# THE GIRLS OF SILVER SPUR RANCH

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# *THE GIRLS OF SILVER SPUR RANCH*

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## LIST OF CHAPTERS

# *THE GIRLS OF SILVER SPUR RANCH*

## CHAPTER I
## A Question of Names

The girls of Silver Spur ranch were all very busy helping Mary, the eldest, with her wedding sewing. Silver Spur was rather a pretentious name for John Spooner's little Texas cattle-farm, but Elizabeth, the second daughter, who had an ear attuned to sweet sounds, had chosen it; as a further confirmation of the fact she had covered an old spur with silver-leaf and hung it over the doorway. The neighboring ranchers had laughed, at first, and old Jonah Bean, the one cowboy left in charge of the small Spooner herd, always sniffed scornfully when he had occasion to mention the name of his ranch, declaring that The Tin Spoon would suit it much better. However, in time everybody became used to it, and Silver Spur the ranch remained–somehow Elizabeth always had her own way.

This young lady sat by the window in the little living-room where they were all at work, and carefully embroidered a big and corpulent "B" on a sofa-pillow for Mary, who was to marry, in a few days, a young man from another state who owned the euphonious name of Bellamy–a name Elizabeth openly envied him.

"I do think Spooner is such a horrid, commonplace sort of name," she declared with emphatic disapproval. "Aren't you glad you'll soon be rid of it, Mary?"

"Um-m," murmured Mary, paying scant heed to Elizabeth's query; she was hemming a ruffle to trim the little muslin frock which was the last unfinished garment of her trousseau, and she was too busy for argument.

"As if," continued Elizabeth, "the name wasn't odious enough, father must needs go and choose a *spoon* for his brand! And he might so easily have made it a *fleur-de-lys*–fairly rubbing it in, as if it was something to be proud of!"

Just then Mary, finding that the machine needle kept jabbing in one place, looked about for a cause, and perceived Elizabeth tranquilly rocking upon one of the unhemmed breadths of her ruffle.

"I'll be much obliged if you'll take your chair off my ruffle, Saint Elizabeth,"

she laughed, tugging at the crumpled cloth, "and just don't worry over the name–try and live up to your looks."

Elizabeth blushed a little as she stooped to disentangle the cloth from her rocker; she was a very handsome girl, altogether unlike her sisters, who were all rather short and dark, and plump looking, Cousin Hannah Pratt declared, as much alike as biscuits cut out of the same batch of dough. Elizabeth was about sixteen, tall and fair and slim, with large, serious blue eyes and long, thick blond hair, which she wore plaited in the form of a coronet or halo about her head–privately, she much preferred the halo, as best befitting the character of her favorite heroine, Saint Elizabeth, a canonized queen whom she desired to resemble in looks and deportment.

"One would have to be a saint to bear with the name of Spooner," she said, rather crossly, as she tossed Mary her ruffle.

Cousin Hannah Pratt, rocking in the biggest chair, which she filled to overflowing, lifted her eyes from her work and regarded Elizabeth meditatively. "How'd you like to swap it for Mudd, Libby?" she asked tranquilly.

Elizabeth shuddered–she hated to be called Libby, it was so commonplace; and Cousin Hannah persisted in calling her that when she knew how it annoyed her. Elizabeth was thankful that Cousin Hannah–who kept a boarding-house in Emerald, the near-by village, and had kindly come over to help with the wedding–was only kin-in-law, which was bad enough; to have such an uncultured person for a blood relation would have been worse.

"Mudd! O, poor Elizabeth!" giggled Ruth, the third of the Spooner sisters, a merry-hearted girl of fifteen, who looked on all the world with mirthful eyes. "Cousin Hannah, what made you think of such an *awful* name?"

"Don't be so noisy, Ruth," cautioned Mary, with what seemed unnecessary severity. "Mother's neuralgia is bad to day. You can hear every sound right through in her room. Cousin Hannah, won't you please make her a cup of tea? I think it would do her good; you make such nice tea."

"Sure and certain!" agreed Cousin Hannah, heartily. Rising ponderously from her chair, she moved on heavy tiptoes out into the kitchen, the thin boards creaking as she walked.

"I might also remark that a person would have to be a saint to bear with Cousin Hannah," said Elizabeth, "she doesn't intend it, maybe, but she does rile me so!"

"I don't see why anybody would want to be a saint; I'd heap rather be a knight," spoke up little Harvie, nicknamed by her family "the Babe." She lay curled up on a lounge in the corner, ostensibly pulling out bastings, but really reading a worn old copy of Ivanhoe, which was the book of her heart. There were no children living near the lonely little ranch, and the Babe, who was only

ten, solaced herself with the company of heroes and heroines of romance–much preferring the heroes.

"I'd rather be 'most anything than a 'mover'," declared Elizabeth, emphatically. "And if you want to know the reason, just look out of the window and watch this procession coming up from the road."

Ruth and the Babe ran to the window; Mary, leaving her machine, slipped quietly out of the room to see about her mother. Also Mary desired to have a little private talk with Cousin Hannah.

It was a pitifully ludicrous spectacle that the girls beheld. Up the driveway leading to the house came a dreary procession of those unfortunates known in western parlance as "movers," family tramps who follow the harvests in hope of getting a little work in the fields; always moving on when the crops are gathered, or planted, as the case may be–movers never became dwellers in any local territory.

These movers were, in appearance, even more wretched than usual. In a little covered cart drawn by a diminutive donkey, sat a pale woman with a baby in her arms, and two small and pallid children crouching beside her. Behind the cart the father of the family pushed valiantly, in a kindly endeavor to help along the donkey, while just ahead of that overburdened animal walked a small boy, holding, as further inducement, an alluring ear of corn just out of reach of the donkey's nose. Certainly the family justified Elizabeth's declaration that 'most anything was preferable to being a mover!

Ruth and Elizabeth both laughed at the comical procession, but the Babe's eyes were full of pity. "The poor things are coming up for water," she said sorrowfully. "Father always let them get water at our well–I'll go show them the way." And she ran out to meet the movers and show them the well at the back of the house, where they filled their water-jugs and quenched the thirst of the patient and unsatisfied donkey.

"I wish to goodness Father never had gone to Cuba," sighed Ruth, as she turned from the window to take up her button-holes, "it is so awfully lonesome without him."

"I think it was splendid," said Elizabeth, with shining eyes, "to be among the very first of the volunteers. And maybe he'll do some deed of daring and be made an officer. Think how nice it will be to say, when the war is over, that our father figures in history–maybe as one of the foremost heroes of the Spanish-American war."

"You're always dreaming of things that never happen, Elizabeth," scoffed practical Ruth. "Of course he won't be made a big officer. If he comes back just a plain Captain I'll be mighty glad."

"O, well, the world's greatest men and women have always been dreamers,"

asserted Elizabeth, cheerfully, "I can't help being born different from the rest of you, can I?"

"H'm, I reckon not–but you can start a fire in the stove. People must eat, no matter how great they are. It's your time to get supper."

"O, dear, it's bad to be born poor!" sighed Elizabeth, as she arose reluctantly. "Especially when there's a longing within you to do perfectly fine things, and not mere drudgery. I wish I were a princess–it seems to me I was born to rule. I'm sure I would be a wise and capable sovereign. Well, even queens stoop to minister to the lowly, like Saint Elizabeth, so *I'll* go get supper for the Spooners!"

And with her head in the clouds, the throneless queen marched majestically kitchenward, to engage in the humble occupation of cooking supper for her family.

Voices from her mother's closed door reached her ears as she passed. Elizabeth would have scorned eavesdropping, but–the ranch being located in the prairie region of Texas, where lumber is so scarce that just as little as possible is used in building, and the walls being merely board partitions, she could not help hearing Cousin Hannah's voice, always strident, rising above her mother's and Mary's lower tones.

"Fiddle-diddle! What's the use of mincin' matters anyway? She's bound to know, sooner or later–ought to know without–tellin', if she had a grain o' common sense. Ain't a single, solitary thing about her favors the rest of you all."

The words sounded very clearly in Elizabeth's startled ears, arousing a train of troubled thoughts in her mind, as she moved mechanically about the kitchen. She felt quite certain that they were talking about her, and that Cousin Hannah wanted to tell her something that Mrs. Spooner and Mary didn't want known.

"I wonder what it can be," pondered Elizabeth, as she slowly stirred the hominy pot. "Whether Cousin Hannah thinks so or not, I've always known I wasn't like the rest."

This was quite true; Elizabeth, though she dearly loved the parents and sisters who had always, Cousin Hannah declared, spoiled her, yet could not help feeling that she was, mentally and physically superior to them, "made of finer clay," she would have put it. People often remarked on this lack of resemblance to the others, and when they did so in Mrs. Spooner's presence she always hastily changed the subject. Elizabeth had often wondered why. Somehow there seemed always to have been a mystery surrounding her–something that, if explained, would prove very thrilling indeed.

Occupied with these thoughts, she moved from cupboard to table, and from table to fire, preparing the evening meal with deft skill, for anything Elizabeth Spooner did she did a little better than other people.

Outside the window stretched a vast brown-green plain, bounded by a hori-

zon line like a ring. There was monotony in the prospect, and yet a curious sense of adventure and romance, as there is about the sea. Elizabeth delighted in the mystic beauty of the prairie, yet to-day her fine eyes studied the level unseeingly as she glanced through the window, looking to see if Jonah Bean was in sight; the glories of sunset that flooded the plain passed almost unnoticed. She was thinking too earnestly on her own problem to observe the outside world.

"If I were by chance adopted, I certainly have a right to know who I am," Elizabeth pondered, as she set the table beautifully, with certain artistic touches that the clumsier hands of the other girls somehow could never manage. "It won't make any difference in my feelings for father and mother and the girls if I should happen to be born in a higher station of life than theirs–though I can easily see how poor mother could think it might; I trust I'm above being snobbish–" Elizabeth's eyes began to glow with a resolute purpose–"I'm going to find out, that's what! I'll make Cousin Hannah tell me. She's so big it's awful to sleep with her, and she snores like thunder. Mary knows how bad it is, and how I hate it, that's the reason she made me sleep with Ruth, when one of us had to give up our place. To-night I'll make Mary take the Babe's place with Mother, who might need her in the night, and I'll sleep with Cousin Hannah–and find out what she knows about me!"

Jonah Bean came stamping up the steps just then to wash up for supper at the water-shelf just outside the kitchen door; informing anybody who chose to listen that he was mighty tired–there was two men's work to do on the Spooner ranch, anyhow, and he was gittin' old, same's other folks. Glancing in at the open door he observed who was the cook.

"Humph! So it's your night for gittin' supper? Well, I hope the truck'll taste as fancy as that air table looks."

"Sure, Jonah," answered Elizabeth, critically observing the effect of her handiwork. "If you'll just step outside and get me a big bunch of those yellow cactus-blooms to put in this brown pitcher it'll be perfect, and I'll see that you get a big painted cup full of coffee."

"Never could see no use in weeds–full o' stickers at that," grumbled Jonah, as he turned to go out for the flowers that were growing on the great cactus in the fence corner. "Hope that air coffee'll be strong and hot, though."

The coffee was strong and hot, and the hominy was white and well-cooked; the bacon was brown and crisp and the biscuits light as feathers. Elizabeth dished the supper in the flowered dishes kept for company, because she could not bear the heavy earthenware they used every day. She filled the squatty brown pitcher with the big bunch of golden blooms old Jonah bore gingerly, careful of the thorns, and then lighted the lamp with the red shade. Really they didn't need a lamp, but the glow from the red shade was so pretty that she lighted it anyway–

she so loved beautiful things.

She arranged her mother's tray daintily, laying a cactus-bloom, freed of its thorns, beside the plate–somehow she felt as if she was preparing for some extra occasion.

"I declare Libby always cooks like she was fixin' for company," said Cousin Hannah, admiringly, as she sat at the gracefully arranged table. "Oughter keep boarders, and she wouldn't find no time for extra kinks."

Elizabeth shuddered a little as she poured Jonah's coffee in the biggest cup, with the painted motto on it–how she would hate to do such a sordid thing as keep boarders!

But she smiled very affably on Cousin Hannah, and asked if she wouldn't tell her how to make spice cake–she always noticed that Cousin Hannah's cake was so good. She wished to get the recipe to write in her scrap-book.

"Shore and certain," said Cousin Hannah, amiably, pleased at Elizabeth's praise, "I'll be glad to write it off. You're 'bout as good a cook as Ruth, though I always did say she was the born cook o' the family–you seemin' to be a master hand at managin'."

That she was indeed a master hand at the art, Elizabeth proved that night, when with a few energetic commands, she sent Mary obediently to her mother's room, to take the Babe's place, who in turn was put to sleep with Ruth.

"Why in the world don't you let Ruth sleep with Cousin Hannah?" argued Mary, "you know how you hate to–and she doesn't mind."

"Because it isn't fair that I shouldn't have my turn as well as the others–it's disagreeable to all of us. Now you just let me have my way, and say nothing else about it!" declared Elizabeth with authority, and as usual, she was allowed to have her way.

While Cousin Hannah undressed, moving ponderously about the little room, Elizabeth sat on the side of the bed, brushing her long blond hair, watching with critical admiration of the beautiful, the gleams of red and gold the lamplight cast upon its glittering strands, and formulating in her mind a plan to find out the secret of her birth–if secret there was.

She finally decided that plain speech was better than beating about the bush, and spoke in a carefully suppressed tone.

"Cousin Hannah," she said, with whispering decisiveness, "I want to know what you, and Mother and Mary were talking about in her room."

"Why, Libby!" exclaimed Cousin Hannah, plumping down upon the bed in her astonishment, "did you go and listen to what we was sayin'?"

"Indeed I didn't! But I couldn't help hearing you–and I think it's my right to know, if you were talking about me."

"But your Ma–but Jennie said she didn't *want* you should know," argued

the bewildered Cousin Hannah, "land o' livin', girl, ain't you got a home, and people to care for you? Why in tunket can't you be satisfied with *that*?"

Certainty made Elizabeth calmly triumphant.

"I have felt, for a long time–ever since I can remember, that I was different from the rest of my family, though you didn't give me credit for having sense enough to see it. Of course, I love them all dearly but I can't help feeling that it's my right to know the truth, whatever it is. Cousin Hannah, is or is not my name Spooner?"

"Well," Cousin Hannah evaded the question, "what would you get out of it if your name wasn't Spooner?"

Elizabeth leaped up softly, she held her hairbrush as though it were a scepter; her long hair flowed and billowed about her as she walked with majestic tread, up and down the tiny room–she was seeing visions!

If her name was not Spooner! That would mean that her birth was, she felt sure, indefinitely illustrious some way. Of course she would never desert the people who loved her, and whom she would always love, but–might not something come of it that would be grand for them all?

"Libby," Cousin Hannah's eyes followed the moving figure with a distressed look in them, "your ma–Jennie Spooner–your true ma, if love and tenderness count for anything, never wanted you told. Mary knows, and she don't want you should know. When I watch your uppity ways I tell 'em it's high time they explained the situation to you."

"The situation–" Elizabeth hung breathlessly on her words with shining eyes, and an eager tremble of her lips.

"Yes, the situation," repeated Cousin Hannah heavily. "Jennie Spooner had a tough time raisin' you–a troublesome young'un as ever I see. You teethed so hard that it looked like she never knew what a night's rest was till you got 'em through the gums. I used to come over here many a time and help her; what with Ruth bein' so nigh the same age, she had her hands full. It was kept from you for fear of hurtin' your feelin's, if you must know."

"How could it hurt my feelings?" questioned Elizabeth, a little puzzled. "I love them all–but they should have told me. They ought to have known they couldn't change–" a swan to a duckling had been on the tip of her tongue, but she stopped in time, "me to a Spooner, even by their love and kindness."

"Change you to a Spooner?" slow wrath mounted to Cousin Hannah's face. She caught Elizabeth's arm as the girl passed by. "I reckon they couldn't make a Spooner out o' you, that's a fact. The Spooners, bein', so far's known to me, respectable householders–"

"But not what *my* people were," suggested Elizabeth, her whole face alight, her eyes shining with eagerness. "You must tell me who they were–what my

rightful name is."

Cousin Hannah groaned. "Looks like I've let the cat out of the bag–don't it? Well, what I've got to tell ain't nigh what you think I've got to tell," she asserted doggedly. "You'll be sorry for askin'."

Through Elizabeth's mind flashed visions of a wonderful ancestry; to do her justice these dream parents did not in any way displace the father and mother she really loved with all her young heart–they were only that vision which comes to us all in some shape when we feel we are misunderstood–different.

Mary's step was heard approaching in the little corridor. She had undoubtedly been disturbed by the sound of their voices, and was uneasy for fear Cousin Hannah would be teased into making in judicious revelations.

"Tell me–tell me quick–" whispered Elizabeth, shaking her room-mate's arm. "Tell me before Mary gets here."

"Well, I will," gasped Cousin Hannah. "You ought to know it–but I warn you it's not what you're expectin'!"

## CHAPTER II
## Roy Rides to Silver Spur

When Mary stepped into the little bedroom Cousin Hannah Pratt had already spoken.

"Your pa and ma was movers that come here sixteen years ago–movers, like the folks you seen to-day and made such fun of. The name was Mudd."

These whispered words sounded in Elizabeth's ears, and the girl crumpled up on the bed sobbing just as Mary opened the door. Mrs. Pratt pulled the elder sister into the room.

"I've told Libby–she ought to have been told long ago–with you marryin' and goin' away and Ruth not havin' a bit of faculty and her bein' the one to take your place I think she was obliged to know it."

Mary came across the room with a rush, and took slim Elizabeth in loving arms.

"Go away, Cousin Hannah, please," she said. "You can sleep with Ruth and I'll stay with Elizabeth."

Mrs. Pratt, glad enough to be relieved from sight of the misery she had

caused, hurried away and the two sisters were alone together. Mary knew very little of what Cousin Hannah had seen fit to reveal, a child herself at the time, she had but vague remembrances of it, and indeed Elizabeth asked no questions–she only needed to be comforted, and this Mary did as best she could.

The next day but one was the wedding day, Mr. Bellamy was expected in the morning and they would probably have no other chance for private talk, but Mary urged Elizabeth to go to their mother for comfort when the wedding was over, and some time late in the night they both fell asleep.

In the days that followed the wedding, when everything was strange, and they were settling slowly back into the usual routine Elizabeth found no opportunity to speak with her mother of that trouble which had come now to haunt every waking hour, and even pursued her into dreams.

Mary and her euphoniously named Mr. Bellamy had gone on their way to Oklahoma, where the bridegroom owned a ranch. Cousin Hannah Pratt, having helped with the wedding sewing and the packing, had gone back to Emerald and her own overflowing boarding-house. Mrs. Spooner, the three girls, and old Jonah were left alone, face to face with the problem of getting along.

Everything had settled into the usual routine at the Silver Spur; Mrs. Spooner, rather weak from her neuralgia and the strain of the wedding, sat on the front porch in a big chair which Elizabeth had endeavored to make comfortable with rugs and pillows.

"Are you perfectly sure I can't do anything else for you, Mother?" she asked anxiously. "Mary always waited on you so beautifully, while–it seems to me I've never done one little thing for you, when you've done so much for me!"

A big tear slipped from the long lashes and splashed on Mrs. Spooner's little hand, fluttering among the cushions. In a minute the mother-arms had pulled the girl's head down to the mother-breast, the thin fingers patting the blond braids and the mother-voice crooning comfort into the crumpled little ear buried upon the maternal shoulder.

"Don't cry, daughter, Mother loves you just the same! Haven't you been our own since you were, O, such a *wee* baby! It was cruel of Cousin Hannah to tell you, but we won't let it make one bit of difference. You're ours and we are yours. A thing like that can't matter to people who love each other as we do."

"It–it doesn't matter, Mother," gasped Elizabeth, as she mopped her reddened eyes, "if I can just take Mary's place to you. I am going to try, my very level best."

"Then you'll be sure to succeed," said her mother, confidently. "You always succeed in everything you undertake–hadn't you noticed that, dear? Now, really, I'm just as comfortable as hands can make me, so you run on down to the corral and help Ruth and the Babe with the ponies. You ride with them to Emerald, and

get the mail–it'll do you good. And be sure you bring me a letter from father."

Cheered by her mother's words, Elizabeth gave one more pat and pull to the pillows, kissed her, and ran down to the corral, where the girls were roping the ponies. She and Ruth could each rope a little, missing about three out of five throws, but the Babe usually flourished so reckless a loop that she entangled herself, and had to be helped out; in spite of which old Jonah Bean insisted that she was the only one who showed any signs of learning the art.

Poor Elizabeth! Her castle of dreams had fallen, leaving her wide awake to the fact that she was no princess of romance but the humble offspring of miserable movers, such as had always been the objects of her shuddering contempt. Even Cousin Hannah's heart was touched with pity, and she tried with clumsy but hearty kindness to make amends for the grief she had caused by her disclosure. Nothing had been said to Ruth and the Babe, of course–they still believed her to be their born sister. However, deep down in her heart, Elizabeth was walking in the Valley of Humiliation amid the dust and ashes of dead hopes; and, as most people know, when one enters the Valley it is very, very hard to find the way out again!

Mrs. Spooner, watching the girls ride down the road, sighed softly. "Poor child," she murmured pityingly, "I can hardly forgive Cousin Hannah. But in the end it may prove the best thing. I'm afraid we were spoiling her. This may bring out the fine nature that I know she possesses."

Texas is a land of far horizons; Mrs. Spooner could see all the vast, brown-green circling plain until it lost itself in the hazy distance.

Away up the trail that led to her brother's distant ranch, twenty miles further from Emerald, she noticed a moving cloud of dust which resolved itself into an oscillating speck–two–a man on a pony, with a led horse.

For some reason which she could not have explained, Mrs. Spooner felt that the approaching rider was going to turn in at the Silver Spur. There was no pleasant feeling between herself and Harvey Grannis. John Spooner had bought the Silver Spur ranch from his brother-in-law when he came to this part of Texas, and there had been trouble over the transaction, due, Mrs. Spooner felt, to Harvey's disposition to take too much authority. He was a bachelor, and the rich man of the community–excepting the English rancher, McGregor, who did not live so far away. He would have liked to do a good deal for the family of his only sister, but he wanted to do it in his own way, asserting that John Spooner couldn't take care of them, and treating them, Elizabeth fireily said like paupers. A hard man, with his good qualities, yet full of the "rule or ruin" spirit, and liable to go to great lengths to make his point.

The approaching rider was now seen to be a young fellow, scarcely more than a big boy. He came up the long bare drive, stopped at the porch edge and

took off his hat before he spoke to the woman in the rocking-chair. She noted that the pony he rode stumbled with weariness, while the led horse trotted briskly, unencumbered with saddle or rider. She saw, too, that while the tired pony bore a brand unfamiliar to her, the led one was marked with a G in a horse-shoe–Harvey Grannis's brand.

"Good morning, ma'am," the newcomer greeted her. He was a handsome lad of perhaps sixteen, but just now in a woeful plight, dusty, shaking, haggard with weariness. "I stopped to ask if you'd like to buy a pony at a big bargain."

Mrs. Spooner leaned forward in her chair with a little gasp. She was afraid of what was coming.

"I don't know," she replied evasively. "Which one of them do you want to sell?"

"O, mine's played out," the boy returned never noticing the admission his words contained. "I've ridden pretty hard, and besides I've got to have her to carry me to Emerald, so I can take the train there. It's the other one. He's a mighty fine pony, and I'll let him go for enough to buy me a ticket back home."

"Won't you come in and rest a minute?–you look tired," said Mrs. Spooner, sympathetically. Somehow she could not bring herself to ask if he was from her brother's ranch, though she felt quite sure something was wrong about the pony that would go so cheap.

"I am tired, but I've got to go on so as to catch the six o'clock train," the boy smiled wanly. "I guess I can stop in for a drink, anyhow."

He dropped the lines, and the two ponies stood, cattle country fashion, as though they had been tied.

Mrs. Spooner got up from her chair, forgetting, in her excitement, any weakness or weariness.

"Just come right in and lie down on the lounge," she invited him. "It's cool and shady. I'll make you a pitcher of lemonade in a minute. You'll gain time by resting."

She smiled that reassuring mother-smile of hers as she opened the door of the quiet living-room. The boy followed in, his spurs clinking on the boards, and dropped wearily down upon the lounge. When she came back he was sitting with his head in his hands, but he drank the cool lemonade thirstily, finally draining the pitcher.

"It's awfully good," he sighed, his eyes speaking his gratitude. "Mother always made us lemonade in the summer time at home. You–you make me think of her, someway."

As if the resemblance had been too much for him, he turned from her with an inarticulate sound, and buried his face in the cushions. Mrs. Spooner sat down beside him, and after awhile his groping hand caught hers. She spoke to him in

whispers, though there was nobody in the house to hear.

"I'm afraid you're in trouble, my poor boy," she said gently. "Don't you want to tell me all about it? Maybe I can help you."

After a time he found strength to face her, and tell the poor, pitiful little story.

His name was Roy Lambert. He was, indeed, one of Harvey Grannis's cowboys, and had come west fascinated by the stories of frontier life. He had made a contract with Grannis to work for him for one year. Then came a letter, telling him that his mother was desperately ill, and he must hurry to her. Grannis refused to advance him money or to annul the contract. He treated the matter with contempt, pretending to believe that the boy was simply homesick, and the letter a ruse to get away. At last, frantic at the treatment he received, and determined to reach his mother, Roy got up before daylight, took his own pony and one of Grannis's which he hoped to sell for enough money to get home, and set out for Emerald and the railroad.

"I couldn't walk it, it would take too long to get to Emerald that way," he said, "besides, Grannis owes me more than the chestnut's worth, if I sold it for full value. I didn't expect to get only just enough to buy my ticket."

"Two wrongs won't make a right, Roy," said Mrs. Spooner, gravely. "Mr. Grannis was wrong–very wrong, not to advance you the money, or let you off your contract. But did you stop to think he could have you arrested for horse-stealing when you took his pony?"

"No!" blazed Roy, "I didn't steal it. If I had, I don't care. He's a hard-hearted old skinflint. I'd like to wring his neck, but even Harvey Grannis can't say I'm a horse thief. And I *must* get home!"

"Of course you must," soothed Mrs. Spooner, well aware as she looked at his flushed face, that Roy himself disapproved of what he had done. "I have a little money, and I will try and manage it, someway."

"Would you?" cried the boy. "I'll pay you–I'll send you a check as soon as I get home."

"Jonah Bean, the only cowboy I keep now, can ride on with you to Emerald, and bring your pony back. I'll try to sell it for enough to repay myself, or I might keep it–I think we could use one more gentle animal."

"You're awfully good," choked the poor fellow. "If all the folks in the world were like you–such a man as Grannis makes me distrust everybody. Do you know him?"

"Yes. I think you're a little mistaken," said gentle little Mrs. Spooner. "Harvey Grannis isn't really a villain, he's just a hard-headed, high-tempered man, that was spoiled by having his own way when he was a boy."

"You don't know–" Roy was beginning, when she interrupted him.

"I think I do. Harvey Grannis is my only brother. My baby child is named after him–little Harvie."

"Your brother?" Roy Lambert leaped to his feet, looking about with terrified eyes.

Mrs. Spooner divined his thought at once.

"I'm not going to give you up to Harvey," she said firmly. "But I'm going to make you let me lend you the money, and leave Harvey's pony here. The laws calls what you've done horse-stealing, and you can't make laws for yourself. You lie down and try to get a little sleep, now, my child. I'll wake you in an hour."

He thanked her with trembling lips, turned on his side, and, secure in his trust of her, fell at once asleep. When she saw that he really slept, Mrs. Spooner once more took her seat on the porch, this time to look for her brother, being quite certain that Harvey would follow hot-foot on the trail of his stolen pony.

She didn't have long to wait; in less than an hour a buckboard drawn by a pair of good sized grade horses turned in at the gate; in it sat Harvey Grannis and one of his men. They were tracking the lost pony. She saw them long before they reached the house, recognize it, as it grazed on the bit of sunburned pasture which Elizabeth hopefully called a lawn.

"Hello, Jennie," her brother called out, ignoring any coldness there had been between them, as Mrs. Spooner walked rapidly out to meet him. Grannis was a loud-spoken individual, and she did not care to have the boy awakened. "I'm after the thief that stole this pony of mine. Is he on your place?"

"He's asleep in the house," said Mrs. Spooner, quietly, though her voice was shaking a little. "He's very tired, and he's going to ride to Emerald tonight. I don't want him disturbed."

"You bet he's going to ride to Emerald!" blustered the ranchman. "I'll have him in jail there before supper-time! Come on, Tom, we'll go in and wake the young gentleman. Fetch your rope. Keep your gun handy. You never know what a young, dime-novel-crazy idiot like that will do."

He sprang from the buckboard, and both men were starting for the house when Mrs. Spooner barred their way.

"You can't go in there, Harvey," she told him. And now she was trembling so that Tom, of the rope and gun, was sorry for her, and heartily sick of his errand. No doubt Harvey Grannis was too, which merely made him talk louder and more harshly.

"Well, I'd like to know why I can't?" he demurred, pretending to laugh at her a bit. "Who's going to stop me? Now see here, Jennie, you always were a simple-hearted, soft-natured little goose. Anybody can bamboozle you. Look at the way John Spooner–"

"We won't go into that," warned Mrs. Spooner, with a flash in her eyes that

made Grannis's cowboy chuckle inwardly.

"What's your reason for defending this boy?" Grannis argued. "He's a thief."

"I'm not defending Roy Lambert alone," said Mrs. Spooner. "I'm defending my brother–a brother I used to be very fond of–from doing a thing he'll be sorry for all the days of his life."

Grannis flushed redly through the deep tan of his sunburned skin, while Tom, standing by and listening, enjoyed himself thoroughly over his employer's discomfiture.

"These boys come west crazy for ranch life," Grannis said dogmatically. "They soon get sick of honest work, and invent any kind of story to get away. This boy's lying to you, and he's stolen a pony from me. Move out of the way, Jennie, and let me handle him."

The men had been standing with their backs to the trail. Mrs. Spooner noted a little figure on a gaunt pony whose gaits were familiar to her approaching from the direction of Emerald. Now small Harvey rose in her stirrups and shouted, waving an envelope above her head. Mrs. Spooner was sorry she had not got rid of her brother before the girls returned. Grannis looked over his shoulder, and feeling unwilling that his beloved namesake should see him doing anything unkind rushed the matter hastily.

"Get out of the way, Jennie," he repeated. "Come on, Tom."

A figure appeared in the ranch-house door, Roy Lambert, flushed and trembling with the fever that Mrs. Spooner had been fearing for him. He carried his belt in his hand, and was fumbling at the holster to get his pistol.

"I won't go back alive," he said.

"Rope him, Tom," prompted Grannis in a low tone. "I don't want to shoot the crazy kid."

"Uncle Harvey–Uncle Harvey," came the Babe's thin, sweet pipe, "I'm glad you're here, 'cause I've got a telegram for somebody out at your ranch. Jonah was to take it on but now he won't have to."

The child's eyes saw nothing amiss. The three men were warily watching each other, Roy tugging desperately at the holster to get his weapon which had caught, and Tom half sullenly loosening and coiling his rope.

"It's for Mr. Roy Lambert," sang out the little girl, triumphant in her ability

to read even bad handwriting.

## CHAPTER III
## A Package and a Leather-Brown Phaeton

The men stood rigid at little Harvey's announcement. Mrs. Spooner took the envelope from the child's hands, opened it and read aloud:

"Mother died last night. Funeral over before you can get here. Sister."

The boy on the steps wheeled and ran into the house. Grannis turned unwillingly.

"Well–that looks genuine," he muttered with the obstinacy of a high-tempered man. "I won't prosecute him for lifting my pony–But I want you to understand that it's on your account Jennie. I tell you to turn him out. He's a bad lot. If ever he sets foot on the Circle G he'll have me to settle with. If you insist on having him around your place I'll–I'll–" His eye fell on Harvie. "Take the halter there, Tom and tie Baldy on behind. He leads all right."

"Aren't you going to pay him the money you owe him," Mrs. Spooner asked as she saw the men preparing to depart.

Grannis would have paid the money if it had not been for the presence of Tom. He could not let one of his cowboys see a loosening of discipline.

"No, I'll not," he said bluntly and whipped his team around into the drive. "He can't collect a cent off me, and I'm done making concessions on your account."

"Where are the girls?" Mrs. Spooner asked as she and the Babe stood watching the Circle G rig depart.

"They're coming," answered the Babe. "I rode ahead 'cause they were carrying so many things and I could go faster. The man at the telegraph office paid us for bringing the message out. Are you going to keep Roy Lambert here, like Uncle Harvey said you ought not, mother?"

Mrs. Spooner nodded as she went back into the living-room, leaving little Harvie to start the fire in the stove. There she did her best to comfort the poor fellow, facing his first big sorrow.

"I won't go home now–there's no use," he declared, when he could speak. "But I'll never go back to Grannis! If you let me I'll stay here and work for you.

And I'd do my best to do for you what a son would. Outside of heaven, I've got no mother now." And once more his grief overwhelmed him.

"I'll be happy to treat a good boy like you as a son," said Mrs. Spooner. "My husband is away with the troops, and we've had a pretty hard time to get along without him. I'm sure my girls will be glad to take you into our household as a brother. Maybe providence sent you to us, to-day. Maybe we need you as much as you need us."

With the relaxing of the terrible strain, and the exhaustion of his grief, the boy seemed to become really ill. She sat beside him, trying to soothe him with tenderly wise words, and bathing his hot forehead hi cool water till at last he slept, and she stole softly out to warn old Jonah, who came stumping in with a basket of cobs for the kitchen fire.

"Make as little noise as you can, Jonah," she whispered. "We have a boy in the house asleep–one of Harvey's cowboys–I'm afraid he has fever."

"O Lord!" groaned Jonah, in a doleful whisper. "Trouble comes double–never knowed it to fail yit! 'T ain't 'nough that you ain't right peart, and the boss gone, and me with the rheumatiz a-ticklin' my right foot ag'in, but we got to have a no-'count cowboy, sweater an' shirk, of course, laid up on us. Poor gals, I feel for 'em!–an' you've got nothin' but gals. Ef you'd 'a' had a right smart mess o' boys, now– They'll have all the work to do–like enough have to ride and rope and brand, 'fore they are done, besides nussin' this here boy, and me'n you throwed in for good measure. Whyn't Grannis tend to his own sick cowboys? Plenty o' folks at his ranch."

"He's not Harvey's cowboy any longer, Jonah–he's ours, if we need him–and according to that, we do. Now don't say a word, just listen to me–" as the old man opened his mouth to remonstrate very forcibly on the utter folly of taking an unknown person into her home. Then, speaking in subdued tones, she told him the story of the boy from the Grannis ranch.

At the end old Jonah Bean, being tender-hearted if cantankerous, took out his bandanna and blew his nose with hushed vigor.

"If I warn't in the presence of a lady what's his sister, Mis' Spooner," he said with elaborate politeness, "I'd up an' say–*Dad rat* Harvey Grannis's hide! Manners an' behavior is all prevents me from usin' them same cuss-words."

"Thank you for *not* saying them, Jonah," approved Mrs. Spooner, gravely, but with twinkling eyes. "Now I'll go out and meet the girls–I hear them coming, and they'll be sure to wake him with their noise, if I don't warn them."

The two girls were riding up the path, and both shouted:

"A letter from *Cuba Libre*!"

"A *fat* letter–and we want to see what's in it so bad!"

Of course the precious letter was immediately read–that came before any-

thing else; the girls, dismounting, the Babe running out, dish-towel in hand, with Jonah hobbling in the rear, and all grouping around Mrs. Spooner, to hear the news from Cuba.

It was a bravely cheerful letter, containing the best of all news; their father was well, the health of the army was good, there was no prospect of a battle. Then followed long messages to each member of the family, loving and jolly; advice to Jonah Bean about the ranch, winding up with impressive charges to everybody to be "sure and take good care of mother!"

"Three cheers for *Cuba Libre*–she's taking good care of our boys!" exulted Elizabeth, and Ruth declared fervently: "It's such good news that it makes me right hungry! Let's make muffins for supper Elizabeth, and celebrate."

"Maybe there won't ever be a real truly sure-enough battle like Ivanhoe and King Richard Sour-de-lion and Jonah Bean used to fight," suggested the Babe, hopefully, and Jonah added, sagely:

"I don't know nothin' 'bout them two folks you named over, honey, but I lay you the war o' the sixties was some punkin's! I misdoubt this here Cuban scrimmage is jest a play war."

"Truly, I hope so, Jonah," said Mrs. Spooner. "Now listen, children, I have some more news for you. We can't have father with us, but I believe I have found a 'real, truly sure-enough' brother–a regular big brother, like other girls have."

"O, Mother," put in the Babe, excitedly, "I didn't know *that*! Is he named after us, if he's going to be our own brother?"

"No, his name is Roy Lambert–but we don't care what it is," she added, hastily, remembering how poor Elizabeth had loved fine-sounding names, "if he is only a good boy, and I think he is."

Then she told them the story of poor Roy.

"I do think Uncle Harvey is the meanest old–" began Ruth, indignantly, but her mother's hand was laid lightly upon her lips, stopping further outburst.

"That's enough, daughter" she said, quietly, "they both did wrong, and I think they're both sorry. It is all over now, and we must try and think as kindly of Uncle Harvey and be as good to poor Roy as ever we can."

"Yes, and I'll lend him my own pony, if his is too bad off for him to ride," added the Babe generously–her own Rosinante being the joke of the ranch. "Uncle Harvey didn't mean to be bad, Ruth–he looked just as *sorry* when you read the telegram–didn't he, Mother?"

"I think he is sorry," agreed her mother, who wished her children to think as well of their uncle as possible, but Jonah, with a scornful snort, ejaculated: "Sorry–Harvey Grannis? O, Lord, that *is* a joke!" And muttering his opinion of Harvey Grannis pretty audibly, went stumping away, to his work.

Elizabeth said nothing, only she slipped her hand in that of her foster-

mother and whispered: "I think the Lord sent him to you, Mother, because he was in trouble and needed you."

"Well, I hope he'll be a nice boy, and I hope he won't be sick. I'll go in and make up the muffin batter, Elizabeth, while you set the table. I bet he didn't get any muffins at Uncle Harvey's ranch," said Ruth, who believed in ministering to the sick by giving them good things to eat.

They had a very good supper, and the muffins were really gems, but Roy could not touch the dainty tray, saying that it looked awfully good, but he was too tired to eat–he'd be all right in the morning.

But next morning he was in a raging delirium, and Jonah Bean had to ride to Emerald and fetch the doctor, who said the boy was in for a pretty bad spell of fever.

For two weeks the Spooner household nursed him, then came a day of rejoicing when the patient was able to move shakily about, gaunt and hollow-eyed, but cheerfully assuring them he felt dandy! Recovery was swift after that, and it was not long before the boy from the Circle G, the outcast horse-thief, was a valued and almost indispensable member of the Silver Spur household.

"I don't see how we ever got along without him," declared Ruth, positively, as she poked the clothes that were beginning to bubble in the big wash-kettle out in the back yard.

"Particularly now that Jonah's laid up with the rheumatism," agreed Elizabeth, rubbing the white clothes on the wash-board with rhythmic strokes that, somehow, seemed to take a lot of the drudgery away from the task.

Ruth and Elizabeth were doing the week's washing; it wasn't a very hard thing to do, when one went about it with the right spirit–the determination to try, with cheerful energy, to get the clothes as clean as possible in as little time as possible:

"To sweep a room as for God's cause
Makes that and the action fine."

The Spooner girls had never heard these words of the old poet, but they practiced the spirit of them a good deal in their work.

It was astonishing how much Roy had helped to lighten the work for them, as well as for old Jonah Bean, who declared him to be nothing less than a God-send. For instance, he had filled the kettles and tubs with water, and fetched a big basket of cobs to make a fire under the wash-kettle, all before he had gone to Emerald on what he declared to be a very particular errand of his own.

"I wonder what it is," mused Ruth, curiously, "last week he went–said he had something very particular to do, you remember, and he came back late. He

never brought anything back, that I could see."

"My private opinion is," said Elizabeth, confidentially, "that he is fixing up some sort of a surprise for mother's birthday, He heard us say we were looking for a package from father, and that we hoped it would get here in time for her birthday. I noticed it was right after that he went to town on business of his own."

"It would be just like him–he's always trying to think up something to do for us. Say, Elizabeth, I certainly appreciate this shelter he built for us, don't you?"

"I don't see how we ever got along without it: he's certainly a handy boy," declared Elizabeth, gratefully.

Heretofore the girls had washed with the glaring sun beating down upon their unprotected heads, but now Roy had built a shelter for the tubs. Timber was scarce, but he had managed to find enough for the posts and cross-pieces, and there were plenty of tin shingles left from re-shingling the house, so that he had managed to make a very neat job of it, and one that added greatly to their comfort.

"Have you all seen the Babe anywhere?" asked Mrs. Spooner, coming out of the kitchen. "I want her to hunt some eggs for me; I think I'll make some tea-cakes for supper."

"She's down at Jonah's shack–I'll call her," offered Elizabeth, but Mrs. Spooner demurred, saying she would rather go herself.

"I haven't enquired about Jonah's foot, today, and he may think I'm neglecting him," said the gentle mistress of the ranch, who never was known to neglect a living thing upon it, and was particularly solicitous about the welfare of her ancient cowboy.

Jonah Bean was a veteran of the sixties, much given to narrating tales of his own marvelous exploits; he was also a bachelor, who declared himself independent of the whole female sex, inasmuch as he could, if necessary, sew, cook, and "do for himself" generally. Though inclined to be a grumbler, he was really devoted to all the Spooner family, particularly little Harvie, whom he had been the first to nickname "the Babe," and he always found her an eager listener to the tales of adventure he delighted in telling.

Mrs. Spooner found him sitting in the doorway of his shack, which was near the corral, and had originally been intended for a bunk-house, when John Spooner's hand was on the helm, and Silver Spur promised to be a paying ranch. He was patching a pair of overalls and talking animatedly to the Babe, who was, as usual, a rapt listener. "So Giner'l Jackson sez, sez'e: 'Send me the pick o' your men from each company.' And, when he looks us over, he p'ints at me. 'What's that runty, tallow-faced little chap named? And what's he good for?' he asts the cap'n o' my company. And the cap'n ups and 'lows: 'His name's Jonah Bean,

Giner'l, and he's a powerful hand at–"

"O, Jonah!" interrupted the Babe, sorrowfully, "Ivanhoe never ran–nor King Richard Sour-de-lion either. Nobody but caitiffs and paynims and folks like that ought ever to run."

"Why you see, honey," explained old Jonah patiently, "what the cap'n meant was that I was like the Irishman's pig–'mighty little but mighty lively', and could git over ground faster'n common."

"O," said the Babe in a relieved tone, "I'm glad *you* weren't a paynim or a caitiff, Jonah."

"No," hastily denied Jonah, "I warn't–I ain't no kin to none o' them sort of folks; I'm a Tennesseean, me'n all my forefathers before me. Well, the Giner'l calls me up, and sez, sez'e: 'Private Bean, your country is dependin' on you to do some mighty tall runnin' to-day. Kin I depend on you to run so fast the Yankees can't ketch you?'

"I s'luted, and sez I'd do my levelest. Then, as I was a-sayin' he gimme the papers and my orders. 'Twas a long way from the ferry, so's to save time I swum the Jeems river–high water, and twenty-five mile acrost, more or less, I disremember rightly, And then, man, sir! I everlastin' burnt the wind! Minie-balls was a-rainin' like hail, and I jest natchully had to kick the bombshells out'n my way. Right through the enemy's lines till I fetched up at Giner'l Lee's headquarters, s'luted and turned them papers over to him dry as powder–for I'd swum with 'em under my hat."

"King Richard would 'a' made you a knight!" breathed the Babe, in ecstatic admiration.

"They didn't have none o' them in our army, honey, or they mighter. I shore'd 'a' been promoted to sergeant anyhow, if Giner'l Jackson hadn't 'a' been killed before he could send in my recommend." The Babe murmured her regret over the General's untimely taking off.

"Mornin', ma'am," Jonah greeted Mrs. Spooner, who just then came up. "Me'n the Babe, here, was jest a-talkin' over old times. She was a-tellin' me the news from Cuby and I was mentionin' of a few things happened back yander in the sixties. I says this here Cubian war ain't no thin' 'tall but jest chillun's play-war."

"I hope and pray so, Jonah," said Mrs. Spooner, her voice trembling a little. "But–war is war, I'm afraid."

And to this, Jonah, scoffer though he was, could only agree. War, even a play war, meant some danger.

It was after dark when Roy returned from Emerald, and–as he had done the last time, instead of riding up the front way and whistling a signal from the road, he came in at the back, surprising the whole family, who were all gathered

in the kitchen.

"Howdy-do, folks! Gee, that fried chicken smells good, Ruth! Mrs. Pratt sent you a quarter of mutton, Mother Spooner–they had just killed a sheep. I hung it up on the peg outside the back door to keep sweet."

He smiled affectionately on the Babe, who was eyeing with much curiosity a big package under his arm. "And this, I reckon, must be that birthday bundle from Cuba; I found it at the express office."

There was a shout of joy from the Babe, and a satisfied exclamation from her sisters, who had about given up hope of the package's arriving on time, the mails from Cuba being very uncertain.

"Day after to-morrow is mother's birthday–just in the nick of time," they exulted. "Don't you dare take one little, little peep till then. Lock it up in your bureau-drawer, Ruth, so she won't have temptation before her eyes," laughed Elizabeth, and Ruth bore off the package, in spite of the Babe's protest that maybe father had sent a little present to Jonah–and he wouldn't like to wait!

"Maybe there's something in it for a little girl or so," laughed her mother, "but I think we can wait. For I'll be forty years old, and it needs pleasant things to make a fortieth birthday happy, I can tell you."

At this the Babe hugged herself in delight, to think there was still another pleasant thing in store for her mother. For to-morrow Elizabeth and Ruth had planned to make a wonderful cake, iced white like a real Christmas cake, which, on the birthday they intended to light with forty tiny pink candles, already bought and hidden away in Elizabeth's trunk. To console herself, she fell to dreaming over the lovely things shut up in the brown paper package–to think of anything real hard was nearly as good as seeing it.

"Mrs. Pratt's Maudie got back from her grandmother's last night," said Roy, as they all sat at supper–except Jonah, who, because of his foot, had had his supper carried to him by the Babe.

"They're planning for a big celebration and a Harvest Home festival in Emerald next week, and she wants the girls to go over and spend a few days. Mrs. Pratt particularly said both, if you can spare them."

"I wonder what Handle's grandmother gave her this time," said Ruth, rather wistfully. "She always has so many pretty things when she comes back from a visit out there. It must be lovely to have a grandmother who is well-off." She sighed a little, thinking of the many-times laundered cotton frocks that served Elizabeth and herself for all dress-up occasions. Maudie, no doubt, would have a challis, or maybe even a summer silk.

Elizabeth said nothing, but at the mention of a well-to-do grandmother she felt a blush of shame creeping over her face. It was such a little while ago that she had indulged in beautiful dreams of unknown and wealthy relations;

stately grandmothers with high-piled white hair, gold lorgnettes and rustling silks; and haughtily handsome grandfathers of ancient lineage and great wealth, who would see that she was lavishly supplied with means to buy the beautiful clothes necessary for a girl who would move in the highest circles of society. Dreams that ended in such a sordid awakening–O, poor Elizabeth!

Mrs. Spooner's mother eyes saw what the girl tried so hard to conceal, and she said with quiet emphasis: "I wouldn't give any one of my three girls with their cotton frocks, for a dozen Maudies with a dozen silks apiece!"

It was next morning that Roy explained his mysterious trips to town.

"You know your mother can't walk much," he said, "and she can't ride a pony, like we do. So when I saw a second-hand phaeton for sale I made up my mind to buy it for her birthday gift. Shasta works fine in harness, so I rode her to town, hooked her up to the old phaeton, and, last week, brought it home and hid it out in the corral shed, where I've been putting in odd minutes painting it, while Jonah's cutting down the harness to fit Shasta. It's just shreds and patches now, and a mile too big. The phaeton's pretty rickety as to looks, so I went yesterday and got some cloth and fringe for the top, and you girls must help me fix up the curtains so's I'll get it done in time for her to take a drive on her birthday."

"I do think you are a wonder, Roy," admired Elizabeth, with sparkling eyes. "The very thing she needed most–and had no idea she'd get till father comes home."

"A package from Cuba, and a cake and a *phantom*!" exulted the Babe, who was present. "That's a *cossal* thing, Roy."

"She means colossal," explained Elizabeth, as Roy turned a bewildered look on her. And Ruth added: "She gets them out of books, those long words that she can't pronounce. I wish Mother could send her to school–she reads too much."

"People can't read too much, Ruth," said the Babe severely. "Some time, when I go to school I'm going to learn to read well enough to read all the books in the round world. Jonah says there ain't nothin' like *eddication*!"

"Sure–I agree with Jonah," laughed Roy. "Sorry I can't have a fine 'eddication,' I'd like it the best sort. But come on and let's have a look at the *phantom*."

It *was* a pretty rickety phaeton–as to cover and cushions; Roy had already made it spruce with a good many coats of leather-brown paint. He showed the girls the fringe and the lining he had bought to renovate the canopy-top.

"We'll cover the cushions right away," said Ruth, viewing the dilapidated affairs that had, in the distant past, been spick and spandy leather cushions.

"There, now–I knew I'd never recollect everything!" said Roy, ruefully. "I just got enough brown stuff to line the top–I clean forgot the cushions."

Elizabeth, as usual, solved the difficulty.

"Mother has an old brown broadcloth skirt she doesn't wear. It'll make

perfect cushion-covers, just the right shade. I'll take the measures now and stitch up the covers in no time."

"Elizabeth always did have a head on her shoulders!" admired Ruth. "I'm willing enough, but I never could do anything but just cook. Anyway, I'll make the birthday cake."

"And I'll beat the eggs–I can beat eggs go nice and soap-suddy," boasted the Babe.

"That'll be a great help. We don't want any hit-or-miss cake. Everything's got to be properly weighed and measured and beaten. Now let's go see how Jonah's coming on with the harness."

Jonah, with the harness in a big cotton-basket which could be hidden from sight by throwing a horse-blanket over it if Mrs. Spooner happened along, was seated indoors, busily snipping and stitching and patching away at the rusty-looking leather.

"Now don't you-all come a-frustratin' me till I git th'ough with my job," fumed the old man, rather crossly, "'course, you'll 'low 'tain't much to look at–which I ain't a-denyin'–but jest wait till me'n the boy gits done–then jedge by ree-sults."

Roy sighed a little bit wistfully. "I did want to get something better, but my money barely held out for this."

"Something better?" scolded the girls, "who wants anything better?"

"A lovely, low-hung, leather-brown phaeton," added Elizabeth, alliteratively, "is a thing of beauty. Add brown cushions, brown harness and a perfectly-matching brown pony and it'll be too stylish for anything."

"That's sure 'seeing things', Elizabeth," laughed Roy. "Glad you believe in us. I'll work at the phaeton and try to have it looking as much as possible like your fancy picture by to-morrow. Jonah'll boss the harness job, and you girls can transform the cushions."

There were great preparations going on that day, right under Mrs. Spooner's unsuspecting eyes. The girls had ironed the clothes the day before, insisting that they required mending immediately, much to their mother's surprise, for they didn't usually bother about the mending.

There was indeed plenty of it to do, and, since Mr. Spooner's absence, very little money to buy new clothes, so that the best the patient mother could do was to mend and darn and patch, till, like the Cotter's wife, she "made old clothes look almost as well as new."

She sat on the front porch and darned and mended busily, while in the kitchen Ruth and the Babe–who did beat the whites into most wonderful soap-suds, made a marvelous silver-cake, which they iced thick and white–a regular Christmas-cake. And Elizabeth ripped up the old brown skirt, sponged and

pressed the cloth, and made the cushions as neatly as any upholsterer could have done. Roy and Jonah Bean, at the same time, were transforming the harness and phaeton, to have it all done by the next morning. Roy, having his own and Jonah's work to do, had to snatch odd moments to rub down the paint and re-cover the ancient top.

Mrs. Spooner was allowed to open her package from Cuba on her birthday morning, with the three girls crowding round to see–the Babe quivering with eager anticipation.

Mrs. Spooner unwrapped from its folds of tissue-paper the gift they all knew to be hers–a shawl or scarf of black, heavily-woven silk, embroidered in most wonderfully natural pansies; a regular Cuban mantilla, exquisitely made.

The girls were so delighted, draping their mother in its soft folds, and admiring the effect, that they quite forgot a smaller package which was still unopened–all but the Babe, who continued to gaze upon it with fascinated eyes.

"O, Mother, *please* open the little bundle," she begged at last. "I'm–I'm just on *ten-pins* to see what's in it!"

"Now where'd she get *that* word? What on earth does it mean?" laughed Ruth, who was often puzzled over her little sister's expressions.

"Tenterhooks," translated Elizabeth. "Only she got 'hooks' mixed up with pins and needles. Do open it, mother, and relieve the 'ten-pins'!"

"I'll let the Babe open it herself. I'm sure she can pick out her own present," smiled the mother, as she gave the smaller package to the child.

With awed delight the Babe removed the tissue-paper slowly, as befitting a solemn rite: three tantalizing little bundles were disclosed, tightly wrapped. She opened the first; it contained a painted Spanish fan.

"This must be for Elizabeth," concluded the Babe, with decision, and handed over the fan to Elizabeth, who waved it with languid grace, imagining herself to be a Spanish Senorita.

The next parcel held a pretty handkerchief, with a wide border of Mexican drawn-work; this the Babe promptly turned over to Ruth. "I don't want that–I can borrow mother's," she said, with fine assurance.

"O, but I do! I never had a real pretty handkerchief in my life. I don't believe even Maudie Pratt has one as pretty as this," exclaimed Ruth, happily.

On this little ranch where things were hard to get at best, the thrifty mother always cut up the flour sacks into neat squares, which she hemmed on the machine; these when washed and ironed were piled neatly in each girl's little handkerchief-box, for every-day use. For Sundays and extra occasions there was a little square of muslin, hemstitched and bordered with narrow lace. No Spooner ever dreamed of possessing a better handkerchief. No wonder that Ruth exulted over her gift.

The third was a little white box. When the Babe removed the lid she hugged the box to her bosom and pranced joyously about the room.

"My beads, my beads!" she crowed, ecstatically. "My own dear, beautiful pink necklace!" she held out a string of coral before her family's admiring eyes. "Put it on for me, Elizabeth, so I can run show it to Roy and Jonah," she begged. "O, mother–" with a sudden look of consternation, "suppose I didn't guess right?"

"You guessed exactly right," reassured her mother, "but Elizabeth, child, what are you pinning my hat on for?"

"Just walk out in front and behold another birthday gift," said Elizabeth, busily pinning on the hat. "There, now, you're all ready–hat, shawl and everything."

Wondering, her mother obeyed, and beheld drawn up at the door a spick and spandy looking little low phaeton, painted a beautiful leather brown; its fringed canopy-top fresh and neat, its cushions upholstered in handsome brown broadcloth, and harnessed to a perfectly-matching brown pony, in neatly fitting brown harness, already for taking a drive.

"O, my dears!" there was consternation in Mrs. Spooner's voice. "Did you go and buy a *phaeton*! How in the world did you manage? You know we simply must not go in debt."

A chorus of protest reassured her. The gift was none of theirs–they had not gone in debt. Roy had bought it for her with his own money.

"For just nothing at all, Mother Spooner," he hastened to assure her. "It was just junk. We, Jonah, the girls and I, fixed it up for you, so it's really a family gift. And you'll find Shasta gentle as a kitten. Now you and the Babe get in, and and Jonah and I'll escort you in style–we are going to take you over the ranch and come back in time for the birthday dinner Ruth and Elizabeth are going to fix up."

As the procession clattered down the driveway and out into the trail along the prairie, the Babe nestled close to her mother and sighed blissfully–she had in mind another surprise that was to help make the fortieth birthday a pleasant one. A big, Christmassy cake, iced white as snow and covered with forty tiny pink candles.

## CHAPTER IV
## A Jewel of Great Price

Every single member of the Spooner family with the exception of Jonah Bean, who declared he didn't have no time to waste a-pleasurin', were going to Emerald, to spend the day with Cousin Hannah Pratt and take part in the Harvest Home festival.

Cousin Hannah, having heard of the new phaeton, declared that now Mrs. Spooner didn't have an earthly thing to prevent her coming to town, and she had sent such urgent entreaties by Roy, that at last the mistress of the ranch was prevailed upon to accept the invitation.

"But I can only spend the day," she declared, "we can't all be spared at once; Jonah is just able to be about, we mustn't leave him too much work to do. The Babe and I will come back in the afternoon, and the girls can stay–and you, Roy?"

There was a little note of interrogation in her voice as she laid her hand affectionately upon the boy's shoulder. She was almost sure that he wouldn't want to go to a party that his grief was too recent.

Roy patted her hand, smiling a little sadly as he shook his head. "I don't feel equal to parties yet," he said.

"And as to both Ruth and me staying, that's out of the question," decided Elizabeth. "There'll be a hundred and one things to do, and you'll try to do them every one. Ruth's going to stay all night because it's her turn–Mary and I went last year. So *that's* settled, mother."

After some argument, Ruth–who really did want to stay very much, yielded. If Elizabeth wouldn't stay, why she would, and be glad to.

"And you may carry my fan," said Elizabeth generously, "nobody–not even Maudie, will have such a beautiful one. And you shall wear my pink girdle, too, it's newer than your sash."

The Babe sighed. She was having a mental struggle as to whether she could practise self-denial enough to lend her sister the string of coral beads that were the delight of her heart. The situation finally resulted in a compromise.

"And *I'll* lend you my beads–after I've wore 'em all day. But you mustn't forget to feel every now and then for the catch, to see if it's fastened," she warned.

"Thank you, Babe, I will," laughed Ruth, "and I'll take good care of your fan, too, Elizabeth. Dear me, won't I be fine! Pink coral, and pink girdle, a Spanish fan and my drawn-work handkerchief!"

"I don't approve of girls borrowing things from each other," said Mrs. Spooner, doubtfully. "I've known serious trouble to result from such practices. There's always danger of losing or injuring the things, you know. But, if you sisters want to lend, I won't object. Only be very careful, because you couldn't replace them if they were lost."

"I'll be careful as care, mother–don't you worry." And Ruth ran happily away, to pack her suit-case and get together her simple finery.

There were various attractions to be at the celebration. A brass band from a big town would play in the public square, between speeches by noted members of the State Grange. Pony-races by cowboys from the neighboring ranches, the inevitable roping match, a big open-air dinner for the public, and, to wind up with a dance at night in the town-hall, where the various exhibits from the farms–the grain, fruits and vegetables–were displayed.

As the Spooners desired to see all these spectacles, they started out bright and early; Mrs. Spooner, the Babe and Ruth's suitcase in the phaeton, the girls and Roy riding their ponies.

Cousin Hannah, whose husband–a mild little man, quite overshadowed by his big, bustling wife–was a rancher without a ranch, spending most of his time taking cattle to the fattening ranges above, or to market in other states, lived in a big, flimsily built frame house in the little prairie town of Emerald. Mrs. Pratt boarded the station-agent, the telegraph operator, the school-teacher, and nearly all of what might be termed the floating population of the town.

Maudie, the Pratt's only child, was a girl about Elizabeth's age, rather pretty and very much spoiled by her mother and her grandmother, who lived in another state, and who often had Maudie come and visit her.

Mr. Pratt, who happened to be at home for the festival, with his wife, came out to meet their guests, welcoming them with much hospitality.

"The sight of you's sure good for sore eyes, Jennie," exclaimed Cousin Hannah, as she folded Mrs. Spooner in her ample embrace. "I'm tickled to death to see you! And ain't that buggy a sight. It looks 'most as good as new, I declare!"

"It's not a buggy, Cousin Hannah–it's a *phantom*," said the Babe, with dignity.

Almost as good as new, indeed! Where were Cousin Hannah's eyes? Very few phaetons looked so new and delightful, to the Babe's vision, anyway, as this vehicle, in whose loving rejuvenation every one of them had been allowed to have a hand.

"A phantom, is it?" laughed Cousin Hannah. "Well, you come in here to the dining-room and find out whether these cookies are phantoms. The big girls want to go up to Maudie's room, I know. Run along, honies, I'll take care of your ma and the Babe, and Mr. Pratt'll look after Roy. Maudie ain't come out, yet; she's feelin' poorly, and wants to save up her strength for to-night. Maudie's right delicate."

"Come in!" called out Maudie, when Elizabeth and Ruth, with the suit-case between them, rapped at her door.

The young lady sat at her dresser, attired in a much trimmed and flowered kimona, leisurely "doing" her nails with a silver-handled polisher from an elaborate dressing-case spread open before her.

"Hello! If it ain't Elizabeth and Ruth!" she greeted, with somewhat condescending cordiality. "You all come in to see the country jays celebrate? Emerald's such a pokey little hole folks are glad to see most anything, for a change."

"If you think Emerald's dull, Maudie, what would you do out on our ranch?" asked Elizabeth, laughingly.

Maudie shuddered. "Horrors! Don't mention it–such a fate would be too unspeakable!"

"Yet Elizabeth and I manage to stand it–and I reckon we're as happy as most girls," protested Ruth, stoutly.

"O, that's because you don't know any better. You've never enjoyed the advantages of city life, as I have," said Maudie superiorly.

"I suppose your grandmother gave you a heap of pretty things, as usual," said Elizabeth, anxious to change the subject.

"O yes, a good many," carelessly replied Maudie. "How do you like this diamond ring? She gave me this on my birthday."

She held out her hand, which was adorned with several rings, one of them a small but showily set diamond.

Elizabeth and Ruth viewed the jewel with admiring amazement. Neither one of them had ever seen a diamond before, and to their untutored eyes it represented splendor indeed.

"Try it on," said Maudie affably, pleased with their exclamations of delighted wonder. It was much too large for Elizabeth's slender finger, but it fitted Ruth's plumper one pretty well.

Maudie replaced the ring on her own finger, and lifted out the tray of her trunk. "What are you girls going to wear to-night?" she asked carelessly.

"I'm not going to stay, but Ruth will wear her white dress," said Elizabeth. Somehow Ruth felt as if she couldn't speak of her poor little frock among all Maudie's radiant treasures.

"Oh," Maudie's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Let me show you what I'm going to wear." And she unfolded and shook out the shimmering breadths of a pale blue summer silk, lavishly trimmed with lace and ribbon.

"O-o-o!" breathed Ruth, rapturously, "I never saw such a perfectly beautiful dress, Maudie!"

And Elizabeth echoed, warmly, "A beautiful dress–and just the color I'd like, if I ever had a party dress."

"It is rather pretty, I think," acknowledged Maudie, with the air of a person to whom silks are a matter of course. She took out more dresses, dazzling the eyes of her country cousins with the sight of so much magnificence, and making poor Ruth feel very shabby indeed.

"My pink challis or blue mull would fit you exactly, Elizabeth–you're tall

as I am. Stay all night and I'll lend you either one of them you want. I'd like to have you stay, too–the girls here are so common."

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed redly. Evidently Cousin Hannah had made no further disclosures. To Maudie, Elizabeth was still her cousin, and a Spooner–the name that had once seemed so commonplace and now so beautiful compared to that of the despised movers.

"O, but really I can't stay, Maudie; it's good of you to want me, and to offer to lend me your beautiful clothes, but mother can't spare us both very well, and Mary and I came last year, you know!"

"O, well, if you won't you won't. But I should think you'd jump at the chance of going to a party," said Maudie, who did not bother over consideration for her own mother.

Just then Cousin Hannah poked her head in at the door. "Maudie, honey," she asked, conciliatingly, "can't you just run in and set the table when dinner's ready, so's I can stay up town with your Cousin Jennie and the girls? And if the telegraph operator comes in give him his dinner? You know he has to have it early."

"Why on earth can't the cook give him his dinner?" frowned Maudie, petulantly. "I hate that old operator, anyway. Isn't the cook hired to set the table? I ain't feeling well, and I don't want to overdo so's I can't go to the hall to-night."

"O, well," said her mother, resignedly, "I reckon I'll hurry back and 'tend to it myself, if you ain't feelin' well."

But Ruth spoke up eagerly: "Let me do it, Cousin Hannah. I don't care about going up town–and I'd love to do it for you."

"Bless your heart–you're a reg'lar little help-all!" beamed Cousin Hannah, gratefully, and with Mrs. Spooner and Elizabeth, went on her way in great content, knowing that everything would go on well at home.

Maudie stayed in her room and spent her time deciding on her party finery, while busy Ruth swept and dusted the big dining room, that was always in a state of more or less disorder, laid the table carefully and had the operator's dinner ready punctually.

"Have a good time, little daughter," Mrs. Spooner said to Ruth, when at the close of a long day of sightseeing she and the Babe were once more seated in the phaeton. And Ruth replied happily that she would–she was certain of having a perfectly beautiful time.

That night she wiped the supper dishes for the cook, and, after she had dressed, helped to button Cousin Hannah into her own tight and unaccustomed dress-up clothes.

Maudie, who declared that she never liked to be among the first because it was more genteel to be late, took a long time to dress but really looked quite

pretty in her pale blue frock; Ruth, with heartily sincere appreciation, told her so.

"Thank you," acknowledged Maudie, languidly, eyeing Ruth's laundered white dress and pink girdle with tolerant pity. Then her eyes falling on Elizabeth's fan her expression changed to eager covetousness.

"Where in the world did you get that fan?" she asked. "Do you–do you really think it matches your dress? It seems to me a fan like that is out of place with a wash dress. I haven't one. I lost mine when I was at grandmother's."

"This is Elizabeth's; father sent it from Cuba."

Ruth spoke rather hesitatingly; she would have offered to lend the ornament at once, if it had been her own, for she was a generous little soul, but she did not feel like risking Elizabeth's property.

"I say," spoke Maudie abruptly, "lend me the fan, Ruth, and I'll let you wear my diamond ring."

"O, Maudie!" gasped Ruth, hesitation in her heart but delight in her eyes, "I couldn't–I oughtn't to wear your ring. Something might happen."

"Not a thing'll happen," declared Maudie impatiently. "Here, let me put it on your finger. No it isn't too loose, either; my finger's just as small as yours. I wish this fan was mine. It would have cost a lot over here, but in Cuba it's different–or of course your father couldn't have afforded it."

She had coolly appropriated Elizabeth's fan, waving it to and fro with complacent admiration. All Emerald had seen the diamond, but the fan was entirely new, and she realized that it would be greatly admired.

Poor little Ruth, dazzled by the flashing ring, forgot her mother's disapproval of borrowing, and went to the hall with a light heart.

The Spooner girls had gone to school in Emerald when their father was at home, and they could be spared from the ranch, so she knew all the boys and girls who were present, and was soon having a very jolly and sociable time, while Maudie, as befitting a person accustomed to city life, was moving about among the crowd with a rather bored air, displaying her finery to the admiring eyes of her neighbors, and waving Elizabeth's fan languidly.

Still, for all her indifferent air, Maudie felt aggrieved that Ruth, in her shabby white lawn, should receive so much attention, while she in her blue silk was comparatively neglected.

As she sat beside her mother and watched Ruth dancing merrily to the music of the band, Maudie felt a growing rancor towards her unoffending cousin, finally deciding that she would put an end to the enjoyment she could not take part in.

"I want to go home, I'm tired of it all–it is so stupid," she complained to her mother. "Besides, I don't feel very well. Call Ruth and let's go right away."

"No use disturbing Ruth, she seems to be enjoying herself, if you ain't," remarked Mr. Pratt, mildly. "Any of the young folks'll see her home safe."

But Maudie flatly refused to go without Ruth, who was hastily summoned from her dance by Cousin Hannah, and hustled unceremoniously away from the hall.

"O, I *did* have such a good time!" said Ruth, radiantly. "I'm so sorry we had to come away so soon, Maudie."

"It takes mighty little to give some folks a good time," said Maudie, tartly. "I thought the crowd was awfully coarse and common, even for Emerald. I hope you took good care of my ring," she continued, sharply, for Ruth uttering an exclamation, of fear, had stopped and was groping wildly about in the sand at her feet.

"O, Maudie!" Ruth's voice quavered with fear, "O, Maudie–I've *lost* it!"

"Lost my diamond ring!" Maudie shrilled wrathfully, "O, why was I such a goose as to lend it to you!"

"What's that? Your diamond ring that Grandma Pratt gave you? O, my me! Was Ruth wearing it? How'd that come? Whatever made you go and lose it, Ruth?" groaned Cousin Hannah, not waiting for a reply to any of her questions.

"It–it was too large," faltered Ruth, "it must have slipped off my finger. We'll find it in a minute. I know I had it on when we left the hail; I kept feeling of it because it didn't fit me very well."

"Then you'd no business to borrow it," scolded Cousin Hannah. "What made you wear it, if it was too loose?"

"Maudie wanted Elizabeth's fan," explained Ruth, miserably. "And–and she lent me the ring in place of it. I told her then it was too large."

"Yes, blame it all on me!" reproached Maudie, bitterly. "Here–take your old fan! I reckon it didn't cost more than a few cents, but at least I took care of it!"

"Think where you had it last, Ruth–think *hard*!" implored Cousin Hannah, distractedly, "I'd hate so for that expensive ring to be lost–just throwed away, you might say. I don't know what we could say to Grandma Pratt."

"I had it in the hall, I'm certain," said Ruth, dull with woe. "Of course I don't remember where or when it came off my finger."

"Then we'll go right back to the hall and search for it," decided Mr. Pratt. "Come along. No use in making so much fuss, Maudie. Wait till you're plumb certain it's gone for good."

Back to the still crowded hall they went, and poor Ruth, in bitter mortification, had to listen to Maudie's shrill announcement to all and sundry of the fact that Ruth had borrowed her diamond, and then lost it. Which came, she explained loudly, of lending things to people who weren't used to them, and couldn't understand their value.

"O," thought poor Ruth, in her despairing heart, "if I'd only listened to mother I never would have been in all this trouble–if I'd only listened to mother!"

Mr. Pratt, going to the young men who had charge of the hall, made known to them the loss, and there was much searching, but all without result–Maudie's ring was indeed gone!

Downheartedly the party trailed along home; Maudie in tears, sobbing wrathfully that she would never, never lend her things again–no matter if people did beg and pray her to do it. No indeed, she had learned a lesson!

And Cousin Hannah, with torturing insistence, kept asking over and over again if Ruth couldn't remember where she had lost the ring. She ought to try and remember, seeing that it was her own fault. She oughtn't to have worn a ring she knew was too loose for her finger.

To these questions Ruth could only answer, over and again, that she didn't know–she didn't know! Indeed she was fast becoming hysterical with fright and worry.

Then mild little Mr. Pratt astonished them all by speaking with authority that commanded attention.

"That's quite enough, Hannah," he said sharply. "Maudie, don't let's have any more noise from *you*! If your ring's gone it's gone, that's all there is to it. I told mother, when she asked me about it, that it was foolish to give you a diamond when you was so young. I don't know if I ain't glad it's lost, if you want my opinion. Now understand, I want an end to all this talk. No use in badgerin' poor Ruth to death, either, Hannah."

"For pity's sake, Jim!" exclaimed Cousin Hannah, "I didn't aim to badger the child. There, honey, don't cry over it–accidents will happen. I didn't aim to hurt your feelin's, no mor'n *you* aimed to lose the ring. I was jest sorter flustered-like." And she patted Ruth's hand soothingly.

Maudie, though sniffing dolefully, said no more at the moment, being warned by a certain unaccustomed note in her father's voice that his commands must be obeyed. But in the privacy of their room that night she turned the thumbscrews on poor Ruth with savage pressure.

"Of course people who are just a little above paupers can lose other people's property without worrying much about it," she remarked sarcastically.

And Ruth, in a burst of indignation at such aspersions on her family, answered spiritedly: "No such thing, Maudie Pratt! I intend to pay you for your ring, of course."

"Pay me?" Maudie jeered, scornfully. "O yes, it's likely you'll ever be able to pay me a hundred dollars for my diamond!"

Ruth gasped–the amount was so far above her calculation. But her fighting blood was up, for the honor of her family was at stake.

"I haven't the money on hand, but I'll certainly pay you by next Thanksgiving," she said, with proud resolution.

And the green cardboard box at home, containing all the money she possessed in the world, held just thirty-five cents!

## CHAPTER V
## The Silver Spur Bakery

"Elizabeth," whispered Ruth, tragically, "I have done something too awful to tell–and I've got to tell it."

"I just knew you were dreadfully worried," whispered back Elizabeth, sympathetically. "I knew it as soon as you came back this morning. Mother thought you were just plain tired, but I felt in my bones that there was worse. What is it?"

The two girls were in their room getting ready for bed, tiptoeing and whispering to avoid waking Mrs. Spooner, who was sleeping in the next room.

"It's this, Elizabeth–" Ruth's whisper was a wail of despair–"I've lost Maudie Pratt's–diamond–ring: And I've promised to pay her for it by Thanksgiving! Elizabeth, it cost–a hundred–dollars! And you know I've got just thirty-five cents in all the world!"

Then, Elizabeth remaining dumb from astonishment, she went on to tell the whole story.

"And, O, Elizabeth, how *will* I ever get the money?" she ended, despairingly.

"You mustn't tell mother, Ruth," warned Elizabeth, with that sweet, elder-sister air that had grown on her since Mary went away; "she's got worries enough already with father away, and everybody afraid it's going to be a dry year. I can't think just now of any way to earn a hundred dollars quick. I'll sleep on it–maybe I'll dream of a way. One thing's certain; you've got to keep your word, for the credit of the family."

"I was just sure you'd feel that way about it, Elizabeth. What on earth would we do without you!" sighed Ruth, gratefully.

Secure in Elizabeth's ability to find a way, she nestled down among her pillows and went peacefully to sleep. And indeed she needed it sorely, after the miserably wakeful night she had spent with Maudie Pratt.

Elizabeth did not dream at all. She lay awake so long trying to think up some miraculous way by which Ruth and she might earn a hundred dollars, that when she did fall asleep her slumber was entirely too deep for dreams to enter–so deep indeed that it took the warning rattle of the alarm-clock to wake her in time to get the early breakfast necessary for Roy and Jonah.

"Did you think of anything, Elizabeth?" asked Ruth anxiously, as she, too, sprang out of bed at the alarm-clock's warning. And Elizabeth was obliged to confess that she hadn't yet.

"But don't you worry," she soothed, "I'll think of a way. Let's ask Roy, as soon as we get a chance; somehow I feel sure he could help."

It was evening before they found an opportunity to take Roy into their confidence, down at the milk-pen. Milking had been one of the girls' recognized duties before he came, since then he had forbidden them to interfere with the chores, declaring them to be men's work.

Roy set the foaming pails on the fence, turned out the little bunch of milk-pen calves kept to lure home the cows from the open range, and regarded the girls with a grave face.

"I should call that a tough proposition," he said thoughtfully, "but not impossible. In fact it seems that 'most anything's possible if you work hard enough for it. How about cooking, Ruth? You're a dandy on 'pie'n things'. Every ranch round here would buy your truck if it was properly advertised."

"That's just it!" jubilated Elizabeth, "advertise! Ruth, we'll put up a sign-board at the road gate: 'Bread, Doughnuts and Pies for Sale.' Every cowboy that passes will see it, and every single one will buy. I never saw a boy or man that wasn't hungry."

"Elizabeth has a great head," nodded Roy, approvingly, "that's the ticket, Ruth. I'll paint the sign-board to-night and to-morrow you begin baking–money!"

Ruth breathed a sigh of relief. "I just can't thank you enough, Roy," she declared gratefully. "I'll bake day and night if I can just pay Maudie Pratt for that hateful ring!"

Mrs. Spooner was rather bewildered when her young folks–the Babe excepted, begged earnestly for permission to make some money by going into the bakery business.

"We can't tell you just now what it's for, mother," explained Ruth. "Only that it's for something important. You'll know all about it when the right time comes."

"It seems to me that every one of you does as much work as possible, now," doubted Mrs. Spooner. "But as Ruth's heart seems to be set upon this extra labor, I promise not to interfere. And I won't ask any questions about it until you see

fit to tell me of your own accord."

The Babe, who had listened carefully to this conversation, beamed hopefully upon them, seeing in the plan certain possibilities.

"*I'll* help you, Ruth," she volunteered magnanimously. "And maybe if you make a whole heap of money, you *might* have enough left over to buy a new Ivanhoe. Mine's got seven leaves lost out, right at the most exciting part."

"Done!" agreed Roy heartily, "I promise that you shall have a new Ivanhoe if you help. The bargain's between you and me, Baby. We'll leave the girls out of it."

"Except to see that you earn your book," laughed Elizabeth.

That night when they were all gathered around the evening lamp, Roy painted the sign on a smooth white board, with some of the brown paint left over from the phaeton. Bread, he declared, was Ruth's "long suit," but as cowboys would scarcely like dry bread, it was cut out of the list. Pies, however, were always acceptable. Custard being objected to as too "squshy," they decided on mince and apple as being best for cooks and customers. Doughnuts, of course, because everybody liked the little fried cakes, and they could be conveniently handled. Completed, the sign read:

"HOME-MADE DOUGHNUTS.
APPLE PIES.
MINCE PIES.
FOR SALE AT
SILVER SPUR RANCH."

"Now," decided Roy, after all the family had duly admired his handiwork, "I'm going to Emerald early in the morning, and I'll fetch back all your necessary supplies, down to the paper bags to hold 'em, by noon. The McGregor ranch is shipping cattle–they'll pass here Thursday, one of their punchers told me; that'll be day after to-morrow. You can spend the afternoon baking and be ready for them, for I'm certain they'll buy you out. Their range-cook's quit, and Chunky Bill's cooking for the outfit, so they're about starved for something good to eat."

"We'll be obliged to have the first groceries charged to you, mother," apologized Ruth, "but we promise to pay for them ourselves."

"Very well–only don't buy too much at a time," warned Mrs. Spooner, who was doubtful of the success of the enterprise, "until you are sure of making sales."

"We'll succeed all right, never you fear, mumsy," asserted Roy, with cheerful confidence. "I'll drum up trade, and Ruth's good cooking'll do the rest."

Fuel in that woodless country was quite an item; Roy, realizing this, brought

home the next day a load of coke along with the other supplies, all, it was agreed, to be paid for out of the proceeds of the sales.

Also he brought good news from Emerald, where he had met one of the cowboys from the McGregor ranch, who not only confirmed the report of the cattle passing next day, but told him that the ranch cook had quit out there, as well as the man hired to go with the shipping outfit. He offered to get Ruth the job of baking for the ranch until a new cook could be procured.

"Of course I said Ruth would take the job, so he's to bring along the order in the morning. How's that for a beginning for The Silver Spur Bakery?"

"I see land ahead!" exulted Elizabeth, joyfully waving her big cook-apron. "Allow me to invest you with your uniform, Mademoiselle Chef: You will now proceed to mix the magic potions, while the Babe kindles the fire on the Altar of Cookery known to mere mortals as the kitchen range, and I complete the rites by rolling out the crust and filling the tins. Know all men by these greetings, the Silver Spur Bakery is ready for business, and Roy may go tack up the sign."

Inspired by the hope of reward, they made a frolic of the baking working with such zeal and enthusiasm that when evening came and the chief cook doffed her floury apron with a sigh of weary content, there were shelves full of pies and pans full of doughnuts as a result of their labors. Delicate pies, with crisply melting covers and toothsome "inwards," and doughnuts that were deliciously tender and flavory.

"Just for this once we'll let everybody have a treat," decided Ruth, generously. "We'll just make a big pot of coffee and have doughnuts and pie for supper. I want Roy and Jonah to have a taste; they'll relish sweets for a change."

"And I think we'd better let them fix the price, too," suggested Elizabeth. "Men always know more about such things than we do."

Roy and Jonah were most appreciative judges, declaring that twenty-five cents apiece was dirt-cheap for the apple, and–mincemeat costing so much more than dried apples–fifty cents for the mince pies. The doughnuts, being superlatively excellent, were valued at five cents apiece, or fifty cents a dozen.

The Babe could not be kept off the porch next morning, hovering there to watch for the McGregor outfit. Soon, like Bluebeard's sister-in-law, she reported a cloud of dust rising–the customers were coming!

Far ahead of the herd rode a single horseman who turned in at the gate and came galloping up to the house. The futile chuck-wagon, with its incompetent cook, slid past unnoticed while the message from Mrs. McGregor was delivered. She had sent a tin bread-box of ample size, and she wanted it filled with so much bread, cake and pie, that the Silver Spur Bakery was rather startled. She thought the amount she specified might last them for half the week, the messenger said, and at the end of that time she would return the empty tin box to be refilled. And

the Spooner girls were to put their own prices on their wares.

While these things were being settled two other riders from the shipping herd came up for sample orders, and hurried into the kitchen with the Babe and Mrs. Spooner, eager to buy something to satisfy the pangs of hunger to which Chunky Bill's cooking had delivered them.

The stocky little Englishman who had brought Mrs. McGregor's note, and said he would be back from Emerald on his return trip next morning for the box, if they would have it ready for him, paused at the edge of the porch and negotiated a more personal errand.

"And I've a little order of my own, Miss," grinned he cowboy genially. "You see, I'm from the old country, myself, and I'm fairly longing for a taste of plum-pudding once more. Think you're equal to making one? I'm willing to pay your own price."

There was a note of wistful eagerness in his voice that touched Ruth's sympathies, but a plum-pudding was, she feared, beyond her powers. Elizabeth, seeing her hesitation, spoke promptly. "Certainly, we'll be pleased to fill your order," she said, with business like briskness. "And if it isn't as good as any you ever ate in England you needn't pay for it."

"I'm sure it'll be rippin' good pudding, if you make it, miss," politely assured the cowboy, and, with a sweeping bow, he mounted his pony and galloped away to join the approaching herd.

As the hundreds of cattle tramped slowly by, one after another of the attending punchers turned in at the Spooner's gate, a purchaser to the full extent of his pocketbook.

Doughnuts and pies fairly melted away; Mrs. Spooner and the Babe filling the bags in the kitchen while Ruth and Elizabeth delivered the goods and received the money.

And, when they counted up the receipts that night, they found that, deducting all expenses, there would be five dollars profit!

"*And* the McGregor ranch to bake for!" crowed Elizabeth, joyously. "Ruth, I plainly see land ahead!"

"I'm so relieved!" sighed Ruth, "But Elizabeth, are you sure you can manage the pudding?"

"'In the bright lexicon of youth there's no such word as fail', little sister," laughed Elizabeth. "*Of course* I can bake–or boil–or steam a pudding as well as a born Britisher! In fact, being an American citizen, I don't see why I can't make even a better one. Let me take a look at that old cook-book of mother's."

All the next day they baked for the McGregor ranch, besides boiling the pudding for the Englishman. Elizabeth declared she wanted him to try it before he paid for it, but after one glance and a hearty sniff, he decided to pay in advance

the two dollars and fifty cents which Elizabeth had figured out as a fair price.

That it was satisfactory was fully proven when he returned for the next baking, with orders for half-dozen more.

"I poured brandy over it and set it afire, like they do in England," he said. "And every bloomin' puncher that tasted it is wild for more! They call it 'The Perishin' Martyr Pie.' O, it's made a hit, all right."

After that there was quite a run on puddings, and hardly a day passed that the girls did not make a "Perishin' Martyr Pie"–a name that tickled them immensely. Even the Babe learned to mix the batter, and Roy declared he was quite an expert at boiling martyrs.

Money flowed into the little green pasteboard box, so that now there was plenty of company for the lonely thirty-five cents it had originally contained, when Ruth rashly decided she would pay Maudie Pratt for the lost diamond ring. It must be admitted that as the money tide rose Ruth's spirits fell.

"O, it would be so lovely if we were earning it for ourselves," she lamented. "Think of the things we could buy: If we could only give it to mother to help with the living I should be perfectly satisfied–but to go and hand it over to Maudie Pratt for a ring she just made me put on–"

"Now, Ruth," Elizabeth interrupted, laying a loving arm across her junior's shoulder, "we're all getting lots of fun out of the work. I think the whole family is finding that it is really play to earn money. Maybe we'll get into the habit and keep it up after Maudie's ring's paid for. Don't you worry. If we do the best we can, and do it every day, we are going to arrive at delectable places."

Ruth looked at her sister fondly. What would they do without Elizabeth's strong heart and capable head for planning? It was Elizabeth who hunted up a Mexican boy sufficiently reliable to be trusted with a lard-can full of the 'pies 'n things' which found a good market at the round-ups. This was not the season for them, but there is always something of the sort taking place in the cattle country, and Juan was willing to drive an absurd number of miles for a modest share in their profits. Never a cowboy passed the Spooners' attractive sign without galloping up for a purchase, and the early receipts from the bakery were astonishingly good.

But after awhile the McGregors secured a cook, and there were no more round-ups in reach; the cowboys had all become surfeited with a rich excess of "Perishin' Martyrs," so that orders declined and finally fell off altogether on that commodity. The grocer was paid, there was nearly a barrel of flour on hand, and part of a large tin of lard, but there was only seventy-nine dollars earned. Thanksgiving was approaching, and the hearts of the girls began to sink, thinking of its nearness and of the insufficient money in the green box.

And then, the very day before Thanksgiving, the unexpected happened,

when Mrs. McGregor rode over, bright and early, from her ranch with a most unusual and imperative order for pumpkin-pies!

It seemed that a lot of unexpected guests had arrived from the east to spend Thanksgiving at the ranch, and, to celebrate the occasion properly, the McGregors had decided to join forces with a neighboring ranch and have a big barbecue and picnic-dinner in the open, to which all the neighbors were invited. The other ranch was to furnish all the meat for the feast–fat mutton and beef and shotes, to be barbecued deliciously over pits of glowing coals, while Mrs. McGregor was to provide the bread, pies and vegetables.

"Of course you should have been notified days ago," said the pleasant little lady, with deprecating hands outspread, "only I didn't know myself 'till last night! Now my cook can manage the bread and vegetables, and you, my dears, must furnish the pumpkin-pies or I'm a forsworn woman: I've calculated and re-calculated, and I find that, allowing five pieces to a pie, it will take a hundred and six pies to give everybody plenty–you know how men eat! Now dears–" she put a persuasive arm around each girl–"*can* you bake them?"

Ruth gasped. "How in the world can we–in one day? Of course we have plenty of pumpkins–Jonah raised a big patch of them for cow-feed, and there's a barrel of flour and plenty of lard and sugar and things. But in *one* day–"

"We'll do it, Mrs. McGregor," interrupted Elizabeth, smilingly. "We'll fill your order, and thank you very much. Jonah Bean shall deliver them early in the morning."

"My dear girl, you've simply saved my life–I can never thank you enough!" Mrs. McGregor rose, fumbling in her pretty silver wrist-bag. "Twenty-six dollars and fifty cents, I believe. Here's your money–and thank you very, very much: And don't you forget that every single member of your family is expected at our Thanksgiving dinner."

"Why did you take her order, Elizabeth?" wondered Ruth, when their guest was gone, "it will work us to death!"

"Not a bit of it, dear child. Listen, Ruth Spooner, there's just seventy-nine dollars in your green box. Twenty-six added makes a hundred and five. Five dollars is a great plenty for expenses, seeing that we have the pumpkins already. The odd fifty cents will buy a little present for the Babe, and leave you your full hundred to pay Maudie Pratt for her ring. 'Rah, 'rah, 'rah for the girls of the Silver Spur! Our debt's paid!"

"Glory!" Ruth's shouts suddenly wavered, the apron she waved aloft was thrown over her face as she burst into tears.

"O, Elizabeth–shut the door–I don't want anybody else to see me cry. I'm a wretch–and you're a genius–but–but–I can't help thinking about us all working so hard and Maudie Pratt getting all our money!"

"I know, honey," said Elizabeth, understandingly, "if I stop to think I feel that way myself. Let's not stop to think."

Ruth choked down her tears, bathed her eyes and turned a resolute face from the washstand.

"I'm all right," she said in a determinedly cheerful voice.

Elizabeth threw open the bedroom door and ran out among their helpers.

"Kindle a fire, Babe, while we get the pumpkins. Isn't it a mercy that Roy and Jonah are off the range to-day and can stay. Everybody'll have to get to work cutting up pumpkins–even mother."

All day they baked. The stove in the house, the brick oven in the yard which had scarcely been allowed to get cold since Ruth began her enterprise, were both kept filled. The baked pies were lifted out of their tins as soon as cool enough and dropped into paper plates. But even so they could not get enough tins to keep the baking up to the volume required for getting out the hundred pies in that length of time. At last Ruth announced in tones of dismay:

"There isn't a single tin left. What shall we do?"

"H'm, let me work my giant brain a moment," pondered Elizabeth. "How about tin shingles? There're a lot of new ones, you know, nice and clean. And plenty of lard-cans. Roy can cut rings from the cans, and lay them on the shingles. They'll be extra large pies, but they'll hold the dough all right."

It was a good idea, and it worked out very well, with a little care in handling the bulky "tins," so that there was no more time lost in waiting for cooling pies.

Jonah, who kept the fires going, became cheerfully loquacious under the influence of the strong coffee Mrs. Spooner insisted on making, to keep the workers awake at their tasks. He regaled them with thrilling stories of the war, and Munchausen deeds of bravery performed by himself while in service. Tales which served the twofold purpose of inspiring Jonah and amusing his hearers.

The girls insisted upon their mother and the Babe going to bed, so as to be rested for the barbecue, which they determined to attend, as the ranch lay only a little way beyond Emerald. But they, with Roy and Jonah as able assistants, kept on baking till the last pie of the hundred and six was cooling on the shelf, and the voice of the oldest and most experienced rooster warned them of the coming dawn.

However, every Spooner was up and dressed in time next morning, with the pies safely packed in the wagon, which Jonah was to drive, Roy and the girls acting as Mrs. Spooner's escort.

When they started Ruth rode ahead. Nobody but Elizabeth knew what was behind her resolutely smiling face. Pinned in the pocket of her jacket there was a roll of bills–a hundred dollars. The thought of Maudie's exultation over its receipt pinched Elizabeth almost as much as giving up the money. She lagged behind a

little and talked of it with Roy. They agreed that the money-earning fever had got into their blood, and that nothing less than a new enterprise to companion this old one, which they agreed must be carried forward, would satisfy either of them.

They had reached Emerald when Ruth, trotting briskly along its one street, suddenly felt her pony go lame, and quickly dismounted to examine its hoof for a possible pebble or ball of clay.

Suddenly, with a curious little choking cry, she sprang into the saddle and raced ahead, the pony now going quite easily.

Roy and Elizabeth exchanged indignant glances. Evidently Ruth was overcome because she had to give up her precious money so soon.

"I guess it's got on her nerves," whispered Elizabeth. "I feel pretty much like crying, myself."

"Ruth must be going ahead to let Cousin Hannah know we are coming," remarked her mother, placidly. "I hope it'll be so that they can all go. I haven't seen any of them since the Harvest Home festival."

But Ruth had stopped a little way ahead, waving impatiently for her family to catch up, and hastening on they all arrived at the Pratt home together.

Mr. Pratt and his wife came out, Maudie, very much dressed up, followed languidly.

"Have you got my money, Ruth?" she called in her high, shrill voice. "I bet anything you haven't–and I was depending on it to go to Chicago and study music."

"No," answered Ruth, with emphatic clearness, "I'm never going to pay you for that ring. I want to keep the money for myself, and mother and Elizabeth, and the Babe. O, what *lovely* things we'll have out of a whole–hundred–dollars!"

The Pratts stared, mystified by this mad speech. Elizabeth gasped–it did sound shocking. Mrs. Spooner was so little informed that she supposed there was a joke on hand, and laughed with motherly complaisance. Only Roy, pulling back close to Elizabeth's shoulder, muttered in an undertone.

"Ruth's got something up her sleeve. Hold on, don't make up your mind too quick about it."

"What in time was Ruthie goin' to pay you a hundred dollars for?" Cousin Hannah demanded, at last.

"For my diamond ring," cried Maudie, "my lovely diamond ring that Grandma gave me, and that I wouldn't have lost for a thousand dollars."

"It never cost to exceed twenty-five," snorted Mr. Pratt. "Ruthie's just right not to pay you more'n that–or half as much. It was partly your fault for lending the ring."

"I'm not going to pay her a cent," repeated Ruth, with dancing eyes. "I've

got the money–a hundred dollars–see here," and she flourished a sheaf of bills that made them gasp again.

"I guess I can *make* you pay," stormed Maudie, "you *promised*, and you've got to keep your word."

"Well, you *did* lose Maudie's diamond, you know. Ain't you goin' to replace it, Ruth?" asked Cousin Hannah, a little wistfully.

"You must do the right thing, daughter," cautioned Mrs. Spooner, taking a part in the conversation for the first time.

"I will, mother," said Ruth, suddenly sobered; and she went toward Maudie Pratt with the sheaf of greenbacks in one hand, and something which nobody could see clasped tightly in the other.

## CHAPTER VI
## The Shiny Black Box

The thing was like a scene in a play, almost. Maudie stood, half abashed, half eager, and wholly frightened. Ruth came forward with a confident, buoyant step that reassured her mother. A girl who was going to do something impudently wrong would never act that way.

"There," said the plump, smiling Spooner girl, dropping into Maudie's outstretched palm a little lump of adobe clay that looked considerably like a rough pebble. "I picked that out of my pony's hoof, right in the path where I'd lost your ring."

"Wha–what is it?" faltered Maudie, afraid to look.

"Turn it over," prompted Elizabeth impatiently.

"O, Maudie's almost a paynim, or a caitiff," breathed the Babe, hiding a too sympathetic countenance against her mother's knee.

The Pratt girl turned the little lump of clay in trembling fingers. Something glittered on one side of it; the clay parted and a circlet with a wee, shining setting lay in her palm.

"My diamond ring!" she gasped.

Then before them all she flung it from her, so that it tinkled and skipped on the porch floor. This done she sat down on the step and burst into a tempest of wrathful tears.

"I always hated it," she sobbed. "It's such a miserable little diamond. I wanted that hundred dollars to go to Chicago and study music. How in the world am I going to go if you don't–"

"Hush, Maudie," Mrs. Pratt cautioned, and her father seconded the admonition rather more sternly.

The Spooner young folks had closed in around Mrs. Spooner's vehicle and were helping her out and explaining all about the earning of that hundred dollars. While they did so the Pratts managed to get Maudie straightened up with the assurance that she should be permitted somehow to go to Chicago; and by the time the two groups came together they were ready to drop the subject, Maudie looking self-conscious if not hang-dog, whenever anything remotely concerning a ring was mentioned.

They went on harmoniously enough to the Thanksgiving dinner at the McGregor ranch. Coming home after they had passed Emerald and the Pratt house, the matter was again brought up by the Spooners. The sky was all a delightful lavender, with the big, white stars of the plains country beginning to blossom in it, and there was still light enough to travel very comfortably over the winding, level road.

"I'm proud of the enterprise and persistance you all showed in earning that hundred dollars," said Mrs. Spooner fondly. "But it hurts me to think you could keep a secret from mother as long as that; and such a hard secret, too. I'd have been so glad to help you, dears."

"It was my fault," Elizabeth said, "that part of it. I wouldn't let Ruth bother you because I felt that you had worries enough. Of course if I'd dreamed for a minute that Maudie Pratt would tell a story about the value of her ring, and that twenty-five dollars was the real price of it, I should have let Ruth tell you; but a hundred dollars–why, Mother, until we tried, I wouldn't have believed it was possible for us to come anywhere near earning a hundred dollars. Would you?"

"No," said Mrs. Spooner. "That's why I say I'm proud of you. It's an achievement any three young persons of your age may well be proud of–and none of you neglected your other duties for it."

"It was *lovely*," sighed Elizabeth, reminiscently. "I think making money is almost more fun than spending it. Ruth can always earn with her cooking. I wish I had a special gift. What do you think I can do best, mother?"

"You do almost anything you do a little better than other people," declared Mrs. Spooner. "But there's one thing you can excel at, and that nobody else around here attempts, and that's photography. Why not try to make a profession of it."

Elizabeth thought it over.

"I suppose I'd have to go to some big town and study," she ruminated.

"Ruth didn't go to a big town to take cooking lessons," prompted Mrs. Spooner, smilingly. "And you were just admiring the fact that it was her good cooking that made the earning of the hundred dollars possible."

"Wise little mother," said Elizabeth, touching her heel to her pony and riding ahead, blowing back a kiss as she passed, and cantering on for some distance.

"I think that's a splendid idea," said Roy eagerly. "I knew a boy who worked his way through college almost entirely by camera work. And he was just an amateur photographer, too."

"I'd help her all I could," put in Ruth, loyally. "She helped me–you all did. I didn't near earn that hundred dollars alone."

Here Elizabeth came dashing back to announce to the family that there was an insuperable obstacle. If she went into the simplest kind of photography she would have a new camera–and oh, quite a lot of things.

"A camera is easy," said Mrs. Spooner, "since you've all agreed to give me the keeping of the hundred dollars, I intend to put it in the bank as a reserve fund to draw on in case of an emergency. I'll consider this case of yours as one, and buy you a camera with some of it."

"And I'll fix up a dark-room all right, Elizabeth," promised Roy, who was always intensely interested in all the Spooners' affairs. "I can do it easily; just board up an end of the back porch, fix a red lantern in it for a light, with some shelves and a sink, same as the kitchen. I can make it. It won't cost much, and you can do your own developing. Say, Elizabeth, that's easy!"

So it came about that, after some persuasion, Elizabeth finally accepted the camera–a small one, with chemicals, films and everything necessary for a start, all of them to be paid for out of the hundred dollars in the bank. Roy fixed up the darkroom with all the needed apparatus, and, thus equipped, Elizabeth declared herself ready for business, and let the public know it by adding to the sign down at the road gate another line, in smaller letters, which read:

"Photographs made to order.
Horseback pictures and views of places a
specialty."

Ruth still kept up her baking in a small way. She no longer undertook such strenuous jobs as baking for ranches or festivals, but people passing by usually dropped in for a bag of doughnuts or a pie, knowing that they were always kept on hand. Some of these customers patronized Elizabeth's "studio," as she named the little boarded-up corner of the porch, and had their pictures taken. More often she was asked to go and make a card-picture of somebody's home, or she

tried snap-shots of cattle handling which sold well to the boys who could identify themselves or their friends in a chance group.

Elizabeth made her charges in accordance with her work, which, being an amateur, could not command professional rates. She studied hard her manual of photography, and finally after considerable debate, took a correspondence course in the art. Still, living on a ranch, she could barely make enough to pay for her materials, and indeed was doing well to accomplish this much.

"When I get so I can earn, and have enough money to buy a bigger camera, I might try a place in town, or maybe I'll put up my prices," she said. But she resisted all suggestions that a finer camera be purchased from the reserve fund. "If anything happens we'll need that to live on," was her wise conclusion.

Let nobody think that there were not days of discouragement, when Elizabeth spoiled her films or the simple drudgery of the work weighed on her. Nothing worth having is got without effort. Whatever this girl's ancestry, she had inherited pluck and persistance, and after a failure she always went back to work with renewed energy.

"I *will* do it!" she would say to Ruth and Roy. "I am going to try to make myself the very best photographer I can,–and then maybe the next higher profession will come along and invite me in."

The Babe, being the only idle inmate of the Silver Spur, continued to devour unchecked her books of romance, until an incident occurred that made Mrs. Spooner decide that the time had come for her reading to be a little more varied. It happened one day in the following summer, when old Jonah, with a worried look on his face, sought her for a little private conversation.

"It's about the Babe, ma'am. Have you noticed anything pertickler wrong with her lately?" he asked anxiously.

"Why no, Jonah; what makes you think there's anything wrong? What has she been doing?" asked Mrs. Spooner in alarm. She arose from her seat hastily. "I must go and find her–where is she?"

"Jest down at the corral, unsaddlin' of her pony," soothed Jonah. "No need to be skeered–at the present. You set down, Mis' Spooner, and I'll tell ye. A while ago I come acrost her out on the range, a-gallopin' along on that little rat-tailed cayuse o' her'n, and I'm blest if she didn't have a broom-handle over her shoulder, and a old fire-shovel helt out right straight in front! She looked out'n her eyes like–well, like she was *seein'* things. I calls to her: 'Babe, whar ye gwine?' But law, she looks at me pine-black like I was a stranger, hits Queen Beren-jerry, as she calls that reedic'lous cayuse, and hollers back over her shoulder: 'Avaunt thee, villain!' and a heap o' other lingo I couldn't make sense outer."

Mrs. Spooner's face relaxed, she dropped back in her rocking-chair and began to laugh. The old man seemed to resent her mirth.

"Now Mis' Spooner, you may take it that-a-way, but 'tain't like the Babe to be miscallin' nobody, let alone me what's raised her. My opinion is the child's comin' down with fever, or got a tetch o' the sun, and you better go to dosin' her mighty quick!"

"No, Jonah," laughed Mrs. Spooner, much relieved, "it's just Ivanhoe gone to her head–not the sun. She reads too much, and is too much alone, I'm afraid. She was only playing she was a knight–a person out of that book she's always reading. But thank you for telling me, all the same."

"I'd be glad to think it was no wuss; but–" Jonah shook his head doubtfully, "a-misscallin' me a villian don't seem natchul. I'll go send her in to you, so's you can look at her tongue. My notion is she needs doctor's truck."

As he hobbled out in quest of the Babe, Mrs. Spooner sighed a little, feeling that she had a problem to cope with. The lonely child was living too much in a world of dreams. "I'll speak to Elizabeth," the mother mused, thankful that she had Elizabeth's wise young head and Ruth's willing hands to rely upon. The older pair must take little Harvie more into their hearts. "What on earth would I do without my girls to help me!"

Both girls were spending the day in Emerald, with Cousin Hannah Pratt, who–now that Maudie was away in Chicago, studying music, and Mr. Pratt up in Wyoming with a herd of fattening cattle–was very lonely, and begged earnestly for some of the Spooners to come in whenever it was possible, and keep her company.

When the affair of the ring occurred, Mrs. Pratt for once found it in her heart to give her adored daughter some much needed plain speech, declaring that she was thoroughly ashamed of the way Maudie had treated her cousin, and insisting upon taking the girl out to the Silver Spur, to apologize to Ruth–a deed that was very ungraciously done.

Mr. Pratt went even farther, for he took the ring into his own keeping, depositing it in the bank with his papers, and declaring that it should stay there until Maudie learned to value the truth more than diamonds.

Still, from that very day Cousin Hannah began to put by a little money every week, with the view in end of gratifying Maudie's wish to study music. Grandma Pratt added to this fund till at last there was enough, and with high hopes Maudie had gone to Chicago, quite sure of becoming a world-famous musician.

Elizabeth and Ruth returned rather late, as they had waited for the last mail, which came in the afternoon. Mrs. Spooner heard their merry young voices down at the corral as she moved about the kitchen, getting the early supper ready. Soon they came hurrying in at the back door, their arms laden with bundles, followed by the Babe, now wide-eyed and alert; knights and paynims had faded

away before the present-day delights of a box of candy the girls had brought her–an extravagance for which their mother could not find it in her heart to scold them, knowing that, next to her books, the Babe loved sweets.

"I declare you've gone and got supper ready–you bad mammy!" scolded Ruth, "didn't you know your big daughters would be back in time to save you from such extra work?"

"Yes, and you must stop right now and go out on the porch, where there's still light from the afterglow, and read your letters–two of 'em, and from the folks you love best–father and Mary." Elizabeth fished the letters from the mail-pouch at her side. "And we've got a heap of mail-magazines, and a letter from home for Roy, that pamphlet on photography that I sent for, and the new films and developer. Ruth had a letter from father, too. He's all right, but make haste and let us hear from Mary."

"And here's a candied fig for you to eat while you're readin' your letters, mother," added the Babe, generously, as she held out the particular dainty her heart loved best. "Now I'll go find Jonah and Roy–I want to give them some of my candy, too."

Mrs. Spooner looked rather grave when she returned from reading her letters in the afterglow of the summer twilight. "Father's well, and sends love, and wants letters more than anything in the world, he says he hopes we'll all remember. But Mary–the letter's from John–is not so well–." Mrs. Spooner's voice trembled a little–"he sends me a check, and begs that I'll go out and spend a few weeks with her. But how in the world can I leave you all?"

"Mary not well?" Elizabeth's tones were filled with anxiety–"O, Mother, you must go; we'll get on somehow. If Mr. Bellamy sent a check for you to pay your way, there's nothing at all to prevent."

"We can go in and stay with Cousin Hannah," put in Ruth, "she needs us, really–she hasn't got a cook, and there are so many boarders that we'd be a great help, I know.

"Yes, you would–and I think it would do you both good, being in the village a little while. But what about the Babe?" asked Mrs. Spooner. "You and Elizabeth could help, but she would only be in the way. Jonah was just telling me about seeing her out on the range, galloping along pretending she was Ivanhoe, or somebody else out of her books. I'm afraid the poor little thing needs company."

"Take her with you," suggested Elizabeth promptly. "A change would do you both a lot of good. Just take enough money from that reserve fund in the bank to pay her fare, and both of you hustle off just as quick as possible. We can get you ready by day after to-morrow, easily."

This plan, after a little consultation with Roy and Jonah, was adopted, and Mrs. Spooner and the delighted Babe set off for Oklahoma, while Elizabeth and

Ruth, much to Cousin Hannah's delight, went in to stay with her. Jonah and Roy–who declared that he was just pining to get a taste of Jonah's boasted cookery, were left alone on the ranch.

Cousin Hannah, who was naturally a very loquacious person, had become decidedly reticent on the subject of Maudie and her musical studies, though in the beginning the boarders had found the repeated and detailed information about the matter rather wearisome. Even to Elizabeth and Ruth she said little, though more than once, they surprised her wiping away tears as she went about her work.

"I don't believe that ungrateful Maudie Pratt writes to her mother!" said Ruth, indignantly. "I found Cousin Hannah crying in the parlor just now; she said it was *toothache*–when I know she has a full set of 'uppers and unders,' as she calls them. You see, she'd forgotten. I believe she was crying about Maudie."

"Ruth," said Elizabeth in reply–they had been at the Pratts three days, "do you remember that a week from to-morrow is Cousin Hannah's birthday?"

"Why, so it is," said Ruth, "and she hasn't said a word about it. She always used to have a big dinner, didn't she? I know what the trouble is–it's Maudie. She can't bear to have a big birthday dinner because Maudie won't be here. Maybe that's what made her cry."

"Yes, because Maudie isn't here, and because she hasn't heard from her in two weeks and is frightened to death about her–I just chanced to find that out. Let's make Cousin Hannah get up a big dinner, and telegraph an invitation to Maudie. The telegraph operator'll send it for nothing. He always gives as much as ten dollars for a birthday present for Cousin Hannah."

"A birthday present," repeated Ruth. "I know what she'd like–she told me yesterday. Say, Elizabeth, I believe we could get one for her, too. The Revingtons are going away, and they'd sell theirs cheap, rather than ship it east."

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded Elizabeth.

"Big secrets!" exclaimed the younger sister exultantly. "Come on and let's run down town to Meeker's store and see if Roy's in from the ranch, I want to talk to him about it. Pretty nearly everybody in town'll join us. Hurry up!"

The two girls ran down the street, stopping in at the insurance office to speak to little Miss Thorpe, a new boarder of Cousin Hannah's, a stenographer who had recently come to Emerald. They went on, cheered by this interview, and consulted the station agent, who agreed that Mrs. Pratt, who had made him comfortable for many years, must be given a birthday which would raise her drooping spirits.

"I'd sure do anything that would bring Maudie home, and *keep* her home," he said, rather grimly, "because I know that's what her ma wants–though I'm not so certain that it'll make her or any of the rest of us any happier. If we're all to

throw in together, for one present you can count on me to double the ten dollars if it has to come."

Roy had joined them by this time, and was taking down what he called "subscriptions" with pencil and paper. As the three young folks went out the door Mr. Rouse called after them:

"But you must give us a mighty good dinner, Miss Elizabeth. A good dinner always goes with a celebration of any kind, and to my notion it's the best part of one. So you and Ruth put on your studyin' caps, and get out your cook-books."

"We'll promise to give you a good dinner, Mr. Rouse," agreed Ruth, heartily, and Elizabeth added: "If you'll all tell us what particular dishes you like best, we'll try to have them, just as a little token of our appreciation."

This was a happy thought, and it pleased the boarders immensely to have such consideration shown them. Ruth got her own pencil and note-book, and gravely made entries of each boarder's favorite dish. It was a funny bill-of-fare that she made out: Chicken-pie and turnip-greens, potato-pone and apple-dumplings, cold-slaw and Waldorf salad, and other equally incongruous dishes, all of which were faithfully and painstakingly prepared by the conscientious little cooks, with certain additions of their own, making a very palatable "company dinner."

Elizabeth sent word to Jonah by Roy; he was to come over bright and early on the morning of the birthday, bringing along the wagon to fetch home the gift for Cousin Hannah.

Many hands, we know, make work easy. The week went by swift-footed. If Cousin Hannah had heard from Maudie she did not mention it, and if the girls had any reply to their telegram they were equally reticent. The difference was that Mrs. Pratt, in spite of the birthday preparations became more and more doleful, while the girls went out on errands that involved that subscription paper of Roy's, and beamed with joyous anticipation.

The great day came. Ruth and Elizabeth helped till the dinner was all on and cooking beautifully, the table set, ready to dish up the dinner when the time came, then they both disappeared in a very mysterious manner, leaving Cousin Hannah bustling about her kitchen all alone.

Everything went smoothly till the kettle became dry, and she found there was no water in the pipes. Calling Elizabeth and Ruth repeatedly and finding that they were both out, Cousin Hannah decided that she would go herself and see what was the matter with the wind-mill, as there was nobody else at hand.

"I know in my mind it's caught," she muttered, "and only needs a tap with a hammer to start it a-goin' again. Well, I just *got* to have water, so I reckon I might's well go try to skin up that ladder."

Taking a hammer to loosen the refractory sails, she climbed slowly and

cautiously up the creaking ladder, and soon had the water flowing again, as the sails began to work; they had needed only a slight jar to loosen them.

On top of the ladder she paused, and looked wonderingly over the vast plains that surrounded Emerald.

"My me! I ain't had such a good look at the country since I used to live in the foothills," she exclaimed. "I feel like I was standin' on top of one of 'em now, viewin' the scenery. O, pity on me–*what* is that!"

With a gasp of horror she clung to the ladder, her eyes fixed on the object that had attracted her startled attention. It was a wagon driven by a man whom she recognized as Jonah Bean, and containing something long, and black and shiny–a box-like object that made her heart grow cold to look upon. She got a mere glimpse since a horse-blanket had been thrown over it, evidently for the purpose of concealment–as if *anything* could hide that awful shiny black box:

The wagon was coming slowly–very slowly, up the road toward her house, and walking beside and around it was a group of young people whom she knew for her own household–Elizabeth and Ruth, and some of the younger of her boarders, with Roy and one or two other boys from the neighborhood. They seemed excited, and had apparently one stranger with them, since she could see an unfamiliar dress of vivid plaid on the other side of the wagon.

"O me! O my!" moaned the poor woman, as she started hurriedly to descend from her high perch. "I ain't heard one blessed word from her in a month! And I thought she was just too careless to write to me: My poor, poor girl!"

Near the bottom, one of the rungs broke under the weight of her foot, and she barely saved herself from a dangerous fall by clinging with both hands and drawing up her foot to the rung above.

Sitting thus she waited for them to come; her eyes shut because she did not want to see, drawing her breath in heavy, muffled sobs, praying for strength to bear the blow that was coming, trying to find courage to look upon that grewsome, shiny black box when the time arrived.

The wagon drew up in front of the house, but Roy and Elizabeth came creeping softly round to the kitchen. Cousin Hannah could hear them whispering:

"Let's find out exactly where she is, so's we can get it in without her knowing–it might frighten her." How heartless the best of young people were!

"Children," quavered poor Cousin Hannah from the ladder, "come and help me down–I know what you're bringing–I saw it away off–and I knew right away–how could I help knowing!"

"O, *did* you!" exclaimed Roy and Elizabeth, dejectedly. They stopped below and stared up. "That's too bad. We're *so* sorry, Cousin Hannah. We tried our best to get it in before you saw what it was."

"What difference does that make?" moaned Cousin Hannah–Roy and Elizabeth thought she must have sprained her foot, and the pain made her groan–"take me to her–my poor, poor child! You shan't call her *it*!"

Roy and Elizabeth laughed rather sheepishly, and Mrs. Pratt glared at them. Had they no feelings!

"How on earth did you find out?" asked the mystified young people, as they helped her down and supported her between them into the house.

They steered her straight for the parlor, where a crowd stood around the black box.

"Am I to break the news?" asked Mr. Rouse. But instead of the serious mien proper to such an occasion he was smiling broadly.

## CHAPTER VII
## The Wire Clipper

The conclusion of that matter at Cousin Hannah Pratt's, left a very warm feeling between the two families, for when Mr. Rouse moved aside from the black box it was discovered to be an old-fashioned square piano, now set proudly on its legs, and seated at the stool in front of it, her lips parted ready to burst into song–was Maudie Pratt.

Her mother's astonishment and rapture pretty nearly scared the donors of the piano to death, for they had cherished no intentions of giving Cousin Hannah a fright with their mysterious preparations. Maudie had simply been ill, homesick, and afraid to come back until she got the telegram the girls sent. Putting her at the piano was an afterthought, and one which some of them regretted, since she sang all afternoon, and had to be dragged away for the birthday dinner. However, that being an example of Ruth's very best skill, helped out by Elizabeth, they had an extremely jolly time, and went home with promises of friendship that were astonishing.

"If you ever need anything from me, remember my heart and my home are open to you," Cousin Hannah kept repeating as she waved to them from the steps.

They had little idea how soon they should be in bitter trouble when they needed assistance from anybody that would offer it. Of course it was a dry year–Jonah Bean declared that it was, taking it by and large, the worst all-round year

he had ever witnessed in the state of Texas–and he had seen a main of 'em!

Mrs. Spooner and the Babe after spending a month in Oklahoma were back again, and all that was left of the Spooner family at home once more. The Babe had greatly enjoyed this, her first railroad trip, and she was kept busy for weeks relating her experiences. Mary was well again, and had promised to come in the winter and make a long visit when, they all hoped and prayed, their father would be at home with them.

It was a thing they hardly dared own, even to themselves, but everybody was beginning to feel worried about Mr. Spooner's safety, for there had come news of a battle fought in Cuba, and though all the papers were filled with the details, no letter had been received from him. Day after day some one rode to the village to bring back the mail, and day after day the poor little mother, watching and waiting at home, was doomed to be disappointed when no letter came.

For the children's sakes she bore up bravely, always saying with forced cheerfulness that probably Father had been sent into the interior, where there was no means of mailing a letter–it would be sure to come after awhile. But in her own heart she entertained a great fear which she never breathed to the others–a fear that he might be among the "missing" after the battle! The nameless missing.

Then there came the day when Harvey Grannis, riding over from his distant ranch, let his sister know pretty plainly that the public shared her fear.

"No use mincing matters, Jennie," he said, speaking kindly–though he could not keep an eager note out of his voice. "We're mighty afraid that poor John won't come back! He never would take my advice, or he'd not have been crazy enough to volunteer."

Mrs. Spooner sank down on the lounge and covered her face, moaning softly.

"Now don't take on, Jennie," her brother said, patting her awkwardly on the shoulder. "Just you listen to this proposition I've come to make to you: I've got a big ranch, and a big house, and you are all welcome to come and live with me. Your girls are growing up wild, anyway, without a man to overlook 'em. Of course you know, good and well, that I hold a mortgage on this ranch of yours, and the interest money ain't been paid for some time, either. But that's neither here nor there. The question is, now that John's gone, will you all come over and let me take care of you?"

A shiver went over the little woman on the lounge, but she dropped her hands from before her eyes, and faced the situation bravely.

"You're good to offer us a home, Harvey," she said, when she could command her voice; "but I can't bear to think of moving till–till I feel sure John's not coming back! I'm hoping every day to have news from him; I'm certain that the children wouldn't want to leave the home. Thank you, Harvey, but we'll stay

right where we are, for the present, anyhow."

Then the storm burst–so angrily loud that Elizabeth and Ruth sitting in the back room heard every word.

"Don't you think for one minute," blustered Harvey, "that you can depend on me to support you on this ranch: You needn't keep an old fool like Jonah Bean and a young horse-thief like Roy Lambert hanging round, and expect a man who knows his business to spend one cent for you. Such fellows as that are good for nothing but to run you and your ranch to rack and ruin. No, ma'am! You've got to come to my house, or you needn't expect me to take care of you."

"I never asked you to take care of us, Harvey," returned Mrs. Spooner with spirit, "I never thought of such a thing!"

Elizabeth, in the back room, looked at Ruth. "I just can't stand it any longer!" she whispered indignantly, "let's go to mother." And they marched into the room, hand in hand.

"Well, I hope you've come to persuade your mother to listen to reason," grunted their uncle, as the two girls entered the little parlor.

"We've come to tell her that we'll take care of her, Uncle Harvey. And you've no right to suppose that father won't come back!" burst out Ruth impetuously.

Elizabeth added in a milder tone: "We don't need any help, really, Uncle Harvey–we're quite able to take care of mother. We thank you for offering us a home, but we don't need it. We've got one–and we mean to keep it, and support ourselves."

Harvey Grannis gave the newcomers a long look. Elizabeth said he tried to "stare them down."

"Support yourselves, hey?" he grunted. "Well–I wash my hands of the whole bunch!"

He got as far as the door, marching very slowly, and expecting to be called back, when Mrs. Spooner hurried after him, her hands held out. The girls were wrathful and disappointed, but their mother's first words brought them comfort.

"Good-bye then, Harvey," said Mrs. Spooner kindly. "But we won't part in anger. The girls didn't mean to offend you. I'm sure we'll get along all right."

"Didn't *mean* to offend?" snorted the now enraged ranchman. "Well they done so, mighty easy! If they get along half as well making a living as they do at being impudent to their elders they'll have no need of help."

"Now, now," soothed Mrs. Spooner, as she took her brother's hand and raised her small, tired face for his good-bye kiss. "My girls are just high-spirited, Harvey–and you ought to be the last to complain of that!"

Harvey Grannis kissed his sister grudgingly–and then was angrier than ever because he had done this apparently gracious act. The girls, nodded to them

as a gentle hint, made no effort towards bidding him farewell.

"Let them alone," complained Harvey, "they're fixing it up that I'm an old brute and they're persecuted angels. Let 'em have their way. We'll see what comes of it–you needn't expect me to care what happens after this!"

The very explosiveness of his protest showed how much he did care. In point of fact his sister and her family were all he had, and at heart he was very fond of them–not the least of Elizabeth. Mrs. Spooner always looked to hear him make some allusion to her alien birth, but he never did. He had longed to have these bright, brave young creatures and his only sister in his home, to feel that they belonged to him, that they were dependent on him. It might not have been a very pleasant life for them, but it was what he longed for, and what he gave up with anger and reluctance.

Down at the road gate he met the Babe, riding on her pony, Queen Berengaria.

"O, Uncle Harvey, I'm so glad you've come!" chirped the child, joyously. "Ain't you going to spend the day? It's been the longest time since you've come, and we all want to see you so bad."

Harvey Grannis's eyes softened; in his own rough way he loved the child very much; she was named for him, and, unlike the other girls, she was not the least bit afraid of him. How he would have loved to have his little namesake niece to ride about with him over his own ranch!

"Glad to see your old uncle, are you Harvie? Well, I can't say the rest of 'em felt that way about it! You're a fine little girl, and I'd like to have you where I could keep an eye on you." He sighed regretfully. "No, I ain't going to spend the day this time–maybe some other day. And say, Harvie, don't you let 'em talk you into hating your old uncle," earnestly.

"Why, no Uncle Harvey, 'course not," agreed the Babe, wonderingly. "But there don't anybody at our house hate you. Please come on back, and Ruth'll make a cake for dinner."

Harvey Grannis declined to accept this hospitable invitation, knowing better than the child that he had made himself unwelcome.

"I've got to go now, honey," he said. "You can give a message to your mother for me." He looked at his namesake a long time. "Harvie," he wheedled, and nobody would have guessed that his voice could be so soft and pleading, "wouldn't you like to come over to the Circle G and live?"

Little Harvie looked doubtful.

"Do mother and the girls want to go? What'll father think of it when he gets home?"

Grannis had not the heart say to her, as he had said freely to the others, that they must give up hope of John Spooner's return. Instead he offered a bait

which he thought would take her mind from the two questions she had asked.

"I'd give you the prettiest little cutting-pony you ever looked at, a pinto with blue eyes. That old skate you're on isn't fit for you to ride."

The Babe's own blue eyes filled with tears.

"Queen Berengaria isn't *very* beautiful," she admitted, "but she's *awful* good!"

Grannis, with that lack of sympathy which his type of man shows for the tender sensibilities of a child, burst out laughing.

"You just say that because she's the best you can get," he surmised, smilingly. "If I had you over at the Circle G to be my little girl, we'd shoot this old bag of bones and give you something that could go."

Old bag of bones! *Shoot* Queen Berengaria! Harvey Grannis never knew that then and there he settled the question as to his namesake's ever agreeing, so long as she could fight the question, to set foot on the Circle G as a home.

"Did you say you wanted me to take a message to mother?" she asked quietly, after a somewhat lengthy pause.

"Yes," said the ranchman. "You just tell 'em I said that the big spring's liable to give out–and *then* she'll maybe think different about some things."

Small Harvie repeated the message, her clear eyes fixed on her uncle's face.

"Now I can say it just like you did," and solemnly she parroted the big man's words, giving quite unconsciously his intonation, and the threat that was in his voice. It appeared that he did not relish this, for he put in hastily:

"Don't say it cross–just *say* it."

"But, Uncle Harvey, even if the spring does give out we always water at the big water-hole. Nobody ever did know it to give out, did they?"

"No," said Harvey Grannis, "that's why I bought the land it's on."

"And you'd always let us water at the big tank," concluded the Babe, comfortably.

"I would if 'twas only you, honey," he told her, and his eyes glittered.

He had said that he bought the land for that water-tank, and he might have added: "That's why I wouldn't sell it to your father when he wanted to buy it with Silver Spur." He might have said this, for the Silver Spur joined his big pastures, had once, in fact, been part of his holding, and when John Spooner bought from his brother-in-law, Grannis retained the pasture containing the tank, saying that he wanted to use it for convenience in watering herds when he drove them down to the railroad for shipping, and that the Spooners could always use it anyhow. This was a mere verbal arrangement, it did not stand in the deed, and when the Babe arrived with her little speech and repeated it at the dinner-table there was consternation.

"What on earth can Uncle Harvey mean?" asked Ruth indignantly. "Do you

suppose he thinks the use of that tank could be taken away from us?"

"I don't think he could really be as mean as that, Ruth," reassured Elizabeth. "He's just trying to worry us because of the way we spoke. The tank is on his own land, you know."

But that the threat was real was proven later, when Roy announced that Grannis had come with a wagon and men from his ranch, and was busy running a wire-fence around the water-hole. They were putting up a locked gate, so that only by permission could anybody have access to it.

"And the big spring's just mud," said Roy, gloomily. "I think Harvey Grannis is the meanest man in Texas!"

Mrs. Spooner, pale and worn from anxiety about her husband, received the news calmly. "I don't think there's anything to worry over," she soothed the girls; "Harvey maybe has some good reason. Remember it's a dry year, and other people may have been annoying him. Anyway, I'm sure he'll not forbid us to water our cattle there. Please put Shasta to the phaeton, Roy, the Babe and I'll drive down and see about it."

The fence was indeed going rapidly up when Mrs. Spooner arrived; Grannis himself was busily directing his men, urging haste in his usual stormy manner.

"Well," he greeted his sister, "have you come to your senses yet–you and those unbroken colts you've got for daughters? You see there's no more water-hole for you to depend on. Cattle'll die, of course. Only thing you can do is to drive 'em over to my ranch and pack up and come along yourselves. If ever a set of young ones need discipline, those two girls do!"

His eyes snapped fiercely–discipline with Harvey Grannis meant punishment.

"Harvey," asked his sister, quietly ignoring his attack on her girls, "aren't you going to give us a key to that gate?"

"Give you a key to the gate? Yes, when you send me word that you're packing to move over to my ranch. I'm doing this for your good. I think you know it, and those stiff-necked young'uns could see it for themselves if you'd brought 'em up right. That's my last word, and I mean it."

Turning on his heel he walked rapidly away, leaving Mrs. Spooner to return to her waiting children.

"Never mind, mother," soothed the Babe, as they drove slowly homeward. "Uncle Harvey's not a bad man–he didn't mean sure-enough that our cattle couldn't drink at the water-hole."

But her mother knew otherwise. Harvey Grannis intended to force them to live with him, for, as has been said, he was really fond of his sister and her children. Since he had come to believe John Spooner dead, the thought that now he

would have them all to himself, in his big, comfortable house, grew very pleasant, so that he had determined, in his usual violent fashion, to use force if necessary to accomplish his purpose.

"I'm sure, children, I don't know what we're to do," Mrs. Spooner sighed, as she related the ill success of her errand to the family. "I didn't dream that Harvey could be so hard."

They soothed her with words of cheer, and Elizabeth sat beside her as she lay upon the lounge, and bathed her mother's aching temples with cool water.

"Never mind, mother," she whispered, "I promise to take care of you–always!"

Soothed by the magnetic touch of the firm young hands, Mrs. Spooner soon dropped asleep, and Elizabeth looking on the pitifully frail little form, beheld through tear-blurred eyes a picture of the past–a vision of the young mother, delicate and burdened with many cares, unselfishly adopting into her home and heart the abandoned offspring of strangers–the child of sordid birth and ignoble poverty! A wave of passionate gratitude swept over the girl as she looked, and again she breathed a vow to always take care of her foster-mother.

Next day Jonah Bean came galloping up to tell them that the wire of the dividing fence had been cut in the night, and the Spooner cattle had, as usual, satisfied their thirst at the water-hole! Grannis's cowboys had rounded them up and driven them out at dawn, and Grannis himself had ordered Jonah to come and mend the break, declaring he had made it.

"I ain't cut that fence, neither a-mendin' it," announced Jonah oracularly. "Stands to reason the cattle got to drink. Providence done it, 'cordin' to my way o' thinkin'."

"Grannis yelled something over at me, but I'm not worrying over it," declared Roy, "it's the meanest thing I ever knew of. I'm certainly not going to prevent the cattle drinking when somebody else cut the wires."

The cutting of a wire-fence is in all cattle-countries a grave misdemeanor, punishable by law. Harvey Grannis, when his "spite-fence" had been cut, was of course in a towering rage, threatening to prosecute the clipper, when caught, and vowing no less punishment than the penitentiary if the offence was repeated.

But the next night they were again clipped, and the Spooner herd once more rejoiced in abundance of water. Harvey Grannis had trusted to the wire-cutter being frightened away by his loud threats, and had not set a guard over the fence. Now indeed did he swear vengeance against the offender–"male or female," he declared fiercely and to further protect the fence drove a bunch of his own cattle down and camped in the pasture–he would see that no more water was furnished the Spooner cattle, or jail the clipper!

It cannot be said that this move increased his popularity with his neighbors

when they came to know its meaning. Indeed his own cowboys muttered indignantly as they moved about, pitching their tents and making ready for camp, that it was a sin and shame, and the boss too pizen mean to live! At the same time they could not help admitting that it would be much wiser for the Spooner family to move over into his comfortable house and be taken care of by the wealthy ranchman, than to try and struggle along combatting poverty and drouth. This knowledge served to keep them from open revolt, though the means he had taken to accomplish his purpose moved them to scornful wrath. Brow-beating women and children didn't agree with the cowboy sense of honor.

With the coming of Grannis's camp to the water-hole pasture the Spooner's case became desperate. The well at the house had a small basin which filled slowly, and the little water it furnished must be saved for drinking and household purposes. Jonah and Roy reluctantly watered their ponies from it, but the big spring their cattle had depended on was now only a dry mud-hole. Roy went privately to Grannis and asked the privilege of hauling water from the big tank. He received for his pains an accusation of having cut the fence-wires. This in addition of Grannis's usual name for him of horse thief proved so unpleasant that he was sorry he went.

"Looks to me like we was at our row's end," remarked Jonah Bean with gloomy philosophy. "If they's a turnin' p'int I hain't seed it. Might's well sell out, Mis' Spooner, if you kin find a buyer for the bunch."

"No, no, Jonah," objected Elizabeth eagerly. "We'll find a way. Can't you think of something, Roy?" she asked.

Roy's face was sober; he and Jonah had discussed the question, and neither one could see any other way than to sell the herd before they perished of drouth.

"Nothing except sell," he said, shaking his head soberly.

"Then *I'll* find a way!" declared Elizabeth, passionately. "They shan't be sold–and they shan't starve, either. You and Jonah round up the bunch and Ruth and I will haul water from Munson's pond–it never dries up, and I know Mr. Munson won't care."

"O, that will be the very thing! Mother, please let us," begged Ruth, eager to help.

Really there seemed nothing else to do. Elizabeth's plan though it meant hard work, was at least feasible–for a time, at least; in the meantime something unforseen might turn up.

So, with a big hogshead in the ranch wagon they drove five miles to get water, which their neighbor Mr. Munson kindly let them have.

"I always knew Harvey was a cross-grained old sinner," frankly declared Mr. Munson. "Wants to starve you out, I hear, so's he c'n make you all live with him. Well, I don't think much of his plan. But you're plumb welcome to

water–long's you hold out to haul it."

For three days they hauled water, staying but not satisfying the famishing cattle's thirst; and on one pretext or another Grannis kept his men in the water-hole pasture. The morning of the third day Ruth came upon Elizabeth with the wire clippers in her hand and a very queer look upon her face–a look that caused an awful thought to flash into the younger sister's mind. Could she–could Elizabeth be the wire-clipper that Harvey Grannis was waiting to catch–and jail? The thing was impossible, she argued fiercely; Elizabeth simply couldn't do such a thing!

Yet somehow all day she felt an uneasy sense that more trouble was brewing, and that night after their early supper when she could not find Elizabeth anywhere, terror seized her, and without letting anybody know, she ran wildly across the pastures by the short cut, to search for her.

It was a wonderful velvet-black summer night, the skies star-sprinkled and the enemy's camp lighted by a great central cook-fire that could be seen far in that flat, plains-country. Flickering lanterns moved about it. Ruth ran on, seeking Elizabeth where the former cuttings had been, and praying that she would not find her there.

Halfway across she met Roy coming back from a secret survey of Grannis's camp. With panting breath she gasped out her story. Somebody must find Elizabeth!

"I will," said Roy quietly, "I think I know where she is. You go back to the house, Ruth–I'll find her."

He turned back in the direction of the camp and Ruth walked slowly to the house, meeting her mother and Jonah, who were driving down the avenue in the phaeton.

"O, mother!" whispered Ruth anxiously. "Where are you going in the dark? Who are you looking for?"

"Hush!" warned her mother. "I'm not looking for any one. Why do you ask? I'm going to your Uncle Harvey's camp. I thought you were all in your rooms–I didn't want Elizabeth to know, and I just can't stand this any longer. I think, if he's made to see things right, that he'll give us a key to that gate, as he ought to, and leave us in peace. You run in the house and go to bed–and don't let Elizabeth know."

"O, goodness gracious! Whatever shall I do?" moaned poor Ruth, as she watched her mother and Jonah drive away. "Maybe Roy won't be in time, and while Mother's right there, begging Uncle Harvey to go home they'll catch Elizabeth and bring her before them all! It would just about kill mother. I can't stay here–I just can't!"

Forgetful of the Babe left alone in the dark, Ruth darted away on the trail

of Roy and Elizabeth.

Supper was over at the camp when Mrs. Spooner and Jonah reached it. The cowboys scattered about on the grass, smoked, or played cards or read old newspapers by the light of the cook-fire. Harvey Grannis sat on a camp stool before his tent and smoked a pipe which was anything but a pipe of peace. He was angry with his cowboys who took no pains to conceal their disapproval of his high-handed proceedings with the Spooners because they would not yield, but most important of all, he was angry with himself, because he knew in his heart he was behaving in a most contemptible way.

The gate towards the road was not locked, nor even shut. Jonah drove through it and was in the middle of the camp before Grannis noticed his arrival.

"Can I speak to you privately, Harvey?" asked his sister, as he arose and came forward to greet her.

"No, ma'am," he answered with emphatic loudness. "Say your say–Everybody's welcome to hear it. I've done nothing I'm ashamed of."

The indignant blood rushed to Mrs. Spooner's pale face. She had no wish to make a scene. She pushed aside the rug and stepped quietly from her phaeton. Jonah held the lines over Shasta, looking straight ahead of him. The circle of cowboys drew closer, listening curiously, eagerly, most of them with angry distaste, yet hopeful that the little woman would speak up to their boss.

And she did. She told him pretty plainly what she thought of his behavior. She began with the sale of the ranch to John Spooner and the verbal agreement concerning the use of this tank or water-hole which had never in the memory of man gone dry. Her voice faltered when she spoke of her husband's absence and danger, the doubt which Harvey had expressed of his brother-in-law's ever returning to his family. She mentioned the conduct of her daughters as highly creditable to them.

At this point Harvey, enraged by being reproved when he fully expected entreaties, broke in.

"Well, those same high-spirited girls of yours have been cutting wires, ma'am–and wire-cutting is a penitentiary offense. Jake over there, saw a girl snooping along the fence and bending over working at it, and when he got down there three wires were clipped in two, and swinging. That's the way your girls show their high-spirit!"

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Mrs. Spooner indignantly. "Neither Ruth nor Elizabeth would do such a thing. They fully understand that it's a crime before the law–though surely what you are doing, Harvey, is a crime before Heaven. Maybe you think I cut the wires?"

"No, no, Jennie," began Harvey, somewhat abashed, yet still thoroughly angry. "You hold on and I'll catch the minx in the act–we've got three men hidden

down by the fence now–Here they come!"

There was a stir off in the darkness where the fence cutting had been. Mrs. Spooner put her hand to her heart and gasped, praying silently that neither of her girls had been driven into reckless reprisals. She had talked to them about it, again and again as she did to Roy, begging them to remember that two wrongs never made a right. Then she turned away and hid her eyes against the phaeton edge.

"Sufferin' Moses!" groaned Jonah Bean.

For Elizabeth Spooner, Ruth Spooner and Roy Lambert were being hustled into the circle of light by two eager cowboys.

"We caught your wire-clipper, boss," they sniggered jeeringly. "Caught 'er in the act! We'll all stand by you when you fix to send her off to jail!"

"Elizabeth–my child! How could you?" wailed Mrs. Spooner.

"You see–I told you!" broke in Grannis, speaking loud to cover his dismay.

"O, I didn't cut the wires," said Elizabeth composedly, adding in her clear tones, "I didn't–neither did Ruth or Roy. But we got there just as they caught the wire-clipper, and we came along to see how Uncle Harvey likes his work. Look, Uncle Harvey!"

And she drew aside to reveal the clipper.

## CHAPTER VIII
## A Partner of the Sun

It took Harvey Grannis a long time to live down that scene by the camp fire; for when Elizabeth drew aside there stood revealed, clinging to her skirts, a pair of wire-clippers clutched in her free hand–the Babe. Harvey Grannis stared incredulously for a full minute, and everybody stared at him. Then he turned away with an inarticulate exclamation that was like a groan.

"O, Uncle Harvey!" cried the Babe, rushing forward at the sound of his voice, clasping his knees, bumping him with the wire-clippers, looking up at him, her face streaming with tears.

"It wasn't this child," he declared fiercely, catching her up in his arms and glaring across her head at the others. "The rest of you are puttin' it on her–of if her poor little hands done the work, you all egged her on and made her do it."

"No, they didn't," declared the child, squirming free and getting to her feet, her real courage coming to her aid and sweeping away the nervous fright that had possessed her. "I cut the wire that first night–and then I cut it the next night, because the cows were thirsty, and I knew you wouldn't be mad after all–you were just making believe, weren't you, Uncle Harvey?"

She turned confidentially to him, and the big man looked exceedingly foolish. The tension of the scene slackened a bit, and one or two of the cowboys snickered. But Mrs. Spooner's face was stern as she came forward and took her little girl by the hand.

"You see, Harvey, why I don't want to come and live in your house," she said clearly and distinctly. "Perhaps you understand now why I'm not willing that you should have a chance to discipline my girls. Look what you drive people into!"

Her glance went fleetingly to Roy, and everybody in the cow-camp remembered how Grannis's ideas of discipline had made a sort of horse thief out of a very honest lad.

"This child's a minor," began Grannis, sulkily. "She's not to blame. If you have a mind to let her come and live with me–even part of the time–I'll give her the key to the gate. What do you say?"

Mrs. Spooner looked at her little girl's face and read the terror and distaste in it.

"Please, O, *please* don't, mother!" came the imploring whisper. The Babe had visions of Queen Berengaria slain and herself set to careering about on a strange pinto that she could never love–and yet expected to be thankful for the change!

"I say that you've proved yourself as hard as usual, Harvey," Mrs. Spooner returned quietly. "I couldn't spare my baby–even if she were willing to go. Why can't you be contented with the children loving and respecting you–and staying independently in their own home?"

The defeat was too public. Grannis would not accept it.

"All right," he growled. "That gate's locked from this on–and you can get along the best way you know how for all of me. It's lucky it wasn't one of your older girls that played this trick–or one of the men you employ. You've got off easy."

The Spooner party went home in despair. The Babe showed unexpected spirit and demanded that, as she had cut the wires, the cattle be allowed to go in and water that night. They were. Nobody interfered with Ruth and Elizabeth when they hauled three hogsheads of water the next morning while Grannis's force was breaking camp and before they had mended the fence.

But that was the end of everything. There was no news from Cuba, and Mrs. Spooner began to look about her for some way to dispose of the cattle. It

was the next week, in the midst of her perplexities, that Harvey Grannis rode up to the ranch to warn them that he intended to foreclose his mortgage on the place at once.

"I'm doing it for your own good, Jennie," he argued. "I'll still hold to my offer to give you all a home. Common sense ought to tell you it will be a sight better to live at the Circle G and have a man to look after you than to stay here and starve, depending on a jail-bird, an old fool and a couple of feather-headed girls. When do you think you'll be ready to move?"

"I must consult my girls first, Harvey," said Mrs. Spooner quietly. "They are down at the corral–I'll call them at once. I have a dreadful headache this morning, and when I've explained the situation to them I'll go and lie down. They can answer your questions as well as I."

Her brother fumed a good deal at this, vowing that he wouldn't be surprised if she felt called upon to consult old Jonah and the jail-bird!

"I certainly do intend to consult them," replied his sister mildly. "Only just now they are out hauling water from Munson's pond. But the girls'll be here in a minute–I will do as we all think best."

Elizabeth and Ruth felt their hearts sink at sight of their uncle, certain that his coming meant some new disaster. "He couldn't bring anything else!" they thought indignantly.

Mrs. Spooner, warning Grannis to silence, explained his proposition to the girls very clearly and calmly; she wished them to see it as favorably as possible, for in her heart she could think of nothing better–there seemed to be no other alternative; it seemed they must live with Harvey, hard as it would be. When she had finished she went to lie down.

Ruth looked at Elizabeth for counsel as her mother left the room. If there was any other way, she was sure that Elizabeth would find it.

"We'll agree to give up the ranch at once," began Elizabeth.

"You'll have to," interrupted Harvey Grannis. "Those are the terms of the mortgage. I *could* put you out to-day, but I'll give you time to pack."

"With the privilege of making our payment when father comes home. Are you willing to do that, Uncle Harvey?" Elizabeth finished.

Grannis agreed promptly to this, certain now that he would have his own way with the family.

"Then we'll move next week," decided Elizabeth.

"I'll send my teams over for your things–Monday, say?" asked Grannis, in high satisfaction.

"O, no," Elizabeth demurred, "there'll be no need to bother you. Jonah and Roy can move us without any help. Thank you, just the same."

"Jonah and Roy, is it?" snorted Grannis. "Well, I told your mother, and I

tell you, that I won't have that young horse-thief on my place. The teams will be here Monday. See that you're ready when they come."

"But we aren't going to the Circle G, Uncle Harvey," said Elizabeth, mildly.

Grannis was in the doorway, he turned, his look of surprise and dismay was almost comical.

"Where are you going, then? Straight to destruction, I suppose. And dragging your poor sick mother with you. I want a word with Jennie about this."

"Mother has allowed me to speak for her," Elizabeth said. "Ruth and I are going to take care of her. We can–you know we can."

She spoke with assurance, but she had as little idea how the thing was to be accomplished as Ruth had when she offered to pay Maudie Pratt a hundred dollars–with only thirty-five cents at home in her pasteboard box! Perhaps the memory of the triumphant conclusion that matter worked up to, put confidence in Elizabeth's voice. Anyway, Harvey Grannis went storming away, informing nobody in particular that his sister's family were an ungrateful lot, declaring that he had washed his hands of them–all except little Harvie.

That night when the chores were over and supper ended, the Silver Spur household gathered on the porch and resolved itself into a committee of ways and means, with Elizabeth holding the floor.

"I've been thinking of a plan," she said cheerfully. "As Ruth claims, I've a head on my shoulders–whether there's anything in the head, or the plan, is for the rest of you to decide."

"I have a great deal of confidence in your ability and common-sense, daughter," said Mrs. Spooner faintly from her rocker. Her head was better, but it left her spent and white.

"Your scheme'll be a good one–I'll back it," Roy followed.

"Of course–we'll all back what Elizabeth says," agreed Ruth.

"'Cause Elizabeth *knows*," chimed in the Babe, loyally.

"Well, she ain't so foolish–for a gal," old Jonah put in last.

Elizabeth was fairly overwhelmed by their trust in her. "You see we can't stay here, and we *won't* go to the Circle G," she began, flushed with her family's praise, "of course we may hear from father any day, but we'd have had to get rid of the cattle–anyhow that bunch Uncle Harvey shut out from the tank. It seems to me the best thing we can do is to go into Emerald to live. There isn't a sign of a photographer in the place; everybody says my work is worth paying for, and Ruth would have a chance of earning something. Besides, there'd be school for the Babe, and we'd be near Cousin Hannah."

"Say, don't think you're the only worker in this family hive!" protested Roy, "I haven't a profession, but I *can* get a job any day. Mr. Pell's son Joe has gone away to school, and he needs a clerk in the grocery the worst kind. I reckon I'll

earn money enough to pay rent, and a little bit over."

"They's jobs a-waitin' for young folks to pick up, but 'tain't easy when you're gettin' on in years," sighed Jonah, dolefully. "Nothin' *I* kin do in town, I reckon. Maybe the Old Soldiers' Home'll take keer o' me."

There was a chorus of indignant protests from the whole family. Jonah knew they couldn't get along without him! Wherever they went he should go to–that was settled. The tender-hearted Babe, with her arms around the old man's neck, cheered him further by adding: "Me'n you'll help mother, Jonah–she'll need us."

"Bless your heart, honey, if that ain't the gospel truth!" agreed Jonah, now quite cheerful. "They's a gyarden to make, an' a cow to milk–we can't get along without one, and wood to chop. Maybe the ole man *will* earn his salt, after all."

Early the next morning after this decision Elizabeth and Ruth rode into town to see about getting a house. The only vacant one in the place was an old adobe, rather dilapidated, but with plenty of room, and enough ground fenced in to keep a cow, besides having the garden and small patches they would be obliged to plant for vegetables and cow-feed. It belonged to Mr. Rouse, the station agent who boarded with Cousin Hannah, and he was so glad of the chance of getting it occupied that he told the girls if they would agree to make the necessary repairs, he would let them have it rent-free for the first six months.

This was joyfully agreed to, and the very next day Jonah and Roy went to town to see about making the repairs–mending the roof, putting in window panes, and whitewashing the interior, so that at last it was converted into a very respectable and comfortable habitation–really more comfortable than the ranch-house, for the adobe walls were thick, and would keep out the cold in winter and the heat in summer as well.

During the days that the men worked on the adobe Ruth and Elizabeth were busy packing up, while the Babe and her mother drove about in the phaeton, making arrangements for the keeping of the cattle and ponies, for Mrs. Spooner determined that she would not sell them–it would be like admitting her husband was dead.

Mr. Munson, a man with a big ranch and a big heart, readily agreed to graze the cattle, scoffing at the idea of taking a third of the increase for his share, until Mrs. Spooner declared that, unless he did, she could not allow him to be burdened with them.

"Then I hope for your sake it won't be long, ma'am," said the rancher heartily. "No news is good news, I've always heard say, and there's no tellin' when John may come."

Another neighbor agreed to graze the ponies, and the Babe earnestly begged that he would be very, very kind to Queen Berengaria, who was a good

pony, if she wasn't so very pretty!

With everybody working like beavers, it was only a few days before the Spooners closed the doors of the lonely little ranch-house, striving bravely to think that it would only be for a little while, and took up their abode in the old adobe in Emerald.

If there had been, just at this time, a voting contest for the most unpopular man in the district, Harvey Grannis would undoubtedly have won the prize by a big majority. Everybody was so indignant at his treatment of the Spooners that they vied with each other in showing their sympathy and friendship for the family, sending them such loads of vegetables from their gardens and choice cuts of fresh meat when a beef was killed, that it was a long time before they had need of anything else; while Cousin Hannah came over on the first day, laden with trays of good things for the first meal.

Everybody tried to be very cheerful as they gathered around the brightly-lighted supper table that evening, eating the good things Cousin Hannah had provided with, it must be confessed, scant appetite; their hearts were full, but each tried bravely to see only the bright side, and, because they tried so hard, at last became really cheerful, discussing their plans for the future with some enthusiasm. Only the Babe wiped away tears, as she thought of Queen Berengaria out in strange pastures without a soul to think of taking her lumps of sugar at feeding-time!

"I'll plow up the land and sew it down in rye for cow-feed," said Jonah, "before I git ready to go to gyardenin'. I got to hustle, too, for time's a-flyin'."

"I won't set into work at the store till next week," said Roy, "for I want to fix up that shack out in the yard for a studio–with *two* display windows, if you please, one for cakes and one for 'takes'. A skylight in the roof, and a little curtained-off dark room, and there you are, all ready for business, Misses Spooner!"

"O, Roy, that *will* be lovely–I simply couldn't get along without you–none of us could, in fact. And I'm expecting my enlarging camera any day. I reckon I'll spoil some pictures before I get used to it; anyway, I can experiment on the family first."

"I'm so glad we've got a good cook-stove," said Ruth, contentedly. "I expect to make money on bread. Cousin Hannah says she'll get me all the orders I can fill."

"And what are me'n you going to do, mother?" enquired the Babe, with interest.

"Well, I'm going down town to the store tomorrow and buy some pretty gingham for cutting out into school dresses which you're to stitch up on the machine, if you'll try to run the seams straight. Then, as soon as they're made, we'll get some school-books, and a little girl about your size will put on one of

the new dresses, take the new books in her new book-bag, and go right straight to school–where she'll be a credit to us all, I'm sure."

"I'll learn to read so good that I'll be able to read all the books in the whole round world!" sighed the Babe, happy in the promised fulfillment of her highest earthly desire.

By the time the new studio was finished Elizabeth had quite a display of photographs, having 'taken' the family and all the neighbors who were handy, finding Maudie Pratt a willing and excellent subject, while Ruth in her own show-window set forth a tempting array of tarts and pies and doughnuts, in token that the bakery was in operation.

Mrs. Pell, the wife of Roy's employer, was their first customer, bringing her twin boys of seven to be photographed.

"Their pa says if anybody can make 'em stand still long enough to get a picture, they'll sure deserve a prize," declared the twins' mother frankly, as she arranged Wilfred's big, smothering collar, and tied anew the huge red bow under Wilmot's chin. "I taken 'em to the finest picture-taker in Houston, last summer, and the best he could do was a proof that had three heads apiece on it!"

"I think I can manage them, Mrs. Pell," said Elizabeth, confidently, seeing more orders ahead if she could succeed where the city photographer had failed. "They are such cute little fellows. Now, boys, if you'll be real quiet I'll give you a doughnut apiece, in just one minute," she promised the squirming twins, who brightened amazingly, keeping expectant eyes upon the doughnuts which Elizabeth had placed at just the proper elevation.

They were muffled and choked in stiff white pique suits, not a bit comfortable, and their mother insisted that they should be posed in a very stiff position, with their arms about each other. However, in the end Elizabeth secured a very good negative, "at least it has only one head apiece," she laughed. "But send them over when they have on their everyday clothes, and let me take a picture for my window, if you don't mind."

Mrs. Pell didn't mind–indeed she was highly gratified, and she sent Wilfred and Wilmot over promptly, as soon as they had changed to their old collarless and tieless play overalls. Then, while the Babe told them a fairy story to excite the proper amount of interest in their faces, and Elizabeth bade them eat doughnuts at will, to promote happiness that "showed through," she snapped her camera on a most excellent likeness–so good, in fact, that their proud father ordered a bromide enlargement to be made, and advised all his customers to go by the studio and see that cute picture in the window–the cutest thing in the shape of a photograph he'd ever seen took.

Trade increased, and both girls soon had all they could do–indeed Mrs. Spooner, in her heart, often sighed to think of the free young souls doomed to

have so much work and so little play in their busy lives.

It was plain from the first that the Spooner girls and Roy Lambert could maintain the family, though it took every bit of strength and every ounce of energy the three young people could bring to bear on it. Mrs. Spooner drew a breath of relief when one day she saw her brother Harvey turn in at the gate and calmly walk across to the studio as though he were an ordinary customer, coming on an ordinary errand.

"Be nice to him, dear," she cautioned Elizabeth, when she informed her of the unexpected customer in the studio. "I'm proud of your independence, but it breaks my heart to have you girls working so hard, and getting none of the pleasure nor the education that you ought to have."

"I think we're getting lots of education, if you ask me," laughed Elizabeth, as she put on her business apron and prepared to go out. "As for pleasure–I never was so happy in my life–except for worrying a little bit about father–and he may come home any day of course, and stop *that*."

She ran across the yard to the little building, where she found her uncle gravely inspecting the photographs in the window, having come to a decision as to the style he preferred for a dozen cabinet portraits of himself, which he announced to be the errand that had brought him to Emerald.

It was to Elizabeth like a little play to keep up her business manner with Uncle Harvey all through the sitting. She was urbane and impressive. She told about it gleefully at the supper table that evening.

"How much? And when can I have 'em?" the customer had asked as he arose from his sitting. Elizabeth got his tone exactly in telling of it.

"One dollar down, five dollars when they are finished, a week from to-day, I'm pretty well rushed with orders, and can't promise them any sooner!" reported the photographer to her family.

"Then he took up his hat, and stood twirling it 'round and 'round, as if he intended to say something else. I suppose he changed his mind, for he went away without another word. I was glad; I wonder what he really wanted. Something more than pictures, I'll bet. Anyway, I think I got a good picture."

On the day appointed Harvey Grannis put in an appearance at the little studio at nine o'clock in the morning. He took the filled envelope Elizabeth handed him without a word, paid his money and lingered a moment, never looking at the pictures.

"Hadn't you better see whether you like them?" asked Elizabeth. "We all think them very good. I took the liberty of giving mother one, because she liked it so much."

"O, er–by the way, how is Jennie?" asked Grannis, uneasily.

"I'll call her if you'd like to see her," returned Elizabeth promptly, and there

was a mischievous light in her eyes.

"No, no–not at all," stammered the ranchman. "That is, I have a little matter to talk over later–never mind now."

They were crossing the side yard between the house and the studio. Without waiting for further Instructions Elizabeth called blithely:

"Mumsy–Uncle Harvey wants to see you!"

She was sure that Mrs. Spooner was just inside by the window, anxiously waiting for what her brother might see fit to say or do. The call was responded to with unexpected, and so far as Grannis was concerned, unwelcome promptness. Mrs. Spooner came out on the front porch and walked down the steps to greet her brother. The Babe, always eager for peace, though still shy of the man who had thought of shooting Queen Berengaria, followed. Ruth advanced from her bakery as the two left the studio. Old Jonah came around the house, wheeling a barrow, and to complete the family picture Roy just then drove up in a grocer's delivery wagon and stopped at the curb.

"Well, we all seem to be here," remarked Harvey Grannis, rather feebly.

A bicycle-mounted boy wheeled up perilously close between the delivery-wagon and the gate, Roy turned with a little annoyance, then he saw that the messenger held a yellow envelope in his hand, and was approaching Mrs. Spooner.

The little woman's breath came in gasps, since the ceasing of her Cuban letters she was always afraid of the sight of a telegram.

"Don't let her have it–I want to say something first," Grannis protested, getting between the messenger and his sister.

"I'll open it for her–she would want me to," declared Elizabeth, snatching the envelope from the messenger's hand.

"Why, it isn't addressed to mother–it's addressed to–to–*father*!" And she let the yellow envelope flutter to the ground, where the messenger regarded it with lack-luster eyes, then picked it up and prepared to depart with it.

"Party ain't living here?" he asked, snapping together his receipt book, which he had opened for signature.

"This here lady's his late wife," asserted Jonah, lugubriously, getting things rather mixed in his excitement to see what the telegram contained. "Give it to her–she's the proper person to open it."

Once more Grannis put himself between the messenger and his sister, protesting again that he had something to say before she read the message. And,

at this second protest, there came an unexpected interruption.

## CHAPTER IX
## A Rose by Another Name

In at the gate walked a tall, bronzed soldier in khaki, who reached forward an authoritative hand, saying calmly to the messenger, "Give it to me–it's mine."

Everything about them seemed suddenly unreal. Mrs. Spooner, catching sight of the newcomer, quietly crumpled down in a dead faint at his feet!

Elizabeth found herself running into the house for a glass of water–moving like a person in a dream, making a desperate amount of effort without advancing an inch. Then, all at once, she was back to find her father kneeling on the gravel beside his wife, resisting Harvey Grannis's efforts to raise her.

"Keep her head low, Harve–never raise a fainting person's head," he cautioned.

The Babe was crying and snuggling in under her father's elbow, Roy had rushed into the house and brought back the afghan from the couch.

"She's all right," said Captain Spooner, confidently. "She's coming round now. What made her faint, do you suppose?"

"O, Father! Because you came back so suddenly," said Ruth.

"We hadn't heard from you in months, you know," Elizabeth added in a low tone. "We've been horribly uneasy, daddy."

The captain turned and kissed his tall girl, then he slipped a careful arm under his wife's shoulders. Ruth and the Babe, pushing for their share of attention, had to be cautioned.

"Quiet, girls!" he warned. "We'll lift mother in to the couch, and then I'll count you chickens and see how you look. Help me, Harve."

Harvey Grannis had been edging away with a very curious expression on his face; now he had no other course left open but to come forward, lift his sister's limp form and assist in carrying her into the house. On the way she regained consciousness enough to protest lovingly, assuring them that she was all right, and ashamed of being so silly as to faint.

"O, Father, why didn't you telegraph, so it wouldn't have scared mother?" the Babe voiced the general wonder.

"I did," said Captain Spooner. "But Mr. Rouse was away on his vacation, and the new man they had in the office sent the telegram out to the ranch, because it was addressed to Silver Spur. You see, I'd got no letters, and didn't know of your moving. The boy had it along with one from Harve to me, re-sent from Havana. I'll read it now." And he tore open the yellow envelope.

"O, Daddy," begged the Babe, frantically trying to smother him. "Don't you ever, ever go to war again–no matter if that's a telegram from the president for you to go back–don't you do it: And *what* did you bring us from Cuba?"

"Wait and see, you little rascal," laughed her father, lifting her in his arms, and forgetting, for the moment, his telegram. "My! What a big girl you are, to be sure! And how well you are all looking–except mother. We must try and get some roses to grow in her cheeks. Jonah, you old sinner–shake! We'll swap war stories to beat the band, winter evenings out at the ranch. And Harve," slapping Grannis jovially on the shoulder, "glad to see you, too. I'll read your telegram now. Why in the world didn't you let the folks know long ago?"

"I–I was a little delayed," said Harvey nervously. "In fact, I just came over to-day to tell 'em."

"And the interest money? I suppose you got that all right? O, yes–you say so in this telegram. Got it right on the dot. No chance to act the hard-hearted landlord and turn 'em out, hey?" and he laughed genially. The world seemed bigger and warmer and sweeter to the children, now that their father was at home; in the fullness of their joy they had no thought of Harvey Grannis and the wrongs he had caused them to suffer.

Their uncle had been nervously turning his hat in his hand, going to the door and coming back during the greetings between the re-united family. It spoke well for his courage that he had not made his escape unnoticed.

"I–I just wanted a chance to speak about that, John," he began, clearing his throat nervously. "Your check was all right, of course, but I haven't banked it yet. In fact, I just came over this morning to tell the folks, as I said."

Elizabeth realized in a flash that Harvey's telegram announcing Captain Spooner's approaching arrival had come just before he came to order the photographs. He was trying them for some decent way of explaining his conduct. She remembered his peculiar manner, and parted her lips to speak when some impulse of kindness made her close them again. Harvey Grannis had done them all an injury, this was an opportunity for her to forgive an enemy. The next moment she had reason to be glad.

"Then you did get the interest money all right?" the captain persisted.

The red blood flamed in Grannis's tanned and bearded face. His confusion was painful.

"O, yes–O, yes, I got that," he admitted with an entreating glance toward his

sister. "I–there was something connected with that that I had intended explaining to Jennie. In fact–if you'll let me, I'd like to make you a deed to the ranch."

"Let you?" echoed Captain Spooner, his keen blue eyes on his brother-in-law's face. "Make a deed to the ranch? Why, I only sent you the interest money. The last payment remains to be met."

"Yes, I know," Grannis hurried to say, "but Jennie's my only sister, and we had a little misunderstanding–she'll tell you all about it later, no doubt. I feel myself to blame–that is, I was mistaken. I'd like to make it up to–of course, I know there's some of your family that'll never forgive me."

Then Elizabeth did a beautiful thing, and one which endeared her to all of them. She marched across the room to Grannis, put out a slim hand and said:

"I hope you don't mean me, Uncle Harvey,"–with a very distinct emphasis–"for if I have anything to forgive–it's forgotten."

Harvey took the girl's hand with a fervor that was pathetic.

"We mustn't talk about disagreeable things when John's just got back," said Mrs. Spooner decidedly. "Harvey, you'll stay to dinner. Somebody ought to go for Roy–he went right away, without giving John a chance to meet him–he wanted us to be uninterrupted at our first meeting. I'm sure Mr. Pell will let him off for the rest of the day, if we ask him."

"I'll go for him," offered Harvey, hastily, and before the eyes of the astonished Spooners, he put his hat on his head and walked away in search of Roy–the boy he had insisted upon regarding as a horse-thief!

While he was gone Captain Spooner was put in possession of all the facts. He was inclined to be indignant over his brother-in-law's conduct, but the girls joined their mother in excusing Grannis's behavior, insisting that it came from an excess of zeal for their welfare. When Harvey and Roy returned together, apparently on the best of terms, Captain Spooner was ready to let by-gones be by-gones with his brother-in-law, and to welcome Roy to the family circle with heart-felt cordiality.

"I've heard all about you from mother," he said as he gripped the lad's hand. "Only she says that he never can make me know just what you've been to them all, and how very proud she is of her adopted son."

Roy blushed–praise was sweet, but embarrassing. "I bet they didn't tell you a word about their goodness to me, sir," he returned, "I never could make that up, no matter what I do."

Everything was satisfactorily explained over a good dinner. When you come to think of it, a good dinner makes many things seem more satisfactory. Ruth and Elizabeth cooked this one, the Babe set the table, and all three girls kept jumping up from their places to run around and hug the tall soldier father, to be sure that he was real, and not just a beautiful dream. Mrs. Spooner sat at

the head of the table, with a color and radiance in her face that had long been absent. Harvey Grannis talked more than anybody had ever heard him. He made good his promise of the blue-eyed pinto pony to little Harvie–though he offered no further suggestion as to the shooting of Queen Berengaria.

"Pinto's half Arab," he urged, "I broke him myself–wouldn't let the bronchobuster touch him–he's as gentle as a dog."

All the elders at the table knew that Harvey Grannis was an excellent horseman, and kind to animals, whatever he might be to his fellow-men. They regarded the gift as highly as the Babe was certain to do when she had fully made the acquaintance of the spotted pony.

"I'm awfully obliged to you, Uncle Harvey," she said at last. "If you don't mind I'll change his name to Prince–as though he was Queen Berengaria's son, you know. I expect I'll be mighty glad to have him, because he'll be able to carry me to school. I couldn't go when we were at the ranch before, because it was 'most too far for Queen Berengaria to come every day, and she's so slow I'd have been sure to be tardy–I don't like tardy-marks."

When Harvey Grannis said good-bye, it was plain they were entering on a new era of friendship with the lonely man. Apparently he would be willing to benefit his sister's family in the way that pleased them–not insisting that it should be exclusively a way that pleased him.

When Grannis was gone Roy returned to his work at the grocery and the Babe finally quieted down to her lessons. Mrs. Spooner asked Ruth if she would not help her younger sister with them, leaving Elizabeth to have a little talk with her father. The tall eldest girl followed her mother into the other room, and soon found herself seated between the two people who were so dear to her, the only parents she had ever known. Thus she listened to a strange story told Captain Spooner by a soldier of his own regiment–and who had died in Cuba.

"I don't remember him much on the way out, or in camp, except that he was a very tall man, well set up and good-looking–a fine type of Englishman," the Captain said. "He kept himself to himself, the other men said, and although I remembered afterward that he had looked at me curiously once or twice, I couldn't be sure that I'd ever seen him before until he spoke to me one day. You'd sent me a lot of little snap-shots, Elizabeth, and I was showing them to some of the officers and mentioned your name. I saw him turn, and after awhile he came and asked to look at the pictures. I noticed then that he didn't pay much attention to any of them but yours, and when he handed them back he said hastily that he wanted to have a talk with me. He had the reserved English way, but I could see that he was much upset. The next day we had a pretty hot little skirmish, getting some of us for good, and wounding a good many. After the fight was over they sent for me to go to the field hospital, and there he was, wounded badly–knowing

he had to die!"

Elizabeth was strangely shaken during this story, and she held fast to her mother's hand, as though to make sure they were not giving her up. Instinct told her of whom Captain Spooner was speaking, and when he went on she needed no further explanation.

"He was an Englishman, sure enough, Elizabeth, of good family, but a younger son, of course, and without any money. It seems he married the daughter of the rector of his parish, and she hadn't anything either. They came over to America–to Texas–thinking to make a fortune, but found hard times and bad luck instead. His young wife died while they were on their way to California, traveling in a wagon, and he was so broken-hearted and helpless that he left his baby girl with–well, he left her with a mighty good woman, and I guess he knew it!"

Captain Spooner glanced at his wife; Elizabeth dropped her head on her mother's slender shoulder and cried softly.

"It makes me feel so sorry," she whispered. "Yet I'm glad too–glad I belong to you, even if my father did desert me!"

"He didn't, Elizabeth. That is, not knowingly," Captain Spooner explained gently. "When he went away from here he had promised to send money for your keep, and he said he would come back for you. He did send some money, then all at once it ceased, and we never heard from him again. It seems he got word that you were dead. Some movers coming through told him of a baby that had died, and they mixed it up some way. He was sick and down on his luck at the time, and failed to write to us, but he never would have done it if he'd known his daughter was living. Philip Maude wasn't that kind of a man. He was a gentleman, born and bred, and a brave man always."

"O, Father–I love to hear you say that!" said Elizabeth. "I'll always be glad to think of him as brave and kind. But I thought–Cousin Hannah said–wasn't the name *Mudd*?"

"Mudd? No, indeed. His name was Maude–M-a-u-d-e. A very good name, too. What on earth made you think it was Mudd?"

"Cousin Hannah told me so," sobbed Elizabeth. "And O, now I can tell you when it's all over–I've been so bitterly ashamed and miserable to know that I, who used to really fool myself into thinking I was better than other people, was just a miserable mover's child–and that my name was Mudd!"

"Cousin Hannah always did pronounce it that way," said Mrs. Spooner, "she may have thought it was spelled so–it's too bad to think how you suffered for her mistake." The motherly eyes overflowed, realizing how sensitive Elizabeth, who adored pretty names, must have felt at being saddled with such a grotesquely ugly one.

"So Philip Maude thought his daughter was dead till I showed those pictures. He told me that when he saw the little photograph it was like looking at a picture of his dead wife. He saw how much I loved you, and how proud I was of you, and he had a struggle in his mind to know whether he ought to claim you after all these years; but he had decided that he must give you up when the fight came on, and the decision was taken out of his bands. The reason he sent for me at the last was that he had, a few weeks before he enlisted, got notice of a small inheritance that had fallen to him in England. It won't be more than twenty-five thousand dollars–five thousand pounds, he called it–but he made his will, and gave me his papers so that you might prove your right to it, and he said that you might want to go home to your own people in England. He sent you this ring, and this broken watch chain–the watch itself was shattered by the bullet that gave him his death wound."

Elizabeth took the ring and chain he handed her and wept over them. They seemed to bring the father she had never consciously seen very close to her. It was not as though he took this father's place, but rather as if he were some one among her ancestors, far back, almost in another life.

"I hope I may go there some time," she said at last. "But you and mother are the only father and mother I can ever have–and my home must be here with you."

* * * * *

The Spooners stayed on in the old adobe through the winter. There was little to do at the ranch, and they were really more comfortable where they were. The first installment of Elizabeth's income arrived from England about holiday time, and made things most wonderfully joyous in the Spooner family. It was comical to see how the new state of affairs impressed Maudie Pratt. Grandmother's diamond ring became a small matter indeed compared to the small packet of really excellent old jewelry that was forwarded to Elizabeth. The fact that she added Maude to her name, simply calling herself Elizabeth Maude Spooner, was rather a disappointment. Maudie Pratt, under similar circumstances, would have promptly dropped the Spooner altogether.

The wise little mother looked on and breathed many a sigh of thankfulness that Elizabeth's good fortune had not come to her before she was tried and proven. When she saw her daughter choose wisely, and behave modestly, and carry her new honors with simple graciousness, she was aware that the year of discipline which had preceded the reward, had made it a reward indeed.

When they all went out again to the ranch, Elizabeth insisted on investing some of her money in making the home beautiful and comfortable for them all.

Harvey Grannis admired her greatly for doing so, yet he was in some sense jealous, and being a man of means he attempted, with a simplicity that sometimes made them all laugh, to match any act of generosity on Elizabeth's part with one of his own. There was soon a commodious, well-built house, a beautiful and properly irrigated lawn, with beds of brilliant flowers where once only the cactus could be coaxed to bloom. These out-door luxuries were made possible by that almost unattainable thing in such a country–plenty of water, for Harvey Grannis made his namesake a deed to the pasture containing the big water-hole. More land was bought and added to the ranch, as Captain Spooner prospered, and with the luck of 'him that hath,' money came in until the Spooner brand was perhaps the best in the country, and of such fine quality that it was the pride of old Jonah's heart.

The question of education was one of the first things to come up in the affairs of these young people, and Elizabeth declared that her income was to be used for schooling the whole bunch–and in the bunch she included Roy Lambert. That independent young man, however, preferred to work his way, as many an independent American boy has done before him. He chose an agricultural college, for he believed that the cattle business would gradually diminish, and that all of the ranches would be forced into more or less farming as the years went on. His ideas have proved correct, and as he is a skilled and educated farmer, and a natural manager, Captain Spooner has never seen the time when he was willing to give up the claim they had on him at the time that Mrs. Spooner called him her adopted son.

Most laughable of all, Harvey Grannis takes a great pride and personal satisfaction in Roy's success. To hear him talk about it one would think he had brought the boy west and placed him in his sister's home–as indeed he did, though quite unwittingly. With the lapse of years Harvey has become gentler in his dealings with people, and more amenable. If he ever quarrels–and being Harvey Grannis, of course he does sometimes–the Babe immediately acts as peacemaker, and he declares that his nieces are the finest girls in the state of Texas, and that the Babe is to inherit every acre and hoof of his possessions!

These greater advantages came to the Babe earlier than to the other girls, and she was the only one of the three who cared to go to an eastern college and take a degree. She was preparing herself for her chosen career as a writer of stories for children, finding in that work free vent for her exuberant fancy.

The year Ruth was nineteen she visited Mary in Oklahoma, and came back engaged to her brother-in-law's brother, a young ranchman of good looks and qualities, and fairly prosperous. She now lives on a ranch of her own, and, with Mary, makes frequent visits to the home folks, where the circle is still unbroken, even old Jonah still being spry and happy, and delighting in relating his wonderful

war stories as of old.

When Elizabeth finally left for England, partly to see her people–who consisted of somewhat distant relatives, and partly for a course of study, Roy felt that he would not be honorable in asking her to consent to an engagement. He told her that he was sure she would find her ideals changing very much when she was among her own people, in such surroundings as were really befitting to her.

But she came back to Silver Spur, a well-trained and popular painter of miniatures, having chosen this for her profession. She came back to Roy, and to the dear parents who were, after all, more her own people than those she had left behind her in England.

And it turned out that Elizabeth's real profession is not art but homemaking. She and Roy are married and live still at Silver Spur, perfectly happy with each other, and radiating happiness about them by the love and forethought of beautiful, unselfish natures.

(THE END.)

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GIRLS OF SILVER SPUR RANCH ***

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