

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Dese

Jessie Graham Flower

Table of Contents

<u>Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert</u>	1
<u>Jessie Graham Flower</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER I. WHEN THE COWBOYS LAUGHED</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER II. AN "OUTLAW" MEETS HIS MATCH</u>	7
<u>CHAPTER III. A THRILLING MOMENT</u>	11
<u>CHAPTER IV. PING WING MAKES A DISCOVERY</u>	15
<u>CHAPTER V. STALKING A MOUNTAIN MYSTERY</u>	20
<u>CHAPTER VI. INTO THE GRBAT SILENCE</u>	23
<u>CHAPTER VII. THE FIRST DESERT CAMP</u>	29
<u>CHAPTER VIII. CALLERS DROP IN</u>	32
<u>CHAPTER IX. PIRATES GET A HOT RECEPTION</u>	36
<u>CHAPTER X. WHEN THE BLOW FELL</u>	40
<u>CHAPTER XI. FACING A NEW PERIL</u>	44
<u>CHAPTER XII. A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT</u>	47
<u>CHAPTER XIII. A STARTLING ALARM</u>	51
<u>CHAPTER XIV. THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN</u>	55
<u>CHAPTER XV. THE GUIDE READS A DESERT TRAIL</u>	60
<u>CHAPTER XVI. THE CROSS ON THE DESERT</u>	64
<u>CHAPTER XVII. ANOTHER MYSTERY TO SOLVE</u>	67
<u>CHAPTER XVIII. AN OLD INDIAN TRICK</u>	71
<u>CHAPTER XIX. THE WARNING</u>	74
<u>CHAPTER XX. CONCLUSION</u>	79

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- CHAPTER I. WHEN THE COWBOYS LAUGHED
- CHAPTER II. AN "OUTLAW" MEETS HIS MATCH
- CHAPTER III. A THRILLING MOMENT
- CHAPTER IV. PING WING MAKES A DISCOVERY
- CHAPTER V. STALKING A MOUNTAIN MYSTERY
- CHAPTER VI. INTO THE GRBAT SILENCE
- CHAPTER VII. THE FIRST DESERT CAMP
- CHAPTER VIII. CALLERS DROP IN
- CHAPTER IX. PIRATES GET A HOT RECEPTION
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- CHAPTER XI. FACING A NEW PERIL
- CHAPTER XII. A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT
- CHAPTER XIII. A STARTLING ALARM
- CHAPTER XIV. THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN
- CHAPTER XV. THE GUIDE READS A DESERT TRAIL
- CHAPTER XVI. THE CROSS ON THE DESERT
- CHAPTER XVII. ANOTHER MYSTERY TO SOLVE
- CHAPTER XVIII. AN OLD INDIAN TRICK
- CHAPTER XIX. THE WARNING
- CHAPTER XX. CONCLUSION

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CHAPTER I. WHEN THE COWBOYS LAUGHED

"Grace Harlowe, do you realize what an indulgent husband you have?" demanded Elfreda Briggs severely.

"Why, of course I do," replied Grace, giving her companion a quick glance of inquiry. "Why this sudden realization of the fact on your part!"

"I was thinking of the really desperate journey we are about to undertake the journey across the desert that lies just beyond the Cactus Range you can see over yonder," answered Miss Briggs, as she gazed out through the open window of their hotel at Elk Run, to the distant landscape to which she had referred. "What I am curious about is how Tom ever came to consent to your attempting such an adventure."

"I presume he really would have made serious objection had it not been for the fact that he had signed up for that forestry contract in Oregon. Tom knew that I would have a lonely summer at home, and, I believe, deep down in his heart, felt that were he to deny me the pleasure of this trip, I might break my neck driving my car. You see,

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

since I drove an ambulance in France I do not exactly creep along the roads with my spirited little roadster."

"He did not object to the trip then?"

"Well, he did threaten to balk when I told him that we Overlanders had planned to ride horseback across the Great American Desert, starting from Elk Run, Nevada. However, he listened to reason. Tom is such a dear," reflected Grace.

"Yes, reason in the form of Grace Harlowe Gray," nodded Elfreda understandingly. "Should I ever have the misfortune to possess a husband I hope he may be as amenable to reason. Where is Tom, by the way?"

"He has gone out with Hippy Wingate to look for one Hiram Lang, known hereabouts as Hi Lang, the man who is to act as our guide and protector across the desert. He is Mr. Fairweather's cousin, you will recall, and my one great hope is that he may prove to be as fine a character as the man who piloted us over the Old Apache Trail last summer."

"I sincerely hope, for our sake, that he knows his business," nodded Elfreda Briggs.

"Where did you leave the girls?" questioned Grace.

"I left Emma Dean, Anne Nesbit and Nora Wingate at the general store where they were selecting picture cards of wild west scenes to send to the folks back home. By the way, when does Tom leave for Oregon?"

"To-night. I wish it were possible for him to go with us, knowing that it would prove an interesting experience for him, but now that he is out of the army he feels that he must get to work without loss of time. Tom now has a large family to look after Yvonne and my own little self."

"I should say that, after fighting Bolsheviks in Russia for the better part of a year, the desert would be a rather tame experience for him," observed Miss Briggs. "Of course he cannot be blamed for desiring to get to work. I feel the same way about myself, but since my return from France my law practice has been about what it was while I was serving my country on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean nothing at all so I might as well be on the desert as in my office."

"Your practice will come back, Elfreda. Don't worry, but in the meantime try to have the best kind of a time and set what happens this fall. I hear Tom's step."

A knock followed the brisk step in the hallway, and Grace's husband entered. Elfreda rose, but Grace held out a hand as a signal that her friend was not to leave.

"Well, Tom dear, did you find him?" questioned Grace.

"Oh, yes. This town isn't so large that one can well miss finding any one. Your man, Hi Lang, is getting the ponies into the corral and you girls are to go out there and make your selections."

"Did Mr. Lang say why he had not called here to see us?" asked Grace.

"No, he didn't say much of anything. He is not of the saying kind. I suppose he expected you to look him up. Besides, he is very busy getting ready for you, I could see that. If you are ready we will go over to the corral now."

"Where did you leave Hippy?" asked Miss Briggs.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Talking horse with the owner of the ponies," Grace's husband informed her, whereat both girls smiled understandingly, knowing quite well that Hippy Wingate was posing as an expert on horses, whereas about all the knowledge he possessed in that direction had been gained from the ride over the Apache Trail during the previous summer.

Tom led the two girls to the corral at the extreme edge of the little western village. Anne, Emma and Nora already had found their way there and were watching the wranglers, as the men who catch up the ponies are called, roping broncos and leading them out for the inspection of Lieutenant Wingate and the guide.

"My, but they are a lively bunch," exclaimed Miss Briggs.

The roped ponies were bucking and squealing and biting and kicking. A suffocating gray cloud of alkali dust hung over the corral, and, altogether, the scene was not only exciting, but it stirred feelings of alarm in some of Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders.

"Surely, Grace, you girls aren't going to ride those wild animals!" protested Tom Gray.

"Judging from the performances I have just witnessed, I am inclined to think we are not," replied Grace whimsically. "Which is Mr. Lang?"

"The man with his hat off leading the pony from the corral."

Tom beckoned to the man who was to guide the Overlanders across the desert, and, as soon as he had turned the protesting bronco over to a cowboy, the guide responded to Tom Gray's summons.

"Lang, this is Mrs. Gray and Miss Briggs," said Tom by way of introduction.

"Reckon I'm mighty glad to know you all," greeted the guide, mopping the perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve.

Hi Lang interested Grace at once. Of medium height, thin-featured, with a complexion that reminded her of wrinkled parchment, eyes that, though intelligent and alert, frequently took on a dreamy, far-away expression, Hiram Lang proved a new type of westerner to Grace Harlowe.

"Got your telegram that you reckoned on starting to-day," he told her.

"Yes. Of course we do not wish to hurry you, but we are eager to get on our way. What about the supplies and equipment! Have you ordered everything that I suggested?"

The guide nodded.

"The stuff already has gone on ahead in charge of Ping Wing "

"Who?" laughed Elfreda Briggs.

"Ping Wing, a Chinaman, with four lazy burros. Good man. Can cook, too. Been on the desert before. Lively as a cricket. Only trouble with Ping is that he thinks he can sing. Ride and shoot?" he demanded, abruptly changing the subject.

"I am not much of a rider, but manage to stick to the saddle most of the time," answered Grace. "I shoot a little. We are all novices, with the exception of Lieutenant Wingate who is an excellent shot. The lieutenant was a

fighting aviator in the war."

Hi nodded and stroked his chin.

"Reckoned you could ride some. When we get out on the desert I'll see how you can shoot. When do you think you want to start?"

"I will leave that to you," replied Grace.

"Three o'clock this afternoon. We'll make the range where Ping will be waiting for us, and have chow there, then go on in the cool of the evening. Want to look over the broncos?"

"If you please. I should like to try the ponies that we are to ride."

"Do do they always kick and buck as we saw them do just now?" questioned Miss Briggs apprehensively.

The guide shook his head and grinned.

"They don't like to be roped, that's all. No bronco does. They'll be as all right as a bronc' can be, so long as you don't use the spur or get the critters stubborn."

"If you say they are perfectly safe for my friends to ride, I am satisfied, though I should like to try them out. Hippy, have you ridden any of these animals?" asked Grace, turning to Lieutenant Wingate.

"He tried to," observed Tom Gray dryly. "Hippy mounted one on one side and promptly fell off on the other before getting his feet in the stirrups. It was not the pony's fault, however, but Hippy's clumsiness that caused the disaster."

"That's right, have all the fun at my expense you wish. I am the comedian of this outfit anyway," protested Hippy. "Let's see you ride one of them, Brown Eyes," he urged, speaking to Grace.

"Please have them saddled one by one and I will try them, Mr. Lang," directed Grace. "Any pony that I can ride, the others surely can."

The guide nodded and turned away. Grace watched the saddling with keen interest, especially the saddling of the first pony selected for her, which squealed and pawed and danced as the cinch-girth was being tightened.

"Vicious!" objected Elfreda Briggs.

"No," answered Grace. "Just playful. If the others are no worse, we shall have a good bunch of horses."

The saddle being secured, Grace stepped up and petted the little animal for a few moments, then mounted. The pony danced under her, then, at a word, galloped off. The Overland girl rode but a short distance, and, turning back, trotted up to the group smilingly.

"Spirited but sweet," was her comment as she dismounted. "He will be all right if he is used right. Try him, Elfreda. I know you will like him."

Miss Briggs took her test without falling off, and promptly claimed the little brown animal as her own private mount.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"You made a most excellent selection, Mr. Lang," complimented Grace, after she had tried the ponies for the rest of the girls and found them suitable. Each girl also tried out and selected her own mount from those that Grace had approved, the cowboys and half the village being interested spectators. Grace was pleased, both with the ponies and with the riding of her girl friends. Not the least of those who were pleased was Hi Lang, who, before the coming of the outfit, had felt considerable doubt as to the success of the proposed jaunt. Now he knew that the Overland Riders were not rank greenhorns, as he expressed it to himself.

"Which animal did you think of selecting for me!" asked Grace smilingly.

"Reckoned you'd do that for yourself," answered the guide.

"Thank you. Please have that black roped and brought out. He is the one I think will please me," replied Grace promptly.

"What, that black bronc'? He's a lively one, Mrs. Gray. Don't reckon you'll be able to stick on him at all," warned Hi Lang.

"I have fallen off before, sir. Have him roped and brought out. I'll try him out."

The guide shrugged his shoulders and walked over to the head wrangler.

"Why take such unnecessary chances!" begged Tom Gray. "Surely there are plenty of ponies in the bunch that are safe for you to ride."

"Tom, surely the black one can be no worse than that wild western pony that I bought last fall and rode. You know he was supposed to be the last word in viciousness and bucking ability, but I rode him successfully."

"Very well, go ahead. You won't be satisfied until you have tried him, but remember, I warned you," returned Grace's husband with some heat.

"Now, Tom," begged Grace pleadingly. "Please don't be a cross bear and spoil my trip. You have been so perfectly lovely about it right up to this moment, that it would be too bad if you were to get peevish now. If you say I must not, of course I will not try to ride the animal, but I do so want him."

Tom Gray shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"Go to it, little woman. You have my full permission to break your neck if you insist. I will see that little Yvonne keeps your memory green."

"Oh, Tom! You are such a dear, but I promise you that you won't have occasion to keep my memory green so far as that mischievous little black pony is concerned."

Grace Harlowe's confidence in herself was not without good and sufficient reason. The western pony that she had ridden the previous winter had demonstrated nearly all the tricks known to the stubborn broncos of the great west. At first Grace had had some bad spills, but eventually she learned to outwit her pony and ride him no matter how savagely he tried to unhorse her.

Not only had Grace learned to ride, in anticipation of another summer in the saddle, but, under her husband's instruction, she had taken up revolver shooting, and by spring was capable of qualifying as an expert, especially in quick shooting at moving targets. Thus fitted for the strenuous life in the wilder parts of her native land, Grace looked forward with calm assurance to the experiences that she knew lay before her.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Bring out the black," Hi Lang had directed. "Cinch him so tight it will make him squeal."

When a wrangler's rope caught him, the wiry little animal fought viciously for a few moments, then suddenly surrendered and was led out as docile as a lamb.

"Who said that black is vicious?" demanded Hippy Wingate.

"Want to ride him?" asked the guide good-naturedly.

"No. I have a real pony for myself."

"Watch those ears, Grace," warned Tom Gray.

"I am," replied Grace, and Hi Lang, overhearing, grunted his satisfaction.

The black pony's ears were tilted back at an angle of forty-five degrees, and there he held them while the saddle was being set in place, and the girth cinched, both forefeet spread wide apart and head well down. He winced a little as the girth was drawn a hole tighter so that the saddle might not slip, but otherwise made no move, which, the cowboys said, was an unusual thing for him to do.

The pony's sudden surrender was of itself suspicious to those who were familiar with the western bronco, and the laid-back ears were significant to them of trouble to come.

"Is he an outlaw!" asked Grace, meaning an animal naturally so vicious that he never had been satisfactorily broken.

Hi Lang, to whom the question had been addressed, gave Grace a quick glance of inquiry.

"Some call him that. At least he's got the ginger in him, and mebbly he is an outlaw. Keep a tight rein on him; don't let him get his head down if you can help his doing so, and stick to your leather. Watch him every second, for he's got a box full of tricks."

"Thank you for the suggestions. I shall not forget."

"I ought not let you ride him. I reckon you'll get enough of the critter before you have ridden him many minutes, even if you stick on that long."

"Mr. Lang, I intend to ride that 'critter,' as you call him, across the desert. Will he bolt while I am mounting?"

"Mebby. All ready now."

"Have you any last requests to make, Grace Harlowe?" asked Elfreda Briggs frowningly. Elfreda strongly disapproved of Grace's "foolhardiness," as she called it.

"Yes, keep back and give me plenty of room. See that the other girls do the same. The black may do a little side-stepping."

Grace, as she had done with the other ponies before mounting, stepped up to the black and began petting and caressing him, now and then straightening up the animal's ears, chiding him as she might a child. This made the cowboys laugh. Cowboys when subduing broncos do not ordinarily do so with anything resembling baby talk, and it was their firm conviction that this pretty young tenderfoot from the east was about to get the surprise of her life.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Instead of feeling sorry for her, however, the souls of the cowboys were filled with joy at the prospect of some real fun. It was not often that they were privileged to see an innocent easterner make an exhibition of himself on a vicious western pony, and this was the first time they had ever seen a woman from the east attempt to ride a bucking bronco, which made the occasion all the more interesting.

"Stand clear, please," warned Grace, giving the pony's neck a final pat, and at the same time edging her way back from his head, measuring the distance to the stirrup with her eyes.

"I'll give you the word when to hit the leather," directed Hi in a low voice. "Watch your step."

Grace acknowledged the warning with a brief nod, watching the black's head narrowly. The animal still stood with forefeet braced apart, head slightly lowered, ears, it seemed, flatter than ever.

"If I miss it I'm lost," muttered Grace, referring to the stirrup.

"Ready," warned the voice of the guide.

The girl's left hand holding the bridle rein crept cautiously to the pommel of the saddle.

"Now!"

Grace's left foot caught the stirrup and, like a flash, the Overland girl landed hard and firmly seated on the saddle, the right foot in the stirrup on that side, then, with the aid of stirrup and cantle, she braced herself to meet the shock that she knew was right at hand.

CHAPTER II. AN "OUTLAW" MEETS HIS MATCH

The black did not move a muscle for a few seconds, then, with a sudden turn of the head, he made a grab for his rider's leg.

Grace, never having taken her eyes from the laid-back ears, gave a quick kick with her left foot, catching the pony fairly on the nose. As he hastily withdrew his head, she took advantage of the opportunity to tighten up on the reins, which brought the animal's head well up.

All these preparatory activities were observed with intense interest by cowboys and Overlanders.

"Watch him!" called Hi Lang in an urgent tone.

Grace was watching, her every faculty bent to the task of discovering what the next move of her mount was to be.

The black, as she tightened the rein, reared high in the air until his rider seemed to be standing straight up. One moment she felt that they were both going to fall over backwards, and was about to clear the stirrups to jump. Instead she brought her crop down on the black's head, with a resounding whack.

"Yeow!" howled the cowboys, but Grace did not hear them, for the pony had dropped to all fours, and no sooner had his feet touched the ground than he leaped clear of it, coming down stiff-legged with a jolt that jarred Grace Harlowe throughout her body in spite of her effort to soften the shock by throwing most of her weight on the stirrups.

"He's going to buck," warned the steady voice of Hi Lang.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Grace knew it in advance of the guide's warning, but, though she tugged with all her might, she was not strong enough to get the black bronco's head up so he could not carry out his intention. There followed a series of bucks and squeals, accompanied with flying hoofs, that sent the spectators fleeing for safety.

As for the Overland girl, her head was spinning, her hair was down and her sombrero long since had fallen off and been trampled in the alkali dust by the hoofs of her mount. The jolting she was getting was almost more than she could endure and sharp pains were shooting through her body. This bronco indeed was a master at the art of bucking, but vicious as were his movements the black had not succeeded in ridding himself of his rider.

"Look out!" yelled the guide.

All four feet went from under the pony and he struck the ground on his side with a force that brought a grunt from him. In the cloud of dust the spectators thought that Grace had been caught under the horse and crashed. Emma Dean uttered a cry of alarm, and Nora Wingate turned her head away that she might not see.

"She's all right!" shouted Hiram Lang, who had sprung forward to give assistance if it were needed.

The pony had thrown itself on its right side. Mr. Lang found Grace sitting calmly on the side of the saddle, free of the body of the horse, but breathing heavily. Her quickness had been the means of her disengaging herself as the bronco threw himself to the ground.

After giving the black a few seconds on his side, the Overland Rider brought her crop down on his rump with a vicious whack. It stung. Like a flash the pony was on his feet, with Grace's feet now planted firmly in the stirrups.

As Grace had expected, the bucking was resumed the instant the pony felt the smart of the crop. How the dust did fly then, and how those cowboy wranglers did yell!

"Who's a tenderfoot!" howled Hippy Wingate. "Just watch her smoke."

Grace Harlowe's whole body was weary, but her grit was not diminishing in the least. However, she decided that the time had arrived when she must do a little fighting for herself, and not leave it all to the pony, so, having arrived at this decision, Grace watched narrowly for a favorable opportunity to begin.

The opportunity came a few seconds later when the horse threw up his head preparatory to pitching forward in another series of savage bucks. Grace jerked the animal's head to one side, brought her quirt down sharply, and, at the same time, jabbed the little black fighter with her spurs.

She continued to apply this treatment for several seconds until the bronco, goaded to a change of tactics, whirled and started away at a run, driving straight through the assembled crowd. The crowd fled for their lives with Grace unable now to do more than stay on the saddle.

The black had not gone far before he stopped as suddenly as he had started, stopped stiff-legged, braced himself and slid on his feet through the alkali for several yards.

Grace Harlowe had been alert for this very thing, but just the same the suddenness of the move had nearly unhorsed her. As it was she fell forward on the neck of the bronco, but, recovering herself before the animal could begin bucking again, she regained her former position in the saddle and applied crop and spur vigorously.

The bronco again tried to buck, but under Grace's lively treatment he gave it up and started to run, and for the next few minutes pony and rider went like a black streak across the landscape, the Overland girl giving the pony no time for anything but to travel as fast as his legs would carry him, until they were a full two miles from the

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

village.

Grace finally turned him about, without resistance on the pony's part, and raced for the corral, driving and urging the pony with crop and word, bound to wear him down and convince him once and for all that she was his master.

As the Overland Rider came up to the corral now at a jog trot, the bronco covered with white foam, the cowboys broke loose. Shrill cowboy yells, whoops and cat calls and a rattling fire of revolver shots into the air greeted her achievement.

"Grab him, you duffers!" shouted Hi Lang, running toward the bronco as he saw Grace wavering on her saddle. "Can't you see that game kid's all in?"

It was only by the exercise of sheer pluck that Grace Harlowe had held her seat on the saddle throughout that grilling ride. She had fought and won a battle with an "outlaw" pony that many a hard-muscled cowboy had fought only to lose. Now that she had conquered, however, Grace felt weak and dizzy, and the reaction, she found, was worse than the experience itself.

At Hi Lang's command, half a dozen cowboys had sprung to her assistance, but it was Hi who held up his arms to help her down.

"Fall over. I'll catch you," he urged.

Grace shook her head and tried to smile.

"I think I can make it, thank you," she gasped, freeing her feet from the stirrups and slipping limply until her feet touched the ground. For a moment she stood leaning against the bronco for support, one hand clinging to the pommel of the saddle.

The guide sought to draw her away, fearful that the pony might spring to one side and let loose a volley of kicks.

Grace shook her head, her left hand grasped the mane of the pony and she pulled herself to his head. Fumbling in her pocket, she drew forth a piece of candy and felt rather than saw the bronco's lips close over the sweet morsel.

"Wall, ef thet don't beat the Dutch!" exclaimed a cowboy. "A bronc' eatin' outer a lady's hand. What's the alkali flats a-comin' to!"

"She's a reg'lar lion tamer, thet's the shorest thing I know," declared another. "Hey! What's up now?"

Grace's fingers had slowly relaxed their grip on the black bronco's mane, a faint moan escaped her lips, and the Overland girl slipped down under the pony's neck in a dead faint. The bronco, merely by lifting a forefoot and bringing it down on his conqueror, could have crushed the life out of Grace Harlowe.

Instead, the horse arched his neck, curled his head down and nosed her with the nearest approach to affection that any man there ever had seen a bronco exhibit.

Hi Lang gathered the unconscious girl up cautiously and carried her to a safe spot where he laid her down.

"Get water. Everybody stand back and give her air," he directed.

"I will look after her," said Elfreda Brigg hurrying to Grace's side.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

The water, fetched in a cowboy's hat, came hand just as Grace regained consciousness. Elfreda bathed her face from the hat and fanned her with her own sombrero.

"What a perfectly silly thing for me to do," muttered Grace, raising herself on elbow.

"If you mean riding that wild animal, I agree with you," frowned Miss Briggs.

"I mean the faint. What will these men think of me!"

"I reckon if you'll give them a chance they'll tell you what they think," interjected Hi Lang. "Bud, come here," he called, beckoning to one of the wranglers. "This little lady wants to know what you fellows think of a woman who rides a horse and then faints away. Tell her."

Bud stepped up, flushing painfully under his tan, awkwardly fumbling his hat.

"Ah Ah reckon they think that you're 'bout the gamest little sport that ever hit the leather," declared Bud. "Any feller that sez you ain't, is a liar and a hoss thief!" Bud glared about him as if challenging some one to take up his defi.

Grace laughed so merrily that, for the moment, she forgot that she was supposed to be in a fainting condition. Getting up rather unsteadily, she offered her hand to the cowboy, who, in his embarrassment, instantly dropped his bravado and half held out a limp paw for Grace to shake.

"Them's our sentiments. We double cinch what Bud jest articulated, Lady," called a cowboy voice.

"Thank you, Bud. Thank you all, fellows. It is much higher praise than I deserve," she replied, smiling and waving a hand to the group.

"Where do you all reckon on goin', Miss?" questioned another of the men.

Grace told him that they had planned to cross the American Desert.

"And maybe we're going to look for a lost gold mine or a diamond mine or an iron mine down in the Specter Range, or something equally exciting," added Hippy Wingate.

"Reckon there ain't no such animal in these here parts," drawled Bud. "If you all need help any old time, Ah reckon you all know where to come for it, Lady," he added.

Grace thanked him and said she would remember.

"You are not thinking of riding that black bronco, are you!" questioned Tom Gray. "What's the next move?"

"Yes, to your first question. We expect to make our start this afternoon, unless Mr. Lang advises to the contrary. What do you say, Mr. Lang?"

"I reckoned that, after what you've been through, you'd be wishing to lay up for the rest of the day," replied the guide.

"That would be the sensible course to follow," agreed Grace's husband.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"No. No change of plans is necessary so far as I am concerned," she replied. "Mr. Lang, will you please ask one of the boys to groom Blackie that is what I shall call my pony and not to be cross with him? I do not wish the little fellow stirred up. I have him temporarily under control, and am certain that after I have ridden him for a day he will be as manageable as the rest of them. Where shall we meet you, Mr. Lang?"

"Eight here at the corral. Three o'clock." Hi turned his back on them and walked away to give Grace's directions about the bronco to one of the wranglers.

"I am going back to the hotel to lie down for an hour," announced Grace. "Tom, you may go out and do a little shopping for me while I am resting. Girls," she said, turning to her companions, "I would suggest that all of you turn in for a beauty sleep. You will need it, for we shall have a hot, dusty ride between here and the mountains, which we shall not reach until some time this evening. If you have any further purchases to make at the general store, you had better make them now, or let Tom do it for you. We must be on time at the corral. Mr. Lang probably has timed our departure to fit certain plans of his own."

The girls said they had completed their purchases, and shortly after that all were sound asleep, fortifying themselves for the experiences before them, experiences that were destined to be the most strenuous that they had ever met with, outside of the battle front in France.

CHAPTER III. A THRILLING MOMENT

"We are ready, Mr. Lang," greeted Grace Harlowe as she and her party came up to the corral where the guide was supervising the saddling of the ponies for the outfit.

The girls now wore the overseas uniforms that they had worn in their ride over the Old Apache Trail. In addition, a red bandana handkerchief was twisted about the neck of each Overland Rider, in true western style, to keep the alkali dust from sifting down their necks.

All the equipment except mess kits and emergency rations, and a canteen of water for each, had been sent forward on the burros in charge of the Chinaman, Ping Wing, whom the Overland girls had not yet met.

"How is Blackie behaving at present, Mr. Lang?" questioned Grace, stepping over towards the guide, who was readjusting the cinch—girth on the little animal.

"Quiet as a kitten after finding a nest of young mice. Better put your revolver in the saddle holster where it will be handy. That's where I carry mine. The lieutenant is stowing his now. Never know when the 'hardware' is going to come in handy on the desert."

A lump of sugar found its way into the black bronco's mouth from Grace Harlowe's hand, as she petted and talked to the little fellow. This time his ears were tilted forward, and he stood motionless while his new master was caressing him. The instant Grace stepped away, however, the black grew restless. He dragged the cowboy who was holding him and threatened to break away, nor was he quieted until Grace herself intervened and, slipping the bridle rein over her arm and leading the pony, walked over to Tom Gray.

"No wonder you are successful in managing a husband," observed Tom. "Even the dumb animals bow to your will."

"Now, Tom," protested Grace laughingly, the color mounting to her cheeks. "That wasn't a bit nice of you."

"Ready whenever you are, Mrs. Gray," interrupted the voice of Hi Lang.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Grace turned to her husband, the laughter gone from her face.

"I shall miss you, Tom dear. Write to Yvonne as often as you can, and to me, but Yvonne needs our letters to keep her from getting lonely at school. Good-bye and the best of luck, as we used to say when we were in France."

Grace patted the neck of the black bronco, and Tom assisted her to the saddle. Blackie began to prance, but, though he threatened to buck, he did not. Grace finally subdued him and sat waiting for her companions to mount, all of whom managed the operation successfully, though Emma Dean was twice nearly unhorsed.

The cowboys, as the Overland girls observed, were saddled up as if they too were going along, but she supposed they were starting out on some duty connected with their work. All but two of them mounted, and there followed an exhibition of prancing and bucking that furnished amusement and interest to Grace and her friends.

Bud and a companion finally rode up before Grace and dismounted, the former removing his sombrero and approaching her awkwardly.

Glancing inquiringly at Mr. Lang, Grace saw that he was smiling.

"Bud has something on his mind. I reckon he wants to unload, Mrs. Gray," announced the guide.

"Yes, Bud?" smiled Grace encouragingly. "What is it?"

"It's yourself, Miss. The bunch here reckoned as I, bein' gifted with the knack of gab, it fer me to speak for 'em. They're tongue- tied when there's a woman on the premises."

"What is it the 'bunch' wishes you to say to me?" asked the Overland girl.

"They seen you bust the black bronc' this morning, and bein' as no female woman ever pulled off a stunt like it in these parts, they reckoned it might not make you mad if they told you you was all to the good."

"Thank you thank you all." Grace waved a hand and smiled at the eager faces of the cowboys who, lined up on their ponies, just to the rear of Bud and a companion, were eagerly hanging on Bud's words, but not taking their gaze from Grace Harlowe's face for an instant.

"The bunch reckoned, too, that bein' a champeen mebbly you'd take a little present from 'em. I ain't much on spreadin' the dough, even if I have some gab," added Bud, floundering for the rest of his speech.

"Bud, I'm just as excited as you are, and, were I in your place, I should not know what to say next," comforted Grace seriously. "What is it that the 'bunch' wished you to give to me?"

Bud reached a hand behind him, whereupon his companion placed something in it. Emma Dean whispered to Nora that it looked like a blacksnake all coiled up and ready to jump.

"This here," resumed the cowboy, holding up the coil that had been passed to him, "is a real Mexican lariat, made by a Greaser, but real horsehair, and warranted not to kink or to miss in the hands of a lady. The bunch reckons they'd like to give it to you to remember 'em by," concluded Bud, stepping forward and handing the lariat to Grace.

"Bud boys, I don't need anything to make me remember you, but of course I will accept your thoughtful gift. I never threw a rope and could not hit the side of a barn with one, but now that you have given me this beautiful piece of rope I am going to learn to throw it. Mr. Lang, will you teach me how to rope to throw the lasso?"

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

The guide nodded.

"If we come back this way, I hope I shall see all you boys here, and I will then throw the rope for you and you shall tell me whether or not I am a hopeless tenderfoot."

"You ain't no tenderfoot already," called a cowboy.

"Thank you. Good-bye, all." Grace waved her sombrero, and, blowing a kiss to her husband, clucked to her pony and was off at a gallop, following in the wake of Hi Lang, who had already started on.

The others of the Overland party swung in and the party began its journey. They had gone but a short distance when, hearing shouts to the rear, they turned to discover the cowboys racing toward them in a cloud of dust.

"What do they want, Mr. Lang!" called Grace, urging her pony up to him.

"I reckon they're coming out to give you a send off," answered the guide.

As they approached, the cowboys spread out and began circling the galloping Overlanders, yelling, whooping and firing their revolvers into the air. Now and then one's sombrero would fly off, whereupon a following cowboy would swing down from his saddle and scoop up the hat.

Ropes began to wiggle through the air as the western riders sought to rope each other. They were giving Grace Harlowe a demonstration of what western roping was, and, as she rode, Grace observed and enjoyed, as did her companions.

Suddenly a rope darted into the air behind her, and, had she not seen its shadow, Grace surely would have been caught. Interpreting that shadow for what it was the Overland Rider threw herself forward on her pony's neck just as the loop descended. It dropped lightly on her back, but she was out from under it in a flash, and, as she sped on, she turned a laughing face to the roper, who was being rewarded by the jeers of his companions who had chanced to see him make the cast and fail.

Howling and whooping like a wild Indian, another rider shot directly across Grace's path, his glee spinning his sombrero as high in the air as he could throw it, intending to ride under and catch it. Grace's revolver, the same weapon that she had taken from Belle Bates, the wife of the bandit of the Apache Trail, whipped out of its holster in a second. Her first shot at the spinning hat missed, but her second shot was a hit. She put a hole right through the crown of the hat.

The whooping and yelling was renewed as the owner of the hat scooped it up from the ground and held it up for the others to see. There were two, however, who were taking no interest in the shooting the cowboy who had tried to rope Grace, and a companion who was chasing and trying to rope him in payment for his unsportsmanlike attempt to cast his lariat over Grace Harlowe's head.

The two were darting in and out among the racing cowboys and Overlanders at the imminent peril of running down some one; the dust was a suffocating, choking cloud except as they rode ahead, and then only those in the lead were out of the worst of it. The Overlanders were coughing and perspiring, and the shouting and shooting at times made conversation well nigh impossible.

"What is this, a wild west show?" cried Elfreda Briggs, riding toward Grace Harlowe, who was entering into the sport with a zest that set Hi Lang's head nodding in approval.

"The real wild west, Elfreda. It is not easy to find, but we have found it in earnest. Oh! Look at that!"

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

The pursuing cowboy had now roped a hind foot of the pony ridden by the man who had attempted to lasso Grace Harlowe.

The lariat being attached to the pommel of the thrower's saddle, the roped pony went down on its nose, violently hurling its rider to the ground, but the little horse was up in a flash, galloping away and dragging along the rope which it had jerked free from the owner's hands and from the saddle pommel.

Not only was it dragging the lasso, but also its cowboy rider, who, with one foot caught in a stirrup, was being bumped along on his back over the uneven ground.

Elfreda Briggs, nearest to the fallen cowboy, instantly spurred her pony after the runaway. She was abreast of it in a moment. Grasping the bridle of the runaway, Elfreda tugged at it with all her might in her endeavor to stop the animal, shouting, "Whoa! Whoa!"

In the meantime, Grace on Blackie was heading for the scene at top speed, seeking to head off the runaway.

Others also were trying to stop the animal and rescue the fallen cowboy, but it was Elfreda's race, with Grace following her. Elfreda was clinging desperately to the bridle of the runaway with one hand, the other holding fast to the pommel of her saddle, but despite all her efforts she failed to check the speed of the runaway, leaning over toward it further and further as the space between the two ponies widened.

This meant a fall for Elfreda, as she suddenly realized.

"Let go!" cried Grace, but Elfreda was too busy to hear and still held on to the runaway.

The runaway swerved sharply to the right. Miss Briggs had the presence of mind to kick back with both feet as she felt herself going to fall off. She did this to clear her feet from the stirrups so that when she fell she might not be dragged along on the ground by one foot. She was now leaning too far over to be able to recover her balance on her own saddle.

Miss Briggs suddenly let go of the pommel of her saddle as she felt herself slipping, and threw both arms about the neck of the runaway, to which she clung with all her might.

"Whoa! Whoa!" she gasped chokingly, her feet whipping the ground with every leap of the runaway as she was dragged along. Elfreda was taking severe punishment, but she was enduring it pluckily, determined to hang on until either the runaway stopped or her arms came off.

Grace Harlowe drew down rapidly on the runaway and its victims, having so timed her arrival that she succeeded in heading the pony off, with several yards between it and herself.

"Whoa! Whoa!" commanded Grace sharply, at the same time hurling her sombrero into the face of the runaway. Instead of slowing down, he came on with a rush, and Grace, who was now directly in his path, saw that she could not avoid a collision.

The bronco ridden by Grace braced himself, seeming to know instinctively what was coming.

In the next moment the runaway plunged against Blackie, and the impact bowled Blackie over flat on his side.

Grace already had slipped her feet from the stirrups, and, when the collision came, she too threw herself on the neck of the runaway.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Hang on! We'll stop him!" she cried, her arms now tightly encircling the runaway's neck, her feet dragging on the ground just as Elfreda's were.

By this time the two girls on the running pony's neck were surrounded by mounted cowboys.

"Let go! Jump clear so we can rope him!" shouted Bud, for the men dared not rope and throw the horse, fearing that he might fall on one of the girls and crush her.

The cowboys did not seem to realize that neither girl would let go of her own free will until the runaway had been stopped.

The end came suddenly. The heavy burden on his neck was too much for the bronco, and, his knees weakening, all at once he stumbled and went down on his nose, then toppled over on his side, enveloped in a cloud of dust.

"They're caught!" shouted Hi Lang.

CHAPTER IV. PING WING MAKES A DISCOVERY

When the cowboys, with Hi Lang in the lead, reached the Overland girls, they discovered Grace Harlowe calmly sitting on the runaway bronco's head to hold him down.

"Get Miss Briggs out from between the pony's legs. She can't help herself. Drag the man out, too. The pony fell on him," urged Grace.

"Are you hurt, Mrs. Gray!" begged Hi anxiously.

"No."

"And Miss Briggs!"

"I think not. She was a little stunned when we fell with the bronco. Hold down his head so I can get to her."

Surrendering her seat on the bronco's head to a cowboy, Grace got up and insisted in removing Elfreda from her perilous position. They stood Miss Briggs on her feet, Grace supporting her with an arm about her waist to give Elfreda opportunity to collect herself.

"How do you feel now!" asked Grace.

"All all mussed up," was J. Elfreda's characteristic reply.

Both girls showed the effects of their experience. Their hair was hanging down their backs, their uniforms were covered with dust and their faces were grimy from the alkali dirt of the plain.

"Let me walk you about to see if all your joints function," suggested Grace.

"They never again will do so properly as long as I live," complained Miss Briggs. "Did the ponies run away? I mean our ponies."

"I have been too busy to notice. If you will sit down I will see what I can do for the poor fellow who was dragged."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Elfreda insisted on assisting, and a moment later both girls were kneeling beside the dazed, but conscious, cowboy whose clothing was in tatters and whose face was scarcely recognizable from the dust that was ground into it.

Grace moistened her handkerchief with water from her canteen and bathed the man's face, and Elfreda, producing a bottle of smelling salts, held it to his nostrils. The cowboy quickly came out of his daze. One arm was doubled up under his body, and this Elfreda Briggs carefully drew out. The cowboy groaned as she did so.

"Can you lift your arm!" she asked.

"No," gritted the cowboy, his face twisting with pain as he tried to raise the arm.

"His left arm is broken," announced Elfreda. "Men, you must get this poor fellow to town as quickly as possible. I will make a sling to support the arm until you can get him to a surgeon."

"Do you folks reckon you want to go back to Elk Run, too?" questioned the guide.

"I was about to ask that question of you," replied Grace, turning to Elfreda.

"You should know better than to ask," returned Miss Briggs.

"We will go on, Mr. Lang. Perhaps it is as well that we have been broken in properly at the start. We shall be in better form to cope with real emergencies if such arise," declared Grace.

"Real! Huh!" grunted Hi Lang.

"Oh, you'll get used to having things happen," soothed Hippy Wingate. "Wherever this outfit goes there is trouble and then some more."

"Yes, but this is the worst," complained Emma Dean.

"Alors! Let's go," urged Elfreda Briggs as she got up after having arranged a sling to support the cowboy's injured arm.

Their ponies were led up by the cowboys and the girls mounted for a fresh start, Grace and Elfreda considerably rumpled and both very tired after their lively experience. The cowboys, having loaded their injured companion on a pony, now gave the Overland girls a rousing farewell whoop and trotted slowly homeward.

Hi Lang had uttered no comment on what had occurred, but he was keeping up a constant thinking, now and then scowling observingly at his charges. Of Grace and Elfreda he had no doubts, for, in his estimation, they had graduated from the tenderfoot class. The others had yet to prove themselves.

The ride was hot and dusty, and, in order to make up for lost time, the party was riding fast, but the ponies, though already flecked with foam, appeared to be as fresh as at the start.

"What time do you think we will reach the mountains?" called Anne, who was suffering tortures from the heat and dust.

"Sundown," briefly answered the guide. "It will be worse than this after we reach the desert."

"Worse!" groaned Emma. "I shall expire, I know I shall."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

The mountains, for which they were heading, were looming larger now, and looked cool and inviting compared to the heat of their present position.

"What is that smoke?" asked Grace Harlowe, as they neared the range, pointing to a thin spiral of vapor rising from the mountains.

"I reckon it's in our camp. Ping should have chow ready by the time we get there."

"You intend to go on this evening, do you not?" asked Grace.

"Yes. You said you were in a hurry to get to the desert."

"I shouldn't put it that way, Mr. Lang, but I am rather eager to get into the real phase of our journey, and eager to know what the desert is like. I have a feeling that I shall love it."

"Some do some hate it," replied the guide thoughtfully.

"Do you hate it?" questioned the Overland Rider.

"I love it," murmured Hi Lang after a brief silence. "Little woman, I love the white sands, the burning heat of the day, the deadly, sweet silence of the night when all the stars come down so close you can almost reach out and touch them. I love the dead odor, and then "

"Yes?" urged Grace.

"I hate it, I fight it and I win," added the guide in a tone that was almost triumphant. "Yet, I'd rather be out there where the starving coyotes howl the night through, where the great, gaunt gray wolves loom up in the night seeking what they may kill and eat, or where a step in the dark may be your last should you tread on a desert rattler. I'd rather be there and face all of that, and the peril of dying from thirst, than be anywhere else in the world," he concluded, and then lapsed into silence.

"I understand, Mr. Lang. It is the lure of the desert that appeals to you, though none knows better than you the perils that lurk there for the unwary traveler. I hope and believe that I may feel as you do about it."

"You will, and so will Miss Briggs. I am not so certain about the others."

"When you get to know us better, Mr. Lang, you will find that, though some of us complain and fret, all are true blue."

"Humph! Beckon I know something about that myself. What I saw to-day shows me that I don't have to worry about you and Miss Briggs. Did you know that Ike Fairweather wrote me a long letter about you folks!"

Grace looked her interest.

"Yes. Ike said I'd have my hands full, and that you folks would trot a pace that would make my legs weary trying to keep up with you. Said you weren't afraid of anything that walked, crept or crawled."

Grace laughed merrily.

"Mr. Fairweather is mistaken. I am terribly shy of snakes and and well, I don't know what else" she added lamely.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Hi Lang chuckled under his breath.

"Yes, that's our camp where you see the smoke. I just caught a glimpse of Ping. I reckon when we get closer we'll hear his voice."

"We are almost there, girls," Grace called back to her companions. "That is Ping's smoke you see yonder."

"Is Ping on fire?" answered Emma so innocently that the Overlanders shouted with laughter, and Hi indulged in the hearty, soundless laugh that they had already discovered was characteristic of him.

A few moments later a cooling breeze from the range was wafted down to them, heavy with, odors of mountain and foliage and suggestive of cooling mountain water as well.

"What's that screeching?" demanded Hippy Wingate, as they fell into single file and began climbing a narrow mountain trail.

"Screeching?" answered Anne Nesbit. "Why, that's our Celestial being singing a lullaby to the coyotes lurking in their dens,"

As they drew nearer those in advance could make out some of the words of the song. The guide pointed to a rock, behind which Ping was cooking supper, and held up a hand to indicate that the party was to stop and listen.

"What on earth, is he saying?" wondered Nora Wingate.

"I should call it a heathen version of 'Little Jack Horner,'" suggested Miss Briggs.

Hi nodded.

"Listen!" urged Grace. "I want to hear it. Perhaps he will sing it again."

The guide said that when Ping got started on a song he ordinarily kept it up for some time unless interrupted.

"Sh h h!" warned Grace as Emma began to laugh. "He is singing again."

Ping, in a high falsetto voice that was almost a screech, sang:

"Littee Jack Horner Makee sit inside corner, Chow-chow he Clismas pie; He put inside t'um, Hab catchee one plum, Hai yah! what one good chilo (child) my!"

The Overland girls, unable longer to contain their laughter, burst into a shout of merriment. The song ceased instantly, and a moment later Ping appeared at the top of the rock, clad in a white linen suit, the blouse, with its wide-flowing sleeves, being cut in native Chinese fashion. The queue, which Ping had declined to part was tucked into a side pocket, being all braided up and shiny, like a snake.

The Chinaman, in greeting, bowed and scraped and smiled and shook hands with himself cordially.

"Hulloa, Ping Pong! Is supper ready?" called Hippy jovially.

"Him come along, top-side piecee Heaven pidgin man," answered the Chinaman without an instant's hesitation, which, being freely translated, meant, "Supper is ready, high Heaven-born man." The retort brought a peal of laughter from the girls and a flush to the face of Hippy.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"All right, old top. You win," was the way Hippy confessed his defeat.

It was a happy, laughing group that rode around the rock and into the camp where odors of cooking food, and the smiling face of Ping Wing, met them. Horses were quickly unsaddled and tethered, then the guide introduced his charges. Ping shook hands with himself at each introduction, and smiled and bowed with a profound grace that would have done credit at a king's reception.

"You belongee plenty smart inside," was his greeting to Grace Harlowe, which she interpreted correctly, Ping having meant to convey that, in his opinion, she was an intelligent woman.

"Thank you. Is mess ready?"

"Les. You belongee one time Flance!" he questioned, touching the sleeve of her Red Cross uniform.

"Yes, we all were in France. I drove an ambulance there; Mr. Wingate was an aviator, and the other young ladies worked in hospitals and canteens. How do you know about France?"

"Me cook—man in Melican army. No likee war. Belongee too muchee number one blam, blam!"

"You mean the shooting? You mean you did not like to have the big German shells come over?" smiled the Overland girl.

"No likee."

Hippy's appetite was getting the better of him and at this juncture he voiced his desire for food.

"Come, come, Ping. We are hungry. Rustle some grub for us, for we may wish to on our way," urged Hi Lang.

Ping, thus reminded of his duty, hurriedly gathered the mess kits of the party and soon produced a really fine supper, which the Overlanders ate sitting on the ground.

"Are you people pretty tired?" questioned Grace.

A chorus of yeses answered her. Elfreda Briggs said she was so lame that she would be glad never to look at a saddle again, and Emma Dean declared that her body felt as if it had been sandpapered.

"I have been thinking that perhaps we had better make camp right here and go on to the desert some time to-morrow. Will that interfere with your plans Mr. Lang?" asked Grace.

The guide said it would not, and the girls of the party eagerly urged that they be permitted to stay where they were and have a good night's rest, so it was decided to pitch their little tents on the spot and lay up for the night.

"Ping tells me that a man visited this camp late in the afternoon and asked a great many questions," Hi Lang then informed them. "The caller, according to Ping, showed a heap of interest in what we were here for, where we were going and what we proposed to do, and said that the best thing for you ladies to do would be to turn about and go back to Elk Run. Do you know of any one who might be interested in heading off your journey over the desert, Mrs. Gray?" he asked, bending a searching look on Grace.

"I do not, Mr. Lang. If I did it would make no difference in our plans. Ping may be mistaken about the man's motive."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

The guide shook his head.

"Ping Wing is not easily deceived. He the caller was a 'number one blad man,' only he expressed it with some further words to emphasize his point. There's something about this business that I don't like. I'll keep my eyes peeled."

"Don't worry, Hi," soothed Hippy. "This outfit can take care of any bad characters that get in its way. I "

"Merciful Heaven! What's that!" cried Emma Dean.

"Ping is in trouble!" cried Elfreda.

A shrill screeching, accompanied by the clatter of tinware, a struggle, then two quick shots brought the Overlanders to their feet. There was a quick rush toward the scene of the disturbance, the guide, Grace and Hippy in the lead as they ran stumbling over the rough ground in the darkness.

CHAPTER V. STALKING A MOUNTAIN MYSTERY

"Ping! Ping!" shouted the guide.

"Where are you, Ping Pong?" added Lieutenant Wingate.

A groan revealed the Chinaman's presence. They found him sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth holding the thumb of his right hand. A brief examination revealed that a bullet had clipped off the end of the thumb.

"I observe that we have started in early," declared Miss Briggs. "Who did it?"

"That's what I want to know," growled Hi Lang.

"Let me dress the wound, then you can question him," suggested Elfreda.

This having been done, Ping was led into camp and placed with his back against a rock where the light of the campfire lighted up his countenance.

"Tell me what happened!" demanded the guide.

"Big piecee man come 'long. Him clawl like dog. Him listen to what say."

"To what we were saying!" interjected Grace.

"Les. Him bad piecee man."

Hi Lang and Grace exchanged glances of inquiry. Each was wondering what the meaning of what Ping had discovered, might be.

"What then!" urged Mr. Lang.

"Him clawl like a dog."

"So you said," piped Emma Dean.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Me clawl like dog too. One timee me tlow can tloatoes and hab hit piecee man on head."

"You threw a can of tomatoes and hit him on the head?" nodded the guide, whereupon Emma Dean laughed, but no one paid the slightest heed to her. "What did the man do then!"

"Him jlump. Me hit piecee man with flying pan; then me run. Him shoot blam, blam! and run away. Hab hit thumb. Hab makee me stop, and run away. Why for big piecee man makee so fashion?"

"We do not know why, Ping. That is what we are trying to find out," answered Grace Harlowe. "Can you tell us how the man looked!"

The Chinaman shook his head.

"What would you advise, Mr. Lang!" she asked.

"We must beat up about the camp to make certain that he is not hiding near, then I will stand the watch to-night so that he may not surise us. I will get out the rifles, but be careful that you don't shoot each other. In case you discover some one prowling, make them stand and put up their hands, then call for assistance. Ping, you will stay here. Three of us will be sufficient to go out."

"Whom do you wish to accompany you?" asked Grace.

"You and the lieutenant will go, if agreeable to you."

"It will be more agreeable to go than to stay. Elfreda, you will please watch the camp," directed Grace. "If disturbed, you know what to do."

Rifles were laid on the ground by the campfire, Hi, Hippy and Grace having decided that the rifles would be cumbersome to carry, and that their revolvers would be much more serviceable. After Hi Lang had given final instructions as to how they were to operate, the three started out and soon were out of sight of their companions.

A new moon, fast sinking into the west, shed a faint light over the mountains, bringing out the bare spots and deepening the shadows cast by rocks and trees. The stalkers laid their course by the moon so that they might keep going in one direction and not get in each other's way, though some little distance separated them, and only now and then did they come within speaking distance of one another.

Not a sound did the guide make as he moved forward. Grace was almost equally quiet in her movement, but now and then Hippy Wingate would stumble, followed by a grunt or a growl of disgust that might have been heard several yards away.

Hippy, being between the guide and Grace, knew that two pairs of ears were alert for any fumbling on his part, which irritated more than it helped him to be quiet.

Grace finally halted at the edge of an open space, faintly lighted by the moon's rays, and waited watchfully before attempting to cross the open spot. Crouching low, she gazed and listened, every faculty on the alert. The Overland Rider's heart gave a jump when she saw something move out there behind a clump of bushes.

With revolver at ready, she waited, then leveled the weapon as something moved out from behind the bushes.

"A coyote," she whispered to herself. "He hasn't heard me."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

He heard her whisper, however. The alert ears tilted forward as the beast halted; then he bounded away and disappeared in a twinkling.

Grace was now well satisfied that she was proceeding with sufficient caution. If she could approach a keen-eared coyote without disturbing it, how much easier would it be to stalk a human being. Having decided upon this, Grace got up and stepped into the moonlit space, feeling more confidence in herself.

She had barely reached the middle of the open space when, from the other side, and plainly at close range, a revolver banged. She heard the bullet, as it sped past her head too close for comfort.

Without an instant's hesitation, Grace fired two shots from her revolver at the flash made by the other weapon, then throwing herself on the ground, wriggled away into a shadow and lay flat on the ground, screened by the short shrubbery and the unevenness of the ground.

Two shots were now fired from the other weapon, aimed, as nearly as she could see, at the place where she had thrown herself down. To the last two shots Grace made no reply. She lay waiting, hoping that the person who had fired them, would come out and show himself.

This he was too wary to do, and finally, becoming impatient, she groped for a stone, and, finding a small piece of rock, flipped it into the air, so that it might fall some little distance from her, hoping thereby to draw the other's fire.

Still there was no response from her adversary.

"He must have slipped away, and here I have been waiting all this time, afraid of what proves to be nothing. I'm going to start on," decided the Overland girl.

Instead of getting up where she was, Grace crawled further to the right for some little distance, until she was in a heavier shadow. There she arose cautiously, weapon at ready, prepared to see a flash and hear the report of a weapon.

Not a sound nor a movement followed her revealing herself. Grace now pushed on with still greater caution than before, but rather more rapidly, believing that her companions by this time had gained a considerable lead over her.

The moon was getting lower, Grace observed, and soon the range would be enveloped in darkness, though she was certain that she could find her way back by the stars, from which she already had taken her bearings.

In the meantime, Hi Lang, having heard the exchange of shots, had started for the scene at a long, loping trot, now and then giving an agreed upon signal whistle to warn Lieutenant Wingate of his approach.

Hippy had heard the shots too, but his orders were to keep his position and continue on until directed to stop. As Hi got within speaking distance of him, Hippy challenged.

"Move forward and keep going until I fire three signal shots to call you in," directed the guide. "The man may run along the ridge. Wing him if you see him. He may have shot Mrs. Gray. Both of them fired. There they go again!" Hi Lang was off at top speed.

Grace, in the meantime, thinking that she had heard a twig snap, halted sharply. Then, to her amazement, a man stepped out into the light a few yards to the rear of her. She saw him the instant he emerged from the shadows, and he was looking in the direction of the Overland camp.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Now I have you!" muttered Grace Harlowe, taking a cautious step toward the man who was standing with his back toward her.

"Put up your hands! I have you covered!" she commanded sharply.

The man whirled like a flash and fired point blank at the Overland girl. Grace fired almost in the same instant. So close was he to her when he fired that she imagined she could feel the hot powder strike her face.

Each fired again. It was close quarters for Grace. She sprang to the right hoping to disconcert her adversary and make a more difficult mark for him to hit. He pulled the trigger of his revolver, and, at that second, Grace, uttering a little gasp, toppled over, half turning as she plunged forward with arms outstretched.

Black night instantly enveloped the Overland Rider, nor did she hear a rattling exchange of shots that followed almost instantly after her fall, for consciousness had left her.

CHAPTER VI. INTO THE GRBAT SILENCE

Hi Lang had reached the scene just as the last shots were being fired by Grace and her adversary. The guide had seen neither of the combatants, but he had seen the flashes of their revolvers.

At first he was not certain which was which, but in a moment the man who had been shooting at Grace revealed himself for a second. It was then that the guide took a hand.

Hi Lang was a quick and accurate hand with both revolver and rifle, and he feared no man, nor collection of men. At his second shot he heard his man utter an exclamation and knew that he had scored a hit. For the next several minutes the two indulged in snap-shooting, firing at the slightest sound or movement; then the mysterious stranger suddenly ceased firing.

The guide was cautious. He did not take advantage of the lull in hostilities for some little time, and when he did he crawled to one side and crept noiselessly around to the position that the stranger had occupied when he had fired his last shot. The man had disappeared.

Mr. Lang was anxious about Grace Harlowe, but it might be equivalent to suicide to search for her until he had satisfied himself that his adversary was either wounded or had gone away. Finally, having searched all the surrounding bushes and rocks and finding no one, he returned to the scene of the shooting, softly calling to the Overland girl.

There was no response.

Hi stood still for a moment trying to recall where he had seen the flash of her weapon.

"It must have been about where I am standing now. I "

Hi Lang suddenly disappeared from sight. The guide had fallen into a crevice in the rocks, a crevice that had been hidden by dwarf shrubs and mountain grass, and it seemed a long way to the bottom. Hi bumped his way to the bottom at the expense of some bruises and a badly ruffled temper.

"Hulloa!" he exclaimed. "What's this?"

He had touched something that was not rock something that felt like a human form. The guide struck a match and

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

peered down at Grace Harlowe, who lay face down at the bottom, and, as he turned her face up to the light, he saw flecks of blood on it.

"The hound! He hit her! I'll kill him for that, whoever he may be!"

Placing a hand over Grace's heart, Hi Lang found that she was alive.

"Thank God for that! Give me the luck to meet the critter that did this thing," breathed the desert guide.

Hi lifted the unconscious Overland girl in his arms and began scrambling toward the top of the big crevice. Finding that he could not make it without freeing one hand, he slipped an arm about Grace's waist, holding her with it while he used his free hand to assist him in climbing to the top. He reached it a little out of breath.

Without giving a thought now to the peril he was inviting by showing himself so boldly, Hi stepped out into the open space, raised his revolver and fired three shots into the air, the signal of recall for Lieutenant Wingate. Then, gathering Grace in his arms, he started for the camp in long strides, raging silently at the ruffian who had tried to kill her.

Elfreda, who was on watch just outside of their camp, heard him coming and challenged.

"It's Hi. I've got Mrs. Gray."

"Is is she hurt?" questioned Elfreda more calmly than she felt.

"She's been shot, but she's alive."

Miss Briggs ran to meet the guide, and, walking along at his side, she placed a finger on Grace's pulse and held it there until they reached the camp. Nora, Anne and Emma paled as they caught sight of the limp figure in Hi Lang's arms.

"Who shot her!" asked Elfreda.

"The critter who tried to kill Ping, I suppose."

"Oh, this is terrible!" wailed Emma.

"Get water," directed Miss Briggs, after the guide had placed her where the light from the fire would shine in her face.

Nora fetched water from the spring near which the camp had been pitched, and Elfreda bathed the wound that she found on Grace's head. Elfreda's hospital training during the war, in France, had already stood her in good stead on several occasions since her return from Europe.

"This is not a gunshot wound," she announced after a critical examination of the patient's head.

"Not not a gunshot " exclaimed Hi.

"No. It is a severe scalp wound, however."

"What made it, then?" demanded the guide.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Either she has been struck over the head or she has fallen and bumped her head against the sharp edge of a rock," answered Miss Briggs.

The Overland girls drew long breaths of relief.

"I found her in a hole in the ground. Fell into it myself. That's where she got hurt," said Hi. "She and that critter were shooting at each other when I came up, then all at once the shooting stopped. I got in a few shots on him myself. Reckon I winged him for he quit pretty soon after I got there. What do you think?"

Elfreda, still noting Grace's pulse and peering into her face, nodded encouragingly, and placed her smelling salts under Grace's nostrils.

"I feared it might be a fracture, but I believe it is not that bad. Concussion is the word. She must have struck hard, and it is a wonder she did not break her neck. You see how the neck is swollen. Her pulse is getting stronger, and I think she will be out of her faint in a few moments."

Grace regained consciousness shortly after that, but she was still dizzy and weak from the severe shock of her fall and the loss of quite a little blood.

"Where where was I hit!" was her first question, weakly asked,

"You were not hit anywhere," replied Elfreda. "You fell into a hole and landed on your head. Mr. Lang, will you carry her to her tent? She must be quiet for the rest of the night, and it won't do for us to start across the desert until she has had a good rest."

"That suits me. I've got a little job on hand for the morning. Here's the lieutenant," he added, as Hippy came in, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"What's this! Brown Eyes knocked out again?" he demanded.

"She fell down and hurt herself," answered Elfreda.

"What was the shooting, Hi?"

"Mrs. Gray and that critter out there were doing it. I reckon she pinked the pirate, for he was shooting with his left hand when he opened up on me. I reckon I touched him up too, and, getting enough of it, he cleared out. I'll get him for that," added Hi, gathering Grace up and carrying her to her tent. "To-morrow we'll go out and see if we can't round up that critter. Can't do anything to-night except to see that he doesn't do any more damage to this outfit."

"I think I'd like to get a shot at him myself," observed Hippy.

"There, Mrs. Gray! You keep quiet. If there's any more scouting to be done this evening, the lieutenant and I will do it," directed the guide, laying down his burden.

Hippy nodded.

"Lieutenant, what do you think of this business? Are you certain that you folks haven't any enemies!" asked Mr. Lang when the two had walked out beyond the camp and sat down to talk over the affair.

"Not that I know of, in these parts, Hi."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"It's mighty queer. I can't figure it out," pondered the guide.

"Have you any?" asked Hippy carelessly.

"Reckon I have plenty. They know better'n to cross my trail, though."

"It strikes me, Hi, old man, that one of them crossed your trail this evening," chuckled Hippy Wingate.

The guide made no reply then, and for some moments thereafter occupied himself with his own thoughts.

"You asked me just now if I had any enemies. I'll say this, Lieu "

BANG! BANG!

Two quick shots were fired from behind Hippy and the guide. One bullet passed between the two men, the other clipped the crown, of Lieutenant Wingate's sombrero.

The answer came, it seemed, within a second after the two shots. Hippy and the guide leaped to their feet, drawing their revolvers as they did so, and emptying them into the bushes, firing low and trying to cover all the ground where a man might be lurking.

"As you were about to say," drawled Hippy, slipping another clip of ammunition into his revolver.

"That there is one man who might and would get me if he thought he could get away with it. But why should he wish to shoot a woman? Crawl out to the left and then go in and let the folks know everything is all right now. I'm going to hang around a bit and try to tease that cayuse into shooting at me again."

"They're at it again," complained Grace Harlowe in her tent. "Go out, Elfreda, am see if any one is hit."

Hippy was reassuring the girls when Elfreda came out.

"Humph!" exclaimed Miss Briggs. "We surely are making a brilliant start. I think I shall be glad to get on the desert. One can see such a long way there. Grace is anxious to know about those shots, so I will run in and tell her. Are you going out again, Hippy?"

"Not unless I get a word from Hi. You see I do not know where he is, and it would not be safe for either of us were we both to be out there without either knowing where the other is."

Ping, wide-eyed, was an eager listener to what Lieutenant Wingate had to say, but he made no comment, and no song that fitted the situation found expression on his lips.

An hour passed, and the guide had not returned. The girls were getting anxious, but Hippy said that, no shots having been heard, it was safe to assume that no one could have been hit.

No one had, and all this time Hi Lang, almost within sound of their voices, had been lying flat on top of a rock, listening with every faculty on the alert. For two hours the guide remained in one position, watching, waiting and eagerly hoping.

"One shot just one second when I can see my mark, is all I ask," he muttered. "I'll get that shot yet!"

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

A few moments later Hi crept down from his hiding place and returned to camp, on the alert every second of the way for the report of a revolver and the whistle of a bullet.

"This beats me," he declared in answer to Hippy's question as to whether or not he had discovered anything. "Yon folks turn in, How's Mrs. Gray?"

"Asleep," answered Miss Briggs. "I think she will be ready for a start some time to-morrow."

The guide told Lieutenant Wingate to turn in also, saying that he would watch the camp through the night, so the Overland Riders went to bed for what sleep they could get, but they passed a restless night, starting up at every sound, listening for the report of rifle or revolver or a call for help. Nothing disturbing occurred. Shortly after daylight, Grace got up and dressed and went out to breathe in the invigorating, sweet mountain air. She felt strong and able to meet whatever emergency she might be called upon to face.

Hi Lang was nowhere in sight. Ping, who was fussing with a cook fire preparatory to getting breakfast, shook his head when Grace asked him where the guide was.

"No can tell," he said, caressing his injured hand.

Breakfast was served at seven o'clock, but long before that Grace had been out looking for trail signs and finding some, though she could not tell whether they had been left by a prowler or by one of her own party.

It was eleven o'clock that forenoon when Hi Lang strode into camp, his rifle slung under one arm, a heavy revolver on either hip.

The greeting of the girls brought a smile to the face of the guide. They were relieved and glad to see him, and he saw it. He also was glad to be with them once more, for, in the brief time he had known them, he had grown to feel a genuine affection for these bright-eyed, plucky young women who preferred to spend their vacation on his beloved desert rather than dance away the weeks of their vacation at some fashionable summer resort.

"Mr. Lang, where have you been?" cried Emma Dean.

"Out looking for game," he answered briefly, laying aside his rifle.

"Did you find it?" asked Grace smilingly.

"No. Ping, bring me some chow. How you feeling this morning, Mrs. Gray?" he asked after he had begun eating his breakfast.

"Fit and fine, sir. You found a trail, I take it," she added in a lower voice.

"Yes." Hi gave her a quick look of appreciation for her keenness. "You hit your man all right. I found blood where he was standing when you two were shooting at each other. I also found the trail, further on, the trail of the same man and another. There were two of them."

"I wonder which, one it was that put a hole through my perfectly new hat," grumbled Hippy.

"At least one of them has left the range," resumed the guide. "I found the trail of a pony and footprints of one man on the other side of the range, but what became of the other fellow, I don't know. I'm going out again after breakfast and look further. Do you feel like making a start to-day?"

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Yes. I think we should be moving," replied Grace.

"We'll leave after chow this evening. Better get what rest you can to-day. Lieutenant, I wish you would stick around and see that the camp is not bothered."

"If you need him, Mr. Lang, we can protect ourselves. Do not worry about us," interjected Grace.

"Don't need him. Ping, put some grub in my pack, then I'm off."

After the guide's departure time dragged rather heavily for the girls. Later in the day Grace took her pony out for a gallop and felt better for the change. At four o'clock Mr. Lang came in, and, though he had been up all night and had been hiking in the mountains all day long since early morning, he appeared fresh and alert.

"Pack up and get out!" he ordered, nodding to Ping Wing. "Serve the grub on our mess kits first. Follow the foothills and we will catch up with you. I give it up, folks. This mystery has got to solve itself. It's too much for me."

"Don't worry, Mr. Lang. If our friend the mystery man keeps at us long enough we shall catch him. I wish we knew why he is bothering us so," said Grace. "I should prefer to stay here until we solve the mystery, but we must be on our way, and perhaps he may follow us."

"That sounds interesting," observed Miss Briggs.

Ping and his lazy burros started about an hour before the rest of the party got under way, and when they did get under way they jogged along slowly through the foothills of the range, where the going was fairly easy. The guide said they should come up with Ping before dark, and that they would, after having mess, then continue on at a slower pace until they reached a suitable camping place for the night.

Dusk was upon them when they finally overtook the Chinaman, who was sitting on the rump of a burro chattering to his mount to get him to go faster, but without much success. The ponies of the party then took the lead, which, Hi Lang said, would induce the burros to move faster in an effort to keep up, but it was a much slower pace than the Overland Riders were in the habit of traveling, that they now dropped into.

Night enveloped the outfit suddenly, it seemed to them, and with the cool of the evening their spirits rose. Even Ping's spirits rose, until he forgot his aching thumb and broke into song.

The ground began to slope away under the hoofs of the horses, for they were now moving down a sharp descent, and the air seemed to take on a strange new quality, a new odor. No longer could the girls hear the rustling of foliage. A great and impressive silence settled over them, in which even the footfalls of the ponies were soft and subdued. Glancing up, they saw the stars shining with a brilliancy that none of the party had ever observed before.

The chatter of the Overland Riders died away, and Ping Wing's song died away, also, in a throaty gurgle.

"What is it?" cried Emma Dean. "I feel queer, and my pony is trembling. Oh, Grace, I'm afraid of something."

Grace knew what it was that was disturbing Emma, for she felt something of the same sensation that Emma was experiencing, but she made no reply.

"It is the desert!" answered the guide solemnly. "It is the mystery of the desert, a mystery that no man can solve. Perhaps it is the mystery of centuries; perhaps it is the spirits of the thousands who have perished here on this sweet, cruel sea of burning sand, that have come back to warn us living ones of the fate that may be in store for us

who dare."

"The mystery of the desert," murmured Grace Harlowe, but Hi Lang spoke no more. His lips seemed sealed, though could they have seen his face they would have observed a new and more tender expression there, and seen him inhale in deep breaths, heavy draughts of the faintly scented air of the desert that he both loved and hated.

CHAPTER VII. THE FIRST DESERT CAMP

"How far do we go to-night?" asked Grace, after a long silence, during which the party moved steadily forward.

"Until we find a tank," was the brief reply uttered by Hi Lang.

"What's that he says?" questioned Hippy.

"Mr. Lang says that we must keep on going until we reach a tank, whatever that may be," answered Grace. "Will you please explain, Mr. Lang?"

"Tank is a water hole covered by a thin crust of alkali. Sometimes the crust is there but the water isn't," the guide informed her.

"Do you know where to find one?" questioned Hippy.

"I know where one ought to be, but you can't most always tell. Ought to reach this one about midnight. If we get water there we will be all right. Go easy with your canteens, for if we shouldn't find water you will need what you have."

"Mine is all gone now," spoke up Emma Dean. "May I have a drink of yours, Grace? My throat is burning."

"One little swallow," admonished Grace, passing her canteen to Emma. "You heard what the guide said."

"Yes, you'll wish you were a camel before you have done with this journey," added Lieutenant Wingate.

Too weary to talk, Anne and Nora were nodding on their saddles, but Elfreda was wide awake and alert, filled with a wonder that was akin to awe at the vast mysteriousness of the desert night.

It was shortly after midnight when Hi Lang halted and sat surveying his surroundings.

"Dismount and rest!" was his brief command.

The Overland girls slid from their saddles, and the guide, after handing his bridle-rein to Ping, strode off into the darkness.

"Oh, this is terrible!" wailed Emma. "I know I shall expire."

"Good! Then we shall have a little peace," retorted Hippy laughingly.

"Don't," begged Grace. "The poor girl really is suffering, but when she gets used to the heat and discomforts out here I think she will really enjoy it." Grace petted the wet neck of her pony and he nosed her cheek and nibbled at the brim of her sombrero. "How do you feel, Elfreda?"

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"As if I had been wearing a mustard-plaster suit. I am burned from head to foot."

"Yes, that's the way I feel," cried Emma. "What is good for it, Grace?"

"Sand," interjected Miss Briggs, which sally caused a laugh and made the girls feel better.

At this juncture Hi Lang came up to them, walking briskly.

"Stake down and make camp," he ordered.

"You have water?" questioned Hippy.

"Yes. Ping! Hustle your bones. Get some firewood and make a blaze so we can see what we're doing. When that is ready, get supper ready, and then pitch the camp."

"Firewood!" scoffed Hippy. "I should like to know where you are going to find it?"

"Sagebrush! Plenty of that hereabouts."

Hippy could not understand how a fire could be made from green sagebrush, but he waited to be shown before making further comments. In a few moments the Chinaman had a little fire blazing, the guide and Hippy, in the meantime, having staked down the ponies and relieved the burros of their packs. The burros were left to roam where they would, Hi assuring his charges that the pack animals were too lazy to run away.

The girls, while Ping was preparing a light supper for them, set to work to pitch the tents. Carrying canvas buckets, Hippy and the guide then hurried to the water hole.

"It won't do to wait for the water, for it has a habit, in this country, of suddenly disappearing while you wait," explained Hi.

"Yes, but where's the water?" wondered Lieutenant Wingate, as Hi got down in a hole that he had opened by breaking down the crust with his boots.

"Give me that blanket and I'll show you," he said, reaching for a canvas square, which he spread out in the opening and pressed down with his hands.

In a few moments water began seeping up through the blanket, which was so placed that it was lower in the middle than at the sides.

"That beats me," marveled Hippy. "How did you know there was water here?"

"I didn't. I knew where I found it the last time I was this way, but that didn't mean it would be here this time. These desert underground streams shift their courses almost as often as the wind does. Hand me a bucket."

Two buckets were finally filled and passed up to Hippy.

"Water the ponies first. Give them only a little at first. They're too warm to drink their fill. When you come back bring the red buckets for water for us to drink," directed the guide.

Hippy, marveling at the ways of the desert, took the buckets and began watering the ponies. The two bucketfuls answered for four of them, and by the time he returned to the water hole Hi had two more bucketfuls ready for

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

him. In this way all the ponies and the burros were supplied with water, and Hi, working as fast as lie could, filled all the buckets for the night's use of man and beast, then scrambled out of the water hole.

"I hope we still find water here in the morning," he said.

"What if we do not?"

"Then we go without it, Lieutenant. One has to get used to thirst out here. You will see many a dry day before we finish our journey."

"Hm m m m!" mused Hippy reflectively.

"Him come along," cried Ping Wing in a shrill voice, meaning that supper was ready, as the two men with their water buckets entered the camp.

"Four meals a day, eh?" grinned Hippy. "That is what I call the proper thing. I shall have to readjust myself so as to know how to live on four meals a day, but I am so hungry now that you can see right through me."

"We always could," teased Miss Briggs.

Now that the supper was ready, Ping piled more sagebrush on the fire and made a blaze that lighted up the little desert camp, its white tents standing out clearly defined in the light and appearing very small. Just beyond them the "crunch, crunch" of the ponies' teeth as they tore at the sage, which was to be their only food for a long time to come, could be heard, and it really was a soothing sound in this sea of silence and mystery.

There was bacon, biscuit with honey, and tea for their midnight luncheon. Emma and Hippy were first to try the bacon, but no sooner did they taste of it than they began to choke and sputter.

"Awful! What stuff are you feeding me?" cried Emma.

"Yes, some one is trying to poison us," groaned Hippy.

"What's the matter?" grinned the guide.

"It is the most awful stuff I ever put in my mouth, so bitter I simply can't eat it," complained Emma.

Grace smiled. She had nibbled at a slice of bacon and knew instantly what caused its bitter taste.

"Alkali," the guide told them. "Everything you eat and drink out here will taste bitter, but time you will not notice the bitter taste."

Emma uttered a suppressed wail. There were complaints from each of the other girls, except Grace, who, though she disliked that bitter taste as much as did her companions, was too plucky to voice her dislike.

"You must make certain that your tents are cleared of tarantulas before you take off your shoes, folks. If you get out of bed in the night be certain to put your shoes on first so you do not step on one of the pesky fellows," warned the guide.

"Any other cheerful little features about this camp that you can think of?" asked Hippy solemnly.

"Plenty, but I'll tell you about them some other time, unless you discover them for yourselves before then."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"I wish to goodness that I had gone to the seashore where the worst that can happen to one is to be pinched by a crab or to drown in the surf," complained Emma.

A laugh cleared the atmosphere, and the girls, immediately after supper, prepared for bed, which they welcomed eagerly; and soon after that the camp settled down for the night, enveloped in deep and profound silence. A gentle breeze, sweetly cool after the burning heat of the day, crept in and lulled the tired Overlanders to sleep.

Now and then the silence was broken by the far off echoing scream of a prowling coyote or the distant hoot of an owl. But the Overlanders did not hear. They were sleeping soundly, storing up energy for the coming day, a day that was destined to be filled with hardships and excitement and peril for them.

CHAPTER VIII. CALLERS DROP IN

Heat waves were shimmering over the eastern horizon when the Overland girls awakened next morning. The guide had been up since daybreak fetching "bitter water," as the girls called it, and serving it to the ponies and burros.

"Whew!" exclaimed Elfreda. "This looks like a warm day."

"Regular Russian bath day," agreed Anne Nesbit.

"I fear we girls will not have any complexions left after this journey," added Nora Wingate. "I wonder if that husband of mine is still asleep?"

"Hippy is always sleeping when he isn't awake or eating," declared Emma ambiguously, causing a laugh at her expense.

"You folks made a mistake that time," chuckled Hippy from the adjoining tent.

"Everybody makes mistakes. That's why they put erasers on lead pencils," retorted Emma quickly.

"Good night!" they heard Hippy Wingate mutter, after which he relapsed into silence, while a shout of laughter greeted Emma's sal.

"Come, girls, turn out," urged Grace. "We have a day ahead of us."

Breakfast was ready when they emerged from their tents, and this time they ate without complaining of the bitter taste of food and water.

The sun came up while they were at breakfast, lighting up the cheerless landscape and whitening the sands. The mountain range where they first camped had disappeared in the distance and they were alone in the burning silence. Ahead, here and there, ugly buttes lay baking in the morning heat, some showing a variety of dazzling colors, others a dull leaden gray.

"How far do we go to-day, Hi?" questioned Lieutenant Wingate.

"Until we find water," was the brief, but significant reply.

After breakfast, and while Ping, singing happily, was striking camp and packing the equipment on the burros, Mr. Lang and Hippy brought in and saddled the ponies, turning each one over to its rider as it was made ready; then

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

the start was made. Hippy Wingate, the girls observed, held a small package under one arm, which he guarded so carefully that it aroused the curiosity of his companions, but Hippy merely grinned in response to their questioning.

As the sun rose higher the heat became well nigh unbearable to some of the party, and especially to Emma, if one were to judge by her bitter complaints. Emma declared that she never could live through it, and Grace began to have doubts herself with reference to her little friend.

As they progressed, the landscape grew more and more desolate and forbidding. Gaunt ravens soared staring over the wan plains, hairy tarantulas now and then hopped from the path of the ponies, and the "side-winder" the deadly horned rattlesnake, which gets its name from its peculiar side-long motion as it crawls across the burning sands squirmed out of the way, following snorts of fear from the ponies.

They halted at noon, for a rest and a light luncheon, near one of the barren buttes. Grace asked if it would not be possible to find a resting place on the butte where they might shade under a rock. Hi Lang shook his head.

"Too many snakes up there," he replied. "Dangerous!"

"Br r r r!" shivered Emma.

The water carried in canvas receptacles on the burros was apportioned among the horses and burros, but there was only a small quantity left for each animal, not more than a quart apiece. This, however, was enough to take the keen edge from their thirst.

Following the resumption of the journey, Hippy carefully unwrapped his package, eager eyes observing the operation. The girls gasped when he threw the wrapping paper away and revealed a dainty blue silk parasol, which he raised and held over his head.

"Every man his own shade tree," chuckled Hippy. "If any of you ladies find you are being overcome by the desert heat, you are at liberty to ride in the shadow cast by my Christmas tree."

"You are very considerate. We thank you," answered Anne.

"Selfish!" rebuked Emma.

Hi Lang laughed silently, but made no comment. Neither heat nor hardship appeared to affect him unpleasantly. Hi, Grace observed, appeared always to be in a listening attitude, as if he were expecting something or some one. Grace asked him why he did so, but the guide merely smiled and rode on with head slightly tilted to one side, listening, listening!

Early in the afternoon the guide began looking for water, now and then dismounting to search about for a tank, breaking in crusts of alkali, putting an ear to the ground to listen for the murmur of an underground stream, or feeling with his hands over several yards of hot sand in search of a cool spot that might indicate water.

"Nothing doing yet," he announced. "There ought to be a tank about five miles further on."

However, they had journeyed on ten miles more before a promising spot was reached, and the guide and Hippy began to dig for the precious water that Hi said surely was somewhere below them.

They found it finally, but there was so little of it that he was not certain that they would get enough for their ponies. There was but little water left in the canteens, none at all in the bags, and it became necessary to find a

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

supply sufficient for both ponies and riders.

"Every drop here is precious," warned the guide. "Be careful that you do not spill any."

Water was first carried to the ponies, small quantities being given to them as before, the girls assisting in the operation, and the supply was getting alarmingly low when Grace, returning from carrying a quart to Blackie, suddenly halted and gazed off across the desert.

A cloud of dust, that appeared to be approaching, had attracted her attention. The Overland girl wondered if it was a wind-squall, such as she had heard was quite common on the desert. After watching it for a few moments she decided to speak to the guide and call his attention to it.

"I see it. It's horses," said Elfreda, stepping up beside Grace.

"Do you think so?"

"I know it is."

"Then your eyes are better than mine," answered Grace. "I suppose it is some party headed for Elk Run. Mr. Lang!" she called.

"What is it?" demanded Hippy, who was standing over the hole in which the guide was working.

"A party of horsemen coming this way, sir!"

"You don't say! That's right, Hi," said Hippy, speaking to Mr. Lang. "Quite a bunch of them, too, I should say."

The guide's head appeared above the rim of the water hole and he gazed searchingly at the oncoming alkali cloud.

"Bunch of cowboys or wild horse hunters," he observed. "Anyway, we've got first claim on the water." Hi returned to his work and Hippy resumed passing water to the girls, but kept the approaching horsemen under observation, as did also Grace Harlowe.

"Those fellows are kicking up an awful lot of dust, it seems to me," observed Nora Wingate.

"Yes, I hope they slow down before passing us," answered Anne. "I have swallowed about all the dust to-day that I can digest."

Emma Dean, not to be outdone, declared that she too had swallowed a lot of dust so much of it that a good wind would blow her away and sift her over the desert.

"You surely would be the plaything of the winds in that event," murmured Anne.

"They are heading directly for the camp," Hippy was saying to Hi Lang, but the guide gave no heed. He wished to get all the water out of the tank that he possibly could before the party reached them, knowing very well that they, the newcomers, would also want water.

A few moments later the desert riders galloped up on foaming ponies. They were not a prepossessing looking lot, and the eight men of the party carried rifles in their saddle boots and revolvers on their hips.

"Water!" shouted the one who appeared to be the leader.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Here's water, old top, but pass it around. We haven't much, of the alkali beverage on hand this evening." Hippy handed up a partially filled bucket to one man and another to the rest until each man had been supplied.

"I'll take the buckets now," announced Hippy.

"Hey, you! Where you all headed for?" demanded Hi, straightening up and surveying the newcomers narrowly.

"Reckon we might ask the same question of you. Who's them gals?" questioned the leader.

"That is none of your business who they or we are!" retorted Hippy Wingate sternly.

"Say, you fellow! Looking for trouble?!" demanded Hi in an even voice.

"Pass that bucket to me!" commanded Hippy.

"Ye want thet bucket, hey?" leered the desert rider. Then, quick as a flash he emptied the contents of it over Lieutenant Wingate's head.

"Get ready for trouble," ordered Grace Harlowe sharply to Elfreda Briggs, at the same time raising her right hand above her head, a signal that Emma, Anne and Nora understood. It was the Overland Riders' signal of distress and meant that all hands should instantly prepare to defend themselves.

All the girls expected to see Hippy's revolver out of its holster after that insult. Instead, the desert rider was violently yanked from his saddle and stood on his head in the sand. So quick had Lieutenant Wingate been in unhorsing the man that the ugly visitor had not even time to draw his weapon.

Up to this juncture, Hi Lang had remained in the water hole, industriously dipping up water, at the same time keeping a wary eye on the progress of affairs above. He did not think best to take a hand until hostilities actually began, knowing that were he to spring out and draw his weapon, the desert riders would shoot before his revolver was out of its holster.

Peering out cautiously he saw that every man of the desert riders was resting a careless hand on the butt of his revolver. At the same time Hi observed something else in the opposite direction. Grace Harlowe and Elfreda Briggs had stepped up close to the water hole and each was standing with a hand on her hip.

The situation was resting on a hair trigger, and, even in the tenseness of the moment, Hi Lang found himself keenly interested in what he saw the Overland Riders in action.

The leader of the newcomers sprang to his feet raging. Hippy Wingate, now close to the man, pushed the flat of his hand against the fellow's face.

"Get off my desert, you imitation rough-neck," invited Hippy sweetly. In the same breath he added in a savage tone: "Keep your hand away from that gun!" emphasizing his command by thrusting the muzzle of his own revolver against the desert rider's stomach.

The visitor's back was toward his companions, so that they did not get the full import of what was taking place, but they looked their amazement when they saw their leader turn his back on Hippy. They did not know that he was doing this in obedience to Lieutenant Wingate's order, nor that the leader's revolver at that moment was in Hippy's hand, Hippy having slipped it from its holster while still pressing his own weapon against the man who had ducked him.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"I told you to get off my desert," said Hippy, incisively. "I've changed my mind. I'm going to kick you off!"

Lieutenant Wingate retreated a step, sprang clear of the ground, and with a kick that had sent many a ball over the goal, he kicked the desert leader into the water hole. Hi Lang was not so considerate. As the fellow scrambled to his feet, Hi laid him flat on his back with a blow between the eyes that instantly put the fellow to sleep.

The battle between the two parties of desert travelers was on in a second.

CHAPTER IX. PIRATES GET A HOT RECEPTION

The desert riders, who had been laughing over their leader's downfall after Hippy jerked him from his pony, suddenly awakened to a realization that the scene they had witnessed had ceased to become a joke.

The rider nearest to the water hole whipped out his revolver and fired, but the bullet went over Hippy's head for the very good reason that, expecting this very thing, he had ducked.

Hippy fired in return, hit the pony, and the rider tumbled off as the pony went down.

Hi Lang was out of the water hole in a twinkling.

"Keep your hands off your guns!" he shouted to the visitors, drawing his own weapon.

A bullet went through his hat. Another spun him around as it furrowed the fleshy part of his left arm, but the man who had fired the second shot got his reward in the next second. A bullet from Grace Harlowe's revolver went through his shoulder.

"Let them have it!" commanded Hi Lang. "They're out to do us!"

Two rifles, in the hands of Anne and Nora, banged from the tent in which they, with Emma Dean, were crouching, waiting for orders to take a hand in the battle. Bullets were flying rather thickly, but the desert riders' ponies, under the touching up they were getting from the revolvers of the defenders, were making careful shooting impossible for their riders. The defenders had the advantage of a steady footing under them, and they were shooting with extreme care, trying their best not to kill any one, but endeavoring to punish the attackers, and to keep themselves from getting killed.

The grilling fire was getting too hot for the desert ruffians, handy as they were with weapons and horses. Several, too, had been hit or unhorsed, though the Overland party did not really know how much damage they had done to the attackers.

"Shoot their ponies from under them!" commanded Hi Lang. "It's the only way."

"No, no! Please, not that," protested Grace. "The ponies haven't harmed us."

The guide shrugged his shoulders and, taking quick aim at a rider who was jerking his rifle from the saddle boot, shot the fellow out of his saddle.

Hi Lang's next shot downed a pony, its rider being thrown heavily to the ground, where he lay stunned from the fall. Four men were now down and a fifth, the leader of the party of ruffians, was still in the water tank where Lieutenant Wingate had kicked him and where the guide had then put him to sleep. The leader had long since recovered consciousness, but, being unarmed, he wisely decided to remain where he was, knowing very well that,

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

were he to try to reach his companions or his mount, he would be shot down.

There were now only three mounted men of the attacking party left and these suddenly began galloping away from the water hole.

"Rifles!" called Hi.

Grace and Elfreda sped to their tent and quickly returned carrying four rifles and ammunition. The guide had instantly divined the purpose of the attackers in drawing off. They wished to get out of revolver range of the Overlanders and then use their rifles on them, but by the time the desert ruffians turned, facing the scene of their late battle, Hi, Hippy, Grace and Elfreda were shooting steadily with their rifles, pouring a hot fire into them.

One ruffian was seen to sway in his saddle and pitch to the ground. One of his companions gathered him up, then, with the wounded man across a saddle, the two remaining bandits galloped away, leaving their fellows to whatever fate might be in store for them.

"Cowards!" growled Hippy Wingate.

"No. Common prudence," answered the guide. "Help me get the fellows who are down. Look out that they aren't playing possum. Keep your gun in your hand and watch them. Mrs. Gray, will you follow a short distance behind us, so that you may have all the wounded men under observation?"

"Yes, Mr. Lang."

"If you see a suspicious move from any of them, shoot!"

"Yes, sir. Come along, Elfreda, your services probably will be needed. Mr. Lang, you were hit. May we not do something for you first?"

The guide shook his head and strode over to the water hole, into which he peered.

"You stay where you are!" he commanded sternly, to which there was no reply from the leader of the ruffians, who sat scowling up at him. "Mrs. Nesbit! Watch that fellow and if he tries to get out, drill him! He isn't fit to live anyway."

The two men, with Grace and Elfreda following, went out to disarm and examine the men who had been downed. They found that two had merely been stunned by falls, two others having been wounded in shoulders and arms, with numerous bullet holes through their clothing.

Elfreda examined their wounds and announced that none was seriously hurt, but that the men ought to be taken where they could have proper attention. Hi Lang laughed.

"Fiddlesticks!" he scoffed. "The only way you can kill this sort of critter is to kill 'em. We'll fix 'em up and send 'em on. The ones who got away will be waiting for 'em, so don't worry about that."

"I shall dress their wounds and give them whatever further attention I can before you send them away, Mr. Lang," replied Elfreda firmly.

Grace nodded her approval.

"Lieutenant, help me carry them in. It is wise to keep them well bunched, you know," advised the guide.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

While he and Hippy were doing this, Grace watched the other men. Elfreda returned to camp with the first ruffian, and there dressed his wounds, gave the man water and made him as comfortable as possible. She treated the second wounded man with similar consideration.

"I do not see that there is anything at all the matter with these men," announced Elfreda after examining those who had been stunned by falls. "They should be able to take their wounded companions back with them. Are there enough ponies left to carry all?"

"I reckon. They're out yonder browsing on the sage. I'll catch them up and stake them down here. When you say the word, we will start these critters off, and good riddance it will be."

Just before dark Elfreda "discharged" her patients, as she expressed it, and they were led to their ponies, assisted to mount, and told to get out as fast as horseflesh would carry them. Not a word of information had the guide been able to get from any of them, not even their names nor why they were on the desert.

"I've seen that cayuse before," declared Hi, referring to the leader, and regarding the rapidly disappearing horsemen with a deep frown on his face. "I can't remember where, but one of these days I'll think of it. Too bad we can't turn them over to a sheriff, but we're too far out to go back now."

"That gang was looking for trouble when they rode up," averred Hippy.

"Yes, I reckon they were after us. Somebody sent them after us, too. Got any ideas on the subject, Mrs. Gray?"

"No, sir. I am thinking of you at the moment. Where were you hit?"

"Shoulder."

"Oh! Why didn't you say so?" cried Elfreda. "Here we have been wasting time on those ruffians and neglecting you. I'll have a look, if you please. Which shoulder?"

"Left. Nothing much, I reckon."

Elfreda bared the guide's shoulder and peered at the wound. She saw that it was merely a superficial flesh wound, but that unless it had attention it might prove to be more serious.

With skillful fingers Miss Briggs bathed the wound and dressed it, Hi Lang observing the professional manner in which she went about her work and nodding reflectively.

"Doctor?" he asked.

"No, lawyer," replied Elfreda with equal brevity.

"Huh!" grunted the guide.

"Were you hit anywhere else?"

"A few scratches, that's all."

Miss Briggs demanded that he show her, which he did. Both lower limbs were, as he had told her, scratched by bullets that had grazed them, and these surface wounds she also dressed.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Anyone else needing surgical attention?" she demanded, smiling at her companions, shook their heads. "Grace Harlowe, how is it that you were not shot? I am amazed. You must have been in the water hole too, hiding from those ruffians."

"Mrs. Gray isn't of the hiding sort," spoke up Hi. "Reckon we better have supper and get set for the night," he said, turning abruptly toward the south and gazing off over the desert.

"Do do you think those men will come back to-night?" questioned Emma, half fearfully.

The guide shook his head.

"Not to-night. We'll probably meet up with them again one of these days, and I hope we do," he replied, looking thoughtfully up at the sky. His survey took in all quarters of the compass, and when he turned to the Overlanders again, Grace thought he looked a little disturbed.

"What is it, Mr. Lang?" she asked.

"I reckon it's the desert this time," he replied.

"A storm?"

"Yes."

"Rain?" questioned Grace innocently.

The guide grinned. "Nothing like that in these parts. Wind, Mrs. Gray. I reckon you'll meet one enemy that you can't drive off, before this night comes to an end. We better have chow now, then make the camp as secure as possible. Shall you tell the others?" he asked, nodding toward the Overland girls, who, after their exciting battle, were chattering and laughing as they assisted Ping Wing to prepare the supper.

"Yes. After we eat. They should know," replied Grace. "You see they are not at all upset over what occurred."

By the time they had finished supper, which had been eaten amid much teasing and laughter, some one discovered that the stars, before so near and brilliant, were now only faintly discernible, a veil of thin mist having intervened between them and the baking desert.

Elfreda Briggs regarded the overcast sky for a moment, then turned inquiringly to the guide.

"Fog?" she asked.

"No. Bad storm. Better go to bed with your clothes on to-night," advised the guide.

"Is it so serious as that, Mr. Lang?"

"It may be. Nobody can figure on anything on this desert storms, water, everything here is as contrary as an outlaw bronco. Better turn in soon and have the others do the same, for you may not have long to sleep to-night."

"I would suggest that you do the same," advised Elfreda. "You need sleep and rest even more than we do. I hear Mrs. Gray telling our friends to prepare for bad weather, so I will run along and listen. Good-night, Mr. Lang."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

The Overland girls, requested by Grace to turn in, after being told that a storm was in prospect, did so, but Hippy still remained up talking with Ping, who was scouring the cooking equipment and carefully stowing it in the packs so that it might all be in one place in the event that the storm was a severe one. Ping Wing had had experience with desert wind storms; he had learned to respect their tremendous force, and he too had read the danger signs in the heavens that night.

The guide being nowhere in sight, Hippy finally crawled into his tent and lay down with his clothes on, first, however, placing his revolver where it might be quickly reached in an emergency, but there was to be no use for his weapon that night. The enemy that he was to face later on would be proof against bullets, an enemy that no human courage, skill or ingenuity could stay.

Out by the water hole, Hi Lang sat keeping silent vigil, narrowly watching those film-mists overhead, his nerves on the alert to catch the first cooling breath, which he knew from past experience would be the vanguard of what he fully expected was in store for them.

CHAPTER X. WHEN THE BLOW FELL

A faint, cooling breath, wafted across the desert, fanned the cheek of Hi Lang. He inhaled deeply of it, not once, but several times.

"It is here!" he muttered, "I hope it may be a light one." Saying which the guide rose and walked briskly to the ponies' tethering ground. The animals were restive, they were stepping from side to side and an occasional snort was heard, but they quieted down when he went among them and spoke soothing words, petting an animal here, restaking another one there until he had spoken to each bronco in the outfit.

The guide's next move was to step to Hippy's tent and awaken him.

"What is it? Have the desert pirates returned?" questioned Hippy, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"No! Something worse is coming. Do not awaken the young ladies just yet. Come out I will show you a great sight."

Hippy sprang up and followed the guide. Hi paused by the embers of the camp fire long enough to stamp them out.

"So they do not blow about and set our equipment on fire," he explained.

"Where's the sight?" demanded the lieutenant.

"Look yonder!" directed Hi, pointing toward the western horizon.

The mist had disappeared from the sky like magic and the stars once more shone out with all their former brilliancy. Off to the westward, however, there were no stars to be seen. In their place, stretched clear across the horizon, lay a cloud, black as ink.

"Watch the upper edge of the cloud," said the guide in a low tone.

"It is rolling like the surf," exclaimed Hippy.

"Yes, and in that cloud are tons upon tons of sand that the cloud is carrying along with it. We'll lose a stretch of

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

our desert here in a few moments."

"Is there nothing that we can do to protect ourselves, Hi?"

"Not a thing. The equipment has been securely packed. I had Ping put the rifles in a sack and stand them upright in a hole in the ground so we may find them after the storm. Without weapons we should be in a bad way, especially if our friends, the pirates, return, but I reckon that what's left of that crowd will be pretty well sanded. This storm is going to pile right up on the range that we left behind us."

A distant, menacing roar now became audible to the two men, such a roar as one can hear by placing an ear to the opening of a conch shell, but magnified perhaps a million times.

The cool breeze, that had shortly before warned Hi Lang, now became a chill blast, moderate, but plainly thrust ahead by a mighty force behind it.

"Good night!" exclaimed Lieutenant Wingate. "That breeze must have been born up in Iceland. Talk about your heat on the desert! Perhaps we shall have some cool weather here after the storm passes."

Hi Lang laughed.

"Don't fool yourself, Lieutenant. It will be hotter than ever to-morrow, blistering, sizzling hot; and the water courses probably will dive deeper into the earth and give us no end of trouble to find them. I –"

"It is coming, isn't it?" questioned Graces who had been awakened by the breeze and had come up behind Hippy and Mr. Lang without their hearing her.

"It's well on the way, Mrs. Gray. Perhaps it might be well to awaken the young ladies. Knock down your tents and sit on them or you won't have any tents left. Reckon we'd better do the same, Lieutenant."

It was plain that the storm soon would be upon them and all haste was made to prepare for the blow. The tents were laid flat, weighted with such equipment as might be expected to hold them there, and the Overland Riders stood or crouched a little fearful in this new mystery of the desert.

"Getting closer!" announced the guide.

"What shall we do?" asked Hippy.

"Lie down when you can no longer stand up, and take pot luck."

"Any orders, Mr. Lang?" called Grace Harlowe.

"Yes. Lie down facing the storm and wind your blankets about you. Be sure to keep your heads covered. If you find that the sand is piling up on your backs, shake it off."

"If you get buried perhaps you may find a tank down there," suggested Hippy, but no one laughed at his sally. "There goes that crazy Chinaman again. I hope he chokes."

"He will if he keeps his mouth open much longer."

Ping had broken out in song, which the wind was not yet strong enough to smother.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Sometim' you look—see piece sand he walkee mountain high, Jist t'hen wind knock top—side off an' blow 'um up to sky. Jist so my heart walk up inside befo' he sinkee down "

That was the last heard of Ping Wing for some time, the concluding words of his song having been lost in a burst of wind that drowned out every other sound.

"Down! Everybody down!" yelled the guide just before the blast struck them.

The sandstorm swooped down on them suddenly, bringing with it black night, a roaring, booming, hideous thing. Sand rained on the blankets, covering the girls of the Overland Riders, and now and then some heavier object, they knew not what, struck one or more of them, adding to the terror of the moment.

Emma Dean struggled and moaned in her fright. Her blanket, loosened by her movements, was whisked into the air and out of sight in a twinkling. She screamed for help, but no one heard her, and Emma threw herself down in the sand, or was blown over when she struggled to a sitting position. There she lay, her face buried in the sand, sobbing and moaning.

Not a sound had been uttered by any of the other girls. They were listening, listening, wondering how much longer they would be able to endure the terrific strain under which they were laboring.

Such wind no person there, except Hi Lang, had ever dreamed could be possible. Grace found herself wondering if the Arabian simoon, of which she had read, could possibly be deadlier. She doubted it.

By now the girls were fighting to keep from being buried alive, and in their choking, suffocating condition they tried to sit up for air. All lost their blankets instantly. The sand beat on their faces and heads like sharp—pointed tiny hailstones. Their eyes were blinded by it, and their bodies burned as if they had been rubbed with sandpaper, but there was nothing that could be done to relieve their suffering because no person could stand up against the mighty force of the wind.

The storm, it seemed to them, lasted for hours, though as a matter of fact it had blown itself out within fifteen minutes from the time it struck them.

"Backbone of the storm is broken," yelled the guide in Hippy's ear, both being under the same blanket.

"So is mine," Hippy howled back. "There's a ton of sand, if there is a pound on it, this very minute. Hope the girls are safe. Can we get out?"

"No. The wind is too strong. It will die out in a few moments. I'll go out the minute I can crawl."

The men waited several minutes, during which the gale was steadily decreasing. The guide finally poked his head from under the blanket, shading his eyes with a hand to keep the blowing sand out, before opening them.

"Cover your eyes and come on," he said, crawling out and starting to beat his way against the gale toward the spot where the Overland girls were supposed to be.

They were huddled together, with their arms about each other to keep from being blown away, every head resting on an arm as they lay face down on the ground.

"Stand up, but protect your eyes," shouted Hi. "Gale's almost over and done for."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"So o o are we," gasped Grace, staggering to her feet, and almost instantly landing on her back on the ground where the wind had hurled her.

Hi assisted her to her feet, Grace laughing and choking at the same time. The others, in turn, were lifted up by Hi and Hippy, all leaning against the wind, clinging to each other, and, with handkerchiefs in their mouths, breathing what air they could get in this way without taking in any more sand than they could help.

The wind stopped with a suddenness that left every one of the party unprepared. The result was that they fell forward on their faces, and for a few moments there was a mixup that, in ordinary circumstances, would have brought merry peals of laughter, but there was no laughter this time.

The eyes of the Overland Riders were so filled with sand that they were too blinded to see the stars that once more were shining "just above them."

"Wet your handkerchiefs with water from your canteens and wipe your eyes," suggested Grace.

"Go easy on the water," commanded the guide. "Let's see where we are at before we use water."

"You are right, sir. I had not thought of that," agreed Grace.

"Our buckets are full, aren't they?" questioned Anne.

"Yes of sand," spoke up Elfreda.

"The first thing to do is to settle the water question. Ping!"

Ping Wing came running up, his white suit the color of the landscape, for Ping had been rolled in the sand to his utter undoing.

"Go see how many horses we have left."

"Me savvy. Tlee."

"Three? That is better than I hoped for," chuckled the guide. "With three we can reasonably look forward to finding the others somewhere on the desert, but we can't do much to improve our situation until daylight. No use to search for our equipment before then. I will look into the water question, however, right now."

"This is the most violent landscape that it has ever been my misfortune to gaze upon," declared Elfreda Briggs, tossing her fallen hair up and down to shake the sand out of it, a proceeding that was followed by each of the girls.

"At least we have one thing to be thankful for," observed Anne. "I thank my stars that it is so dark that we cannot see how really tough we do look."

"If I look as bad as I feel I must be a terrible sight," wailed Emma. "Here comes Hi. Have we water?"

"Not a drop except what you have in your canteens. The water hole is buried so deep that we have lost it. Guard every drop. We are in a serious situation."

CHAPTER XI. FACING A NEW PERIL

"Aren't the water bags safe?" asked Hippy.

"They're gone," said the guide.

"Everything but the sand seems to be gone," observed Miss Briggs. "I suppose we should thank the kind fates that we still have plenty of sand."

"Plenty of some things is too much," declared Nora Wingate. "Hippy, my darlin', you weren't hurt, were you?"

"Yes, I was killed, but I have come to life again. Hi, what is the next thing to be done?"

"Kill time until daylight!"

That was practically what the Overland Riders did, but with the first streaks of dawn the barren spot assumed an appearance of activity.

"Lieutenant, we'll go out and look for the horses," announced the guide.

"Is Blackie still here?" questioned Grace.

"No, but there are three ponies left, as you know. Wish to go along?"

"Yes."

Ping was directed what to do, and Miss Briggs was left to see that the orders of the guide were carried out during his absence. Hi, Hippy and Grace then mounted the remaining ponies and started away, working back toward the range that they had left two days before. The wind had blown in that direction and it was reasonable to suppose that the lost animals had been driven before it.

"Spread out, but keep within sight of the lieutenant, who will be middle man," directed the guide.

When they had finally taken up their positions, some three miles separated Grace Harlowe and the guide, with Hippy a mile and a half from each of the two outside riders.

The sun was not yet up, and the morning, while not uncomfortable, gave promise of what Hi Lang had said it would be a sizzler.

The three had ridden for a full hour, when off to her right Grace discovered what she thought was one of their ponies. Urging her mount forward, she galloped rapidly in that direction, but after riding for some time she was amazed to find that the animal seemed to be as far away as when she had started toward him.

"I hope to goodness the pony I see isn't a desert mirage," muttered Grace. "Mirage or no mirage I am going to run it to earth."

She galloped on at a more rapid pace, but it was a long time, it seemed to Grace, before she saw that she really was nearing the little animal, who was browsing on desert sage, or what few scraps of it remained after the storm.

Hoping fervently that it was her own little spirited Blackie, Grace urged her mount forward at a lively clip and

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

bore down on the bronco who began edging off when he saw her heading for him.

"It's Elfreda's pony!" cried Grace. "Here, boy; here, boy!" she called.

The "lost" animal kicked up its heels and started away at a gallop, with Grace Harlowe in full pursuit.

"How provoking!" cried Grace as the bronco kept galloping from her with aggravating persistence. The Overland girl rode and coaxed until she tired of it, then, touching her mount lightly with the crop, she dashed straight for the tantalizing roamer.

It was a race for a little while, the runners steadily drawing away from Hippy Wingate and Hi Lang, but to this Grace gave no thought. Once she nearly got her hand on the bridle of Elfreda's mount, but the little fellow dodged her at the critical moment.

"Oh, for a rope and the skill to throw it. I'll learn to throw a lasso at once. I see it is necessary out here. Whoa, boy!" she commanded sharply.

The runaway bronco stopped short, and, with feet spread apart, stood gazing at her as if daring the Overland girl to come and catch him. Grace decided to try new tactics. Dismounting, and slipping her bridle rein over one arm, she walked slowly toward the animal, plucking a bunch of sage as she went, and holding it out toward him.

The pony looked interested, his ears sloped forward and he took a step or two towards her. Grace walked up to him confidently, gave him the handful of sage and, after petting him, grasped the lead rope and then the bridle.

"All of which goes to prove the assertion that it is easier to catch flies with molasses than with vinegar. Now be a good boy, and we will jog back home to Elfreda," she soothed to the captured pony.

Mounting, and attaching the end of the lead rope to the pommel of her saddle, Grace started for camp. At least she thought that was what she did. Instead she was headed for the range of mountains on which they had first made camp. After a little the Overland Rider came to a realization that the guide and Hippy were nowhere in sight. Still, she was not greatly disturbed, but she was thirsty. A few drops of water from her canteen was all that she dared allow herself.

Grace had been traveling for the better part of an hour, from time to time glancing up at the glaring sun that was just rising, when she suddenly brought her pony up short.

"Do you think you can find the way back if I give you the rein?" she asked, petting her mount.

The pony pawed the dirt and whinnied, but his rider knew that it was because he too was thirsty, instead of being an answer to her question.

Grace paused to reflect over her situation, to consider what was the wise thing to do, finally deciding that she would follow her trail back to the spot at which she captured the pony.

"From there it should be easy for me to find my original trail; then all I shall have to do will be to follow it to the camp. We must go back," decided Grace, turning about and starting away at a trot, finding no difficulty in making out the tracks of the two ponies.

The spot at which she had found the lost bronco was reached at last. Grace sat for some moments, staring at the landscape, turning in her saddle until she had looked all the way around the compass, then, clucking to the two animals, trotted away, following her original trail.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

As she progressed, the trail grew fainter, a desert breeze having almost obliterated the tracks her pony made on the way out with Hi Lang and Hippy Wingate. To make certain that she was on the right road, Grace got down and compared her mount's footprints with those that she was following.

"Yes, I am positive that I am right," she decided and once more set out. "Hark!" she exclaimed sharply.

Three faraway shots had been fired. Grace waited, and in a few moments the shots were repeated. She raised her revolver and fired three signal shots in return. She did this twice, then reloaded and thrust the revolver into its holster.

"It is doubtful if my shots can be heard, but I have the satisfaction of knowing that some one probably is out looking for me. We'll go in under our own power. They shan't say that we could not find our way home in broad daylight."

The rifle signal shots were repeated shortly after Grace got started again. She answered them, but was unable to tell from which direction the signals had come, though the shots sounded off to the right of her, but she decided to continue on in the direction she had chosen however, believing that she was headed towards the camp.

It was nearly noon when Grace discovered a horseman far to the right. He was too far away to be recognized, and, evidently, he had not seen her.

The Overland girl fired three shots into the air, which were answered by a similar signal, then the distant rider was seen to turn and gallop towards her. Grace headed for him, riding more slowly than she had been doing, and finally discovering that the horseman was Hi Lang.

Despite the confidence that Grace had felt in her ability to find her way in, she experienced a sense of relief. Now he would compliment her on her ability to find her way on a trackless waste such as this.

"Where have you been?" shouted Hi when near enough to make his voice heard.

"I went after Miss Briggs' pony, then got on the wrong trail, if there be such a thing as a trail on this landscape," answered Grace.

"We've been worrying about you. Did you get lost?"

"Well, not exactly. I was puzzled at first, but I was following my trail back towards the camp when you discovered me, or when I discovered you, to be exact."

"Hm m m m!" mused the guide. "Do you know where you were headed for when I first saw you?"

"Why, yes. I told you. For the camp, was I not?"

Hi shook his head.

"If your canteen and rations had held out, and you'd kept on going the way you were headed, eventually you would have landed in Death Valley," the guide informed her.

"But I followed the tracks left by the pony I was riding," she protested.

"I reckon you followed some other pony's tracks, for I was on the trail of the bronc' you are riding."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Mr. Lang, as a plainswoman I fear I am a miserable failure," complained the Overland girl.

"On the contrary you are very much of a success. You did not get panic-stricken when you found you had lost us, but you used your head. You found and followed a trail that would have fooled me as it did you."

"Thank you! How many of the ponies did you find?"

"All of 'em, lacking the one you have here; also found one that didn't belong to us. We sent him adrift."

"Oh, I am so glad. Then you have Blackie."

"Yes. Let's be going. Things at the camp are not very encouraging. Much of the equipment has been blown away or buried, but that isn't the worst of the situation."

"You mean water?" questioned Grace, regarding him inquiringly.

"Yes. We haven't been able to locate a tank to-day, and there isn't more than a quart altogether left in the canteens."

"What are we to do now?" asked Grace.

"We've got to pull up stakes and move. All hands must search for water search until water is found, and keep moving forward at the same time. If we don't find it by night –" The guide shrugged his shoulders and clucked to his pony. Grace, her face reflecting the concern she felt, followed at a gallop and they were soon raising a cloud of dust on the baking desert.

CHAPTER XII. A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT

A wan and considerably mussed up party of girls met Grace and the guide when the two rode into what was left of their camp.

"Well, here we are at last," cried Grace cheerily.

"We thought you were lost. How could you have missed such an opportunity?" wondered Miss Briggs.

"I did not miss it, Elfreda dear. I got beautifully lost and didn't know it. Most persons when they get lost are very much alive to the fact, but I traveled on in blissful ignorance of the fact that I was headed straight for Death Valley."

"I wish you wouldn't talk about it. Death Valley reminds me of the experience we had last night," complained Emma.

"Oh, then you have been to Death Valley?" questioned Anne.

"No, I said I mean I said I mean I meant to have said that –"

"Let it go at that. You will get tongue-tied. if you keep on," warned Hippy Wingate. "We have something more serious on hand than to listen to your "

"Yes, girls," interrupted Grace. "Mr. Lang tells me that we MUST move on immediately, that we MUST find

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

water, and that, too, without delay. What shape are we in with regard to equipment?"

"We have our tents," answered Elfreda.

"Some cooking utensils, and our food, which Ping had the foresight to take to bed with him," said Anne Nesbit whimsically.

"Were the rifles saved?"

"All secure, and the ammunition too," replied Lieutenant Wingate. "I believe that a few blankets were blown away and lost, together with numerous odds and ends that weren't nailed down. What could you expect with a wind strong enough to blow our horses far out on the desert. Got any water?"

"I have some. Do you mean to tell me, Hippy Wingate, that an old campaigner like yourself has drunk up all the water he had in his canteen, and in the face of a great drouth?" demanded Grace, trying hard not to smile.

"Every last drop of it," admitted Hippy. "But what's a fellow to do when he is thirsty and his throat is cracking open?"

"Use the precious stuff sparingly. Here! Take a sip from my canteen. Only a sip, Lieutenant."

With the eyes of the entire party on him, Hippy dared not take more than enough water to moisten his throat. Grace then took the canteen from him, passing it to Emma.

"The same holds good for you, Emma," she said, "Take a sip and pass it along. What water is there may have to be our only supply all the rest of the afternoon."

"That's right, Mrs. Gray," spoke up Hi Lang. "Ping!"

"Les?"

"Are you all packed and ready?"

"Me belongee chop-chop," answered Ping, meaning that he was ready to move.

"Follow along behind us, but make those lazy burros keep close up. We don't want to lose you and have to look all over the desert for you. Now, folks, please listen carefully to what I have to say. While I do not wish to alarm you, it is well that you thoroughly understand what our situation is. We must find water. You will all spread out with an interval of a hundred yards, say, between ponies, and scrutinize every foot of ground on either side."

"Who goes where?" interrupted Emma.

"Please be quiet," rebuked Grace.

"I am coming to that," resumed the guide. "Two things I wish you to look for, alkali crusts that may cover a tank, and discolorations on the desert. That is, if you find a spot darker than the prevailing color of the ground, that discoloration may be the result of moisture. Do you get me?"

"Yes," answered the Overlanders in chorus.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"In the event of such a discovery, shout, or if I am too far away to hear your voice, fire one shot into the air. About the crusts that I spoke of, when you find one, hop off and break it in. You probably will not see water, even though it is there, but, after you have broken open the crust, thrust your head into the opening and sniff the air."

"What we need is a thirsty bird dog in this outfit," observed Hippy, without the suggestion of a smile on his face.

Hi Lang permitted himself a brief silent laugh.

"What are we to sniff for?" questioned Emma in all seriousness.

"For a damp odor. The air under the crust, too, will be perhaps a degree cooler than the outer air. If it is a dry tank you will get a dry, earthy odor that you cannot mistake. The one who finds water will, as I have suggested, shout or shoot. The others will hold their positions until I have investigated.

"Another thing. Ponies familiar with desert conditions, as most of ours are, sometimes can smell water when they can't see it. If one of your animals suddenly bolts in a direction that you think he should not go, give him his head for a little way. He may lead you to water."

"Why didn't I think to put a divining rod in my pocket?" chuckled Hippy.

"You brought a sweet little parasol, that blew away on the wings of the storm," reminded Nora. "Why didn't you bring something useful while you were about it?"

"Nora darling, didn't I bring you along? What, tell me, could be more useful to this outfit than your own beautiful little self?"

"Go on, go on with ye! If there were a Blarney Stone here I'd throw it at ye!" rebuked Nora, laughing in spite of her effort to be stern, joined in her merriment by the other girls of the outfit.

"Take your positions!" ordered the guide. "The lieutenant will take the center. To the right, Miss Dean, Miss Briggs. Left, Mrs. Nesbit, Mrs. Wingate and Mrs. Gray. I will take the extreme right. You, Mrs. Gray, will look after the extreme left. Keep your formation as well as you can so that we do not straggle too much. All ready!"

The Overland Riders swung themselves to their saddles and moved to the positions assigned to them, then started away, walking their ponies. Their line looked like a troop of cavalry going into action, except that the horses moved listlessly.

Emma found the first alkali tank, and getting off, broke the crust and thrust her head in the opening.

"What do you find?" called Hippy.

"Ugh! It smells like a rummage sale," answered Miss Dean.

"Dry!" announced Hippy. "Move along."

All along the line the girls were trying to make merry, trying to forget the terrible heat, a deadly burning heat, but their efforts in this direction were not very successful.

Heat waves shimmered over the white sands of the desert with not a breath of air stirring to relieve the deadly monotony. It did not seem possible to Elfreda Briggs that human beings long could endure such heat, and she wondered at the cheerfulness of her companions.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Hi Lang rode around behind the line of riders to see what it was that Emma Dean had discovered, but he paused at the dry water hole for but a moment, then hurried back to his position. Now and then one of the riders would dismount and examine a patch of ground, only to meet with disappointment.

They had come up to a vast cup-like depression in the desert, white with the alkali crust that covered its bottom, when Hi fired a signal shot to indicate that they were to halt for a rest

"What is that big hole?" called Lieutenant Wingate.

"A prehistoric lake, in whose alkaline dust no plant, not even sage-brush, can grow, and upon which a puddle of rainwater becomes an almost deadly poison. This is one of the most thoroughly hated spots on the desert, hated and shunned by most of those who travel this way."

"Is there not water under the crust at the bottom?" asked Miss Dean.

"Not a drop. There probably has not been in centuries. No water is known to have been found within a few miles of this spot either, but, as I have said, one never knows, and the traveler must take nothing for granted."

"Fine place for a summer outing," observed Hippy.

"Probably there is on all the globe no other spot more forbidding, more desolate, more deadly," added the guide. "We must be going. Move on!"

All that afternoon the Overland Riders plodded wearily along, now and then hopes suddenly raised being dashed to earth by dry water holes. At the next halt, Hi passed along the line, giving each rider a sip of water from the slender supply in his canteen, Grace smilingly declining to drink.

"Have you any left in your canteen?" he asked.

"A few drops, but I am saving them until I am thirsty. I have been sucking the cork for the last hour." Grace then asked about the dry lake, and the guide repeated what he had said to Emma and Hippy.

"How are the girls standing the strain?" she questioned.

"Very well indeed. I hope they hold out as well until we find water."

"Now that there is no one but ourselves present, please tell me what the prospects are?" requested Grace.

"I can't, Mrs. Gray, for the very good reason that I don't know. Of course water we must have or we shall perish, and so will the ponies. As a last resort we can head for the nearest mountain range, but it would take us nearly two days to make it with ponies and riders in good working condition."

"Then the situation really is serious!" asked Grace.

"No, not yet, but we are on the verge of a serious situation. Yes, that about expresses it. However, I have hopes that we may find a tank about ten miles from here, one that I have never failed to find some water in, though at times it has been a mighty slow process to get it. I must get to the other end of the line now. Good luck."

Several tanks were found during the next few hours, but not a drop of water in any of them. It fell to Emma Dean to make a discovery, however, that thrilled all within sound of her voice.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Water!" she screamed. "Water!"

"I believe you are right. Hooray!" shouted Hippy Wingate.

"I know I am. It's a lake, a lake full of beautiful blue water!" cried Emma. "Quick! Shoot to let the others know."

Instead of the agreed-upon single shot as the signal that water had been found, Hippy Wingate emptied his revolver into the air, then, urging on his weary pony, rode on ahead, with Emma following, shouting and urging her pony to go faster that she and Hippy might reach the precious water ahead of the others. Even Hippy was excited at the sight that had burst so unexpectedly on his smarting eyes, for there, a mile or so ahead, surely was a body of water that the guide himself had not known of or he surely would have told them.

Attracted by the shots, Hi Lang looked, first in the direction from which the shots had come, then off across the desert. What he saw led him to head towards Hippy and Emma, who themselves were traveling as fast as they could make their ponies go.

Some of the other Overland Riders had followed Emma and Hippy, they too having discovered the blue lake in the near distance.

The guide fired into the air, to recall the excited riders, but they gave no heed to his signal.

"Stop!" he shouted when near enough to make himself heard. "Stop, I say! You'll run your ponies to death."

"Water! Don't you see it?" cried Emma.

"No! That isn't water. Stop, I say!"

"The heat has gone to Hi's head," laughingly confided Hippy to Emma. "All right, old man, just trail along behind us and we'll show you," he flung back.

"Stop, Lieutenant! Listen to reason, won't you? What you see is a desert mirage. There isn't a lake within a hundred miles of us."

Hippy Wingate brought his pony to a slow stop, and Emma, who had heard, stopped about the same time.

"Mirage?" wondered Hippy stupidly.

"M m mister Lang, do do you mean that what we see isn't water at all?"

"It's a mirage, I tell you. Get back to your positions!"

CHAPTER XIII. A STARTLING ALARM

Elfreda Briggs and Grace Harlowe did not give way to the panic that had seized their companions. Both had seen the mirage, each knew instinctively what it was, but when they saw Hi Lang overhaul the two leaders, Grace and Elfreda hurried in from their positions and joined their companions.

"Grace! Oh, Grace," moaned Emma as her friend rode up to them. "Give me water or I shall die."

"Have courage, Emma dear. We are all suffering from thirst. Hand me your cup and I will give you a swallow. I

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

don't dare trust you with the canteen."

Grace poured out about a tablespoonful of water, which Emma drank in one choking gulp. Each of the others got about the same quantity, but it was not much of a relief.

"Shall I return to my position now, sir?" questioned Grace of the guide. "Yes, please. I have told the others to do so at once. Hereafter, in no circumstances are you people to run away as you did just now. We must go on as rapidly as is consistent, until dark. I wish to reach a certain point before we stop for the night. We may find some relief there unless the storm has buried everything so deep that we cannot find the place," said Hi Lang.

"Do you mean water?" asked Elfreda.

"I am in hopes that it may be so, Miss Briggs."

"Alors! Let's go!"

The party broke up at once and rode to their positions, Emma Dean, red of face, her hair down her back, tear drops still trickling down her cheeks, leaving little furrows behind them, summoning all her courage and doing her best to regain control of herself.

The mirage had disappeared by the time the start was made, and did not appear again to tantalize the suffering Overland Riders. All the rest of the afternoon, eager eyes, reddened by the glare of the sun on the white desert, sought for water holes. None were found, not even dry tanks, but when darkness settled over the desert a faint breeze sprung up. They drank it in eagerly, taking long, deep breaths and uttering sighs of satisfaction.

Hi called the party together with a signal shot.

"How long before we make camp?" called Grace as she rode up.

"About five miles if my reckoning is right," answered the guide. "No need to look for water holes now that it is dark. We shan't find any unless we accidentally fall into one."

"You are about the most cheerful prophet I've ever known," declared Lieutenant Wingate. "Glad you weren't with us in the war."

"At least, Mr. Lang has made good all his forecasts. You must admit that," reminded Miss Briggs.

"He has, bad luck to him!" growled Hippy, which brought a grin to the thin, bronzed face of the desert guide.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Hi finally ordered a halt. The Riders, upon looking about them, observed that there was considerable vegetation there, sage, cactus, dwarfed trees and shrubbery, scattered, twisted, misshapen things, all of them.

"Turn the ponies loose immediately," directed the guide. "They will get a little moisture from the green stuff. Never mind staking down. They will not run away. Ping, start a fire and cook something. Sorry, folks, but it will have to be a dry supper this time."

"Where is that relief you were promising us a century or so ago?" demanded Nora Wingate.

"Yes, Mr. Lang. We have been patient and borne our thirst uncomplainingly. Now, we MUST have relief. I don't want a dry supper, I want water!" cried Emma.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Anne said she feared that she too had about reached her limit.

"Be patient, girls. Mr. Lang is doing the best he can," urged Grace.

"Yes, don't we know that?" agreed Miss Briggs. "He is splendid. I hope these unsolicited compliments do not turn your head, Mr. Lang," teased Elfreda.

The guide laughed silently.

"Come with me. We can pitch our tents later on," he directed, striding away. He led them through mesquite bushes, finally halting before a patch of odd, pumpkin-shaped cactus, that, with its grotesque shape, its spines and fishhooks, was far from being attractive-looking.

Hi's knife was out as he halted, and, with it, he laid open a cactus plant, revealing to the eager eyes of his charges a silver- white pulp glistening with water.

"This will relieve your thirst," he said, handing the white, moist mass to Emma.

"Oh h h h!" gasped Miss Dean. "This is heavenly."

To each of the others Hi gave a handful of pulp.

"Nectar straight from Heaven," murmured Elfreda at her first taste. "Who would think that so much heavenliness could come from such a hideous plant, so hideous that, were I alone, it would give me the shivers to look at?"

Uttering exclamations of satisfaction and delight, the Overland girls ate and ate, soothing their throats and satisfying their thirst.

"Please tell us what this is, Mr. Lang," asked Grace.

"It is the bisnaga, sometimes called the 'niggerhead,' belonging to the cactus family, a plant that is ever hailed with joy by the thirsty traveler."

"It's a life saver," agreed Lieutenant Wingate. "Where is that Chinaman? Doesn't he ever get thirsty?"

"Don't worry about him. He is out there in the bushes now, swallowing 'niggerheads' as fast as he can gulp them down. This is one of the secrets of the desert. There are others but a man must know them before he can take advantage of them."

"Tell us about them. I just dote on secrets," exclaimed Emma, her good nature now fully restored.

"They might answer for an emergency, but nothing short of real food would answer for me," declared Hippy.

"Just the same a man might live on what we see before us here for a long time," replied the guide. "If you will examine those mesquite bushes you will find a bean pod on them. It is a rich and nourishing food. Then there are the pears of the tuna and the fruit of the sahuaro or giant cactus."

"We saw a forest of them on the Apache Trail," Grace informed him.

"Yes, I know. You will find all of these nourishing foods about you here, hideous, some of them, but furnishing food and water that have saved the lives of many desert travelers."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Besides these food plants of the desert, we have the cat's-claw, mesquite and cholla shrubs for fuel; the bear-grass and yuccas for camp-building. Better than a mirage, is it not, Miss Dean?"

Emma flushed.

"I don't know about that. The sight of that lake that wasn't a lake made me forget for the moment that I was thirsty," answered Emma spiritedly.

The Chinaman's shrill call for supper sounded while they were still talking. The girls, now greatly refreshed, turned campward and sat down on the ground to eat "poisoned pig," as Hippy Wingate had named the bacon with its bitter alkaline taste.

"I fear we are forgetting that we still are without water," reminded Grace after they had finished their supper, feeling more like themselves than at any time in the last two days.

"Don't throw a monkey-wrench in the machinery," begged Hippy. "Let's live while the living is good, and die when we haven't anything else to do."

"Grace is quite right," agreed Anne. "I am worrying about to-morrow myself."

"I have been thinking it over," spoke up Hi Lang. "I believe I will go out early in the morning and ride until noon. I can cover a lot of ground in that time, and if I do not find water, the chances are against our getting any in the direction we are going. In that event we will head for the mountains and fight our way through. I never knew so many water holes to fail, but the storm is largely responsible for that condition."

"Why didn't we bring an artesian well with us? I have heard that one could have water anywhere with one of those. Are they very heavy to carry?" asked Emma innocently.

A shout greeted her question, and the guide brushed a hand across his mouth to hide his silent laughter.

"What's the matter? Have I said something funny?" demanded Emma, bristling.

"That would be impossible," answered Hippy. "No, Emma Dean, an artesian well would be no burden to carry at all if one were able to solve the problem of how to carry it. All the makin's are right here, too. Hi, why didn't you bring a medium-sized artesian well with you! I am amazed that you would neglect to find a way to bring one along," rebuked Hippy.

"You are all making fun of me. I think you are real mean," pouted Emma.

"We're not," protested Hippy.

"Yes, he is, dear. Hippy, stop teasing Emma. She is worn out and irritable. By the way, Mr. Lang, what is an artesian well?" asked Nora, which brought down another shout of laughter, this time at her expense.

"I'm not irritable," objected Emma.

"An artesian well is a hole in the ground, Miss Dean," the guide gravely informed her.

"I'm going to bed!" announced Emma, getting up. "Am I to sleep in the open, or do we have tents to cover us to-night?" she asked with much dignity.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Ping will pitch the tents. He is getting out the canvas now," replied Grace. "Before I turn in I am going out to eat some more 'niggerheads.' Any one going with me?"

All signified their desire to have more of the luscious white pulp, and in a few moments they were gorging themselves among the bisnagas.

The moon was now well along in its first quarter, and in the cool of the evening the Overland girls were in a frame of mind to appreciate and enjoy the scene.

"The desert has a strange and beguiling beauty all its own," murmured Grace.

"Yes," agreed Elfreda. "Such an evening as this makes one forget the awful heat, and lays hold of one's spirit. Then the silence no whistling of wind, no rustling of leaves. Why, I find myself holding my breath so as not to break the silence."

"I had not observed it," retorted Grace, presenting a smiling face to her companion. "The camp should be ready by now. I move we go back and turn in."

"The mystery of it all, too," added Elfreda, turning to walk to the camp.

The guide told them not to be concerned at his absence if he did not get in until late on the following day, and the Overland Riders sought their blankets for a rest which all needed.

The night passed without one of the girls moving, so far as any of them could remember, when they were rudely awakened next morning.

Shouts and yells from Hippy Wingate, and a scream from Emma Dean, brought Grace, Elfreda, Anne and Nora to their feet, hurriedly throwing on sufficient clothing to make themselves presentable.

"Girls! Hurry, hurry!" shrieked Emma.

"Coming! Hold fast!" shouted Elfreda Briggs, running out ahead of the others.

CHAPTER XIV. THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN

"For mercy sake, what is it?" cried Elfreda.

Emma was dancing about in a high state of excitement.

"Hippy's gone down! Hippy's gone down!" she cried.

"Gone down where?" demanded Grace, appearing on the scene at that juncture.

"He must have gone very suddenly, for I surely heard him yell less than five minutes ago," averred Elfreda.

"Look, look!" urged Emma, pointing to Hippy's tent, only the top of which was visible above the ground.

Grace was already running towards the tent, believing she knew just what the trouble was.

"Hippy, are you there?" she called.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"I am that, what's left of me," answered a voice that sounded some distance away.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, Brown Eyes, I am not hurt. Please clear away the wreckage, so we can see what we have here."

Grace and Elfreda hauled the tent out of the hole in the alkali crust and peered in. Hippy was sitting at the bottom, about five feet below the surface, and the instant Grace thrust her head into the opening she uttered a cry.

"Water!" she exclaimed. "I smell it!"

"I tasted it when I landed on my head in the wet sand," answered Hippy. "It was good, but I'd a heap sight rather drink my water standing. One doesn't take in so much sand that way."

"Wa ater!" gasped Emma Dean. "And it isn't another mirage?"

"It is water, my dear, but how much of a supply there is remains to be seen. What were you doing out so early?"

"I was going out to get some water food from that horrible looking pumpkin plant, or whatever it is."

"Ping! Oh, Ping! Fetch the water buckets. Hurry! Mr. Lang has gone, so we must do what is to be done before the water disappears. What happened, Hippy?" asked Grace.

"This did, Brown Eyes. I turned over on my blanket, then the earth yawned and swallowed me down. I slid in head first."

"Here are the buckets and the canvas. I think I will get down there and assist you. Girls, drink your fill, then water the ponies. No, you carry the water out and let Ping do the watering."

Hippy assisted Grace down. She dropped to her knees and immediately began digging in the sand, which was wet and sticky. With Hippy's aid, she patted the canvas blanket down as she had seen Hi Lang do it, and in a moment the water began seeping through. Grace observed that it seeped much more rapidly than when the guide had performed a similar operation.

"Buckets!" demanded Hippy.

They were lowered, and, in a few moments, half a dozen of them were filled and handed up to the outstretched hands waiting to receive them.

"This is splendid! I wish Mr. Lang were here. Too bad," said Grace.

"Might it not be a good idea for us to fire signal shots to recall him? He may be within hearing. Sound carries a long distance on the desert," suggested Miss Briggs.

"Fine, J. Elfreda. Will you fire the shots?"

Miss Briggs said she would, and, in a few moments, three interval shots rang out. Elfreda fired the signal six times, listening after each signal for a reply. None was heard, however, and Grace suggested that she wait half an hour or so, then try it again.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

The baling went on, but the ponies and burros drank the water faster than Grace and Hippy could get it out of the tank and pass it up to those who were carrying water to Ping who was giving it to the horses, singing as he worked. This was the happy refrain he sang:

"Look—see you bucket, 'fore you tly,
Got lopee (rope) 'nuf to pump 'um dly.
One piecee mouse can dlink at liver,
But let he mousey tly for ever,
All he can do top—sidee shore
Is squinch (quench) he t'hirst an 'nuffin more."

"Every 'r' is an 'l' with a Chinaman," laughed Anne.

"That is what makes their pidgin English so quaint," answered Miss Briggs.

"Ping says the horses don't care for any more water," announced Nora, returning with two empty buckets.

"Pass them down," directed Hippy. "We will fill everything in camp, including ourselves."

When, they had finished with their work, the familiar, "Him come along," in Ping Wing's shrill voice, brought Hippy out of the water hole in a hurry.

"Are you going to leave me down here, Hippy Wingate, or are you going to assist me out?" reminded Grace.

"A thousand pardons! The thought of food drives every other thought from my mind." Hippy reached down and gave Grace a hand.

"Please fire another set of signal shots," suggested Grace, shaking out her skirt to free it from the damp sand. "Mr. Lang will be surprised when he finds that we have a water tank right here in camp. I hope he hears our shots."

Elfreda, having shot into the air six times, put down her rifle and joined her companions.

"Oh, doesn't that coffee smell good?" she cried. "A warm drink is even more necessary out here than it is in the city. I hope we never have another such a dry time as we have just experienced."

"Listen!" warned Grace, holding up a hand for silence.

The reports of two rifle shots were faintly borne to their ears.

"That's a signal. I heard the first a second before I spoke. Answer them, Elfreda."

Miss Briggs sprang up and fired the rifle three times. An answer came in the form of three reports that plainly were from a long distance away.

"That must be Mr. Lang. I am glad," said Grace, her face lighting up in a pleased smile.

"Him come along," announced Ping a few moments later, using the elastic expression that stood for the dinner call, as well as to indicate that some one was approaching.

The Overland girls stood up and, shading their eyes, gazed off over the desert. They saw a horseman approaching, but the pony he was riding appeared to be almost dragging himself along.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"That isn't Lang," exclaimed Hippy.

"I see it isn't," agreed Grace.

Being a lone rider the Overlanders knew they were safe from trouble so far as he was concerned, but they observed the rider narrowly as he neared the camp.

"Ping! Fetch water!" ordered Grace incisively. "That man and horse are exhausted."

"Water!" cried the man hoarsely as he rode up to them and would have fallen from his saddle had Hippy not sprung forward and grabbed him. He placed the exhausted man on the ground, and raising the rider's head, held a canteen to his lips.

"Take it easy, old top. Don't choke yourself. We have plenty, but you mustn't try to drink it all at once," admonished Lieutenant Wingate.

"Get food," directed Grace. "Coffee and whatever else you think he can eat."

Ping glided away to prepare the food, Nora and Anne, in the meantime, having brought water for the traveler's pony.

In a few moments the man sat up, holding his head in his hands.

"Here, bathe your face. It will cool you off," urged Elfreda. The traveler did so, and, by the time the coffee was ready, he was able to stand.

Ping had fried some bacon, and, with the coffee and biscuit, the traveler had a meal the like of which he had not eaten for many a long day. As yet, the man had spoken only one word "water" but he regarded the outfit with wide, inquiring eyes, as he ate greedily of the food placed before him.

"Where going?" he asked after finishing.

"Specter Range, I believe. Perhaps taking in the Shoshones. I am not certain. Our guide, Hi Lang, is not here just now."

"Bad gang there. Drove me out. Will drive you out." He would say no more, shaking his head when Grace pressed him for an explanation. After an hour's rest, during which the caller drank water until they feared for its effect on him, he filled his water bags from the water hole and lashed them to his pony and mounted. Elfreda handed him a chunk of bacon, which he acknowledged with a nod, and stuffed it into his kit.

The traveler now threw back his shoulders and peered at each member of the outfit in turn as if to impress their faces on his mind, then swept off his sombrero.

"Thankee, folks," he said, and, putting spurs to his pony, galloped away.

"There is one man to whom it would be perfectly safe to entrust a secret," declared Miss Briggs with emphasis.

"What a strange character," murmured Anne, as she gazed after the galloping pony. "I wonder who he can be."

"I am curious to know what he meant by warning us against the mountains," interjected Elfreda Briggs.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"And I am rather concerned about Mr. Lang," added Grace. "He must be a long way from here, else he would have heard our signal shots. I have an idea that our late caller must have heard them and that it was he who answered. That must be it. If so I am glad, for the poor fellow was ready to drop and so was his horse. Shall we fill the buckets?"

They did. The ponies were thirsty again, and it required several bucketfuls to satiate thirst, after which everything fillable was filled with water. Grace, to pass away the time, got out her lasso and tried to throw it, but she made a complete failure. In turn, each of the others tried their hand at throwing the rope, but with no better success. Ping offered himself for a mark, chattering like a magpie as, each time, the loop of the lasso collapsed before reaching him.

"What for you makee so fashion?" he cried between laughs, chuckles and grimaces.

"Never mind, Ping. You will not talkee 'so fashion' one day. When I learn to throw the rope, which I shall, I will rope you when you are not looking," threatened Grace.

"No can do," grinned the Chinaman. "HAI YAH! Man b'longey top-side horse," he cried, pointing off over the desert.

Looking in the direction in which he was pointing, the Overland girls saw in the far distance a horseman, sitting his mount so motionless that at first they were not positive whether it were a horseman or a distorted cactus plant.

Grace ran for her binoculars and for some minutes studied the stranger.

"That's our caller," suggested Hippy.

Maybe he has decided to hang around for another meal. I don't know that I blame him."

"No, it is not the same man, at least not same pony," answered Grace, snapping glasses shut. "The man yonder is riding a black pony. The one who called on us rode a nearly white animal. I can't imagine why he is so interested, but he is surely watching us. However, we won't worry so long as we have a water tank at hand."

At four o'clock in the afternoon the mysterious stranger was still in practically the same place. He appeared to move only when his pony stepped forward a few paces for more sagebrush.

"Man b'longey top-side horse!" cried Ping, again pointing in another direction.

The Overlanders saw a cloud of dust rolling toward them over the desert, ahead of the cloud being a horseman riding at a swift gallop.

"This would seem to be our day at home, judging from the number of callers who are dropping in," observed Elfreda.

Grace threw up her glasses and took a quick look.

"I can't make him out," she said. "It can't be Mr. Lang, for this man is coming from a direction different from the one he took, if the footprints of his pony leading out of this camp are any indication."

"Man b'longey horse hab go chop-chop!" volunteered Ping.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Looking quickly toward the west the Overlanders were amazed to find that the silent horseman who had had them under observation for hours was no longer in view. Though not more than two or three minutes had elapsed since Grace Harlowe last saw him, he had disappeared as suddenly as if the sands of the desert had opened and taken him in.

"Maybe he has fallen into a tank, just as I did," suggested Hippy.

"Mr. Lang is coming. It is he, after all," cried Grace joyously, as she gazed at the swiftly moving cloud of dust that Ping had called her attention to some moments before.

CHAPTER XV. THE GUIDE READS A DESERT TRAIL

"Did you shoot?" called the guide, pulling his pony down sharply.

Both pony and rider were gray from the desert dust, and the guide's face was lined with perspiration streaks. It was plain that he had ridden hard and long.

"Yes. Did you find water?" cried Emma.

"I did, twenty miles or nigh that, from here. What's that?" he demanded, pointing to the water hole.

"We have water, Mr. Lang," Grace told him, "Mr. Wingate fell through a crust and discovered a tank. There is water in plenty. We are so sorry that you had all that journey for nothing. Ping! Water for Mr. Lang and a bucketful for his pony. How long since did you hear our signal shots?"

"More'n an hour ago. I wasn't certain, but I thought I heard three shots. My journey was not for nothing, for I have found a tank and there we will make our next camping place." The guide paused to lift the bucket that Ping had fetched, and to drink deeply from it.

"Who's been here?"

"What makes you think anyone has?" teased Emma.

"Plain as daylight. I followed a pony's trail in for more than two miles. There's the tracks where he went away," answered the guide quickly.

"You surely have sharp eyes," nodded Elfreda.

"He was one of those sphinxes, like some other deserts have. This one was not stuck fast to the ground like a regular sphinx, but his tongue must have been stuck to the roof of his mouth, for he couldn't say any more words than a ten-month-old baby," declared Hippy Wingate.

"Tell me about him," urged Hi, turning to Grace.

The guide nodded understandingly after Grace had told him in detail of the arrival of the stranger, choking for a drink, and half famished from hunger.

"That's like him."

"Like whom?" questioned Hippy.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Like the desert traveler. He is just one of those brainless fellows like myself, who would rather be out here, suffering, choking, dying by inches, than be at home surrounded by all the comforts that a home gives a man. Didn't say what his name is, did he?"

"No, sir. Let me see," reflected Grace. "He said, 'Water!' Then, later, after asking where we were going, and being informed that we expected to visit the Specter Range and perhaps the Shoshones, he replied, 'Bad gang there. Drove me out. Will drive you out.' As he left he said, 'Thankee, folks.' To the best of my recollection he opened his mouth at no other time, except to eat and drink."

"Hm m m m," mused the guide. "In the Specters, eh?"

"I don't know whether he referred to them or to the Shoshones," answered Grace.

"Didn't say where he was going?"

"No, sir. Can you tell us, Mr. Lang, why it is that desert lovers like yourself, and like the stranger who was here, as a more extreme case are so silent, so taciturn and ever listening for something? What is it they are listening for?"

"I reckon they take after nature herself out here. When a man is alone on this big desert he feels very small, and speaking out or raising a fellow's voice seems as much of a sacrilege as speaking out loud in church when the preacher's praying. As for listening, I don't know, hut maybe we listen for the sounds that we are so used to hearing at home, the rustle of leaves, the song of a bird, but all we ever hear out here in the daytime is now and then the buzz of a rattler's tail. We don't always shoot 'em because we sort of hate to make so much noise. I reckon that isn't much of an explanation, but —"

"I call it very fine," nodded Elfreda. "By the way, Mr. Lang, we had another caller, a distant caller to-day. He didn't come near the camp, but sat his pony for several hours apparently observing us. Perhaps he was resting."

Hi Lang's face showed his interest. He asked questions and frowned thoughtfully, requesting that they point out as closely as possible the spot at which the man had been seen.

"You say he disappeared suddenly?"

"Yes, Mr. Lang," answered Grace.

"Was that when I was coming up?"

"You were."

"He evidently saw me and ducked. There's a high ridge of sand over there where you saw him. He was on that ridge or you wouldn't have seen him, and when he discovered me he just naturally slid his pony down the other side and walked away under cover of the ridge or else got down and peeked over the top of it. I don't like that. You weren't thinking of going on to-night, were you?"

"Not unless you think best, Mr. Lang," replied Grace.

"Then I reckon I'll ride over there in the morning and see what his tracks look like. To-morrow night we'll make camp by the water hole I found to-day, unless some other party comes along and dips the water all out or it disappears between now and then."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Did you answer our signal shots that you say you thought you heard?" asked Hippy.

"Of course I did, though I didn't think you would hear them, being as there was a gentle breeze from this direction against me. I staked the ponies down before I went away this morning, and that black bronco of yours gave me some trouble, Mrs. Gray. I had to lasso him. When are you going to learn to throw the rope?"

"When are you going to teach me?" returned Grace smilingly.

"That's the talk. We'll begin right now. Get your rope."

Grace was instructed first how to coil the rope, how to make the loop and to properly grasp it by its hondo, or knot, before throwing; then the real lesson began.

It was sorry work for her at first, but by the time Ping uttered his shrill call for supper, Grace had learned to throw the rope and let the loop drop to the ground without destroying the form of the loop. Hi announced that, on the morrow, she should be able to hit a mark on the ground but that considerable practice would be necessary before she would be able to rope an object that was in motion.

Supper was followed by an interesting evening, during which Hi Lang told the Overland girls more of the desert secrets.

"We are now in the skunk country," he said, as they were about to turn in.

"The what?" demanded Emma Dean.

"I do not mean the sort you probably are familiar with in the east. The desert skunk is an entirely different animal. He bites, and his bite is supposed to produce hydrophobia, which means death out here. He is, therefore, known as the hydrophobia skunk. Go into any desert camp just before turning-in time and you will hear the desert wanderers speaking of rattlesnakes and skunks. Every man who knows those two pests is actually afraid of them."

"This is a fine time of day to tell us," complained Nora.

"That's what I say," wailed Emma. "Why didn't you tell us after breakfast instead of after supper?"

"Yes. I know I shall dream of snakes and skunks and other creeping, crawling things to-night," added Anne.

Hi laughed silently, masking his mouth with a hand.

"String a rope all the way around your tent on the ground. No snake will go over that, especially a horsehair rope. Your lasso is the thing for that, Mrs. Gray. I will have Ping keep the fire going and that will keep the skunks away. The insects and other creeping things we can't stop, so we shall have to take our chances with them. Sorry, but it was necessary to tell you. If you are going to be desert travelers you must learn the desert."

"You are perfectly right, Mr. Lang," nodded Grace. "I am very glad you have told us so much to-night, especially about skunks and snakes. I will lay my lasso around the tent and sleep in perfect security. Girls, let's turn in."

Emma dreamed of snakes that night and had nightmare, crying out in her sleep and getting a violent shaking from Elfreda Briggs as her reward. Otherwise, the night was peacefully passed.

Early on the following morning, before any of the outfit was awake, except Ping, who seemed never to sleep, Hi Lang had caught up his pony and ridden out on the desert and on to the spot at which the girls had seen the

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

mysterious horseman the day before. Hi readily found the hoof-prints of the pony ridden by the man, and examined them with keen interest. He observed other features of the trail that might easily have escaped even a desert wanderer's observation, and that told him much.

"I reckon there's going to be some lively doings before we've got to the end of this journey," muttered the guide, assuming a listening attitude, with head tilted to one side, eyes fixed on the blue sky overhead. He stood motionless in that position for many minutes. Finally arousing himself from his reverie, Hi mounted his pony and galloped away towards the camp, reaching there some time before the Riders were awake. Grace Harlowe appeared about an hour later, and walked out over the desert a short distance, inhaling the sweet morning air in long, delicious breaths.

"What is it that smells so sweet?" she called to the guide, who was busying himself about the camp, for there was a new and strangely sweet fragrance in the air.

"That's another of the desert mysteries. Supposed to have been rain somewhere. It's like a breath straight from heaven. I love it!" Hi straightened up, and, throwing back his shoulders, inhaled deeply.

Grace was thoughtful as she returned to camp, but it was not of the desert she was thinking. Rather was it of the man who was guiding them. He was a poet by nature, but did not know it. He was intelligent and he possessed a mind and a power of reasoning far beyond what one might look for in a man of his calling.

"Was the morning perfume what induced you to take such an early ride, Mr. Lang?" asked Grace sweetly.

The guide gave her a quick glance.

"What makes you think I took a gallop this morning, Mrs. Gray?"

"In the first place your pony is not tethered where he was last night, and, secondly, your trail, going and returning, is plain out there," she said, with a gesture towards the desert.

"You're sharp," observed Hi briefly, and proceeded with his work without offering further information. Grace believed, however, that he had ridden out to look at the trail left by the solitary horseman who had been watching their camp, but asked no further questions. Hi would speak when ready to do so; that she knew.

The Overlanders moved at an early hour and made camp that night at the water hole found by the guide the day before. Several pairs of keen eyes frequently swept the horizon during the day, and again on the following morning, for the mysterious horseman, but it was three days later before he was again seen in the distance.

"What's the matter with my taking a shot at him?" demanded Lieutenant Wingate.

"No!" answered the guide with emphasis. "Give the calf enough rope and he'll hang himself. Saddle up and we'll ride that way and have a look at the trail again."

The watcher disappeared as the Overlanders were saddling their ponies. As before, the guide made no comment after he had examined the hoof-prints left by the observer's pony, and the journey was resumed.

The days drew on, and the Overlanders, now more used to the hardships and heat of traveling on the desert, began to take a real pleasure in the work, to enjoy the free life and the excitement that came to them in one form or another nearly every day. Now and then a day would pass without water, but they made the best of it, having confidence that Hi Lang would find it in time, no matter how dark the outlook. The mysterious horseman had appeared several times, always too far away to enable them to get a good look at him. Occasionally Hi would go

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

out for a look at the pony's trail, but it was not until they were nearing the mountain ranges, after three weeks of journeying across the hot sands, that the guide gave a direct answer to a direct question as to whether or not he knew what the mysterious one was up to. Hippy had asked the question when they were at supper one evening.

"I don't know what he's up to, of course," replied Hi Lang. "I do know that he is the same fellow who left the range after we folks were shot at there, for the hoof-prints of his pony are the same. He is watching us, and we'll hear from him later," he declared impressively.

CHAPTER XVI. THE CROSS ON THE DESERT

"You should have let me take a shot at him when I had the chance," grumbled Hippy.

"Time enough to shoot when we are shot at," rebuked Grace. "We are not starting trouble, but when it comes we know how to meet it. Do we not, Mr. Lang?"

Hi Lang nodded enthusiastically.

Grace had been practicing persistently with her Mexican lasso, and was now beginning to learn to rope a pony. That is, she had succeeded, when riding alongside a trotting pony who objected to being caught, in casting the lasso over its head, but so far as catching the hind foot of a moving bronco with her loop, that was far beyond her. Grace doubted if she ever would gain sufficient skill to do that.

Elfreda, too, was an apt pupil and not far behind her companion in casting the rope. She was glorying in the life of the west, which was becoming more and more alluring to her as the days passed.

"Two days more and we'll be in the foothills of the Specters. Maybe you will be able to rope a wildcat there," said the guide, smiling at the two girls.

"Four—or two—legged?" inquired Hippy.

"Possibly both. After we get cooled off in the mountains, if you folks think you wish to go on down into the Colorado Desert, I will show you some real desert heat. By comparison, this desert is as cool as a summer resort."

Grace said they would discuss their future movements after they had rested up a bit in the mountains. All the girls were looking forward to the mountains where shade, spring water and cooling breezes awaited them. Some of them were filled with curiosity as to what else awaited them there, having in mind the prophecy of the desert rider whom they had succored.

It was with thoughts of the mountains, and with eager eyes searching the horizon ahead, that the Overland Riders set out for their day's journey on the following morning. A brief stop was made at noon for a cup of tea and biscuits, after which the daily search for a water hole was begun. As night approached, the search became more intensive, but it was not until after nightfall that a tank was found.

A full moon hung in the heavens and the night was a beautiful one, a peaceful, restful desert night. Camp was quickly made a short distance removed from the water hole, and, after water had been supplied to the ponies, and the water bags and pails filled, the party sat down to supper and to a discussion of the topic uppermost in their minds the attack that had been made on them, and the mysterious horseman.

"What is that I see out there?" suddenly demanded Nora Wingate, pointing to an object out on the desert, some fifty or sixty yards from where she was sitting.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"It looks like a cross tilted on its side," said Anne.

"That's what it is," nodded the guide.

"A cross? What for?" questioned Emma.

"Some poor desert traveler who couldn't find a water hole," replied Hi Lang reflectively.

"Did you know that thing was there?" demanded Emma.

"Yes, of course."

"And yet you camped right here? I shan't sleep a wink to-night."

"Don't be foolish, Emma. Let it be a reminder to us to be prudent with our water supply," soothed Grace. "I do not suppose this water hole existed at that time; did it, Mr. Lang?"

"It may have. Travelers have been known to give up and die of thirst when water was almost within reach of their hand. You will see more such as that as we get south," said Hi, nodding in the direction of the leaning cross.

"I suppose that, in most instances, they were persons who did not know the desert well," suggested Grace.

"Just so," agreed the guide. "Shall we go out and look at it?"

"Not to-night, thank you. The morning will do for that. It is not a pleasant thought to take to bed with one."

Hi got up and strode out to look at the cross, followed by Hippy. The guide believed in investigating everything. It was a precaution that he had learned after many journeys across the Great American Desert. It might not mark the resting place of a lost traveler at all; the cross might be a guide to water, or it might mean nothing at all. In any event Hi's curiosity must be satisfied.

"What do you find?" questioned Hippy, as he joined the guide by the leaning cross.

"The stones that held it up have been moved, as you see. They are scattered, some half covered with sand. Windstorm did that in all probability. Queer thing, but I don't see any indications of anything but wind having disturbed the place."

"Hand me a stone and I'll prop it up," requested Hippy. The guide did so, and Lieutenant Wingate dropped the stone beside it, after straightening up the crude cross.

Both men heard a metallic sound as the stone struck the ground. The quick ear of Hi Lang told him that something other than desert sand lay there at the foot of the crossed sticks.

"See what it is," urged Hi.

Grace had been observing the movements of the two men and her curiosity was rapidly getting the better of her.

"Come, Elfreda, let us go out and see what those two men are so deeply interested in," she urged, rising and starting towards them, followed by Miss Briggs.

"Looks like a tin box," answered Hippy. "There's only a corner of it sticking above the sand."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Hi got down on his knees and peered at the object, then, lighting a match, looked it over more closely.

"Reckon it's a cracker box. Pull it out."

"I wouldn't do that," protested Grace, who now saw what had so interested Hippy and the guide. "It seems like a sacrilege to disturb it."

"On the desert, Mrs. Gray, one's life may depend upon the thoroughness with which he investigates everything that he was not before familiar with anything unusual. This is unusual."

"I know, but —"

"Out she comes," answered Hippy.

"Oh!" exclaimed Grace Harlowe under her breath.

"Another match, please, Hi."

By the light of the flickering match the men and the two girls peered at the object that Lieutenant Wingate took from the sand and held up for their inspection.

"It isn't a cracker box at all. It looks more like a safe deposit box," he declared. "What shall I do with it, Hi?"

"Take it into camp and open it, of course."

Grace protested again, but not so insistently as before. The guide said he had a theory about the cross and the supposed grave, a theory which he proposed to prove or disprove before leaving that night's camping place.

"I know what it is," volunteered Miss Briggs. "I have one like it to keep my private papers in, except that this one shows wear and has lost most of its enamel, I suppose from the action of sand and weather."

"What is it? What is it?" cried Emma, unable longer to restrain her curiosity. Following her, as she came running to the scene, were Anne and Nora.

"We don't know yet. It is a box, but we haven't opened it," Grace informed her.

"Who found it?" demanded Emma.

"Mr. Lang and Hippy."

"Do do we get what is in it?" persisted Miss Dean.

"This is an Overland affair, Emma," said Hippy. "Mr. Lang is an Overlander so far as this party is concerned, and, as a matter of fact, he discovered the box."

"You mean you did, Lieutenant," corrected the guide.

"We discovered it. That, I think, is the best way to settle it. However, we are counting our chickens before they are hatched. Let's go in by the fire where we can see."

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Hippy carried the box under his arm, followed by the entire Overland party, their curiosity being intensified by his delay in opening it. Observing this, Lieutenant Wingate took his time, helped himself to a drink of water, discussed their find with Hi, then shifted the box to the other arm and began, discussing the weather.

"Are you ever going to open that thing?" cried Emma. "You are so aggravating."

"Oh, yes, the box," exclaimed Hippy. "Come over by the fire where we can see what we are about."

Hippy sat down, held the box up to his ear and shook it.

"Yep! Something in it. Sounds like gold rattling about in there, but the box is locked. Get a hammer so I can break it open."

"I do not like the idea at all," objected Grace somewhat severely. "It is not our property and we have no right to –"

"Everything on the desert is any man's property," corrected the guide. "Further, it is our duty to open the box. We do not know but it may contain the last request of some unfortunate desert traveler, and if that is so it may lay in our power to do him a great service. Of course, if you say we must not open it, we will respect your wishes in the matter."

"You may do as you wish," answered Grace.

The guide produced his heavy clasp-knife, provided with a can– opening attachment, and pried the cover loose.

"Do you wish to open it, Brown Eyes?" asked Hippy, holding the box up to Grace.

She shook her head.

"Then here goes for better or for worse," announced Lieutenant Wingate, throwing open the cover and revealing the contents of the box to the eager gaze of the Overlanders.

CHAPTER XVII. ANOTHER MYSTERY TO SOLVE

"Fiddlesticks! Nothing but paper," wailed Emma Dean, peering into the mystery box.

"No. There is something more." Hippy lifted out the paper, a folded paper, and placed it on the ground. "Here is a gold watch and a handful of gold. Let's see how much there is." He counted out a hundred dollars, which, with some silver and a plain gold ring, and the paper first removed, made up the contents of the box.

"Not much of a find, is it?" smiled Anne.

"No. It's a shame, too, after our expectations had been worked up to concert pitch," declared Nora. "Hippy Wingate, this is your doings."

"Blame the fellow who put the things in the box. I only took them out," grumbled Hippy. "Guess that's about all, Hi," he added, looking up sheepishly at the guide.

"You haven't looked at the paper," reminded Elfreda.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"It's only a piece of wrapping paper," returned Hippy. "What do I want to look at that for?"

Grace Harlowe stooped over, picked up the paper and felt it gingerly.

"There IS something here!" she exclaimed. "The wrapping paper evidently has been folded over as a protection to what is inside." Grace thereupon opened the wrapper, revealing a tightly folded package of heavier paper. The rubber band that held the inner package together fell apart as she placed a finger on it to remove it.

The eyes of the party were instantly centered on Grace Harlowe, who carefully unfolded the paper and held it down so that the light from the campfire might shine on it.

"It is a map," she said. "It is a map, drawn with pen and ink. This looks promising," she added, spreading the map out on the ground. "What a queer thing to bury, and who did it? Surely not the man who lies there under the cross."

"I should not take that for granted," observed Hi Lang quietly.

"Please let me see it," requested Miss Briggs.

Grace handed the map to her, and Elfreda studied it frowningly.

"It means nothing in particular, I should say. It might be a map of a scene in Switzerland for all we know," declared Nora. "Hippy, you are a champion finder. I wonder if they give medals for persons who find things who make great finds."

"Nora dear, if I had found one of the Egyptian pyramids out here on the American Desert, you would blame me for not handing out the Sphinx at the same time," protested Hippy.

"It may mean a great deal," said Grace.

"I agree with you," nodded Elfreda, who was still studying the map. "It is a mystery map, and it plainly meant something to its possessor or he would not have brought it out here and buried it. By the same token, I should say that it applied to something in this part of the country. I am inclined to believe that it does. There is a name here. Mr. Lang, do you know of any person of the name of Steve Carver?"

"No, Miss Briggs. May I have a look?"

"Oh, pardon me," begged Elfreda, handing the map to the guide. Hi studied it for several minutes, then returned it.

"It's not a picture of anything that I ever saw, I reckon," he said.

"What shall we do with it?" asked Miss Briggs.

"I would suggest that we make a copy of it, returning the map to the box and burying the box by the cross where we found it," replied Grace.

"Yes, but what about this gold, Brown Eyes?" demanded Hippy.

"Put that back, too. It doesn't belong to us, Am I not right, Mr. Lang?" she asked.

"I reckon you are," agreed the guide, nodding his approval of the suggestion.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"What's the use in finding things?" grumbled Hippy, permitting the gold to slip through his fingers into the metal box.

Elfreda, on a piece of wrapping paper, made a careful copy of the map, then returned it to Lieutenant Wingate, who placed it in the box and slammed down the cover.

"I'll bury the old thing, of course, but some one else will dig it up. That's why I should advise keeping the whole business," said Hippy, rising and walking over to the cross with the box under his arm. They heard him working out there and, in a few moments, he returned. "Deed's done," he informed them. "What are you going to do with the copy of the map, J. Elfreda?"

"Entertain myself in studying it. Nothing may come of that, of course, but, like Emma, a mystery does appeal to me."

"So it does to me," agreed Grace. "Were it not for the fact that my intuition tells me that the map is going to play an important part in our journey, I should not have been in favor of making a copy of it, so take good care of the copy, Elfreda dear."

The rest of the evening was spent in discussing their mysterious find and all sorts of theories were advanced for the box being buried by the leaning cross. Hi Lang listened to all of this, but made no comment. He had his own ideas on the subject.

Next morning Hi was out long before the others were awake, making an investigation on his own account. He had barely begun this when, upon glancing up, he saw the solitary horseman far out on the desert, sitting motionless, apparently observing the camp of the Overland Riders.

The guide took his time at what he was doing, at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the distant horseman.

"I thought so!" exclaimed Hi Lang. "I think I'll give that fellow a run," he decided after a moment's reflection, during which he observed the watcher narrowly.

Catching up his pony, the guide quickly saddled, and, mounting, started across the desert at a brisk gallop. Five minutes later the solitary horseman turned his pony about and dashed away. Hi threw up his rifle and sent a bullet after the man, continuing to fire until the magazine of his rifle was emptied.

After reloading Hi thrust the rifle into its saddle boot and rode on until he reached the point from which the horseman had been observing. Hi Lang got down and again examined the hoof-prints of the watcher's pony.

"Huh!" he grunted. "That cayuse will keep on until something hits him hits him hard. I reckon I begin to smell a mouse, and I think Mrs. Gray does, too. Hope she didn't hear me shooting back there. But none of that outfit is so sleepy or thick-headed that they don't see or hear pretty much everything that's going on about them."

Having freed his mind, Hi remounted and rode slowly back towards the camp. The Chinaman was getting breakfast when Mr. Lang rode in and tethered his pony.

"Pack up right after breakfast. We've got a long journey to-day," he directed.

Ping nodded his understanding and went on with his work, humming to himself. Half an hour later the Riders began to appear, each with a cheery good morning for their guide and adviser.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Grace and Elfreda came out together. Miss Briggs paused to chat with the guide, Grace walking on and strolling about to get an appetite, as she nearly always did in the early morning.

Hi Lang observed her narrowly when Grace halted by the cross and stood gazing down at it thoughtfully.

"I wonder who you are, unhappy traveler?" she was murmuring. "I wonder, too, if there are any who are wondering where you are?" Grace observed that the ground had been disturbed since last she saw it, but she made no comment when, a few moments later, she joined Mr. Lang and Elfreda.

"Grace, I was just asking Mr. Lang who it was that was shooting this morning," greeted Elfreda.

"I presume he told you it was a mirage of your dreams, did he not?" smiled Grace teasingly.

"It was Mr. Lang who did the shooting," replied Elfreda. "Grace, our mysterious horseman was on the job again this morning."

"Did you hit him?" questioned Grace.

Hi Lang shook his head.

"Too far away. Knew I couldn't get him. All I expected to do was to give him a polite hint that his attentions were displeasing to us. It was the same man that has been following us all along, Mrs. Gray. It was the same hoofprints, too, that I found up in the range where we first made camp. If that critter and I ever get close enough to see each other's eyes there's going to be a shooting match. When we get to the hills he will have the advantage of us, because he can get closer without being seen."

"Please don't worry, Mr. Lang. We will meet that emergency when we come face to face with it. Perhaps by then I may have skill enough with the lasso to practice on a real live man," laughed Grace.

"I reckon you could get most anything you cast for already."

"Thank you! When do we start?"

"Right away. Just as soon as we finish breakfast. Ping is packing up and we will be off in no time."

Breakfast had been eaten, and in something less than twenty minutes from that time, the party was well on its way, and the sun, red and angry, was showing its upper rim above the sands of the desert.

"A hot time on the old desert to-day," observed Hippy. "Emma, how would you like a dish of strawberry ice cream for luncheon?" he teased.

"I think you are real mean," pouted Emma.

Grace, at this juncture, galloped up beside the guide to ask him about the water hole that they were hoping to reach, that day, but from his shake of the head she knew that he was not particularly hopeful about finding water there.

"It should be easy for you to nose out a water tank, Mr. Lang," she said, smiling over at him.

"How so?"

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"You are so successful in unraveling the mysteries of nature that you surely should be able to discover water even where there isn't any."

"What are you driving at, Mrs. Gray?"

"I have an idea that you solved at least one mystery this morning."

Hi Lang flushed a little under his tan and shook his head.

"There's no use trying to keep anything from you, and there's no reason that I know of, why I should. No one is buried in that place where we found the box. The cross was set up to keep people away so they wouldn't find the box with the gold and the map. It was my idea that we should find it to be so. How did you know?"

"I saw what you had been doing," answered Grace. "What do you think is the most important contents of the box, the gold?"

"No. I reckon the map might be a sight more valuable than the handful of gold if one knew where to find the place that the map pictures. There's a heap of bad actors down this way, Mrs. Gray. They are regular land pirates. We call them desert pirates. They'd murder a man for two bits, and I reckon that maybe they had something to do with that place back there, and that the fellow who owned the map, when he saw the pirates coming, buried it so they shouldn't find it."

"Then this is another mystery for us to solve, Mr. Lang the mystery of the buried map. I suppose you have discovered that the girls of the Overland Riders are possessed of the usual curiosity of their sex, have you not?"

Hi laughed silently.

"You've got a poser this time. 'Fraid your curiosity won't be gratified, so far as that map is concerned, but I reckon you'll find so much doing before long that you will forget all about this particular mystery. We are not being watched out of mere curiosity, Mrs. Gray," declared the guide.

"I am well aware of that, Mr. Lang," replied Grace Harlowe gravely.

CHAPTER XVIII. AN OLD INDIAN TRICK

It was the most trying day of their journey that the Overlanders were experiencing, because of the heat and the fact that they were getting further and further below sea level. The heat was a lifeless heat, and the members of the outfit found themselves nodding and swaying in their saddles, keeping awake only by much effort.

"Water only five miles away," called Hippy Wingate late in the afternoon in a cheerful voice. "Wake up, Overlanders! Hi says we will be there before sundown."

A little later the party broke into a gallop, leaving Ping Wing and his lazy burros far to the rear of them. They were now crossing that arid region known as the Pahute Mesa, and, just over the horizon, lay a series of broken mountain ranges, wild, cut off from civilization, and shunned by all save those whose duty, fancy or love of adventure called them there. On beyond these the desert again took up its monotonous reach, hotter, more deadly than before. Just now, however, the thoughts of the Overland Riders were on the water hole for which they were heading, and, next in importance, the cool mountain ranges. Hi Lang beckoned to Grace to ride up to him.

"What is it, Mr. Lang?" she asked.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Please caution the young ladies to be sparing of the water."

"Why, it isn't possible that we are short of water," protested Grace.

"We may be."

"Will you please explain? Your words intimate that you may have discovered something."

"I saw dust rising from the desert over yonder, a short time ago. It moved along in a little cloud to the westward and finally disappeared."

"Do you think it was our mysterious horseman?" asked Grace.

"Maybe. There was more than one horse, as I could tell from the dust kicked up."

Grace asked what relation that had to the shortage of water.

"Just this, Mrs. Gray. That cloud rose and I saw it the instant it appeared from about where the tank that we are heading for should be. That's all. Of course I don't know what those folks were doing there, but I am warning you to go easy on the water."

Grace thanked him and rode over to her companions to caution them to be sparing of the water, saying that it were possible that they might be short of it, though Grace confessed to herself that she did not see how even a visit of the desert "pirates" to a water hole possibly could prevent her outfit from getting sufficient water for their use. Of course, if there were but little water in the tank it might take a long time to get enough for the ponies.

"Something has occurred, has it not?" questioned Elfreda in a tone barely loud enough for Grace to hear.

"Mr. Lang saw a cloud of dust that aroused his suspicion. The guide has something of an imagination," added Grace, smiling at her perspiring companion.

After a little Hi Lang ordered the party to drop into a slower pace, saying that he wished to save the ponies so far as possible.

"Dismount, but wait before you unpack," directed the guide, when the party arrived at the water hole.

"Girls, please stay where you are for the present," called Grace.

"What's the big idea?" demanded Hippy Wingate.

"Mr. Lang wishes to see if any one has been here. He thought he saw a dust cloud in this direction this afternoon and desires to have a look around, so don't stamp about and destroy the trail, if there is such a thing," admonished Grace.

Hi Lang got down in the water hole, and for a few moments was out of their sight. He rose finally and clambered out, his face wearing a stern expression, and Grace saw at once that the guide was trying desperately to control his temper.

Without so much as looking at the Overlanders, Hi Lang began nosing about, now and then bending over to peer at the ground, stepping cautiously, following a crooked course, all of which excited Hippy Wingate's merriment.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"He works just like a dog does when the rabbit season opens," declared the lieutenant. "What's he up to?"

"Looking for trouble," suggested Emma.

Hi followed the trail he had picked up some little distance out on the desert, which the light of the full moon enabled him to do. He then stood up and gazed at the sky for a brief moment.

"Unsaddle and make camp," he directed tersely.

"Did you find what you expected?" asked Grace.

"Yes. I'll tell you about it as soon as we make camp."

"How's the water?" called Hippy.

"There isn't a drop in the tank, Lieutenant. Ping, you will give the ponies about a quart apiece from our supply, no more. We will stake down now."

Camp was quickly made and the bacon was frying over a small, flickering cook-fire a few moments afterward. Efforts to be merry at supper that night were a failure, and Hi Lang was unusually taciturn.

"May we hear the worst now, Mr. Lang?" asked Grace as they finished the meal.

"As I told you, there is no water in the tank, but the sand is still moist, showing that there was water there a short time since."

"Some one must have been rather dry," observed Hippy, but no one laughed at his humor.

"There probably was not much water left there after the party before us finished helping themselves, but there would have been sufficient for us if they had left the tank alone. They tampered with it, folks!"

"How do you mean, Hi?" questioned Lieutenant Wingate.

"By digging in and poking about in the tank they have managed to start the water seeping deeper into the ground until it finally found a new course and disappeared. It's an old Indian trick they've worked on us."

"Is it possible that men can be so desperate?" wondered Anne Nesbit.

"Men!" exploded the guide. "They're not men. They're low-down hounds!"

"Why should they wish to do these things to us?" demanded Nora, flushing with resentment.

"There were three men in the party this time, one being the same fellow that has followed us most of the way out here. I don't know who the others are. It isn't so much the water that's bothering me as it is that they don't come out and face us if they have a grudge to settle with us. I'm ready to meet them and I reckon you folks are too."

"I think it would be a relief to have them do so," agreed Elfreda Briggs. "This constant tormenting gets on one's nerves after a time."

"What is your plan? I know you have one, Mr. Lang," spoke up Grace.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"The clouds are making up in the south, and in a couple of hours they will hide the moon. It isn't advisable to do anything until the night gets good and dark, so I suggest that you folks lie down and get some rest, for we have a long, hard ride ahead of us."

"To-night? Ride to-night?" questioned Emma.

"Yes. Ride and ride hard. Even the lazy burros have got to get a move on. We must ride all night to-night, and when day dawns we must be in or near Forty-Mile Canyon. Then let those pirates find us if they can. They will find us sooner or later, in all probability, but by that time we shall be doing some stalking on our own account. You see, they will be expecting to find us here in the morning, but we shall be far on our journey by then," said the guide.

"What! Ride all night?" demanded Emma. "I'll die! I surely will."

"And probably all day to-morrow," nodded the guide. "I will start the Chinaman on his way the moment the sky becomes overcast, and we will follow an hour or so later. You folks will have that much longer to sleep. Good-night, folks." Hi got up abruptly and walked away to give his orders to Ping Wing.

"This is where we link arms with trouble," observed Miss Briggs, with a shake of the head.

"Stick by me. I have a rope and I know how to throw it, J. Elfreda dear," replied Grace Harlowe laughingly.

CHAPTER XIX. THE WARNING

"Turn out!" It was Hi Lang's voice that summoned the girls from their tents, and a far from welcome summons it was, for they were sleeping soundly.

"Lieutenant, the ponies are saddled and ready," said the guide, halting at Hippy's tent. "Please give the Riders the tent equipment to carry and assist them to lash the stuff on. Everything else has gone forward."

"All right, old ma-an. Can't give me five minutes for a cat-nap, can you?" begged Hippy.

"Turn out!" Hippy yawned and got up. The night was now pitch dark, and Lieutenant Wingate fell over tent stakes and ropes and whatever else was handy for him to catch his toes on, as he staggered about aimlessly.

Bethinking himself of the guide's orders, Hippy suddenly began pulling up the stakes from the girls' tent and let it down on their heads. Emma Dean cried out, which brought a stern command for silence from Mr. Lang. Following that, there was not a sound in the camp during the next fifteen minutes.

"Packs lashed to ponies behind saddles," announced Hippy. "Party ready to move."

"Mount and follow me. No loud talking, please; light no matches. You understand why I am so strict?" said the guide in an apologetic tone.

"We understand fully, Mr. Lang," replied Grace in a low voice.

"Start!" he commanded.

The start was made at a jog-trot, which, after a few minutes, was changed to a gallop. This pace was continued for some time, but finally the guide slowed down and began peering into the darkness, looking for Ping and his

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

burros. Elfreda marveled at the almost uncanny instinct of their guide, and how Ping could lay a course that could be followed in the dark was a mystery to her. She asked Hi Lang how it was done.

"See that red star over on the horizon, Miss Briggs? Ping is instructed to keep that star between the ears of his burro and not to wobble. By keeping the same star between the ears of my bronco I am bound to overhaul Ping, provided he has held to his course. I am, however, allowing for some deviation and keeping a close lookout."

It was not more than ten minutes after that when Mr. Lang discovered the Chinaman and his burden bearers plodding along less than a hundred yards to the right of the course that the Overland Riders were following. Ping, though he had heard the party coming up, held to his course until directed to fall in behind them.

"A mariner following a compass course could do no better than that," declared Grace Harlowe.

"It really is marvelous, though Mr. Lang doesn't think so," replied Elfreda.

From that point on the journey was slow and wearisome. No one complained, however, and the ponies with their riders moved through the night like specters of the desert.

The first leaden streaks in the sky in the east next morning found the Overland Riders still a long distance from their objective, the clouds not having darkened the moon as early in the evening as Hi Lang had hoped they might do, thus delaying the start.

"I see nothing to interest us," announced Grace after a survey of the desert with her glasses.

"Neither do I. Reckon that spy will be surprised when he makes his morning call and finds us gone," chuckled the guide. "Yonder are the mountains where we turn in," he added, pointing.

"I thought that was a cloud on the horizon," said Miss Briggs. "How far is it from here?"

"About five miles. We'll be there in two hours. Mrs. Gray, will you use your glasses occasionally as we go ahead? Stop now and then and take your time in making observations. You can catch up with us without straining the pony, I reckon," grinned the guide.

"Don't we stop for breakfast soon?" begged Emma.

"Tighten your belt," answered the guide. "It may be some hours before we can settle down for rest and food."

Emma groaned dismally, and Hippy looked serious. Missing a meal meant taking a good part of the joy of living from his day.

Sweltering heat followed the rising of the sun, and, as it lighted up the desert with its glare, Grace stopped and began her survey of the horizon as requested by the guide. She sat her pony until she had carefully examined it all the way around.

"All clear, so far as I can see, Mr. Lang," she said, riding up to him.

Hi nodded, but made no comment, for he could read the desert better than could Grace Harlowe with her powerful binoculars.

It was eight o'clock in the morning when finally they turned into Forty-Mile Canyon and began picking their way over the rough ground. The desert heat followed them until the walls of the canyon rose sheer for several hundred

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

feet, and they came to a cascade that, falling into the canyon, became a mountain brook. Here there was a marked change in the temperature.

"Dismount and water the horses; then we will press on," directed the guide. "Drink cautiously yourselves. This water is too cold to be gulped down and will chill your blood if you take too much of it. Do not let the ponies have all they want, either."

"You mean to say that we will go on after breakfast, do you not?" questioned Lieutenant Wingate.

"No. We move in ten minutes."

"Humph! France in wartime was living. This is well, I don't believe my vocabulary is quite equal to the occasion," declared Hippy.

"Do we go the entire length of this canyon, Mr. Lang?" asked Grace.

"No. There are several trails leading out of it, but I shall not take the first one. I prefer to take the second or third trail, perhaps just before night. Whoever is interested in us will surely find our trail leading into Forty-Mile Canyon and will follow it, but by the time they reach, say the second turning-off path, the canyon will be as dark as a dungeon. They will then either make camp for the night or turn back, believing that we are going all the way through the canyon."

Elfreda nodded her appreciation of the guide's reasoning.

"With the easier traveling on the desert, which they probably will follow, they will be able to take their time, knowing that they can head us off at the lower end of the canyon. You see, a straight line isn't always the shortest distance between two points so far as time is concerned," smiled Hi Lang.

"But we won't come out at the lower end, eh?" nodded Hippy.

"You said it, Lieutenant."

"I always say something rather brilliant before mess," observed Hippy airily.

"Yes, but after mess you are afflicted with what might be called a 'fat mind,'" interjected Emma Dean.

Hippy grinned and took up another hole in his belt.

From that point on, the ponies traveled in the mountain stream.

"There's no need to be quiet here. Make all the noise you wish," suggested the guide.

"May I scream?" called Emma.

Hi Lang nodded, and Emma uttered a wild cowboy yell which so startled her pony that the little fellow jumped, and, losing his footing on a slippery rock, went down on his nose. Emma landed in the stream, and for a few moments there was excitement among the Overland Riders, Hippy and Grace succeeding in rescuing Emma and holding her pony before serious results could follow. Emma, however, was soaked to the skin; her hair was wet and tumbled, and in a short time her face took on a bluish tinge from her ducking in the icy cold stream.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Serves you right," declared Hippy Wingate. "Anybody who can make a noise like that before breakfast ought to be ducked."

"Were it not that the water is so cold, I should be inclined to agree with you," laughed Grace.

After the girls had walked Emma about to get her blood circulating, a fresh start was made. Thereafter the journey was uninterrupted until darkness began to settle over the canyon. In passing, the guide had pointed out in turn three trails leading up the mountainside, but the Overlanders were unable to see anything that resembled a trail in any one of them. When they reached the fourth trail Hi ordered a halt while he investigated it.

"We shall leave the canyon by this trail. You will have to climb the mountain and lead your ponies," directed the guide on his return. "It will be a hard climb, but it has to be made. I'll lead the way. Dismount and follow me."

Night had fully fallen when, after a desperately hard climb, the top of the mountain was reached. The Overlanders were tired and hungry, but they were not to have their supper yet. Hi pushed deeper into the mountains before he found a place to his liking. Then they had supper and soon after were sound asleep.

Before sunrise the next morning the journey was resumed. Their objective was the Specter Range, still a four-days' journey distant.

When they at last reached the range they pitched their camp on the western edge, overlooking an arid desert to the south, broken mountain ranges in all other directions.

"Did you see any trail marks at the point where we entered the Specters, Mrs. Gray?" asked the guide of Grace.

"No. Should I have seen something?"

"Several horsemen passed that way only a short time before we arrived, but, from the glance I got of the trail, I don't think the fellow who's been dogging us was among them."

"Who could they have been?"

"Wild horse hunters, maybe. There're plenty of them and they're usually a tough bunch. I'll scout about and see what else I can discover."

Mr. Lang discovered nothing of importance, nor was the camp disturbed that night.

Early next morning Grace went out to familiarize herself with their surroundings and also to try to shoot some game, for the party needed fresh meat. She had gone only a short distance when, her gaze focused on a yucca tree ahead. Fastened to the tree was a sheet of paper, evidently recently put there, and on this was a crudely drawn heart with a bullet hole through it. Beneath the heart were scrawled the words:

TAKE NOTICE HI LANG AND YOUR FRESH KIDS!

Grace stared in amazement for a moment, then removed the paper from the tree and flattened it out on a rock. Taking a pencil, she drew a smaller heart below the one already there and filled it in entirely in black. She put the paper back in place and, drawing her revolver, put a bullet hole through the center of the black heart.

"I hope they'll take the hint," she muttered, and turned back toward the camp, knowing that the sound of her shot would cause anxiety.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"What were you shooting at?" cried Hippy, who had started to run toward the sound.

"At a mark," replied Grace truthfully.

"Oh, all right. Breakfast's ready."

Grace went to the stream that flowed from the foot of the waterfall near by. The stream followed a shallow ravine for a short distance then disappeared in a crevice in the rocks. As she was washing her face, Grace straightened up to throw her hair out of the way. She gasped in amazement:

"Gracious, I'm getting nervous! I thought I saw a face peer out from behind the waterfall!"

Hi came in, stating that he had shot a bear.

"It's a small one, and after breakfast I'll have him over here and we'll have bear steak."

"Did you get anything else, Mr. Lang?" asked Elfreda.

"Well, I learned that we were not trailed here, but were headed off. I think that's Alkali Pete's otherwise known as Snake McGlory work. Then, too," and he turned his eyes on Grace, "I saw a black heart."

"A black heart!" was the cry.

After the story was told Anne asked:

"Do you know what it means?"

"No, Mrs. Nesbit. But keep away from the yucca tree. A gun may be trained on the spot. Never be without your weapons in this country," he warned, "and keep eyes and ears open." Then he left them, to go for the bear.

Grace walked to the waterfall with Elfreda.

"Grace Harlowe Gray, I've been studying that map," Elfreda said. "Look here. I think this is the very place meant."

"Oh, Elfreda, I believe you're right!" cried Grace after studying the map, which Elfreda put before her, for a moment. "There's the pyramid rock and the waterfall. Yonder are the three rocks designated as 'the three bears,' and there's the trunk of what was a yucca tree, and the stream disappears just a few yards beyond us 'stream's end,' as it says on the map! Elfreda —"

"Grace, look! A rag doll over there on that boulder!" interrupted Elfreda.

The two girls went over. The doll was soiled, but had evidently not lain out in the weather.

"Shall we take it in?" asked Elfreda.

"No; leave it where the child put it. But we'd better keep watch on the place. It's queer to find a child's toy here, and while it may mean little, it may mean much."

When the two girls returned to camp they found that Hi was just back with the bear.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"Oh, girls! Hippy! Mr. Lang!" and the two in chorus fairly spilled out the story of the face seen by Grace back of the waterfall and the doll and their belief that the map was of the place on which they now camped.

Hi Lang took the map and studied it intently.

"It surely is," he finally announced.

"What does the map mean?" questioned Anne.

"Oh, I guess there'd been rumors of gold or silver, and some one, believing the stories, made a map, maybe by hearsay, maybe at first hand. Maybe he talked too much, and some other fellow knocked him on the head and took it."

"Don't you think there's anything in it?" inquired Emma Dean disappointedly.

"Oh, maybe so, maybe not. Can't say."

After lunch Grace donned hip boots and went down toward the fall. Seeing Elfreda there intent on the map, she announced:

"I'm going wading, Elfreda. Want to come?"

"Emphatically not. Do your boots leak?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," laughed Grace, stepping into the water. "All right, so far," she called, wading toward the fall.

Grace thrust her bare arms through the sheet of water pouring from above, groping for the rocks behind.

Sharp screams, at first loud and piercing, an instant later muffled and seeming far away, brought Elfreda to her feet. Grace was nowhere to be seen.

"Help! Grace has gone in!" shouted Elfreda, plunging into the cold water.

CHAPTER XX. CONCLUSION

Hippy heard. Hi, farther away, heard. Both ran through the bushes. Anne, Nora, and Emma sped to the stream.

Hippy and Elfreda were searching the bottom of the stream, which was not more than three feet deep. Hi stopped them and asked Elfreda to tell what she knew.

"Both hands were thrust through the fall like this," and Elfreda thrust her own hands through the sheet of water. "I was looking at the map when I heard her scream. Looking up, she had disappeared."

Lang nodded and plunged through the waterfall. Those on the outside heard a shot, followed almost instantly by a second one. At the sound Elfreda and Hippy plunged through the fall. Near the base of the fall was no wall of rock behind the water. Instead, a tunnel-like cave led into the mountain. Elfreda gasped and Hippy looked in amazement. Grace lay on the floor of the cave and Hi Lang had a man floundered and was beating him, while a little girl was trying to aid the man by striking Hi over the head and shoulders with a stick.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Wingate snatched the stick from her. The child shrank back, and Hi, realizing that he was going too far, ceased beating the man.

"The fellow struck Mrs. Gray with the butt of a revolver, I reckon, then shot at me. I put a bullet through Ms shoulder and we clinched. How's Mrs. Gray, Miss Briggs?"

"I'll have her around in a few minutes," answered Elfreda confidently. "Who's the man and what is he?"

"Some crazy loon. Strong as a giant, too. Here, you!" to the child reaching toward the man's revolver that lay on the floor. "I'll take that. Is this man your father?"

The child nodded.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Lindy Silver."

"He grabbed my hands and jerked me into the cave. Then he struck me," explained Grace, who had opened her eyes and now sat up.

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Hi, jerking the man to his feet.

At Hi Lang's suggestion, Hippy and the two girls went up to the camp. It was an hour later when the guide joined them.

"The fellow's name is not Silver. He's Steve Carver," Hi informed his hearers. "He's loony. He didn't say so, but he thinks he has a claim that's valuable. He declared, too, that we're here to rob him and threatened to get us if we didn't move on at once."

"Was it he who put the paper on the yucca tree?" questioned Elfreda.

"No, he didn't do that."

"Then we have other foes," said Grace slowly.

"What a shame to let Lindy live like a wild animal," broke in Elfreda.

"Perhaps we can do something for her," responded Grace.

Just then a revolver, fired close at hand, sent a bullet a few inches from Nora's head. Then came a rattling fire of rifle shots. The rifle bullets were going high, possibly due to the fact that they were being fired from a point higher than the camp.

The men, armed only with revolvers, had gone from the camp at the revolver shot.

"Quick, Elfreda!" cried Grace. "Rifles and ammunition for all. For Hi and Hippy, too. We're being attacked!"

"Him come along," chirped Ping Wing, trotting up to Elfreda with a rifle in either hand and two belts of ammunition.

"Take them to the men," ordered Elfreda.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

Grace took command of her Overland Riders and placed them at advantageous points out of sight behind rocks and bushes. From her own position Grace saw a head and a pair of shoulders above them on the ridge and a rifle aimed toward the spot where Anne was stationed.

Before the fellow could fire there was a report near at hand.

"Got him!" exclaimed the guide.

"Now we'll get it!" muttered Grace.

They did. Bullets from the ridge above them rained on the foliage and the rocks about the campers, but so far none was hurt, though they could tell that several of the attackers received bullet wounds when raising their own rifles in order to fire.

Creeping closer to Hi Lang, Grace held a whispered consultation, suggesting to him that they try to flank their opponents and to drive them toward the camp where it would be possible to capture them. This was agreed to, but at Elfreda's suggestion they decided to wait until darkness fell.

When night came there was shooting from the ridge, but the return fire came only from one rifle, that of Ping Wing. Even this ceased in about half an hour, but by that time the Overlanders met in the rear of the party on the ridge. Here they spread out and began to move cautiously toward the camp, hoping to come upon their attackers, either singly or together, and drive them before them.

Grace had gone a short distance when she saw a man rise suddenly about ten feet in front of her. Without a sound she rose and, slipping her revolver to her left hand, grasped her lasso with her right. It was a true throw, and the rope fell over the man's shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. Without a moment's hesitation, the girl snubbed the lasso about a tree and, holding it firmly, fired three signal shots into the air.

The man was heavy, and the best Grace could do was to keep the rope taut, taking up the slack when the fellow tried to roll toward her to loosen the strain.

"I'll get you for this!" raged the ruffian.

"Keep quiet or I'll get you first."

Rifles began to bang toward the camp. Three sides were engaged, so it seemed to Grace, judging by the sound. What was the meaning of that?

The sound of voices presently reached her ears. The prisoner heard, too, and began, to stir.

"Keep quiet!" ordered Grace. "One sound from you and I will shoot. Understand?"

"Yes," he muttered, and sank back.

Grace strained her ears. Were the men of her party or of that of the roped villain? To her relief the men apparently only two of them passed by without discovering her and her prisoner, and he, intimidated, kept quiet.

Suddenly a loud, penetrating "Coo-e-e-e-e!" woke the echoes of the mountains. It was the call of the cowboy, a friendly, thrilling sound.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

A moment of silence, then "Overla-a-a-and!"

"Overla-a-a-and!" cried Grace joyfully. "Careful, man. I can yell and shoot at the same time," she told her prisoner, who had moved.

Two men came running over the rocks.

"Mrs. Gray!" shouted the guide.

"Here! Careful! I have a prisoner!"

"Hullo, kid," cried a familiar voice.

"That's Bud Thomas's voice! The man who gave me this lasso," answered Grace, laughing joyously, if a bit hysterically.

"Sure, it's me. And a lot of the other boys!"

The two men came over to Grace's side.

"Hello, kid. You're a smart one. That fellow's Snake McGlory, the hombre we boys came out to get."

The fighting was over, for the members of McGlory's gang, for such they were, were captured, some of them wounded.

"Steve Carver got his," said Lang, on the way back to camp, the two men seeing that McGlory went quietly. "He was the fellow who shot at us and some of this man's gang got him, probably thinking he was one of our outfit."

"Oh, poor little Lindy!" murmured Grace.

Back at the camp Grace had to tell her story.

"And I caught him because you boys gave me that lasso. Wasn't I thankful that I had the rope and had learned to use it! But how did you boys happen to come along?"

It seemed, according to Bud's story, that Belle Bates, the wife of the bandit whom Grace had wounded when he attacked the Overland Riders on the Apache Trail the summer before was the sister of Snake McGlory. It was she, bent on vengeance, who had instigated the trailing of the party and the attack on them. Snake and his gang were delighted with their task. Through a girl of Shoshone Pete's whom Belle liked and confided in, the cowboys had learned of the plan and set forth to prevent its accomplishment.

The prisoners were taken to the county seat, and in time received prison sentences for their many crimes in the countryside.

Hi Lang spent some hours in the cave, and when he came back told the girls that Carver had not been "loony" after all, for in the cave he found silver, and, time proved, a considerable vein.

Lindy grieved over her father's death. But the Overland Riders took her in charge, first registering the mine in her name, inducing Hi Lang to see to it that it was later worked. The child was sent to school, the Overland Riders being appointed her guardians by the court.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert

"But now we are to head for home," said Grace, leaning over her camp outfit.

"Ping Wing is pleased over that prospect. Listen to his song," laughed Elfreda.

All stopped their work to watch the Chinaman pack his stores, singing as he did so:

"Supposey you makee listen to my singee one piecee sing.
Me makee he first—chop fashion, about the glate Ping Wing;
He blavest man in desert side, or any side about;
Me bettee you five dolla', HAI! ha blavest party out."

THE END