see, we thought we recognized you sitting here and yet could hardly believe our eyes. Tell me what has happened and where you wish to go?"

A moment later, after a second careful consultation of his guide book, Frieda was escorted through the streets of Rome by a youth, who was unconcernedly carrying her large basket of violets in one hand and feeding her chocolates from a box which he held in the other. He did not seem to bear the least malice, and Frieda herself was extremely cheerful, considering her talent for getting into scrapes.

She even promised gratefully to accept the gift of a red Baedeker of her own and not to depend on their chaperon's possession of one.

Arriving at the Hotel l'Italia Frieda begged that Dick Grant

come in with her and let her family know of his presence in Rome and of his kindness to her. In reality she wished for a stranger to be present so that she might in a measure escape the disapproval awaiting her.

And this time Frieda was correct in her judgment, for Ruth and the girls were more irritated with her than alarmed. And even after her explanation as to just how the accident happened Ruth seemed unreasonable. Actually, right in Richard Grant's presence, she scolded Frieda more than she had before in years. However, the young man did have the good sense to turn his back and be engaged in earnest conversation with Jack during the worst of Ruth's tirade, for which the younger Miss Ralston was truly grateful. She was also grateful to her sister Jack for inquiring after Mrs. Grant just as though nothing unpleasant had occurred between them. For Jack asked either that Mrs. Grant come to see them or that they be permitted to call on her.

When Dick had finally departed to join his mother (who must have been weary of waiting, except that her good nature was as certain as her bad taste), Frieda found as usual that it was Jean's teasing which was harder to bear than any scolding. For just as they were at last about to leave their hotel and right in the presence of the English lady and her two daughters who were returning, Jean pulled a long pale blue ribbon from her pocket (one of Frieda's own ribbons) and tied it in a kind of lasso about the younger girl's wrist.

"Better keep a string attached to our one ewe lamb, don't you

think, Ruth dear?" she inquired innocently. And the strangers stared with a kind of cold surprise, when Ruth was obliged to produce the pair of scissors she always carried in her hand bag to cut the knot, so close had the ribbon been drawn.

For the rest of the day Frieda kept close to her sister and Olive, feeling too deeply wounded with the other members of their party to care to have much to say to them.

CHAPTER XII

AFTERNOON TEA

"ON Pincian Hill my father feeds his flocks," remarked Frieda pensively one afternoon several days later.

And while Ruth, Jack and Jean tried their best to keep from laughing aloud, Olive had to explain.

"It was not Pincian hills but Grampian, Frieda dear, and the speech refers to Greece and not Italy."

But Frieda was too blissfully happy and deliciously entertained to care either about her mistakes or the cause of the others' laughter.

For at last the Ranch girls were having afternoon tea in the beautiful gardens of the Pincio. Near them a military band was playing, and in their vicinity apparently most of the best people in Rome, besides the summer travelers, had gathered. There were hundreds of carriages moving to and fro and stopping now and then while friends exchanged greetings. A short half hour ago little King Victor Emmanuel, whose stature is the only small part of him, and his beautiful big Queen had driven by, giving the four girls and their chaperon one of the most delightful thrills of their whole trip. For no matter how good Democrats we Americans are at heart, the first sight of royalty cannot fail to be interesting. It is only after the royal persons have been viewed often enough

and long enough that they appear like ordinary persons.

Then, beneath the hill of the Pincio, lay the most wonderful of all the panoramas of Rome. There was St. Peter's again (and already the Ranch party had spent one entire day in this largest and perhaps most beautiful church in the world). There the castle of St. Angelo, the roof of the Pantheon, and innumerable other churches and towers, which Ruth even after an almost painful study of her map of Rome was not able to name. But more fascinating than the buildings, at least to Jacqueline Ralston's outdoor loving vision, were the far-off hills with their groupings of cypress, palms and pines.

The Rainbow Ranch party had found seats at a table not far from the small café in the center of the gardens. And although delectable sweets were being served to them, together with very poor tea, not even Frieda had been able to display her usual appetite.

Unexpectedly a hand was placed on Jean Bruce's shoulder, and turning in surprise she saw standing by her side no other person than the Princess Colonna! If Jean had thought her American-Italian Princess beautiful on shipboard, the sight of her now in her Parisian toilet almost took away her breath. Waiting a few feet away were her companions, two young Italians of about twenty and twenty-five years of age, besides an elderly man, who was nearer sixty years old than half a century.

"I thought my little Miss Bruce was to let me know when she and her friends reached Rome," the Princess began, shaking

hands with Ruth and the other three girls, while continuing to smile upon Jean. "Is it that you do not wish more of my society?"

Jean, having regained her self-possession, shook her head. "That is such a ridiculous question I shan't pretend to answer it," she returned. "It is only that we have been such a few days in Rome and thought perhaps you – "

The Princess made a slight motion of her hand toward the three men back of her so that they approached. "*I* have not a short memory, but *you*," she replied. "But permit me to introduce to you my husband, the Prince Colonna, and his two nephews."

Fortunately at this instant no one in the group chanced to be gazing toward Frieda. For although the older girls had sufficient self-control to conceal any expressions of surprise, this was not true of her. At this moment her blue eyes opened wider than usual.

The Prince Colonna with his snow-white hair and stately manner, bowing courteously over Ruth Drew's hand, was assuredly twice his wife's age.

Jean, Olive and Jack were feeling sufficiently embarrassed by the meeting with the two Italian nephews. In less than a moment, however, Jean gave a slight but characteristic shrug of her shoulders and then a sigh of relief. For both Signor Leon, the younger, and his brother Giovanni Colonna spoke excellent English.

"We were so afraid we should not be able to talk to you," Jean confessed so frankly that immediately any awkwardness in the

situation passed away. "You see, we Americans are dreadfully stupid about foreign languages. We never realize how important they are until we come abroad, and that is apt to occur after our school days have passed. Nevertheless, we dearly love to hear ourselves talk."

This was a long speech for the commencement of a conversation with strangers, but Jean was soon glad to have had the first opportunity. For, drawing a chair close beside hers, Signor Giovanni Colonna never gave her much of a chance afterwards. It seemed, by the young man's own confession, that he had always wanted to know American girls. His only acquaintance so far had been with his aunt, and of course she had increased his desire. But the Princess had lately told him and his brother of meeting on the steamer four delightful western girls whom they might possibly see later on in Rome. From the first Giovanni seemed to prefer Jean's society, leaving Leon to the other three girls to entertain. The entire conversation between the young man and Jean could hardly have lasted ten minutes.

Before saying farewell, however, the Princess had made an engagement to call on Ruth at her hotel on the following afternoon with the promise that she should bring the four girls to her villa later in the week.

Unfortunately Jack laughed when the two young men were safely out of hearing, though still in sight. They were both below medium height, with clear, dark skins and curling black hair, and to Jack's American ideas were almost too well dressed and formal

of manner, although Giovanni was really handsome except for a scar across his left cheek.

"They are rather funny, don't you think?" she inquired idly and without any special meaning. "I don't believe I could ever learn to like foreigners as much as I do American men. They are not so big for one thing, are they, Ruth?" And Ruth, before whose eyes Jim Colter's big figure straightway loomed, shook her head.

Jean flushed slightly. She had liked the two young men fairly well. Moreover, they were her Princess' nephews. Anyhow, her cousin's speech had irritated her, although Jack had already forgotten what she had said and was once more gazing in fascination at the scene about her.

"Your dislike of foreigners does not include Englishmen, does it, cousin of mine?" Jean queried with a too great pretense of innocence.

Jack's clear gray eyes faced Jean's dark ones in such surprise that Jean's were the ones to droop.

"If you mean Frank Kent or Captain Madden, why of course I like both of them, don't you?" she returned. And then, "Whatever in the world, Jean, has made you so cross about Captain Madden? I wonder what idea you have in your head! If you knew anything against him on shipboard why didn't you tell me?"

Jean discovered that Ruth was frowning upon her more severely than usual. Besides, what answer had she to make to her cousin? Really, she had no actual reason for disliking their new acquaintance and the impression that had once or twice come

into her mind on shipboard may have been absurd. Ruth had thought it ridiculous and had not agreed with her. Now certainly the stupidest possible thing she *could* do would be to permit Jack to guess her suspicion.

"Oh, of course I like them too, I was only bad tempered," Jean replied, giving Jack's gloved hand a penitent squeeze and thinking how unusually beautiful she was looking this afternoon. Somehow no one appeared so well in white as Jack did. She was so fine and pure, so different in many ways from other girls. It would never dawn on her to dream of evil in man or woman. Jean found herself blushing.

"I like Frank Kent better than most anybody, Jack dear. He is one of our oldest and truest friends, I feel sure. Sometimes I wish we were going to see him before arriving in England," she murmured.

Half an hour later, driving slowly down the long hill away from the wonderful Pincian gardens into the city of Rome, Ruth and the four girls were equally surprised at seeing a stiff, military figure on horseback lift his hat to them.

"It is Captain Madden, I do believe! I didn't know he was to be in Rome!" Frieda exclaimed, and no one made answer.

Later that evening, however, when a great box of her favorite red roses containing the English army officer's card mysteriously arrived for Jack at their hotel Jean did not know whether to be glad or sorry for having held her tongue. Of course Jack was pleased, just as any other girl would have been with the attention.

But for the life of her Jean could not have explained why she felt so convinced that in some fashion or other this Captain Madden was to be the evil genius of their European trip. However, Ruth Drew was her cousin Jack's chaperon and she did not appear concerned. That night, after having thought the subject over for an hour when the other girls and Ruth were probably asleep, Jean finally came to this conclusion: undoubtedly she must be more foolish than anybody else. So no matter what she herself believed, if Ruth and Olive remained unsuspecting of Captain Madden's attentions the wrong thinking must be her own.

CHAPTER XIII

JACK

TEN days later if Ruth and Jean had again talked this same matter over together, it is possible that their points of view might not have been so far apart. But this was difficult, since Jean was then spending several days with the Princess Colonna at her villa several miles from the city of Rome.

From the hour of meeting with Captain Madden near the gardens of the Pincio, apparently his time had been entirely at the disposal of the Rainbow Ranch party. And Ruth having completely banished her momentary fear that his kindness meant more than a passing fancy for Jack, was at first glad enough to accept his attentions. If she thus revealed a lack of wisdom, there would be time enough for regret later on.

It was extremely agreeable to have some one to act as their guide through Rome. For in spite of her winter of study Ruth found herself becoming dreadfully confused. Rome was so overpowering that actually there were hundreds of things one wished to do all at once. Then the girls developed such different interests! She and Olive desired to make a real study of the many churches in Rome, while Jack curiously enough, as she had known nothing of art before, was enthusiastic over the old sculpture. Jean and Frieda had no great fancy for the antique,

but were open in their preference for visiting the shops and for driving about to the wonderful gardens and villas about Rome. So every now and then Ruth, departing from her original rule of keeping their entire party together, had allowed Captain Madden to have charge of several of the girls, while she went elsewhere with the others.

And more often than any other way it turned out that Frieda was in the habit of accompanying Captain Madden and her sister. For Frieda's attitude toward their elderly friend had lately changed. From her former dislike she had now become his warm advocate. And if Ruth Drew had been suspicious or even properly worldly-minded this fact in itself should have begun to open her eyes, so assiduously had Captain Madden been cultivating Frieda's liking. When a box of flowers arrived for Jack, or sometimes for Ruth, a box of sweets came with them for the youngest of the Ranch girls. In their morning riding parties Captain Madden announced his preference for keeping by Frieda's side and leaving Jack to ride a little in advance as she seemed to prefer.

Once, however, Frieda had innocently repeated a conversation held between herself and her escort, which made Jack angry and Ruth uncomfortable. For it appeared that she had told Captain Madden the entire history of their Rainbow mine, even to the amount of gold taken out of it the previous year. And this, when Jack had particularly asked her younger sister never to discuss their affairs with strangers, and especially their recent

wealth. Older now and realizing the good taste of this, Frieda, in explaining the subject to their chaperon, was puzzled to remember how she had been drawn into the conversation. Of course no questions had been asked by Captain Madden, he was too much of a gentleman, but somehow in telling him of their past life on the ranch and of their acquaintance with his cousin, Frank Kent, naturally she had spoken of their mine. To Ruth this explanation did not appear unreasonable. Besides it did not seem of importance then whether or not Captain Madden might be too much concerned in their private affairs.

Afterwards an evening came while Jean was away at the Princess' villa when the Ranch girls' chaperon had her first awakening. The incident was a slight one in itself, yet aroused great uneasiness.

Almost every pilgrim who makes his way to Rome has the desire to see its ancient ruins by moonlight. And this had been Olive's wish ever since their arrival in the eternal city. Her suggestion was that some night they drive around the broken walls of the Coliseum and afterwards wander about inside the Forum Romanum. Surely in the moonlight it would be easier to forget the modern world! Perhaps one might even conjure up a mental picture of the great days of pagan Rome, when these same decaying arches, columns and temples were monuments and buildings of wonderful beauty. For it was past them that the Roman generals used once to lead their victorious cohorts bringing home captive the barbarian armies of the western world.

One evening, rather laughing over her friend's enthusiasm, Jacqueline Ralston had repeated Olive's ambition to Captain Madden. And straightway he had suggested that the moonlight excursion actually take place, and that he be permitted to act as escort. The moon was now almost in the full and certainly Rome was as well worth seeing under its glamor as under day-time skies.

Therefore, twenty-four hours afterward, at about nine o'clock, a party of seven persons set out from the Ranch girls' hotel. Ruth was riding in one carriage with Captain Madden and Jack, while Mrs. Grant, Frieda, Olive and Dick were together in the other.

No one talked much. Even Frieda and Mrs. Grant, though not specially susceptible to beauty, were somehow silenced. The road to the Coliseum led away from the crowded centers of Rome into a kind of eerie stillness. Although the radiance of the moon seemed partially to have obscured the stars, the night was brilliantly clear. Twice both carriages drove about the outside walls of the Coliseum. And through its broken spaces the riders could catch strange glimpses of the big amphitheater, the crumbling tiers of seats, and now and then the outline of a small stone chamber overgrown with moss and lichen, where the early Christian martyrs, were once imprisoned before being fed to the lions.

In the course of the drive Ruth and Captain Madden spoke to one another occasionally, commenting on the unusual beauty of the night and the weird and fantastic shadows cast by the moon.

But Ruth noticed that Jack hardly made a remark and that she was pale. This made no special impression, for Jack was probably tired. She was wearing her long white cloth coat and a small white hat and for some reason or other looked almost younger than Frieda.

But by and by Jack asked that their carriage stop at the entrance to the Forum. There a guide could be found with a lantern, should the moonlight prove insufficient to light their way about the ruins.

Captain Madden first assisted Ruth to descend from the carriage and then something in his manner as he turned to help Jack, gave Ruth a sudden feeling of discomfort. What could he have to say to her which her chaperon should not hear? And yet Captain Madden did whisper to Jack in a low voice as though there were some secret understanding between them.

A moment later, when the second carriage had driven up and its occupants were alighting, for just a moment Ruth Drew had a brief chance to speak to Olive alone.

"Don't leave Jack by herself tonight if you can help it, and on no account let her be with Captain Madden without the rest of us." Then, scarcely waiting for Olive's reply, Ruth moved off slipping her own arm firmly through Jack's.

Certainly the next hour afforded no opportunity for interchange of confidences between Jacqueline Ralston and her new friend. But the girl seemed glad enough to have Ruth and Olive close beside her. Now and then she even asked aid of one or

the other of them. For stumbling about in semi-darkness among crumbling earth and stone seemed to be making her nervous.

Then came a moment when both Olive and Ruth lost sight of Jack completely. It was the simplest possible accident. They were in a place of shadows, lit only by the moon, which made the spaces behind the ruined buildings of almost impenetrable blackness. And although their guide and Dick Grant carried lanterns, it was difficult to catch their reflections unless one were near.

Olive, believing Ruth to be with her friend, had drawn closer to the guide to listen to some bit of information that he was struggling to impart to Mrs. Grant. While Ruth, thinking that Olive was discharging her task, and finding Dick Grant and Frieda engaging in one of their frequent quarrels, had interposed herself between them.

It was at this time that Jack, wearier than she cared to confess, sat down on one of the steps beyond the Arch of Titus, descending toward the Coliseum. For the moment a cloud had passed half over the moon, making the ancient ruin before her appear more gigantic and mysterious. The next instant a figure seated itself beside her and Captain Madden's voice spoke:

"You think you don't care for poetry, Miss Jack, but surely tonight is made for poetry, or poetry is made for tonight. Do you know these lines of Byron's in *Childe Harold*?"

Captain Madden moved nearer the girl so that he might see into her face. Then he pointed toward the magical scene close by.

"A ruin – yet what a ruin! from its mass
Walls, palaces, half-cities, have been rear'd;
Yet oft the enormous skeleton ye pass,
And marvel where the spoil could have appear'd,
Hath it indeed been plunder'd, or but clear'd?
Alas! developed, opens the decay,
When the colossal fabric's form is near'd:
It will not bear the brightness of the day,
Which streams too much on all years, men, have reft away.

"But when the rising moon begins to climb
Its topmost arch and gently pauses there;
When the stars twinkle through the loops of time,
And the low night breeze waves along the air
The garland forest, which the gray walls wear,
Like laurels on the bald first Cæsar's head;
When the light shines serene, but doth not glare,
Then in the magic circle rise the dead;
Heroes have trod this spot – 'tis on their dust ye tread.

"While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand;
When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall;
And when Rome falls, – the world."

Jack made no answer for a moment. Then she said quietly, "It is a beautiful description; thank you for repeating it to me." She did not feel in the mood for talking tonight. The world was too beautiful and too strange. Here was she, Jacqueline Ralston, a

girl raised on a ranch in far-off Wyoming, in the ancient city of Rome. And Captain Madden, the friend near her, why should a man so much older and wiser and with so great a knowledge of the world that even Rome itself did not seem unfamiliar to him, feel an interest in her? She was neither beautiful nor clever like Olive and Jean. Yet Jack, though not twenty, was woman enough to realize that Captain Madden liked her best.

The next instant she started to get up when, placing his hand on her arm, her companion held her back.

"I don't want to speak to you too soon," he whispered. "I don't wish to hurry or frighten you. But you must know why I have so longed to be with you alone for a few minutes tonight."

"Please," Jack faltered.

And then, suddenly appearing from out of nowhere, Ruth Drew actually seemed to swoop down upon the man and girl. Almost immediately she took tight hold on Jack.

"Let us go to our carriage at once, if you please, Captain Madden," she demanded brusquely. "We have stayed out in the night air far too long as it is. It is time we were safe in bed."

Then, although Jack kept obediently close to her chaperon until they were back in their hotel, that night when the three girls had fallen asleep, Ruth was so restless that, putting on her dressing gown, she walked up and down her room for a quarter of an hour. It simply could not be possible that this Captain Madden was falling in love with their Jack or that she could entertain the slightest interest in him! Why Jack was still a child and the

man twice her age! Besides, what in the world did they know of him except what he himself had told them? The man might be a fortune hunter, he might be most anything! Ruth wiped her eyes in consternation at the thought of what Jim Colter would say and do if she allowed his splendid, brave Jack to become entangled in an unfortunate romance. Then she asked herself: Was there no one in Rome who could tell them of Captain Madden's history? Recalling Jean's statement that the Princess Colonna and Captain Madden were acquaintances before their meeting on board the Martha Washington, Ruth relieved her anxiety by writing a long letter to Jean. In it she confessed her own uneasiness and asked that Jean inquire of the Princess what knowledge she had of Captain Madden's past. But she also insisted that Jean keep her reason for wishing to know a secret and that beyond everything else she should never betray their suspicions to Jack.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRINCESS'

MYTHOLOGICAL BALL

FOR some little time before and after the event, the Mythological Ball given at her villa by the Princess Colonna was the most talked-of entertainment in Roman society.

The Princess was young, an American and immensely rich. Having married into one of the noblest families in Italy, in spite of their poverty, it was but natural that she had soon become a conspicuous social leader in Rome. Her parties were always regarded with deep interest, but this latest ball was to outstrip all the others in novelty and beauty. For her guests were invited to appear as characters from ancient Greek or Roman mythology. Surely the idea was sufficiently original and daring to excite wide curiosity.

And to the Ranch girls, naturally, the Princess' ball was *the* important social occasion of their lives. For days Jean had written of nothing but the preparations going on at the villa and to inquire what parts they wished to impersonate and what costumes to wear. Several times she had driven into the hotel for long consultations with Ruth and the other girls, for Jean had been asked to remain at the villa until after the costume ball. As a matter of course the four girls were a good deal

overwhelmed at the decisions before them. For in the first place Ruth positively declined to be present at the entertainment unless she were permitted to appear in a regulation evening dress. For Ruth would always be a Puritan at heart and the thought of arraying herself as a Pagan goddess, or even as an humbler heroine, actually made the cold shivers run up and down her back. To Ruth the Princess' idea seemed fantastic and absurd. Nevertheless, she did not wish to spoil the Ranch girls' pleasure, and was in reality more deeply anxious than any one of them that they should make as beautiful an impression as possible. The girls were lovely enough, she felt sure; their only problem was to select suitable characters and to see that their toilettes were exquisite and appropriate.

Of course the Princess Colonna agreed to Ruth's desire about herself, assuring her that there would be others of her guests who would dress as she did. However, she made a great point of the Ranch girls' coming in costume. For she had been talking of her four American girls to her friends in Rome and was counting on their making a sensation. She and Jean together had decided on their heroines and also what they were both to wear. Jean had then kept her character a secret from the other three girls and from Ruth, wishing to be a complete surprise to them as well as to everybody else.

The drive from the hotel to the Princess' villa would require almost an hour. Notwithstanding, when Captain Madden asked that he might accompany the Rainbow Ranch party, Ruth

thanked him and declined. There were only Jack, Frieda and Olive, she herself making the fourth, so with Jean away, one carriage would hold them all comfortably. She did not care to separate their little party. They would see Captain Madden later at the ball.

No one could have guessed whether or not Jacqueline Ralston had noticed it, but it was perfectly true that her chaperon had never allowed her a minute alone with her new friend since the night of their moonlight excursion. Captain Madden was well aware of it, though he had not yet made any protest or given any sign. He had been studying Jack pretty closely in the few weeks of their acquaintance and felt fairly sure that if she could once be persuaded to make a decision, no amount of opposition afterwards would have the power to change her. It was not for nothing that her chin had that slightly square outline and that she held her head with an unconscious and therefore a beautiful pride. Jack had a look of purity and faithfulness that sometimes made older persons watch her with a kind of wistful anxiety. Would life ever make her lose her faith in her ideals and in the few persons to whom she would give her undivided love?

The entrance to the Prince Colonna's estate was through a long avenue of magnolia trees so that the night air was heavy with their fragrance. As there were several hundred guests driving into the grounds at nearly the same time, the Ranch girls' carriage was compelled to move slowly. And for this they and Ruth were devoutly thankful. Because they were one instant thrilled beyond

measure at the prospect of the brilliant scene before them, and the next terrified at the thought of the parts they were expected to play.

"I don't see how Jean Bruce has ever managed to spend an entire week in such grandeur as this and with strangers. I should have died of embarrassment!" Olive exclaimed, in a rather shaky voice, slipping her hand inside Jack's and giving it a gentle squeeze. She wished to assure herself of the reality of the fairy world about her and also to receive strength for the coming ordeal from the sense of Jack's presence. For never, for an instant, had these two friends swerved in their devotion to each other, the one always finding in the other just the qualities she herself lacked.

Jack laughed. "Jean, you must remember, is never afraid of any one and is the only truly society person among us. Then, if you please won't mention it, I've an idea that the Italian nephew is entertaining Miss Bruce mightily. Remember she confided that he was teaching her Italian and she instructing him in English, poor Ralph! I am afraid Jean will never be content at the Rainbow Ranch any more after this experience of foreign life."

With her pale blonde hair carefully concealed from the night air in clouds of pale blue chiffon, Frieda, from the opposite seat, now leaned over toward her sister.

"Jack," she demanded seriously, as only Freida could, "why do you say, 'poor Ralph!' Do you think Ralph Merrit has ever been in love with Jean? They were always friends at the ranch, I know, but Ralph is poor and isn't good-looking and doesn't care

for society. I am sure he would never suit Jean one bit."

But before she had finished speaking, Jack's gloved fingers were laid lightly on her small sister's lips. "For goodness sake, baby mine, do hush," she implored. "Of course I was only joking about Jean and Ralph. I can see how Ruth is frowning at me even in the dark. Who would ever have supposed that an infant like you would talk about 'being in love' in such a solemn fashion! You don't know the meaning of the word."

"Do you?" Frieda returned, speaking just as seriously.

But Jack only shook her head without replying.

The wonderful ivory-colored house, built in the fashion of the Italian Renaissance, was now coming into view with hundreds of low-growing evergreen shrubs close at its base. The house itself was lighted with golden, shaded lights. To one side was the Italian garden, where the girls had had tea with the Princess several afternoons before. It was also lighted, but hardly discernible now from the driveway.

By the Princess' orders, Ruth and the three Ranch girls were shown immediately to Jean's bedroom, which was apart from the dressing rooms provided for her other guests.

There Jean was waiting for them in her fancy costume and in a delicious state of excitement. As her door opened, the newcomers, forgetting themselves altogether, gave a cry of surprised admiration and were then curiously silent.

Jean had been standing in front of a long, gold-framed mirror, and now, turning swiftly, moved in their direction. Her costume

was of the palest pink. The little bodice was of pink silk and pink chiffon, simply made and cut with a girlishly rounded neck, trimmed with a narrow edging of old lace. But from her silk girdle the skirt showed a wonderful arrangement of chiffon drapery, falling below her feet into a slightly pointed train at the back. She wore pink sandals bound with pink ribbons.

All this Ruth and the three girls observed in the instant that she ran to greet them. But the next moment, swinging slowly around on one lightly poised toe that the full effect of her appearance might be disclosed, between Jean's shoulders could be seen a tiny pair of butterfly wings. Her dark hair was parted low over her forehead and drawn into a loose knot high toward the back of her head. The costume was a lovely one, and Jean looked exquisite in it.

"Can you guess whom I represent?" she asked shyly, abashed by the admiration of her own family.

In answer Jack did something unusual between the two cousins, who were not usually as demonstrative with each other as with Ruth or with Olive and Frieda. For suddenly she leaned over, and holding Jean's chin in her white gloved hand kissed her, afterwards studying her face closely.

"I think I can guess, Jean," she returned. "I have been reading so much mythology lately, besides seeing so many famous statues. Your butterfly wings tell me that you are Psyche. I remember your story. Psyche was the daughter of a king and so beautiful that Venus, the goddess of beauty, grew jealous of her

and sent her son Cupid to punish her for her presumption. But Cupid wounded himself with his own arrow and so fell in love with Psyche. There is a great deal more to the story, of course; afterwards Psyche and Cupid quarreled and for many years she had to wander around the world performing difficult tasks before being reunited with her love again. Psyche is the Greek name for soul and a butterfly the ancient emblem of the soul. Somehow you don't look like yourself tonight, Jean," here Jack hesitated; "you are like a spirit. Please don't be finding your fate too soon and so flying away from us."

But although Jean blushed and seemed for half a second troubled by her cousin's suggestion, she shook her head and began helping Frieda remove her wraps. When the blue cloak and the blue veil were thrown aside, the youngest of the Ranch girls stepped into the center of the room.

"Do I look almost as well as Jean?" she inquired earnestly. "I thought my costume so pretty when we left the hotel. But now that I have seen hers – "

Jean was dancing around Frieda as though she had been in reality a butterfly. Ruth, Jack and Olive would not allow the maids to take off their cloaks in order to give her their undivided attention.

"Frieda is the star of us all, isn't she?" Jack declared, since the spoiling of her small sister was a sin upon which the entire ranch party agreed. Unwrapping a round gold bowl, she then handed it to her. "Frieda represents the lovely goddess, Hebe, who served

nectar and ambrosia to the high gods on Mount Olympus," she explained.

Quite oblivious of the admiring Italian maids, Ruth knelt down on the floor to rearrange Frieda's skirt. The young girl's dress was of corn color, almost the shade of her blond hair. So her eyes looked bluer and her cheeks pinker than ever. It was odd that her toilet had been copied from an old Greek model and yet was not unlike the modern style. A tunic of soft yellow crepe was loosely belted at the waist, the overskirt falling to her knees. About this was a border of gold braid in the Trojan wall pattern and beneath it hung the narrow, plain skirt. Frieda's yellow hair was caught together in a bunch of curls and a gold fillet encircled her head.

Olive was by this time ready to be admired. She seemed shy at being seen even by her dearest friends; but then Olive would never entirely recover from her timidity. Tonight she wore Nile green, the shade always best suited to her. She was dressed as Amphitrite, the wife of Neptune. Her costume was unlike the others. It was of India silk, because of its peculiar glistening quality, and strung with tiny sea shells. Around her slender throat was a string of pearls, which she had lately bought for herself in Rome as a gift from her friend, Miss Winthrop. In and out among the braids of her black hair were other strands of pearls. Above the middle of her forehead was a jeweled spear with three points. This represented a tiny trident, the symbol of Neptune's power over the sea.

Notwithstanding the assistance of the maids, after Ruth Drew had finally given a hurried glance at herself in Jean's mirror and had seen that three of the girls were ready to go down to the ball room, to her surprise she found Jack loitering. The girl had seated herself in a chair and, in the face of Olive's and Jean's protestations, still had her opera coat wrapped close about her.

"Are you ill, Jack?" Ruth queried, observing that she was paler than any one of them.

But Jack shook her head, smiling nervously. All of a sudden she did not seem like herself.

"I am *frightened*," she confessed the next moment. "It does not seem possible for me to go down to the ball room dressed as I am before so many strangers. I don't want to keep the rest of you waiting, but can't I stay here by myself for a few moments, Ruth? I want to think about something."

But before Ruth could answer Jean had almost forcibly pulled off her cousin's wrap. "If you are not ill, Jack dear, how can you be so absurd! If it were Olive now who suddenly had an attack of stage fright we might forgive her. But you! Why you have never been afraid of people or of things in your life. Besides you will only have to speak to the Princess and the Prince Colonna. We won't know any one else except Captain Madden and – perhaps a few other persons. The others we can just enjoy seeing." During her speech Jean had tried to catch her cousin's expression. But Jack had her eyes down. Now she jumped hurriedly to her feet and went out of the room ahead of the others. Evidently she did

not wish to hear herself or her costume discussed. She did look unlike the other three Ranch girls tonight – taller and older. And while their costumes were in colors, hers was pure white, nothing but soft folds of drapery from her shoulders to her feet. Her only ornament was a half moon of brilliants in the bronze coils of her hair. For Jacqueline, partly because the girls had used to call her Diana in the old days at the ranch on account of her love of hunting and supposed coldness of character, had dressed as the far-famed Latin goddess of the moon.

Slipping down the marble staircase in her gray evening gown, Ruth Drew felt like a chimney swallow amid an assemblage of brilliant, gaily colored birds. Yet she was glad enough to be inconspicuous. Never in their lives had the four Ranch girls been so lovely. Ruth was almost sorry. She did not wish them to attract too much attention. The interest they had taken in their toilets had been for their own and for her pleasure and because of the Princess Colonna's kindness. At this instant Ruth decided that so soon as their greetings were spoken she would find a secluded place, where they might have their first sight of foreign society and yet be properly out of the limelight themselves.

CHAPTER XV

A SURPRISE

JACQUELINE RALSTON was sitting alone in a quiet portion of the Princess Colonna's Italian garden, listening to the soft splashing of a fountain at no great distance away. Now and then she put her hands to her face. Why were her fingers so cold and her cheeks so warm? For Jack was no longer pale; indeed, her whole countenance was curiously flushed. No longer did she look the tall, stately goddess of a few hours before, but like a tremulous and startled girl. For Jack had just received her first proposal and could not for the life of her tell whether she had accepted or rejected it.

Captain Madden had gone away. She had sent him to find Ruth, as she did not wish to remain alone; neither did she wish him to stay with her. It was not that Jack wanted to confide what had taken place to her chaperon. Nothing was further from her intention at the present time. For Jack had not yet been able to make up her mind whether or not she cared for the man who had just told her that he loved her. And fortunately or unfortunately it was not Jacqueline Ralston's habit to ask the advice of other people about what seriously concerned herself. She must decide one way or the other, and then it would be time to tell Ruth. But suddenly she had felt very young and lonely and forlorn with an

absurd disposition to cry. If only Ruth would come to her now she could say that she was tired and not feeling particularly well. It would be quite true. Tonight had been the most wonderful in her whole life; never had she dreamed of such beauty and such splendor. Yet suddenly Jack had felt a kind of homesick longing for Jim Colter and the simplicity of their old life on the ranch.

And yet Jack could not truthfully have said that she had been taken completely by surprise by Captain Madden's proposal. Ever since their meeting with him in Rome, there had been times when she had wondered if it could be possible that he was learning to care for her with more than a friendly interest. For even a girl as young and as innocent as Jack cannot be wholly blind.

Ruth had believed herself a careful chaperon. Little did she dream of the intimate talks the girl and man had had together, standing side by side in some church or gallery, looking at some special object, when the other members of their party had wandered away.

Then had come tonight! Jack had grown tired; Ruth was talking to some new acquaintances, Jean and Frieda and Olive were dancing. Captain Madden had asked that she walk into the garden with him to rest.

There were many people about and yet they had managed to find a secluded place. Jack could see a number of men and women passing near her, some of them in wonderfully beautiful costumes, others looking a trifle absurd. She closed her eyes, not

wishing to see but to think!

Captain Madden had told her that he loved her. He had confessed also that he was twice her age and poor. But could Jack forget these things and care for him notwithstanding?

One wonders how the man had come to appreciate Jacqueline Ralston's nature so thoroughly in the few weeks of their acquaintance? Did he know that this appeal would be the surest way to awaken her sympathies? Jack had always a passion for doing things for other people rather than having them do for her. If she loved Captain Madden, she would gladly share all her money with him. It was stupid of her, however, not to realize that no true man could have been willing to ask *all* the sacrifices of her. Jack's only present problem was: "Did she care enough?" Captain Madden was older and wiser and so much better and braver! Think of all the stories he had told them in which she felt sure he must have been a hero! Although never once had he so spoken of himself! Then, too, had he not saved her life? Jack had never forgotten that moment of danger at Gibraltar, however little her rescuer had made of his part in it.

Jack sat up suddenly. Captain Madden had consented that she have a week in which to make up her mind, but had asked that his suit be kept a secret. Now some one was evidently coming toward her and there must be nothing in her face or manner to betray her.

What a picture she made at this moment Jacqueline Ralston would never know! For nowhere could there be surroundings

more beautiful nor a figure which seemed so unreal and yet so ideally lovely! Surely Diana had wandered to earth from the groves of high Olympus and was resting here, waiting for her nymphs. She was sitting on a three-cornered marble bench under a group of palms, with the moonlight flooding her white dress and sending forth tiny sparks of light from the crescent of brilliants in her hair.

In surprise she lifted her head to watch the stranger approaching her. She had thought at first that it might be Captain Madden with Ruth or one of the other girls. But the man was taller, younger, more slender and was alone. Who on earth could he be? Jack rose hurriedly and took a step forward. The man was holding out both hands with an oddly familiar gesture.

"Jack," he said slowly, "don't you know me? Aren't you glad to see me? I arrived in Rome only an hour ago and came directly here. I have spoken to Jean and Ruth and now have found you."

"Frank Kent!" Jack repeated, too surprised by the young man's unexpected appearance to show any other emotion. "You *have changed*, but in the daylight of course I should have recognized you. It was only that I should never have dreamed of your coming to Rome without letting us know. I asked you to wait to see us until we arrived in England."

She had given both her hands to her old friend and was trying not to have her manner appear cold. Yet she could feel rather than see that Frank's face was flooding with color, just as it had so easily in those old days of their first acquaintance at the Rainbow

Ranch.

"That is a discouraging greeting after a two years' separation. I hoped you might feel more pleasure in seeing me," Frank suggested.

Jack and the young man had walked slowly forth from her retreat and were now within the glow of the yellow-shaded electric lights. Jack looked up into her companion's face. He was older and tonight seemed graver. Also he wore the expression of dignified displeasure, which Jack recalled so readily. She could almost remember this same look on his face the day she had run away to the round-up and so lost Olive and brought tremendous unhappiness upon herself and her family. Less than anybody in the world did Jacqueline Ralston desire to see Frank Kent during this particular week of her life. Yet she could not willingly hurt his feelings.

Now she laughed, looking a little more like the girl of the past.

"I didn't mean to sound ungracious, Frank. Of course I am glad to see you, for you must have had some good reason for coming to Rome just now. Otherwise I know you would have granted me my wish and waited until we got to England for our meeting. What was your reason?"

But Frank Kent did not at the present moment have to answer this question. For within a few feet of them were Captain Madden, Ruth and Olive.

And whatever of kindness Jack's reception may have lacked was made up for by Olive's enthusiasm. Forgetting her shyness

for one of the occasional times in her life, she ran forward with her eyes shining and a lovely color in her cheeks. Jack thought she had never seen her friend prettier or happier.

"Oh, I am so delighted you have come, Mr. Kent – Frank," she declared. "It seems too much like old times to be formal. Ruth had just told me of your arrival and I could hardly give you time even to speak to Jack."

There could be no doubt of how much pleasure Olive's frank welcome afforded the Ranch girls' former friend. Frank Kent had always been much interested in Olive and her peculiar history from the day when his presence saved her from being taken away from Rainbow Lodge by the Indian woman Laska and her son. He had seen her develop from an apparently poorly educated, part-Indian into a gentle and charming American girl.

And now she was no longer a girl, but almost a woman.

The expression of Frank's brown eyes changed. He gazed so steadily at Olive that she blushed and then smiled.

"I have been seeing so many visions tonight I ought to be prepared for most anything," he remarked. "But I confess I am not for this transformation of Olive into a sea nymph." The young man made no effort to conceal his admiration as he held Olive's hand in his own a little longer than was necessary.

For just half an instant Jack wondered; then she brought herself sharply to task. Because of her own recent experience why should she be dwelling so much on one subject? Besides, without wishing any one to guess it, she was interested in Frank

Kent's and Captain Madden's manner toward each other. Captain Madden approached to shake hands with his cousin with entire amiability, but to Jack's irritation Frank's behavior was hardly civil. The young man never had been able to disguise his real feelings (the trait is not an English one); so now he bowed coldly. Then he continued talking to Ruth and Olive, almost as though the older man were not present.

If all of Jack's friends had been doing their level best to force her into the championship of Captain Madden, they could hardly have arranged a better method. She slipped her arm through the older man's at this moment in a very pretty fashion and together they led the way back to the ball room.

It was now a good deal past midnight and Ruth decided that the time had come for saying farewell. Jean was dancing with Giovanni Colonna and Frieda with Leon. But in a few moments they were persuaded to stop, and the Ranch party found the Princess Colonna, to say good-night.

The Princess had appeared at her ball in the character of Atalanta, the maiden who could run more swiftly than any man in the world. To all her suitors she had imposed the condition that she should be the prize of the man who could conquer her in a race, and had been finally won by the youth who dropped the golden apples at her feet, which she stooped to pick up.

Jean's Princess wore a crimson robe and around her yellow hair a wreath of golden laurel leaves. In her hand she carried a golden apple.

Yet in spite of the magnificence of the scene about her, she excused herself from her guests and went with the Ranch girls to Jean's room. Jean was going home tonight with her family.

Quite like another girl, who was neither a Princess nor yet a mythological character, the Princess Colonna kissed Jean good-by.

"I do wish you could let one of your girls stay with me always," she said, when she and Ruth were parting. "I think I am often homesick for America and the old life in the west which I led as a child. Jean has made me feel almost young again."

And though Ruth and the four girls laughed at the suggestion of the Princess' needing to feel young, each one of them noticed that when one studied her face closely there were lines about her mouth and eyes.

On the way home, the five women crowded into one carriage, Jean turned to her chaperon: "I know it isn't good taste to talk about people, Ruth dear, when one has been visiting them, so please don't reproach me. But I could not help seeing while I was the Princess' guest that, without knowing it, she has been a kind of Atalanta. Only in the race for happiness the golden apple she stopped to pick up was not money. She had wealth enough, but it was a title and a great position. The Prince may be very nice. I did not learn to know him very well, but certainly he seemed more like his wife's father than her husband. How can a girl ever marry a man twice as old as she is?"

CHAPTER XVI

LEAVING ROME

"I AM sorry, Jean, that you think no one could care for me for myself, and that it is my money that is my sole attraction. If that is true I could wish for my own part that the Rainbow mine had never been discovered."

The two cousins, Jack and Jean, were alone in their sitting room in their hotel in Rome. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, six days after the Princess' ball, and although it was raining and a cold, disagreeable afternoon, Ruth, Olive and Frieda had gone forth on another sight-seeing pilgrimage.

Jack had been writing letters, but had ceased and gone over to stand by the window when Jean began her conversation. There was just a chance that it might be wiser for her cousin not to be able to see her face, for she was quicker to arrive at conclusions than any other one of them.

But Jean had said more than Jack supposed she would have dared. Now she turned from pretending to view the dismal picture of chilly orange trees and chillier marble statuary and her gray eyes met Jean's brown ones coldly.

Jean sighed. Somehow she and Jack had so often managed to misunderstand each other, ever since they were little girls. And now, when she particularly wanted to keep her cousin from

growing angry and to talk things over candidly, why, as usual, she had begun matters by putting her foot in it. Jack had such an uncomfortable fashion of growing white and quiet when she was furious, instead of crimson and teary like Jean and Frieda. Why on earth had Ruth ever appointed her to tell Jack Frank Kent's account of his cousin and to find out whether she cared for him. It was certainly Ruth's place to have done it herself. Why in the world hadn't she had the sense to decline.

"But I never said anything in the least like that, Jack, and it is not fair of you to suggest it," Jean replied, doing her best to answer as gently as possible. "It was only that I told you we had good reason to believe that Captain Madden is a fortune-hunter. I don't know, of course, whether you care in the least who or what he is, but he is desperately poor, has had to resign from the British army because he didn't or couldn't pay his debts, and, and – do you care to hear anything else?"

Jack's eyes flashed curiously. Jean remembered how ever since she was a little girl her cousin's eyes had had this fashion of turning dark when any one opposed her will. And they had all thought Jack so entirely changed by her illness, so much softened, so much readier to give up her own way to other people's. At this instant Jean wondered if any one ever really changed in the leading traits of character?

"I don't care to learn anything more just now to Captain Madden's discredit," Jack was saying quietly and reasonably enough, "but I would like very much to know how you and Ruth,

and Olive and Frieda for that matter, have heard so much in such a short time? Is it Frank Kent who has told you? Because if he has, I should like to tell you that Captain Madden had warned me Frank was apt to say disagreeable things about him. As for his being poor and having had to leave the army because of it, why of course I knew that. And I don't believe I care to hear anything more on the subject that you may wish to say."

"But you *must*, Jack," Jean ordered unwisely. "Unless you can positively swear to me that Captain Madden means nothing in the world to you and that you do not intend having any further friendship with him. Ruth told me if I could make you promise this, we need not speak of the matter again."

Jack bit her lips. However angry Jean's interference might be making her, this was no time to be losing her temper like a silly child.

"I can make you no such promise, Jean, and I don't think Ruth should have allowed you to ask it of me. But there is one thing I should like very much to have you tell me. How did Frank Kent happen to come to Rome at this especial time? Before we left America I asked him to wait until we reached England before joining us, and all of you knew of my letter and made no objections. I thought it would be better for us to have the first of our journey to ourselves while we were learning to be more experienced travelers. Frank said he understood and agreed, and yet here he turns up in Rome without writing me and straightway begins interfering in my affairs. I used to like Frank very much in

the old days at the ranch, but no amount of friendship can make me forgive – "

"You need not be so unfair to Frank, Jack," Jean interrupted, losing control of herself at this evidence of Jack's liking for the middle-aged man whom she had always detested, and whom the other members of her family were now learning to dislike almost as much. "I wrote Frank Kent while I was staying with the Princess Colonna, begging him to join us here in Rome at once. Ruth had said she was afraid you were growing too much interested in Captain Madden and that we ought to be finding out more about him. I knew Frank would know, and I thought you would believe what *he* said. Frank is here now, waiting downstairs to talk to you. Perhaps he will have more influence than I can." And without daring to find out whether or not her cousin would consent, Jean darted quickly from the room. Something or other Jack called after her. Nevertheless Jean preferred neither to hear nor heed and a few minutes after reappeared with Frank Kent.

During her brief absence Jacqueline was trying desperately hard to make up her mind what she had best do. To run away, declining to see Frank, would look as though she feared what he might have to tell her. To stay – Jack wondered how far in her present mood she might trust herself?

Certainly, on his entrance, Frank appeared as supremely uncomfortable as a young man could, which should have softened Jack's heart or her temper.

However, his first words were as unfortunate as Jean's had been.

"I never could have dreamed it would be necessary for me to tell you all this, Jack," he began. "I never have thought of you except as a child – well, not a child exactly, but a jolly, sensible kind of a girl. And now, oh, it is too absurd to find you thinking you have a liking for a man like Bob Madden! He is more or less of a rascal, you know," Frank blurted with the dreadful English directness which the Ranch girls had used to like in him.

Jack had been listening so quietly that he had no idea of what mood she was in. The next instant, however, it was easy enough for him to guess. Jack was sitting quite still in a tall carved chair with her head bent a little forward and both hands clasped so tightly together in her lap that the knuckles showed white. The lines of the girl's face were always clearly cut, but today they seemed more so. Even Jean noticed how deeply gray her cousin's eyes looked and how crimson her lips. The bronze of her hair was of an even richer tone than usual. Inwardly Jean sighed again. If only Jack could realize how splendidly handsome she was and how worth while, would she waste any more of her time and their's on such an undesirable friendship?

But Jack was speaking. "No, I am not a child, Frank," she declared, "though I am sorry you think I am no longer a jolly or sensible girl. You see, I am nearly twenty and I don't believe you are more than three years older. Ever since you and Jean began talking to me this afternoon I have been wondering why you had

agreed that I cared for Captain Madden. I have never said a word of his liking for me or of mine for him. And I am sure he has never spoken to Ruth or anybody else."

"That is just the horriddest part of it," Jean murmured irritably. But her cousin went on without heeding her. "The truth is I have been trying this whole week to find out whether or not I cared enough for Captain Madden to promise to be his wife. I was intending to write to him and beg him to wait a little longer, when Jean came in to talk to me. Now you have both helped me make up my mind. I shall not ask him to wait. I shall tell him that I do care and that I do not believe the things I hear against him. Oh, he warned me long ago, Frank, of the trouble he had had with your family, of how your father had inherited all the money so that no one else had any – "

But the rest of Jack's declaration was discontinued because of Jean's bursting suddenly into tears and rushing out of the room.

Frank picked up his hat uncertainly. "I suppose it is not worth while for me to tell you anything further, Jack, if you have determined not to believe me," he declared. "Nevertheless I feel it my duty to warn you that I shall talk freely to your chaperon, Miss Drew, and that I shall also write Jim Colter. Oh, say, Jack, I can't bear it, you know, for you to go and throw yourself away like this!" Frank had started his reproof like Jack's grandfather, but the ending was a good deal more like the boy friend for whom she had once had such an affection.

Then for a moment Jack's lips trembled and she wanted to say

something kinder, except for her fear of following Jean's example and beginning to cry.

At this moment, however, Ruth Drew, still wearing her hat and coat, came hurrying into the room. She had just seen Jean and knew what had passed between Frank and the two girls.

Ruth put her arms around Jack. "It is my fault, dear, and I shall never forgive myself. I have been blind and a coward straight through. You are too young to know anything of the world and have been left too much to your own judgment. I ought to have stopped this acquaintance at once and I ought to have talked to you myself this afternoon instead of having Jean do it. I was just hoping against hope that we had all been mistaken and that you would laugh at our idea. But, oh Jack, you won't write the letter you have just said. You *must not*, dear; I forbid it. You are not yet of age and I am here in Europe as your chaperon, temporarily as your guardian. What will Mr. Colter think and say?"

Quietly Jack drew herself away from Ruth's agitated embrace. Frank had already gone out of the room.

"Please don't talk to me as if I were a silly child, too, Ruth, please," Jack pleaded. "I am sorry to be disobedient; but you can't forbid my writing to the man who has asked me to be his wife. After all, it is *my* life and *my* love Captain Madden has asked for. But I don't want you and Jean and Olive and Frieda to be angry with me and not love me any more. I must write Captain Madden, of course, but after that I will wait until you hear from Jim." Jack's self-control was giving way now and she covered her

face with her hands.

"Of course you will tell Jim what you think and what Frank says, and poor Jim will be nearly crazy. Because he is sure to believe you as long as he has always been in love with you. But Jim has more charity and sympathy and will want me to be happy and – " Jack could not go on.

Ruth was by this time shedding tears herself, so that the atmosphere of the room with the rain pouring down outside was distinctly dismal.

"Don't we want you to be happy too, Jack? You must believe that; but I suppose you consider we are unjustly prejudiced. Still, dear, won't you promise me at least not to see Captain Madden again until we have heard from Jim?" Ruth implored.

There was no immediate answer, and for this much the older woman was distinctly thankful. If Jacqueline Ralston would only once give her word there would be no going back upon it.

"Yes, Ruth, I promise," she replied after a little while.

The next moment Ruth had led her to a chair and after Jack had seated herself, she rested on the arm for a moment, pressing her cheek against the girl's golden-brown hair. For although Ruth was a good many years the older, Jack was now several inches taller than her chaperon.

"Are you so sure Captain Madden does mean your happiness?" Ruth whispered, and then held her breath, so fearful did she feel of the answer.

For the second time Jack hesitated. "Yes, I *think* so; that is,

Captain Madden says he will spend his life trying to make me happy. But, oh Ruthie, please don't let's talk about anything more that is serious just now. It seems to me that everybody has been scolding me all afternoon and I'm tired." This was spoken so like a fretful child that actually Ruth was able to summon a smile.

Before her reply, however, Frieda came strolling in, carrying a box of chocolate drops and thoughtfully biting one in two.

She extended her refreshments to her sister and chaperon. "Dick Grant has just brought me these; they are American, and I *am* grateful to him," she remarked pensively. "That foolish Mrs. Grant told me that the candy business was such a be-au-ti-ful business and I laughed at her. Now I am beginning to think so too. I am so homesick for most anything that is American. Isn't Rome dismal today? Ruth took Olive and me to another old picture gallery and just as we were trying to take an interest in things, suddenly she decided that we had to rush back to the hotel. Don't you think we have had enough of Rome? Jean says she is tired and I am, and Ruth and Olive say they are a little bit. Besides, if we are to see enough of Europe to count, this summer, ought we not to be starting out again?"

Ruth had risen and walked toward the window. She was not sure of how much Frieda knew of what was troubling all of them this afternoon. However, she devoutly hoped that there might be no further reference to it until the atmosphere was more peaceful.

Frieda placed herself on a stool facing her sister.

"Jack, let's go away from Rome in a few days?" she demanded.

"I am sure the rest of us would like to if you are willing."

Jack shook her head. "No, no, Frieda, not for another week or two," she protested. "I am sure there are still lots of things that we ought to see."

"There would be if we stayed here until we died," the younger girl grumbled. "Look here, Jack, you know you like to preach to me sometimes, though you are mostly pretty good about it, now I would like you to remember our compact. Didn't we promise that if three of us decided that we wanted to go to a certain place or do a certain thing the other two had to follow suit. So if Ruth and Jean and Olive and I are weary of Rome and want to go away, don't you think it your duty to do what we like? Just think it over, dear!" And Frieda popped a chocolate drop into her sister's mouth and then one into her own with instant promptness.

Jack got up and moved toward the door. Somehow, in the face of the question she was now having to solve, Frieda's reference to their compact seemed childish and absurd. Could she actually have felt young enough not a month ago to have entered into such an agreement with all seriousness? And yet to give one's word was final.

"All right, Frieda baby," Jack assented, as she was about to cross the threshold, "if the others really do want to leave Rome now, it would not be fair to keep you here on my account. Wherever you go I will come along."

When Jack had finally disappeared and was safely out of hearing, Ruth turned from pretending to stare out the window

and gave Frieda an ecstatic hug. "That is the best thing that has happened to us this day, baby!" she exclaimed, not pretending to explain her remark.

Frieda received the mark of affection placidly; she was perfectly accustomed to being embraced by her family at unexpected moments.

"Yes, I thought it would be best to get Jack away from the chance of seeing him, though I did not want her to guess that was our reason," she remarked sagely. "Of course Captain Madden is Jack's first truly beau and she takes love and things like that so seriously. She and Olive are not like Jean and me. She'll get over it, though, I am pretty sure, if we can only get her into the country where she can hunt and fish and do the things she used to do. The sky is too blue and there are too many flowers in Italy."

Then Frieda went on pensively devouring dozens of chocolates, while Ruth retired into her own room to lie down. She was half amused and half aghast at Frieda's sudden burst of worldly wisdom. Indeed, she was not at all sure whether she wished to shake the youngest of the Ranch girls or whether she desired to embrace her again.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OVERSEER OF THE RAINBOW RANCH

"OH," sighed Frieda sleepily, "isn't it too delicious to hear the American language spoken once again!"

Ruth and the three other Ranch girls laughed almost as sleepily as Frieda had spoken. They were on the night train coming up from Folkestone to London, after having crossed the English channel from Boulogne earlier in the afternoon. It was now the first week of June.

"Bravo, Frieda!" teased Jean. "One can always count on the younger Miss Ralston's saying *the* memorable thing as soon as the Rainbow Ranch party arrives on a new soil. Who would have thought of the American tongue being employed in the British Isles. I shall mention it to Frank Kent as soon as we see him."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't be funny, Jean Bruce," the first speaker protested, "for you know exactly what I mean. I suppose I should have said the English language. But even if the English do speak deep down in their throats and their voices are kind of choky and queer, at least one can understand what they mean without consulting a dictionary or trying to remember something one has learned at school. After having heard nothing but Italian, German and French for over two months, I could almost have

hugged that porter who carried our bags off the boat."

Frieda had been resting her head on her chaperon's shoulder, but now lifted it to continue her argument with Jean. However, Ruth drew her back to her former place.

"Don't be a purist at this late date, Jean," Ruth murmured, shaking her head in a kind of mild reproof. "I must confess I am feeling pretty much as Frieda does. English or American, whichever you may prefer to call it, after our continental wanderings, England does seem almost like home."

And Ruth closed her eyes, she and Frieda both dropping off into a gentle doze, while Olive and Jean talked in whispers, and Jack stared out of the window into the darkness.

Since leaving Rome, the five young women had become proverbial Cook's tourists. They had been traveling almost continuously, sight-seeing during every possible hour, and allowing no time for loitering. For after Rome had followed Florence, Venice and then Paris, until now they were on their way to spend the fashionable season in London.

Such rapid journeying had not been Ruth's original idea, but somehow after Jack's experience in Rome it had seemed best to keep her constantly busy, allowing as little time as possible for reflection or argument.

Faithful to her word, Jacqueline Ralston had not seen Captain Madden since the afternoon of her talk with Ruth. At that time, it is true, she had promised to wait only until an answer could arrive from her own and Ruth's letters to her guardian, Jim Colter, but

later she had made a further promise to Jim.

Almost from the day of his arrival at the Rainbow Lodge, the overseer of the ranch and afterwards the girls' devoted protector and friend, had had a peculiar understanding of Jack's character. When she was a small girl, insisting on some order of hers being obeyed or angered because it had not been, Jim's "Steady, boss!" used always to help her control herself. For reasonableness was ordinarily one of Jack's strongest characteristics. Always she wished to be just and patient. Her wilfulness came not so much from original sin as because she had had too much her own way as a child and had had to depend too much on her own wisdom.

Her mother had died when she was a very young girl and her father not so many years after. Why, when Jacqueline Ralston was fourteen, virtually she was, under Jim's guidance, the head of a thousand-acre ranch, and a kind of mother to little Frieda and Jean.

So, though Jim Colter was more broken up by the news in Ruth's and Jack's letters than he had been by anything since Ruth's refusal of his love, he wrote to Jack with more tact than you could have expected from a big, blunt fellow like Jim.

It took him almost one entire night, however, to write the letter.

For one thing, he did not say that he believed just what Ruth Drew had written him of Captain Madden, nor did he mention Frank Kent's information, which painted an even worse picture of Jack's friend. Nor did he demand that Jack immediately break

off her engagement or stop writing Captain Madden. He simply suggested, as he had in the old days at the ranch, that "the boss go slow" and would Jack agree not to see Captain Madden and not to think of him more than she could help, until Jim himself could find out something more about him? For of course Frank Kent might be prejudiced and Ruth might be mistaken. Jim would see to the whole matter himself, and Jack could surely count on his wanting to give every man a square deal.

Jack had at once agreed to her guardian's request. She realized that Jim's efforts must take time, as he was a long way from proper sources of information. So she had meant to be and had been very patient, trusting that Jim would never believe Captain Madden the kind of villain that Frank Kent had declared him.

Jack was reflecting on this now as the lights from hundreds of small houses along the line of the road blinked at her like so many friendly eyes. Probably Jim would let her hear what conclusion he had reached some time during their stay in England. She was rather dreading this visit to London. For not once had she seen Frank Kent since their interview in the hotel sitting room in Rome. Frank had come to say good-bye the next day, as he was leaving that evening for home; but Jack had excused herself from meeting him. Now there would be no way of escaping, for Frank was Ruth's and the other girls' devoted friend, as he had formerly been hers. They would want to be with him as much as possible. Jack glanced at Olive. Had she not imagined several years ago that Olive liked Frank better than any other young man of their

acquaintance? Certainly she had seemed to prefer him to Donald Harmon, in spite of Don's devotion.

Well, for the sake of her family, she must conquer her own unfriendly attitude. Candidly, she was sorry not to be able to like Frank herself as she once had. How much they had used to talk of her first visit to England! Then Frank had insisted that Ruth and the four Ranch girls were to make a long visit at his country estate in Surrey. He wished them to know his family intimately, as for several years he had been talking continuously of his western friends. Jack regretted the loss of this visit. Frank had made her almost love his beautiful English home in his homesick days in the west, when he was ill and had chosen her for his special confidante.

Just in time, a sigh that was about to escape into their compartment was surreptitiously swallowed. Ruth was stirring and begging Frieda to wake up. Olive and Jean were dragging down luggage from the racks overhead. And where the twinkling lights outside had been hundreds, now there were thousands. They must have reached the outskirts of London and would soon be entering the Charing-Cross station.

"I believe," announced Jack, who had not spoken for the past half hour, "that I have more real feeling about seeing London than any other city in the world. I think we have something more in common than just the language, baby." And she helped Frieda get into her traveling coat.

Perhaps Ruth had been asleep, for she appeared more than

commonly flurried. "I hope you girls understand just exactly what we are to do," she began nervously. "I declare, I don't consider that I shall ever make a successful traveler, I do so hate the excitement and responsibility of arriving in places. I wish now I had allowed Frank to meet us. He was good enough to offer to come in from the country, but I declined."

"But, my beloved Ruth, what have we to do but get ourselves and our belongings into cabs and drive to our hotel? I will manage if you prefer it," Jack proposed.

Their train had stopped and a guard was opening the door. Several porters soon had their bags and steamer rugs, and almost before they were aware of what they were doing the five young women were following the men down the station platform, Jack in advance, Ruth and Olive together, and Jean and Frieda bringing up the rear.

Once inside the gate, however, the four girls were startled past speech on seeing the usually dignified Jack stop for an instant, clasp her hands tight together, then stare and with a cry rush forward and positively fling herself into a tall man's arms.

Their silence and stupidity only lasted for an instant. Ruth was next to run after Jack and seize the man's one disengaged hand.

"Oh, Jim, oh Mr. Colter, why didn't you tell us you were coming to London? I never was so glad to see anyone before in my life!" And this from the former dignified "school marm." Probably Ruth had never forgotten her reserve so completely in her life as at this moment. Tears of delight gathered unheeded

in her eyes.

Jack and Ruth were both swept aside by the onslaught of Frieda, Jean and Olive.

"How on earth did you decide to come? When did you come? Why did you come?" Jean demanded all in one breath and then stopped to laugh at herself.

Jim was staring at the little party critically. He looked more western and unconventional than ever in his big, broad-brimmed, felt hat, his loose fitting clothes, with the tan of his outdoor life still showing on his strong, handsome face.

Jim's deeply blue eyes suddenly crinkled up at the corners in a way they had when he wanted to laugh or to show any particular emotion.

"Well," he drawled in his slowest and most exaggerated cowboy fashion. "I've been thinkin' lately that I was gittin' a bit tired of bein' everlastingly left at the post. Seems like you been acquirin' so much culture and clothes I was kind of afraid you might not want to know me when you got back to the ranch. I ain't so sure about the culture, but I'll capture the glad rags all right soon as you girls are able to go on a shoppin' party or so with me." And Jim, glancing at an Englishman just passing them, attired in a top hat and frock coat, pretended to wink.

No one was deceived in the least by his poor pretense of a joke. Jim was really so much upset by the pleasure of seeing Ruth and the girls that he was talking foolishness to cover his emotion.

Frieda's break, therefore, saved them all "Oh Jim, won't you

look too funny, dressed like a gentleman!" she exclaimed, and in mock wrath Jim marched the five of them off to their cabs.

CHAPTER XVIII

RELIEF OR REGRET?

"TELL me what you have found out, Jim. I think I know why you have come all this way to London," Jacqueline Ralston said.

The man and girl were seated on a bench in Kew Gardens, the wonderful park a few miles out from London, two afternoons after the arrival of the Rainbow Ranch party. Ruth and the three other girls had gone to view Westminster Abbey. But Jack, pleading a need of fresh air, arranged for a few quiet hours with Jim.

The man rose and thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, started striding up and down. His blue eyes were curiously gentle, but his mouth was stern. Indeed, he represented a strange combination of anger and nervousness. Finally, before speaking, he placed himself on the seat next Jack again, but this time so that he could look directly into her face.

Jack's eyes were down, her manner quiet and reserved. The man had no way of guessing how his news would affect her.

"See here, boss," he began after a moment, "you and I've been pretty much on the level with each other *all the time*, haven't we? We ain't tried to keep things back 'cause they hurt." He took the girl's gloved hand, patting it softly. "Sometimes, maybe, I've seemed harder with you, Jack, than with the others. But I always

thought you'd understand. You kind of like to face the music, to know the worst and have things settled quick. Well – "

Possibly Jacqueline's face turned a shade paler; certainly her lips did. Nevertheless, they curved into a kind of a smile.

"Well, we aren't getting them settled very quickly today, are we, Jim?" she returned. "You are right, though, I do like to know the truth. What have you found out about Captain Madden."

"That he ain't no good," Jim replied, forgetting his grammar and all his carefully planned methods of breaking the unpleasant news to the girl. "Seems like the English know how to put it better than we do when they say a fellow is a *cad*. I tell you, Jack, this is honest. I've found out every thing I could from the time this man was a boy. He has never done an honest day's work in his life. Why, I even learned that he had written back to Wyoming to ask what the Rainbow Mine was worth. 'Course, I don't claim he don't care for you, child – most any man might be able to manage that. But to think of John Ralston's daughter and my old boss of the Rainbow Ranch marrying a man old enough to be her father, and such a man!" Jim had been trying his best to hold in, but now he swore softly under his breath. "Say, Jack, old girl, say you believe I'm telling you the truth. I hate to hurt you, the Lord only knows how much, but if you don't tell me you'll break it all off, I think I'll go plumb crazy." And Jim mopped the moisture from his brow, though it was a peculiarly cool day.

Jack was so painfully silent. Could a girl not quite twenty suffer much over an interrupted love affair? Jim did not know. He

remembered his own grief when Ruth refused him. It had been awful! He carried the ache inside of him to this day. Glancing at the girl near him, he saw that the tears, which came so rarely, were now in her clear gray eyes.

"I believe you, Jim," she returned finally. "I believe you'd play fair with me and with Captain Madden even if you loathed the idea of my caring for him. Don't worry, old man. I promise this is the end. But, please, would you mind if I cried a while? No one is paying any attention to us and I think I'd like to very much."

Without waiting for permission, Jack's shoulders shook, and she covered her face with her hands. But a few seconds later Jim sighed so miserably that Jack slipped one of her hands inside his and held it close.

"I am not crying because my heart is broken, Jim dear," she explained; "I think I am crying because I am ashamed of myself. Sometimes I wonder how many lessons it will take before I learn not to be so self-willed. I have made things so hard for Ruth and for the other girls. Yet I believed what Captain Madden told me; I thought people were prejudiced against him just because he was poor. And I hate that. So when Ruth and Frank said such horrid things I told him I would marry him if you would give your consent. And, oh Jim, I have been so afraid lately – "

Jack began crying softly again.

"Been so afraid, poor little girl! If you only knew how I dreaded telling you this, I haven't had a good night's sleep in two weeks, and waiting for you to arrive in London nearly broke

my nerve." Jim Colter probably had not shed any tears in almost twenty years, yet he looked perilously on the verge of them now.

Jack pulled at his coat sleeve uncertainly. "But Jim, dear, you don't know what I have been afraid of! I have been afraid you would discover that Captain Madden was all right and that I would then *have* to marry him. I had given him my word. It would not have been honest to go back on it. You see, when we were in Rome I did believe I cared for him. He was awfully kind and interesting and different from any one I had ever known. Then I suppose I was flattered in thinking a so much older, wiser man could care for a stupid girl like me. And Ruth and Frank were dreadfully dictatorial. But since we left Rome, I've been thinking – I feel I have not been doing anything else *but* think. And I realized that I did not really love Captain Madden. I felt as if I should die if he took me away from my family. Still I didn't know just what to do. I was so frightened, Jim, until I saw you there at Charing Cross."

Jim Colter took off his big western hat. The English sky of a June day can be a very lovely thing – soft fleecy clouds, floating over a surface of translucent blue. Jim looked up into it. "I thank Thee, Lord," he whispered reverently, and then, stooping over, kissed Jack.

The next moment he was up on his feet. And though he failed to electrify Kew Gardens by giving his celebrated cowboy yell, he waved his sombrero and the yell apparently took place inside him.

"Come on, Jack, let's do something quick to celebrate or I'm liable to bust with gladness!" he exclaimed. "This is a right pretty park we're in. I hear it's one of *the* most famous on the map, with every known tree growing inside it. Wouldn't you like me to buy it for you, or maybe you can think of some other little remembrance?"

Jack hung on to his arm and the man and girl started off on their sight-seeing expedition together, both feeling as though they were treading on air instead of the velvet softness of the English turf.

"I should like to go back and tell Ruth at once and apologize for being a nuisance," Jack confided, "but I don't want any one to guess I have been crying, and then Ruth will probably be mooning over tombstones in the Abbey until dinner time. I tell you what, Jim, we will have a wonderful dinner party tonight to celebrate and you can wear the new evening clothes you bought yesterday. Then, afterwards, you must take all of us to the theater. Now I have got you to myself, we might as well see Kew and have some tea. I am dreadfully hungry. You can bring Ruth some time by herself and I will promise to keep the girls away."

Jim did not answer. But, under the circumstances, it is perfectly certain that he could have refused Jack nothing in the world.

For the next two hours he could hardly keep his eyes off her. And he seemed especially happy when she devoured three English scones and drank two cups of strong tea.

"Ain't intendin' to pine away, are you, Jack?" he asked. And then, when the girl blushed, he laughed and held out his hand.

"Shake on it once more, boss," he demanded, "and you can count on this, sure thing. You ain't going to make but one man happier than you've made me this day. And that is when you say 'yes' to the right fellow."

CHAPTER XIX

RECONCILIATIONS

LATER that evening the four girls and Ruth were dressed and waiting in their sitting room for Jim Colter to come to them, when Frank Kent's card was sent up to their room. By accident the man at the door gave it first to Jack. The girl's face flooded with color, but she turned at once to Ruth.

"Frank Kent has come to see us," she explained, "and I want very much to see him by myself for a few minutes. If you don't mind, I will go down to meet him."

And as Ruth nodded, Jack disappeared.

Before she got near enough to speak to him, Frank realized that some change had taken place in his former friend since their last meeting in Rome.

For one thing, Jack looked younger and happier. Then she had on some thin white girlish dress, and was coming forward with a smile to greet him.

"I have been perfectly horrid to you, Frank, and I apologize with all my heart," she began immediately. "Yet you knew I had a bad disposition years ago, and still managed to like me a little. Please try again. Our dear Jim Colter is here from the ranch and has made me see things in the right light. But don't let's talk about my mistakes. We are having a dinner and a theater party tonight.

Do join us. Olive and Ruth and everybody will be so glad."

In the elevator on the way upstairs to their apartment, Jack looked at Frank critically for a moment. Not until now had she been willing to make a fair estimate of the changes the two years had wrought in him.

In the first place she could see that Frank had grown a great deal better looking. He had lost the former delicacy which had sent him to the west, and seemed in splendid physical condition. He was six feet tall and had the clear, bright color peculiar to young Englishmen. Frank's expression had always been more serious than most young fellows', and this had been lately increased by his wearing glasses. Tonight, however, his clever brown eyes positively shone with relief. And though he could hardly dare express himself so openly or so eloquently as Jim Colter, Jack appreciated that he was unfeignedly happy over her escape.

Possibly the Rainbow Ranch party and their two men friends had never had a more delightful evening in their lives. They were in such blissfully good spirits. Indeed, each one of the seven felt as though an individual load had been lifted. And particularly because Jack appeared to be the gayest of them all. And Jack *was* happy in feeling herself released from an obligation which lately had begun to weigh upon her like a recurrent nightmare. Moreover, she was particularly anxious not to have her family regard her as broken-hearted.

She whispered to Jean and Frieda before starting for the

theater that they were to leave Ruth and Jim and Frank and Olive together as much as possible, for in so large a party it was necessary to make divisions.

Olive and Frank did sit next one another at the play, but the three girls were not so successful with Jim Colter and Ruth. For there was no doubt but that Jim avoided being alone with Ruth whenever it was possible. He had always been perfectly polite to her, but not once since the night of their parting had he ever voluntarily spent an hour in her society, unless one of the Ranch girls happened to be present.

Of course Ruth was aware of this. What girl or woman can ever fail to be? Nevertheless on their way back to the hotel Ruth turned to Jim.

"Would you mind, Mr. Colter, staying in the sitting room with me for a little while after the girls have gone to bed. I am so anxious to talk to you?" And there was a gentleness and a hesitation in her manner that made it impossible for the man to refuse. Also, he understood what it was she wished to discuss.

Although Jim's manner was gay enough as he told the four girls good-night, Ruth saw with regret that it altered as soon as the last one of them had disappeared. He did not even sit down, but waited by the door, awkwardly fingering his hat like an embarrassed boy who wished to run away but did not quite dare.

Ruth did not ask him to have a chair. She, too, was standing by the open fire, with one foot resting on the fender and her head half turned to gaze at him. She looked a little unlike herself

tonight, or else like her best self. For the Ranch girls had seriously objected to their chaperon's nun-like costumes, which she had had made in Vermont, and insisted on getting her some new clothes in Paris, while they were making their own purchases. Ruth had objected but Olive had solved the problem. Each one of the four girls had presented Ruth with a toilet shortly before leaving Paris. And so much care and affection had each donor put into her gift that she had not had the heart to decline.

Tonight she was wearing Jean's offering, which had been voted the prettiest of the lot. Over an underdress of flame-colored silk there were what Jim considered floating clouds of pale gray chiffon. And at her waist, with a background of the chiffon, was a single flame-colored flower.

Ruth had lost a good deal of her Puritan look; somehow the man thought she seemed more human, more alive. She had a vivid color, and her hair, which Jean had insisted upon dressing, was looser about her face. Jim remembered the moonlight ride they had had together when a lock of her hair had blown across his cheek. Then he brought himself sharply to task.

Ruth had already begun speaking.

"Mr. Colter," she said, "there are so many, many things I want to say to you I hardly know where to begin. I know how you must feel toward me, how you must feel that I have utterly failed in my duty toward Jack, and how nearly I have come to allowing her to wreck her life. There is nothing that you can think about me that I do not about myself. Of course, you know, I erred through

ignorance, and yet ignorance is no excuse. A woman with so little knowledge, so little tact – " Ruth's face was crimsoning all over and she had to put her handkerchief to her eyes to wipe away her tears.

Jim had stepped forward and stood towering above her so that he had to bend his handsome head to see into her face.

"Miss Drew, you are not to go calling yourself bad names and then declare that I feel as you say I do. Honest Injun, Miss Ruth, I haven't had a single one of those feelings about you. Since I have known about this tragedy that poor Jack has nearly gotten us all into, I have been plumb sorry for you with all my heart. How could a little New England girl like you know anything about an accomplished rascal like this fellow Madden? Yet I guessed if Jack wouldn't give in (and she is usually a hard-headed customer), why you'd be blaming yourself for a thing you couldn't prevent until the end of your days. I tell you, Miss Ruth, that thought, besides my love for Jack, kept me hot on that man's trail. And it even helped me break the news to Jack today, which was the hardest part."

Ruth looked up into the deeply blue eyes above hers.

"Jim Colter," she announced quietly, "I believe you are the very best man in the world."

But instead of being pleased, Jim drew back as though his feelings had been deeply hurt. "Don't say that, Miss Ruth," he begged. "And don't you go and believe because I don't mention it that I have forgotten that sin I committed a way back in my youth

and the way it made you feel about me. You have been awfully good treating me so kind and polite whenever you have to meet me around with the girls. I've done my best not to worry you any more'n I could help."

"Oh, Mr. Colter, oh Jim," Ruth faltered, "please don't say a cruel thing like that to me. Haven't you forgiven me after almost three years? You must have known that in a few months, as soon as I got away from the ranch, I realized how narrow and foolish and blind I had been. You are a good man; you are the bravest, kindest, most forgiving in the whole world. And I don't care, I know you have forgotten about me long ago, but I want you to know I love you. It seems to me sometimes a woman must have the right to say this just to prove she can be as generous as a man. But I don't care whether I have the right or not. I am just saying it because it is true."

"For heaven's sake, stop, Ruth," the big man implored.

But the little New England school teacher, who had hardly ever dared show her real feelings before in her life, would not be silenced.

"Don't worry, Jim, I shall never regret what I have said, though I shall never speak of it again – and perhaps never see you after you sail for America."

Jim swept the little woman off her feet and held her for a moment to his heart.

"Don't you dare say a thing like that to me, child," he threatened. "And don't you believe you are going to lose sight of

me more than a few hours at a time while both of us are living in this world. Why, you little white, New England snow-maiden. The very idea of your having the nerve to stand up right before my face and say you love a big, good-for-nothing, sinful fellow like me. But I kind of wish you'd wake Jack and the other three girls up and tell them we are going to get married tomorrow."

CHAPTER XX

AN ENGLISH COUNTRY PLACE

TWO figures on horseback galloped rapidly across the English downs, the one a number of yards in advance of the other.

A low stone fence divided the adjoining meadows. But at a slight touch from its rider the first horse rose easily in the air, clearing the fence without difficulty. On the farther side it stumbled, plunged forward until steadied by the hands on its reins and came gradually to the earth upon its knees. Then the rider slid off and talking quietly to the horse brought it up on its feet again, just at the moment that her escort jumped the fence and drew up alongside her.

"Jacqueline Ralston, I take off my hat to you. You are one of the best riders I ever saw in my life. Goodness, but you gave me a nasty moment when you made that unexpected plunge forward and I had a vision of your going over head-foremost." Frank Kent's face was pale from the moment's alarm, but he tried making his voice as calm as possible.

"Yes, it was stupid of me," Jack returned. "There evidently was a hole this side the fence and I managed to make straight for it. Look, will you, Frank, while I get my breath."

Jack took the reins of both horses and waited for a moment, while the young man made the search. It required hardly a

second, for the depression in the ground was only a few feet back of them. There it was a hole not more than twelve inches in diameter and half as many inches deep, yet of a peculiarly dangerous character for horseback riders.

"Suppose I had broken your father's finest riding horse's leg!" Jack exclaimed, when her companion had made the report and pointed out the spot to her. "Gracious, I should have been so sorry, both because of him and because of the horse, too!" Jack added. Having now given up both bridles into Frank's keeping, she continued patting the quivering sides of the beautiful animal, which had not yet recovered from its moment of danger.

"Let us sit down here a few moments and rest, Jack," the young man suggested. "I can tie the horses nearby and it will be a good idea to let them have a short breathing space. The others won't miss us for a while yet; we were too far ahead."

Several yards beyond there was a clump of old chestnut trees, and Jack sat down in the shade of one of them, where Frank joined her a little later.

Flinging himself down lengthwise on the ground, the young man rested his head in his hands, facing his companion.

Jacqueline had taken off her riding hat and was adjusting the heavy braids of her hair, which had become loosened by her plunge.

"I say, Jack, you do look awfully fit these days. You turned a bit pale a few moments ago, but now your color is as good as ever. I was afraid you might feel kind of used up. It was like you

to start talking about the possible loss of a horse when you might have been smashed up," Frank began.

Jack laughed rather faintly. "Oh, I had a bad moment too," she confessed. "What is the use of pretending to be a heroine when it is not true? But one can't be laid up for nearly two years as I was without even being able to walk and face the chance of another accident with altogether steady nerves. And just when I was feeling exactly like my old self. I tell you, Frank, this visit to your father and mother has been a beautiful experience for all of us. I can't tell you how grateful we are. I believe it has been this delicious outdoor life and the news of Ruth's and Jim's engagement that has made me absolutely well in a hurry, after taking rather a long time to get fairly started."

"It can't mean to you, Jack, what it has to me," the young man answered in such a queer, constrained voice that the girl looked at him curiously from under her downcast lids.

Jack wondered if he were going to tell her of his love for Olive. Earnestly she hoped that he would not – at least, not today. She hated this business of growing up. Perhaps her own unfortunate experience earlier in their trip had given her this foolish prejudice. That must be the reason why she had developed such an odd, choking sensation as soon as she believed that Frank intended making her his confidante. She wished that they might all remain good friends as they had in the past. How dreadful it would be to have to give Olive up – or Frank! Besides, think of Donald Harmon's feelings! A month ago Donald had joined them

in England and since had been Olive's shadow. Indeed, the young man had not made the slightest effort to disguise his attitude. He was in love with Olive and did not seem to mind the whole world's knowing it.

But Olive! Jack glanced carefully at Frank and was glad to see that he was not looking at her, but was still trying to reach a decision. There could be little doubt in Jack's mind that Olive must prefer Frank Kent to Donald. Not that Olive had ever confided in her. But there had always been something in her friend's manner to make Jack feel this unconsciously. She believed that she had noticed it particularly in the past two weeks while they had been the guests of Frank's parents, Lord and Lady Kent, at their wonderful country estate.

Jack stirred. Then she must not be keeping Frank so long away.

The entire house party from the castle was spending the day in the woods, and the others must have halted somewhere nearer home and would be expecting them to return and join them.

"I think we had best go back now, Frank, please. I am not in the least upset by my near tumble," the girl announced. "But you will not mention it to Ruth or Jim or any of the girls? It did not amount to anything, yet I don't want Ruth and Jim to have the slightest shade of anxiety to spoil their beautiful time of being engaged. Poor Jim was desperate at first at the thought of waiting almost six weeks before his marriage, but now the ceremony is so near I think he would not have given up this time for a great deal.

You see, he and Ruth are only going to take a week's honeymoon journey, as your mother has been good enough to promise to look after us. And then we are all going back to the ranch together. This time poor Ruth will be dreadfully well chaperoned."

"Yes, I know, Jack, but please don't go just yet. There is something that – " Frank hesitated. Evidently, however, Jacqueline had not heard him, for she had gotten up as she finished speaking and was moving off.

The young people found the rest of their party about half a mile back, where they had chosen their picnic grounds in the neighborhood of a brook. Jim and Ruth were not with them, but Olive and Donald Harmon, Frieda and Dick Grant, Jean and the young Italian, Giovanni Colonna, Lord and Lady Kent and Frank's two sisters, Marcia and Dorothy, were sitting in a great circle and in the center was evidently a gypsy woman. Frank had met Dick Grant in London and thinking him a nice American boy had asked him down to Kent castle for the day. Giovanni Colonna had been his guest for a week.

Apparently the advent of the two newcomers had interrupted the flow of the fortune-teller's narrative, for she was standing perfectly silent with her big, rather impertinent black eyes fastened on Olive's face.

"Please send the gypsy away, Lady Kent," Olive begged. "She seems to be making up her mind to say something to me. And years ago I had such a dismal fortune told me by a gypsy who stopped at the Rainbow Lodge that I have never been able to

forget it."

Frank was paying off the woman and telling her to be gone, so that he did not hear the next few moments' conversation.

"What did she tell you, Olive?" Frieda asked. "I remember we thought it queer at the time, but I have forgotten what it was."

Olive flushed. She had her old childish dislike of being the center of attention, and yet she had brought this upon herself.

"Oh, she told me that I was going to find out my parentage some day, and I have. Then she told me that I would inherit a large fortune." Olive glanced a little nervously at Donald Harmon, adding, "but of course that will never come true. And – and I can't remember much else. The story was told in a kind of jingle."

"Yes, and I recall it better than you do, Olive dear," Jack suddenly broke in. "The ridiculous woman suggested such abominable things about me. She said that without knowing it I was going to bring sorrow upon my best-beloved Olive. I don't know just in what way she meant it, but of course it was a ridiculous falsehood." And Jack flushed so hotly and spoke with such unnecessary intensity that her listeners laughed.

At the same time a man servant appeared, announcing that luncheon was about to be served. And Olive and Donald, who had been informed where the lovers were to be found, went off together to summon Ruth and Jim.

CHAPTER XXI

MIDNIGHT CONFIDENCES

A FAINT knock at her bedroom door several nights after their picnic in the woods startled Jean. It was half-past twelve o'clock, and thirty minutes before all the guests in the castle had gone to their own apartments, an informal dance having made them more tired than usual.

But Jean was not a coward, and, still brushing her hair, walked over to her door. Immediately she heard Jack's voice on the outside.

"Please let me in, Jean dear, I hope I haven't frightened you." Then Jack slipped inside and stood irresolutely in the center of the big chamber. She was ready for retiring, clad in a pink dressing gown, with her hair hanging in two braids over her shoulders.

"I was kind of lonely," she explained. "It is very grand for each one of us to have an apartment to ourselves, but I am not used to it."

She sank down on a low cushion in front of the big open fire and in a few moments was staring into it, having apparently forgotten her cousin's presence in her own room.

However, without speaking, Jean went on quietly undressing. Then, when she had finished, she too got into a kimona and piled

her grate high with fresh logs. The next moment she had placed herself on another cushion by the side of her unexpected visitor.

But Jean asked no questions.

"I hope you are not very sleepy, dear," Jacqueline remarked finally. "Of course you know that I wouldn't have disturbed you at such an unholy hour except that there was something important I felt I must talk to you about."

"It isn't – " Jean began. But to her intense relief Jack immediately shook her head.

"No, it isn't and never will be again. And the sooner that all of my family forget my miserable mistake, the happier you will make me. It is something different and yet it is such a kind of intimate, personal thing, I can't decide whether I have the right to mention it even to you."

"Ruth and Jim?" the other girl queried. For the second time Jack demurred.

"No." But she kept on gazing at the fire rather than at her confidante.

"See here, Jean," she inquired suddenly. "I wonder if it has ever occurred to you that Frank Kent cared, well, cared more than just an ordinary lot for Olive? Perhaps it does not seem exactly square of me to be prying into Frank's and Olive's feelings for each other, but on my honor I have a real reason for wishing to know."

Jean's big brown eyes opened wide with amazement. Was there any question in the world farther from her imagination than

this unexpected one?

Notwithstanding, Jean gave the subject a few moments of serious consideration. "No," she replied at length, "I have been thinking over all the time I can recall from Olive's and Frank's first acquaintance with each other. And I don't remember a single occasion when he seemed more than just a good friend of hers. To tell you the truth, Jack, I personally should never have dreamed of Frank's being in love with Olive in a thousand years! Whatever put it into your mind? Why you and Frank, after you got over your first prejudice against his being the guest of our old enemies, the Nortons, were much more intimate than the rest of us. I always took it as a matter of course that he liked you best until you had that quarrel in Rome. Lately, though, you seem to have made up."

Jack frowned. "Oh, certainly we were more intimate then. But in those days Olive was too shy to reveal her real self or her emotions to anyone except us. Besides, we were only children. Still, I used to notice even then that Olive grew more cheerful and animated when Frank was around. And afterwards in Rome and the last month since our arrival in England, why haven't you *seen* the change in her? Please think, Jean dear, for it may be of the very greatest importance what you tell me. You see, I am so stupid and make such dreadful mistakes about people caring or not caring for each other; but somehow you are wiser. I feel I may trust to your judgment. Do you think Olive – " Jack stumbled a little bit over the fashion for putting her next question. "Do you

think that Olive likes Frank Kent better than anybody else?"

The silence was longer this time and Jean did not happen to catch a glimpse of her cousin's face, being too deeply concerned over her inquiry.

"I should never have conceived of such a thing myself, Jack," she declared after pondering for two or three minutes, "but as you have put it into my mind, why, possibly Olive *may* be interested in Frank. He has always been awfully good to her ever since their first meeting, and he thinks her wonderfully beautiful and charming. I can't say, though, that I am at all convinced that her feeling is serious. Oh, dear me, why can't you two girls be as frivolous over affairs of the heart as I am! I should like at least a dozen romances before I settle upon one."

"Well, I presume you are in a fair way to have them, sweet cousin," Jacqueline returned. "And tonight I feel as though I could almost echo your wicked wish. But, Jean dearest, I have *got* to find out how Olive really feels. I can't tell you why now, yet it is of more interest to me to know than anything else in the world."

And suddenly Jack's face flushed with such a wonderful, radiant color that Jean caught her breath.

What she saw, however, made her turn her eyes away.

"I will find out for you if I possibly can, Jack," she then replied quietly, without asking any further questions or attempting to probe the mystery of why Olive's attitude toward their host should be of such vital import to Jacqueline Ralston.

"You know though that Olive is desperately shy and reserved,"

Jean added, "and has never confided in anybody except you and Miss Winthrop. Don't you think, after all, perhaps Olive likes Donald Harmon more than we guess? She and Don would be such a suitable match and her grandmother is so anxious for it."

But Jack shook her head. "No, I am afraid not," she returned and was not aware of how much the word "afraid" meant to her cousin's ears. "Olive told me yesterday that Don had asked her to marry him and that she had refused him. She told him that she would take the whole responsibility for the refusal upon her shoulders, that she would write her grandmother and explain that Don had done his best. The opposition to the plan had been hers. So Madame Van Mater must do as she had threatened and leave Don the larger share of the fortune. Poor Don was dreadfully broken up over Olive's thinking that he had asked her on account of her grandmother's desire, or because of the money that they were to share if she accepted him. Don honestly loves Olive, I think, though I don't believe she returns it in the least. Indeed, Olive told me that she had never given up her old plan of going out west to teach the Indians as soon as she feels she has learned enough through her studying with Miss Winthrop at Primrose Hall. Actually she announced that she was going to take a teacher's place there next winter for the experience it would give her. But of course I don't think that Olive means this not if she cares – if she cares for Frank." Jack got up from the floor. "Dear, I won't keep you awake any longer. Only there is one more favor I should like to beg. Will you stay with me as much as

possible until you can find out what I have asked you?"

And Jean only nodded, as her cousin kissed her good-night and went away.

She sat for some time gazing into the fire instead of getting into bed. Not a particularly good mathematician in her school days, still Mistress Jean had rather a talent for putting two and two together under certain circumstances. She had not felt it fair to ask questions of Jack, yet there could be nothing disloyal in trying to penetrate a mystery for herself. Especially as she should never betray her conclusions.

Jean pondered. In the first place there was not the least doubt in her own mind that among the four Ranch girls Frank Kent certainly liked Jack best. He always had liked her and it was perfectly plain how much her unfortunate affair with Captain Madden and her unkind treatment of him had hurt him, although he was not the type of man to betray himself so openly as Donald Harmon had. Jack's feeling for Frank, Jean had believed until tonight to be merely friendly. They had many of the same interests, both loved horses, animals of all kinds, and the business that went with the running of a big place like their old ranch or the immense estate, which had been in the Kent family for many generations. However, since the last hour, Jean was no longer assured of Jack's impersonal attitude. There was no doubt that her cousin had in her mind at present two fears – one that Olive, her dearest friend, cared for Frank, the other that Frank, instead of returning Olive's affection, was beginning to fall in

love with her. Something must have recently occurred to give Jack this impression. Jean did not believe that she would ever have attempted to probe Olive's emotions unless this had been the case.

So here was the difficulty of the situation according to her train of thought. If Olive really did care for Frank Kent, Jean understood Jacqueline Ralston well enough to realize that nothing could induce her to accept his suit. For Jack would never accept her own happiness at the price of another's; and surely not when the other person was her dearest friend, for whom she had always felt a kind of protecting devotion.

Yet if Olive did not love Frank, and Jack felt herself able to return his affection, it would be both cruel and unnecessary to refuse to listen to him.

At last Jean tumbled into her big, four-posted bed; but even then she could not go at once to sleep. What a delicate mission she had taken upon herself and how ever was she to perform it? For Olive must never suspect any possible motive behind her questioning.

CHAPTER XXII

OLIVE'S ANSWER

JEAN BRUCE'S task did not prove any simpler than she had anticipated. For one thing, events at the castle left little time for leisure or for making individual plans of one's own. Almost every hour there were visits from the neighbors of surrounding country estates, calls to be returned, riding parties, dinners and dances. For the Kents seemed determined to give Ruth and the Ranch girls as agreeable an impression as possible of English country life. And the time was short, since Ruth and Jim were soon to be married.

Undoubtedly Frank's family had taken a decided fancy to his American friends, but if one of the number was a greater favorite than the others, assuredly it was Jim Colter.

At first Jim had strenuously resented becoming a visitor at Kent Castle. The idea of having to hobnob with titles, as he put it, was extremely distasteful. He was sure that he would turn out to be an embarrassment to Ruth and the girls, and that Frank would be sorry for having invited him. Nevertheless, when Ruth, and therefore the four Ranch girls, positively refused to leave without him, Jim was compelled to give in. And now, when there was no opportunity for the overseer of the Rainbow ranch to be with Ruth, he and Lord Kent were inseparable. The two men were as

unlike as any two extremes could be, and yet they were alike in that each man was absolutely himself. Lord Kent represented all that money, education and a high position can do; Jim only what good sense, a strong heart and energy can accomplish. Yet so far had Jim Colter learned to forgive Lord and Lady Kent, that actually he had consented that his marriage to Ruth take place from their home and that the ceremony be performed at the little English church nearby. He and Ruth had both been unwilling to delay their wedding until their return home and had also objected to the strangeness of a wedding in London. So now everything had been delightfully arranged. They were to be married at high noon with the Ranch girls as their attendants and only a few intimate friends of their host and hostess present.

Yet, in spite of their expressed wish to have "no fuss or feathers," according to Jim's description, necessarily there were many reasons why Jean found it peculiarly hard just then to have her quiet interview alone with Olive. Especially when the interview must appear as an entirely accidental one.

Nevertheless, Jean did manage to keep one of her promises to her cousin. She did very often succeed in interfering with any situation which would apparently throw Frank and Jack together without the rest of the party. And many times in the face of this, Frank would then seek out Olive's companionship. So that in the days of her watchfulness Jean herself became more and more puzzled and anxious. Finally, however, came her desired opportunity.

Frank had begged as a particular favor that the house party ride or drive as they preferred to a famous old ruin in the neighborhood. And just as they were about to leave Olive had suddenly pleaded a headache, entreating to be left behind. To Jack's and Ruth's requests to remain with her, Olive had insisted that she would be far more apt to recover if she might stay alone. And as this was a perfectly sensible statement, both her friends agreed. Jean, however, made no such offer, said nothing of her own intentions, but simply, when the party started, could not be found. Nevertheless, she had left a proper explanation with one of the servants, so that no time was lost in searching for her.

As Olive had looked really ill, Jean first went for a long walk, hoping to give her a chance to recover before having their talk.

Tip-toeing softly in at about four o'clock in the afternoon, she found her friend lying on the bed with a shawl thrown over her. And even in the semi-light of the great oak chamber Jean could see that Olive's face was white, and that there were circles about her eyes.

"I would not have let you come in if I had known who you were. I thought you were one of the maids," Olive protested querulously. And her manner was so unlike her usual gentle one that the other girl's heart sank.

"I didn't know; I am sorry. I thought you were better or that I might do something for you," Jean explained hurriedly, making up her mind not to approach the subject she had anticipated for anything in the world.

Then both girls were silent for a few moments. And finally Jean tried to slip quietly out of the room.

A voice from the bed called her back. "Don't go, dear. I am sorry I was cross. I believe I am homesick today. I have been thinking a whole lot of Miss Winthrop and wanting to go back to my own country. Dear me, I am glad Ruth and Jim are so soon to be married and we shall then be sailing for home!"

Jean smoothed Olive's dark hair back from her lovely Spanish face.

"I am glad Jack is not hearing you say this, Olive child," she whispered. "Think how jealous it would make poor Jack feel to hear that you felt nearer Miss Winthrop than you do to her. I thought you used to love her best."

"I did. I do," Olive replied faintly. "But Jean, haven't you or Ruth guessed that we are not going to be able to keep Jack at the old ranch always, much as she adores it. Frank Kent is deeply in love with Jack. And I believe Jack cares for him. Of course I know you will think this strange after the other affair with Captain Madden. But that is just the reason why Jack will be able to realize she is in love with Frank. Her feeling for him is so entirely different."

Jean was glad that her own face was in shadow. This was her opportunity. But what could she, what should she say?

"Why Olive, I don't believe for a moment old Jack cares a great deal about Frank," Jean protested, trying to make her manner appear as light as possible under the circumstances.

"Indeed, I am almost sure of it. It must be a fancy on your part, for I am almost sure Jack thinks that Frank cares for you."

"Then she is very foolish," Olive returned.

"But why foolish? It seems to me Frank is always preferring to go off alone with you. And he always has been tremendously fond of you. Once he told me that he thought you quite the prettiest of the four of us."

The other girl laughed. And Jean wondered if it was her imagination or if there was a sound in Olive's laugh which she did not like.

"Frank has always cared for Jack. It would have been absurd of me ever to have failed to see it. Why, he began caring when we were almost children at the ranch. He has always been a good friend to me, but nothing else. And lately, if you have suspected anything because we have been alone together, it was only because poor Frank wished to talk to me about Jack. He does not believe that she cares for him in the least. He says that once when he began to try to tell her she stopped him immediately. Frank is afraid Jack may still have some feeling about the old affair. I have done my best to make him see things differently. And he has no right not to make Jack listen to him, even if he believes she may refuse him. Deep down in her heart Jack has always cared for Frank. Don't you think so yourself, Jean?"

"I – oh, I don't know anything about it. I am so surprised!" Jean stammered.

"Frank has asked me to talk to Jack, to find out if she would be wounded by his telling her of his love so soon after Captain Madden. But somehow, Jean," and here Olive's voice faltered, "I don't believe I know how to do it very well. Why, if I began poor Jack might think that I had believed Frank in love with me and was telling her this to prove to her I had no feeling for him. It would be like old Jack to get some such absurd fancy as that into her head. And then, of course, we both know that Jack would rather die than give poor Frank the slightest chance."

"But don't you care for Frank?" It was on the tip of Jean Bruce's tongue to ask Olive this question. Yet just in time she stopped it.

Never so long as she or any one else lived could this question be put to Olive Van Mater. By her own words and manner had she not chosen forever to silence it. And actually Jean herself did not know what to think. It was so easy in this world to receive a false impression.

"Would you like me to tell Jack then, Olive dear?" Jean queried, for her own sake keeping her eyes away from her friend's. "Of course I should not dare say anything about Frank's feelings. But I could kind of intimate what you have just told me."

Olive drew the cover a little closer about her. "You are awfully good, Jean. Yes, that will be best. Now, please, you won't mind if I ask you to leave me. And will you make my excuses to Lady Kent at dinner? My head really aches too severely for me to come down."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WEDDING DAY

IN England the roses bloom all the summer through. And nowhere are they more lovely and plentiful than in the county of Surrey.

So the little English church on the Kent estate was filled one August morning with white, pink, red and yellow roses.

Ruth wore a simple white tulle dress and hat. For she did not wish a wedding veil, and Jim announced that he did not intend having his Ruth's face concealed at the time he most desired to see it.

Olive, Jean and Frieda were bridesmaids, and Jack maid of honor. Frank Kent was best man, Richard Grant, Giovanni Colonna and another friend of Frank's acted as ushers. Donald Harmon had returned to London, explaining that he felt compelled to join his mother and sister there.

Since the bride would have no unnecessary adornments, the Ranch girls' toilets were of the same character – French organdies trimmed in Irish point lace, and big picture hats. The three bridesmaids wore white, and Jack, pale yellow.

Of course Ruth carried a big loose bunch of white roses and the four girls yellow ones. Indeed, all the wedding arrangements were perfect in their simplicity. There was only one possible flaw

in the success of the program and that was the behavior of the bridegroom.

For Jim began by insisting in the early days of the preparations that he was more than likely to give a cowboy yell of triumph at the conclusion of the ceremony, and the day of the wedding rehearsal became so nervous and unreasonable that Frieda decided he would never be able to go through with the real thing.

Jim did look white as a ghost as he came out into the chancel, supported by Frank, to wait for Ruth. The English vested choir was chanting, "Oh, Perfect Love;" the atmosphere of the church was heavy with the odor of flowers; the light through the old stained glass windows shone dimly golden.

There was a moment when Jim Colter had a strange and incongruous sensation. What a queer setting this for *his* wedding! Surely he would have felt more at home under a group of tall pines somewhere out in his western plains or under the roof of one of their homely neighborhood churches.

Nevertheless, when Ruth started up the aisle toward him on Lord Kent's arm and Jim caught the expression of her face, he did not know or care about anything else in the world. Frieda always insisted that he never answered the responses, since not a single sound was she able to hear fall from his lips. There were other witnesses though, Jack and Frank for instance, who agreed that the bridegroom did mutter "I will" at the critical moment after being prompted by the bride. So that Frieda was finally persuaded to believe that the ceremony was fairly legal.

Back at the castle Ruth had entreated that they need have only the family to breakfast with them. Mr. and Mrs. Colter were leaving in little more than an hour for London to take the train to Harwich and cross on the night boat for Holland, where they meant to spend their week of honeymoon. And Ruth had also said that she wanted a few quiet moments alone with each one of the girls.

The marriage was probably as satisfactory a one as had ever taken place, yet unquestionably the bride and the four Ranch girls were uncommonly teary all during the wedding feast. Indeed, Frieda actually sniffled when she drew the thimble from the cake proclaiming that she would be the old maid of the group, and only recovered when Olive insisted that some mistake had been made and exchanged the ring for the thimble.

But Jim had entirely regained his spirits, and he and Frank devoted their best energies toward making the breakfast party as cheerful as possible. Nevertheless, both Jean and Olive guessed that Frank Kent was not so gay as he pretended to be. For his brown eyes had a way of looking grave, even while he was actually laughing. And at least one of the two girls believed that he had a definite purpose in his mind, which must be accomplished before the day was past.

By and by Ruth slipped away to her room, asking that Jack be alone with her for the first five minutes, and then that each one of the other girls follow in turn, according to age.

Because Jim liked her best in the colors that he had been used

to seeing her wear in the old times at the ranch, Ruth's traveling costume was as Puritanical a gray as in her most nun-like New England days. But the hat was a coquettish Parisian creation with a pink rose under the brim. Besides, Ruth's expression had so changed in the last weeks that there was no chance of her ever again suggesting an old maid.

She had only taken off her wedding gown, however, when Jack, putting her arms about her, stooped to kiss her.

"Ruth, dearest," Jack announced, holding the older woman at a little distance from her, "I want to tell you again that nothing that has ever happened to me in my whole life had made me so happy as your marriage to Jim. I know I have always given both of you about twice as much trouble as the other three of us. Yet I kind of feel it has been made up to you by having known each other through your coming to teach us at the Lodge. But I am grown-up now, I think. And this last experience has taught me more than any of you can guess. If you and Jim can make up your minds to live on at the old ranch I will try my best never to be a nuisance again, not if I live to be a hundred years old!"

"Do you expect to live always at Rainbow Lodge, Jack?" Ruth asked, smiling, but watching Jack's face pretty closely.

Jack nodded. "I don't think I shall dare trust myself again."

But Ruth shook her gently. "That is what I wanted to speak to you about alone, dear. It was a foolish fancy of mine, wishing to say farewell to each one of you this way. You must remember how much happiness I have kept from Jim and myself because of

a mistaken idea. Don't repeat it, my dear. If ever you feel you can care a great deal for any one and that your love is returned, don't get any silly fancies in your head. Don't let your one mistake – "

"But, Ruth," Jack interrupted, more seriously than the older woman had expected, "suppose your foolish fancy happened to be connected with some one else? Suppose you could only be happy at another's expense! You see, you never had a rival in Jim's affections."

"And I never would have paid any attention to her if I had," Ruth replied so emphatically that her companion laughed. "If a man loves a woman and she loves him, that is the end of it. The third person I am afraid is the one that must suffer. For can't you see that she must suffer any way if her affection is not returned!"

There was no thought in Ruth's mind at the present moment that Jack's words had any special bearing on her own case. For although Ruth and Jim had suspected Frank's feeling for Jack, their imaginations had gone no further. Indeed, they were both afraid that the girl had no more than a passing affection for her former friend.

Ruth now walked over toward her mirror to fasten a diamond brooch in her dress, which had been the Ranch girls' engagement present.

"I believe our time alone is almost up, and Olive will be appearing in another moment. But Jim and I have a gift for each one of you which we want you to keep always if you can in remembrance of our wedding day."

And Jack noticed that there were four jewel cases side by side on Ruth's bureau, a white, a green, a blue and a scarlet one.

Ruth opened the white one first and clasped a string of pearls about Jack's throat. Then before the oldest of the Ranch girls could thank her, she gave her a gentle push toward her bedroom door.

"Go now, Jack, I hear Olive outside. And promise not to let any one shed a single tear when Jim and I drive away."

Olive flung her arms about the bride with more emotion than Ruth had ever seen her show. "I wish I could say things like the other girls!" she exclaimed. "But oh, Ruth, you do understand how grateful I am to you and Mr. Colter for all you have done for me? Because, however kind the girls wanted to be, they could not have succeeded without your aid and Jim's."

"You are as dear as the other girls to me, Olive, I know no difference between you," Ruth answered, choking a little over Olive's unusual display of feeling. And as she clasped an emerald chain about her neck she whispered, "I can hope in return that some day you may be as happy as I am."

Olive said nothing; only shook her dark head quietly, but before Ruth could speak again, Jean danced into the room.

"Jack stayed so long there won't be any good by turns for Frieda and me," she pouted, "unless Olive comes away at once. Jim is already raging up and down the veranda like a bear, saying that he is sure you will miss the train."

Jean's gift was a necklace of sapphires set with tiny diamonds

in between. And Ruth had only a chance to kiss her favorite Ranch girl (for Jean was her favorite, though she would never have admitted it) and whisper:

"If you don't leave Giovanni alone while we are away, I will make Jim lock you up alone in your stateroom for the entire voyage home."

Then Frieda, with a slice of wedding cake in her hand, made her appearance. "I didn't have a chance to eat hardly any at the table," she defended immediately, answering Jean's teasing glance. "Jim says you must say what you have to say to me when you get back from your trip, Ruth; you simply must come on down now right away."

So Ruth had only time to push the scarlet jewel case into the hand Frieda did not have occupied with cake. And begging her to be a good baby and not eat too many of Dick's chocolate drops in her absence, she hurried off to her impatient bridegroom.

Faithfully the four girls kept their promises and not a tear followed the departing carriage. However, when the last sounds of the wheels had rolled away they stared at one another as though the world had suddenly come to an end.

"Well," Frieda remarked, as she held her pretty chain of rubies in her hand, "I must say I never supposed that Ruth and Jim would ever want to get married. They *knew* each other so well. Now take the rest of us. Nobody would ever want to marry any one of us except a stranger. Jack is too high-tempered and wants her own way too much, Jean is a perfectly horrid tease, Olive goes

and stays by herself and cries when her feelings are hurt – "

The day was saved! The three Ranch girls burst into laughter instead of tears, in which Frank and his sisters, who were standing near, joined.

"And what about you, Frieda Ralston?" Jack demanded, pulling at one of Frieda's blond curls. "Could anybody ever know you and love you? Tell us, because a good many times we have felt the strain."

Frieda blushed slightly. "Oh, I suppose I have some faults," she conceded. "But though I suppose Ruth's wedding has made you forget it, I would like to mention that I have been cross fewer times than any one of us on our European trip. Ruth showed me the record and I am to have the prize when she gets back."

In the face of this evidence there was no chance for a dispute, so within a few minutes the girls disappeared to their rooms. They were tired, and each one of them wanted to be alone and to rest in her own particular way.

To Jacqueline resting meant being out of doors, now that she was strong again. So within an hour, after the bride and groom's departure, their maid of honor slipped down the big oak staircase, arrayed in a very different toilet. She wore a short brown corduroy skirt, leather boots and leggings, and a soft hat, much the same style of costume that she had been accustomed to wearing at the Rainbow Ranch.

Five minutes later she was off across the fields on the riding horse which her host had designated for her especial use during

her visit. It was not a customary thing for an English girl to ride alone; nevertheless Jack refused the services of the groom. She knew the English roads and lanes in the neighborhood thoroughly well by this time. All afternoon she rode, sometimes galloping across an open stretch of meadow, often walking her horse along a narrow, wild rose-bordered lane.

The English country was fascinating to Jack, perhaps because of its utter unlikeness to her own broad, open country. She had been amused at first by its smallness, its trimness and look of dignified old age. Yet she had since learned to love the wonderful greenness of the English landscapes, the quantities of exquisite flowers and trees, such as she had never seen in her own land.

Certainly the scenery on this special afternoon must have been unusually fascinating, for suddenly Jack realized that the darkness was coming down and that she was some distance from the castle. She must not allow Lord and Lady Kent to become uneasy on account of her absence. Her horse was comparatively fresh; she would enjoy a hard gallop home.

So Jack paid little attention for the first half mile or so to the sound of another horse's hoofs pounding after hers. Finally, however, Frank got within calling distance. "Look here, Jack," he said, "this style of riding after you reminds me of our first meeting on the Norton ranch. Remember how you rushed off without allowing me to show you the trail. I was pretty well out of breath when I caught up with you then, and I am now."

Jack laughed and slowed her horse down a trifle. "No such

thing, Frank; you look cool as a cucumber. You English people never seem to get upset and disheveled as Americans do. But it is awfully jolly, Frank, that you are perfectly strong these days. You used to look pretty sick sometimes when we first knew you."

"Wyoming gave me two great gifts, Jack; it gave me back my health and it gave me my love for you."

Frank said this so quietly and so simply that Jack felt she must have been mistaken. Surely she had not understood him! He ought to have given her some warning, allowed her a few moments of preparation. She could never have imagined that a man could declare his love in such a matter-of-fact tone of voice. Jack hardly knew what to do or say. Surreptitiously she made a movement of her bridle so that her horse quickened his pace.

But Frank's hand reached out and caught hold of hers firmly. "You must not run away from me, Jack," he protested. "For you would not like to have me ride after you shouting out my love for you for all the neighborhood to hear. And if you won't listen to me quietly, that is exactly what I will do. Why is it you have been unwilling to listen, Jack? If it is only that you don't love me in return, I understand that. But a girl like you has got to get used to refusing men."

"Oh, Frank," Jack protested, "please don't say such foolish things."

Nevertheless, she slowed down her horse, seeing that Frank was determined that she should listen this time.

"I have loved you always, Jack, from the first day of meeting

you. I have never cared for any one else. I think it only fair to let you know that I mean to make you love me in return some day."

Frank's tone was so quiet and so positive that Jack smiled. She was not accustomed to being spoken to in this fashion, but she was not at all sure she disliked it.

"Why don't you answer me?" Frank asked a few moments afterwards. "By and by, when you have gone back to the ranch, I suppose you know I shall follow you. Will you give me my answer then?"

Just for a moment Jack's face turned the warm, radiant color Jean had seen there once before. Bending slightly from her horse she took Frank's hand that was now hanging at his side and an instant held it close.

"Don't think, Frank, I don't appreciate what you have told me, or that I am so cold and unfeeling, as you seem to think I am. It is only that I don't know, that there is something I may be mistaken about, that I can't trust to any one else's judgment except my own. But, Frank dear, if you think I am worth coming across the water and the land to far off Wyoming to see, why then, then I shall know what to say."

Frank kissed the hand that had held his the moment before. They were now riding up the avenue within a short distance of Kent castle.

"There is no land and no water that can divide us, Jack," Frank answered, "if ever there is a chance of my hearing you say you love me on the other side."

The fifth and closing volume of the well-known Ranch Girls Series will be known as "The Ranch Girls at Home Again."

In this volume the love stories of the four girls will be finally concluded. It will also introduce old and new characters at the Rainbow Ranch.