



TRAILS' END

AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

SECOND INSTALLMENT

OPIS—Three weeks after a colored roadster had been wrecked in the sea at the foot of a girl calling herself Anne...

glimpse was only a glimpse, as quickly as it had come, and gave a jolt of protest and a look of obliqueness from the road...

hills were coming closer and a rise of land began to be spotted with dwarf evergreens...

He sighted Anne White, even teeth flashed. "All ready for action? Come along, and I'll show you the estate."

"Don't see why they shouldn't," he agreed calmly. "There's plenty to eat, and we can keep two men busy until supper time. Boone, you take these things out, and I'll show you where they go. And then you might clean out the stove—it'll need it—and lay a fire for me. Barney, suppose you show Miss Cushing around and tell her about things. And you might take a look at the well, and see if it needs cleaning out."

Anne listened to them, eyes alight with laughter. "Tell me when I can help. I'm not going to be a drone, you know. But I want to see what the house is like, first. Coming?"

The room wasn't bad at all. The bare floors needed scrubbing, but there was a generous stone fireplace with some glinting quartz surfaces, and a long mantel above it formed of a single cedar slab. The time-darkened beams were hand-hewn, and if the few pieces of furniture were heavy and primitive, that had she known it, was something to give thanks for.

now." He lingered in the doorway. "I'll do a chore or two for Martha before she gets after me, and then if you're ready, we can take a look around. Or perhaps you'd rather unpack first."

He went, but with a backward look. Interested and not a little puzzled. He knew that the girls of his own generation did practically what they pleased, but they didn't usually please to bury their talents in humdrum and unspectacular farm work. Perhaps it was just a whim, or a let-down after a love affair, or—Oh, damn it, what business was it of his, anyway? He went to find Martha Larrabee.

Left to herself, Anne grimaced frankly at the slightly dingy look of her new quarters, and blessed Martha's stern creed of soap and water. She slipped into a pair of smart sport shoes and hurried out. "Mrs. Larrabee, I can't ask two perfect strangers to do all my work for me. It's awfully nice of them to be willing, but it's really too much."

"My name's Martha," said that capable woman composedly. "and don't you worry about the work. It won't hurt them. Besides, they'd want to anyway. It's only neighborly. Now you run along and tell Barry to show you around, but before he goes he might as well help Boone out with that table. I thought we might have supper early, and eat it outdoors."

"An Indian," said Barry Duane, "would feed a tribe on what a Simpson wastes. A primitive damn out there and some irrigation ditches on each side would add acres to this place. But try to make them do it."

"Why, I think it sounds exciting." "Yes, it's exciting enough." He broke off with an apologetic grin. "Don't let me get started. It's a hobby of mine. Come on, let's go up to that knoll. You will get a good view down your little valley and a nice glimpse of some aspens on the other side. When they turn in the autumn that upper slope is like running gold."

That had been hours ago. They had eaten picnic fashion, with zestful appetite and in the open air. Strange that it should seem so natural! They had talked of deserts and of deep bosomed hills, of the temperamental habits of the dry, sandy washes in the season of rains. Of everything, in fact, except the reason why a girl with beautiful hands and the smart tailoring of expensive city shops should have elected to live on a little ranch in an isolated valley.

it in. Back of the ridges tall peaks loomed darkly, mysterious in moonlight. Trail's End. She wondered if it would be.

She had learned that "home" for Barry was rather high up in the hills. She wondered if he had always lived there. He must have been away to school. He didn't talk like the others—She liked him.

"Nothing that plain, ordinary hard work and a little backbone won't bring up again," said Martha bluntly. "There's a home and a reasonable livin' on it, and in good years there ought to be a little over to tuck in the bank."

"And if you ever get tired of ranchin', I guess you wouldn't have any trouble turnin your money over. Anybody could easily turn it into a dude ranch, and I guess there's a rinch men and women that would like it just for the shootin' and fishin' back in the hills. Now I'm on my way to bed. We've got to get up early tomorrow morning."

"The firm step retreated. Anne was alone again, and thoughtful. Home and a living. It was curious how precious that seemed now. Hidden away in her smaller suitcase there was still a little store of bills in that golden bag, bated and yet miraculous. Enough to buy some needed things for her ranchito, and a little in reserve. Always in reserve, if by any chance disaster should pursue her even here, and the need for flight should come suddenly.

"Hire me!" she whispered fiercely. "Hold me and hide me until no one remembers my face!" A memory stung her like a nettle. She shook it off, abruptly and jumped to her feet.

Four days had passed since Anne had arrived at this tucked away, neglected ranch of hers, four days of almost unremitting work which had sent her to bed with every muscle protesting and had swept her in five minutes into dreamless sleep.

Barry Duane, what are you doing?" "Oh, hello!" He turned with a guilty grin. "Do you mind having visitors at this hour? I thought I'd bring a pinto down and ask you to exercise him occasionally. His name is Comet. It's a great riding country around here. I know some pretty good trails."

"You better go to bed. You look mighty near done out to me." "Just lazy. You've done wonders of your time and Petry's, and hammered and dug and sawed, and made special trips to Marston on errands that I ought to have looked after myself, and even brought things down from your own ranch, but when it comes to taking your saddle horses—"

"Don't you like him?" "Of course I like him. He's a darling." "Then he's yours. And don't think that you are getting anything very great, because I have a hundred more running loose. Comet, come and make friends with your new boss."

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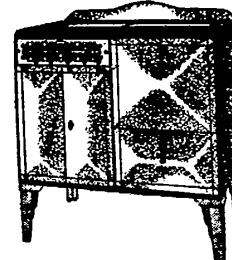
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