

**VIRGINIA OF V. M.
RANCH**

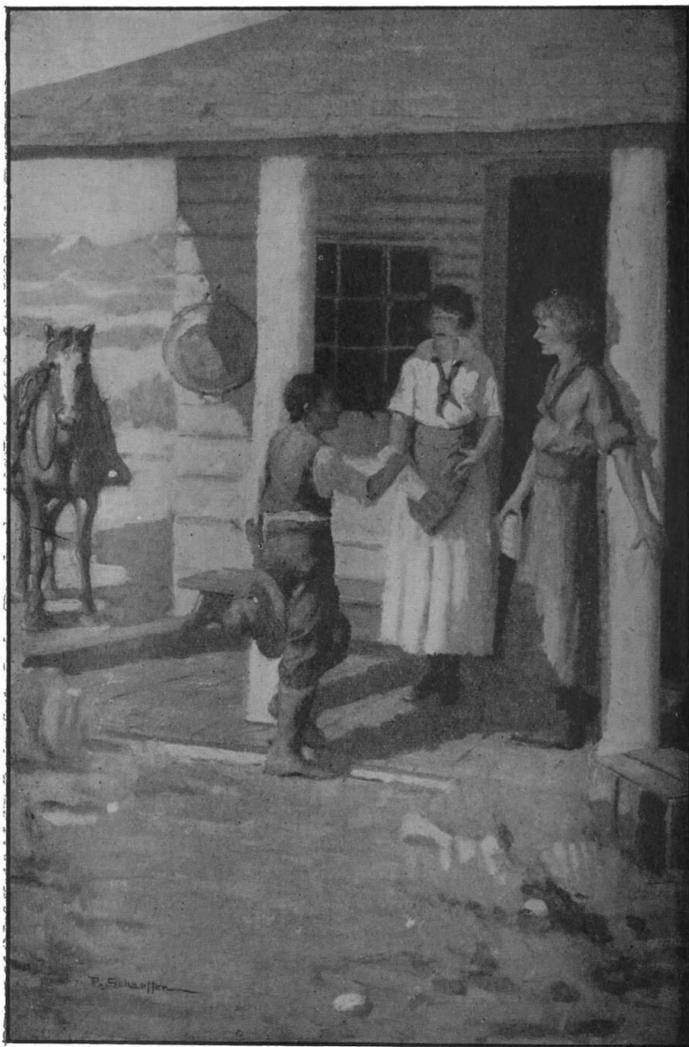
By GRACE MAY NORTH

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AN EARLY MORNING RIDE
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TOM'S RETURN



He removed his gayly adorned peaked hat and took from it a letter, which he handed to Virginia.

DEDICATED TO

VIRGINIA DAVIS
MARGARET SELOVER
BARBARA BLAIR WENTE

And to all other girls in their teens
who like adventure and the desert.

VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH

CHAPTER I—VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH.

Down a winding mountain trail, a girl of sixteen was riding on Comrade, her wiry red-brown pony.

It was a glorious morning. The sky above was a gleaming cloudless blue, the desert, below, stretching to the far horizon, shimmered white in the sunlight, while some bird in a canon near was caroling a tipsy song of joy, but these things Virginia Davis did not see or hear, for her eyes were gazing at the rugged trail and her thoughts were puzzling over the contents of a letter which her brother Malcolm had brought to her that morning when he had returned from the town of Douglas which was twenty miles away.

Her father's best friend had died the year before, and had left a motherless girl all alone in the world. When Mr. Selover realized that he had not long to live he had written Mr. Davis asking him to become the guardian of his daughter, Margaret, who was then in a select boarding school in the East.

In some unaccountable manner, the letter had been delayed for many months, and during that time, Mr. Davis had also died, leaving Virginia and Malcolm as sole owners of the vast cattle ranch which was known as "The V. M."

This morning Virginia had ridden to the top of the trail where she often went when she wanted to be alone with her thoughts, for the long delayed letter had indeed brought a new problem to these two young people.

This unknown Margaret Selover, it seemed, was their father's ward. Ought they not to assume the responsibility which he would so gladly have taken had he lived? And yet, what if the girl should prove to be very unlike themselves? She might not care to make her home on their wonderful desert, and, if she did not, would it be right for them to take her from an environment in which she was happy and content? But how could they tell, since they did not know her?

Comrade had carefully wended his way down the mountain trail and had carried his young mistress, who was deeply absorbed in thought, across the dry creek, under a clump of cottonwood trees and up the steep farther bank before the girl looked about her with eyes that saw.

Her brother was galloping toward her. "Ho, Virginia!" he hailed as he waved his wide sombrero. "Did your Inspiration Peak help you to solve our problem? What are we to do with our ward?"

The girl flashed a smile at the lad, whose frank, bronzed face resembled her own, for, though he was two years her senior, twins could not have been more alike or dearer to each other.

"If only we knew what type of a girl this Margaret is," his sister replied as he wheeled his horse about and rode by her side, "we could so much more easily decide upon a plan. I did indeed receive an inspiration, but one hard to carry out I fear. I have been wishing that in some way we might become acquainted with our ward without having her know who we are."

“You are right, sister,” Malcolm said seriously. “I do not wish to invite this unknown girl to share our home unless I am convinced that your life will be made happier by the companionship. Our father would not wish it otherwise. Now tell me your plan.”

Virginia looked at her brother with unexpected laughter in her violet-blue eyes. “It is one by which we could become acquainted with our ward without revealing to her our true identity. Harken and you shall hear.”

Malcolm’s hearty laughter rang out when the half serious, half merry plan had been told.

“If only we can persuade Uncle Tex to play the role of elderly guardian,” he exclaimed. “I am sure that your little drama, when staged, will bring about the desired results, but, knowing our faithful old overseer as well as I do, I fear that we may have a tragedy, or a comedy, which perhaps would be equally disastrous.”

Virginia’s amused expression had changed to one of serious concern. “Brother,” she said, “if we do carry out my plan, will it be quite honest to Margaret?”

“Not right in the beginning I must confess,” Malcolm replied, “but, of course, we will at once tell her the truth, if, after meeting her, we decided to invite her to become one of our household, but, on the contrary, if we find that she would not wish to share our home, she would, of course, return to the school where she has been for so many years. We will at least have tried to do our duty as we see it.”

“Then shall I write the letter?” the violet eyes turned questioningly.

“Yes, that will be the prologue to the little drama. Rusty Pete is going to Silver Creek Junction this afternoon and he will start the message on its eastward journey.”

Again Malcolm’s amused laughter rang out. “It will be better not to let Uncle Tex know that we have designs upon him,” he said, “for, if he has an inkling, even, that we are going to request him to do a bit of ‘play actin’ as he would call it, he will start at once for the mountain cabin, the location of which we have never been able to discover.”

Their low rambling ranch house having been reached, Virginia leaped to the ground, tossing the reins to her brother, who, still chuckling to himself, rode on down to the corral where an old, white-haired man could be seen repairing a fence.

CHAPTER II—MARGARET.

Barbara Blair Went in the Vine Haven Seminary looked up from the cosy window seat where she was comfortably curled, studying French verbs, when she heard the door open. It was Margaret Selover, her room-mate, who entered.

“Megsy,” Babs exclaimed with real concern as she sprang to her feet and approached her friend with hands outstretched, “what has happened, dear? Are the algebra reports in and didn’t you pass, or, is it something else?”

The newcomer looked at Barbara with eyes tear-brimmed. She tried to speak but her lips quivered; then, flinging herself down upon the couch, she sobbed as though her heart would break.

Babs, deeply concerned, knelt by the side of her room-mate, and tenderly smoothing the gold-brown curls, she pleaded. “Tell me, Megsy darling, can’t I help?”

Impulsively Margaret sat up, and, putting her arms about her friend she sobbed. “Oh Babs, I can’t do it! I won’t do it! I did think that my dad loved me too much to punish me so.”

“Can’t, won’t do what?” Barbara sat on the couch and drew her room-mate comfortingly close. “Megsy, please begin at the beginning.”

Margaret put her hand in a pocket of her rose-colored sweater-coat and drew out a crumpled letter.

"It's from some-one way out on that terrible Arizona desert," she said, "and it informs me that my father appointed a Mr. Davis as my guardian and that the elderly gentleman, having given the matter due thought, believes that it is time for me to come to his home and take the place that my father wished me to occupy, that of a rancher's adopted daughter."

Barbara gazed at her friend, almost unable to comprehend. "Megsy, does this mean that you and I are to be parted? That you are to leave Vine Haven Seminary forever?"

For a brief moment Margaret sat as though stunned, but her room-mate's words roused her to action. Springing up in a sudden tempest of anger, she tore across the room, threw open the desk and began to write rapidly.

"There!" she exclaimed a few moments later. "I have written my answer."

"Read it," Barbara begged, and in a hard cold voice, very unlike her own, that was merry and musical, Margaret read:

"My Dear Mr. Davis:—

"You undoubtedly have written with the kindest of motives, but the picture you present is not in the least attractive to me. A ranch house on a desolate desert twenty miles from town is not a home which I wish to enter.

"It is better for me to be honest and tell you at once that I do not care to be your adopted daughter. I have a sufficient income on which to live and I shall remain at Vine Haven

Seminary until I have graduated. Soon after that I will be eighteen and you will no longer be responsible for my actions.”

Barbara listened and watched, puzzled indeed at this new Margaret. “Dear,” she said when her friend paused, evidently expecting comment, “it is very unlike you to hurt anyone. Couldn’t you add a little something that would soften the sting?”

With a shrug Margaret turned back to the desk and after a thoughtful moment, she again wrote a few lines. Then in a voice more like her own, she read:—“Since you were a close friend of my father, I regret that I must make a decision that may seem defiant, but surely you would not wish to have in your home a rebellious daughter and that is what I would be.

“Sincerely yours,
“MARGARET SELOVER.”

Without waiting for further comment, the letter was sealed and stamped.

“I hope you are doing right, dear,” Barbara said; then, almost tearfully: “If you do go so far away, Vine Haven will be more desolate to me than the desert.”

“I’m not going!” Margaret remarked conclusively, then, springing up, she added. “Three bells! Time for French class and I haven’t even looked at those verbs.”

Together they left their room and descended the wide flight of stairs. “I’ll skip ahead and put this letter in the mail pouch,” Margaret declared; then, somewhat repentantly: “Really, Babs,

I am sorry to hurt the feelings of the old man. Father often told me how much he admired Mr. Davis who was many years his senior. They owned some mining property together near Bisbee. In fact, I believe that my income is derived from that same copper mine even now. Well, someday soon I'll send him another and a kindlier letter, but there isn't time today, and he will, of course, be watching for an answer."

But before the other letter was written, something very unexpected happened.

CHAPTER III—MARGARET'S REPLY.

Virginia was right in believing that she would receive a reply from their unknown ward as soon as one could possibly reach them. She had counted the days that her own letter would require for its journey east, and then had allowed one in between, and so, at last, the day had dawned when she might reasonably expect to hear from the unknown Margaret.

Luckily Rusty Pete was in town and would bring the mail if there was any. Virginia, as she went about her household tasks that morning, skipped often to the wide front veranda and looked up the mesa. A huge cactus growing at the top of the trail stood like a silent sentinel and around this a horse and rider soon appeared.

As the girl hoped, it was one of their two faithful cow-boys. "Good morning, Rusty Pete," she called, as he rode alongside of the wide, shady porch. "Have you letters for me?"

"I reckon I have, Miss Virginia. 'Pears to me a couple is stowed away somewhar's." As he spoke, the cow-boy thrust a lean, brown hand into his deep leather pocket, then, with a sudden smile that wonderfully illumined his rugged wind and sun bronzed face, he removed his wide sombrero and drew forth two letters that were very unlike each other in appearance.

"Didn't pack the pouch 'long this time," he explained, "so put 'em thar for safe keepin'."

The girl laughed. "Thank you, Rusty Pete," she said, and then the long, lank cow-boy rode on toward the corral.

After glancing at the name in the upper left hand corner of the lilac scented and tinted envelope, Virginia uttered a little excited ejaculation, and, catching her wide hat from the top step, she raced down the trail to the fenced-in enclosure where Malcolm was busy filling the trough near the windmill for the yearlings were soon to be driven in from the range.

"What ho?" he called when he saw the figure flying toward him. The girl waved the two unopened letters and Malcolm, equally interested, vaulted the bars and stood at her side.

"Has our ward written?" he inquired merrily. "Is she eager to be the adopted daughter of an elderly rancher?"

There was a shade of anxiety in the violet eyes that were lifted to him. "Brother," she said, "I wonder if we did wrong to deceive Margaret. Of course it was merely to be a temporary arrangement. If she comes, Uncle Tex is to play the role of elderly guardian, that is, if he can be persuaded to do so, then you, as cow-boy, and I, as housekeeper, will have a splendid opportunity to become acquainted with our ward and find out what manner of girl she really is."

While Virginia had been talking, she had opened the tinted envelope. One glance at the very short note and her merry laughter pealed forth.

"Brother, Margaret actually refuses to come. Well, we surely may thank whatever kindly fate has delivered us from having

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