

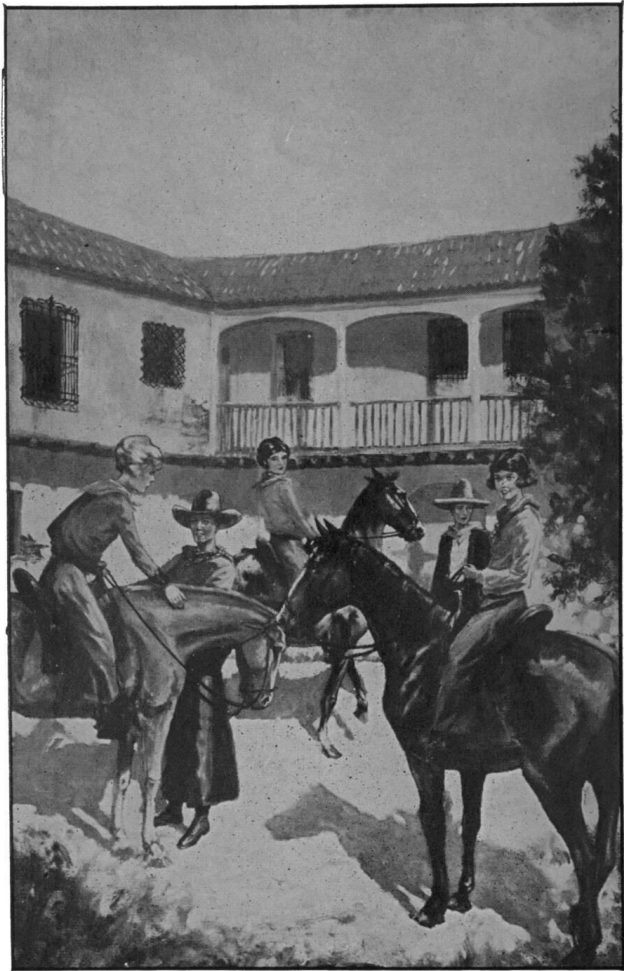
VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS

By GRACE MAY NORTH

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They were entering the door-yard where a cowboy advanced to take their ponies.

VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS

CHAPTER I

HOME ONCE MORE

“Oh Virg, are we really to arrive at your desert home this morning?” Betsy Clossen exclaimed the first moment that she opened her eyes on the fifth day after their departure from the Vine Haven Boarding School.

“Not until nearly noon,” Virginia, who was dressing in the lower berth, smiled up at the eager face that peered down from the upper.

“And will your nice brother Malcolm be there to meet us, do you suppose?”

“I certainly hope so. I wired him from Chicago that we were to be on this train. If he can’t come himself, for any reason, he will surely send Lucky over with the car.”

“That’s one disillusioning thing about the desert,” Betsy continued. “I’m powerfully sorry that you have an automobile. It’s heaps too modern. I wish we were to be met with a—well a prairie schooner or something like that.”

Virg laughed. “I’m afraid you are going to be disappointed in us, Betsy. You’ll find V. M. really quite tame if you have been reading Wild West stories.” Then Margaret said quietly to her berth companion, “I do wish something exciting would happen the moment we arrive, don’t you, Virg?”

The older girl smiled but shook her sunny head. "No need to wish for that these days, dear. Life in Arizona is not nearly as thrilling as it is in the city of New York, if one can believe the newspapers."

"Don't tell Betsy, for if she thinks it is to be too commonplace, it will take all the thrill of expectancy out of it for her. You know she is never really enjoying herself unless there is a mystery to unravel or some adventure awaiting her."

Fifteen minutes later the four girls were in the dining car.

Betsy beamed on her companions. The early morning sun falling on her red-brown hair made it shine like burnished gold.

"Even your freckles look gilded this morning," Barbara teased.

The pug nose of the youngest wrinkled at her tormentor, then with an excited little squeal she exclaimed, "Oh, isn't the desert just gloriously lonesome looking? Those mountains over there are so bleak and gray and the canons so dark! I can't see a living thing anywhere, can you?"

Margaret, being questioned, peered out at the wide sandy waste of desert stretching to the distant mountains that rose grim, gray and forbidding. Here and there a clump of greasewood or of mesquite was half buried in mounds of sand that the frequent whirlwinds had left.

Betsy shivered. "Girls," she said solemnly, "the very scene teems with mystery. I just feel sure that an exciting adventure is about to begin at most any moment. The setting is perfect for one. I'm going to watch that sandhill over there as long as it's in

sight. I expect to see a Mexican bandit peer around it and utter a shrill cry which will mean—”

“Do the young ladies wish oatmeal this morning?” It was the suave waiter who had interrupted, and although the girls gave their orders with solemn faces, they laughed merrily when they were again alone.

“It’s too bad to disappoint you, Betsy, but that’s about the way all of your hoped-for adventures will end,” Virginia told her friend.

The four girls, Virginia Davis, the seventeen-year-old mistress of V. M. Ranch and her adopted sister, Margaret Selover, who was sixteen, their neighbor, Barbara Blair Wentz, also sixteen, and Virginia’s guest, Betsy Clossen, who as yet was but fifteen, had traveled from Vine Haven, where they had been attending boarding school for the past year.

Although the other three girls were well acquainted with the Arizona desert, Betsy Clossen had never been west of Chicago. However, she had often frequented that big city, as she had many others in the east, for her father was a famous detective who was often following clues that led him from Chicago to New York, and, at first, not wanting to be parted from his motherless little girl, he had taken her with him, but at last, believing that he was doing the child an injustice, he had placed her in the Vine Haven boarding school, where she had since remained, making friends of all whom she met. The years she had spent as her father’s close companion had given her an insight into the ways of unraveling mysteries and the game had fascinated her adventure-loving nature.

To the great amusement of the girls she was always trying to imagine a mystery that she might solve it, but in the past year she had twice failed while two of her comrades who had no such ambition had been successful, and so, no wonder was it that Betsy looked forward to the desert as a place where she would surely find a mystery to solve.

Virginia, who had been born on the V. M. Ranch, which was twenty miles from the town of Douglas, and who had lived there all her seventeen years, was indeed overjoyed because she was returning to the home she so loved, to her very dear brother Malcolm Davis and to old Uncle Tex, who, when he was younger, had been the foreman of V. M.

The father of Barbara Wente had recently purchased the Dartley Ranch which was four miles north of V. M. This he had given to his son Peyton. Barbara had learned that the old house was interesting, but she had never seen it as, with the other girls, she had left almost at once after the deal had been completed, for the school in the east.

“What do you think, Virg?” Babs chattered as the four girls with their hats on and their bags ready, sat peering ahead, “Peyton wrote in his very last letter that he hasn’t even opened the old ranch house yet. He is leaving it for us to do.”

“I adore old houses,” Betsy began, when Virginia exclaimed as she pointed out the windows. “See that dark hole in the mountain just ahead of us?” The others leaned forward to look.

“Oh, good!” Margaret exclaimed. “It’s the last tunnel, and Silver Creek station is just beyond.” Megsy turned toward her

adopted sister, a flushed eagerness betraying the excitement she felt. "Just think, Virg, in ten minutes we are to see Malcolm."

Betsy uttered a little excited squeal as the train plunged into the darkness of the tunnel.

"Virg, isn't this a thrilling moment," Barbara whispered, "not being sure who is to be at the other end?"

Sunlight again flashed into the car windows. Virginia stooped and looked out. "There's the little old station that's the only house for miles and miles around, but I don't see anyone on the platform except the old man who lives there. Wonder what has happened?"

Mr. Wells, the Silver Creek station master, hurried forward when he saw that the limited was slowing down. It never stopped unless it had passengers. When the four girls alighted, the tallest placed her bags on the platform and went toward the weather-tanned middle aged man with hands outstretched. "Oh, Mr. Wells," she exclaimed, and her voice betrayed her anxiety, "why isn't my brother here to meet me, or Uncle Tex or one of the boys? I sent them a telegram. Didn't you get it?"

The small boy, Davie, who had a front tooth missing, had come running up from somewhere. "Yes'm, Miss Virginia," he said breathlessly, "I took the telegram over to V. M. two days ago jest as soon as Pa give it to me. Mis' Mahoy was all the folks I could find. The men was out riding the range. She said they seemed to be huntin' for something. She didn't know what, but

they acted mighty puzzlin'. Uncle Tex, though, he was 'spected back that night or the next."

The girls had gathered around, listening, when suddenly the boy, who felt very important, as he was the center of attention, suddenly leaped across the platform and looked toward the north. "Pa," he shouted, "see that dust cloud a-comin'? D'y 'spose it's a stampede or suthin'? D'y 'spose—"

"I do believe it's our automobile." Virginia shaded her eyes to gaze through the dazzling sunshine. It was indeed, but it was approaching in such a zig-zag manner that even Mr. Wells was puzzled.

"I reckon the fellar at the steerin' gear is plumb beat out. I figger that thar car's sort o' runnin' itself," he speculated.

The watchers were convinced that this was true for as the cloud of sand cleared away, they could see the big seven passenger car that belonged to the V. M. Ranch, but the driver was neither Lucky nor Malcolm.

"It can't be Uncle Tex, for he doesn't know how to drive," Virginia had just said, when Margaret exclaimed, "But it is Uncle Tex, and he certainly doesn't know how to drive. Oh, Virg, did you see the lunge he took just then? I do believe he is going right over the tracks and down into the dry creek instead of coming this way."

"Mighty-tighty!" The station master's favorite expletive expressed his consternation. "Cain't nuthin' be done to head him off? I dunno a tarnel thing about them pesky iron-bronchos."

Virginia had caught one glance of the driver's face as the front wheel had struck a hummock of sand, causing the car to swerve. If it should cross the tracks, it would plunge over the steep bank and crash down among the huge rocks on the bed of the dry creek.

Leaping from the platform Virginia shouted, "Uncle Tex, stop the car!"

Luckily it had slowed considerably since the sand, through which it was ploughing, was deep and soft. Virginia sprang upon the running board, leaned over and shut off the gas.

"Uncle Tex," she cried, "why did you risk your life that way?" The old man removed his sombrero and was mopping his brow. "I dunno, Miss Virginia, dearie, I foresee, now, I orter not have done it, but it allays looked plumb easy, and when thar wan't no one else to come an' meet yo' all, I jest figgered as I'd take a chance."

The girl got in the car and skillfully brought it alongside the platform. Then, leaping out, she began stowing the bags in back, while Margaret and Babs welcomed the old man, who found, when he tried to stand that his knees were "plumb beat out." Betsy was introduced, then Virginia asked, "Why didn't Malcolm come?"

Uncle Tex looked quickly around to be sure that Mr. Wells was out of hearing, then he said softly, "I cain't be tellin' ye, least-wise, not here, Miss Virginia, dearie. Malcolm said, 'Keep it dark.' He's all right, though. You needn't be fearin' as to that."

Betsy had heard enough of this conversation to be tingling with curiosity and excitement. It certainly did sound to her as though there was both mystery and adventure awaiting them, nor was she wrong.

CHAPTER II

HUNTING THE SURPRISE

With Virginia at the wheel, the seven passenger car kept on the well-beaten road that extended from the Silver Creek Junction to the V. M. Ranch.

Uncle Tex sat beside the girl whom he so loved and the three on the rear seat often sent smiling glances, one to another, as they noticed his pride in his "gal's" skillful driving.

"Seems powerful pleasin' to have yo-all back, Miss Virginia dearie," the old man said as the car began the ascent of the mesa road.

The girl at the wheel flashed him a bright smile. "Oh, but it's good to be home. I can hardly wait to reach the top of the trail." Then glancing back over her shoulder, she called "Betsy, in just another moment you are to behold the nicest spot on earth, or, at least, it is to me." Then chancing to recall something, she inquired "Uncle Tex, I'm just ever so curious to know what the surprise is that you have for me. May I have three guesses?"

She and Malcolm as children had always had three guesses whenever the old man had brought them a treasure from out on the range. Then, when they had guessed, they searched through his many pockets to find it. The weather-tanned face wrinkled in an amused smile. "I reckon 'twould take more'n three guesses, Miss Virginia, this time, I reckon 'twould, an' even then, 'twon't be found in my pocket nowise."

“Oho, that’s a hint. It’s something big!” Then over her shoulder. “Girls, help guess. Megsy, you and Babs have lived with me at V. M., so you might perhaps, think what Uncle Tex has planned for my surprise.”

“Maybe it’s a new hen-corral,” Margaret suggested. “I remember one twilight last year when I went out to get the eggs, and found a coyote in the hen house, Uncle Tex said the very first thing he was going to do after we left was to build stronger fences.”

The pleased grin on the old man’s face was evident even to the girls on the back seat. “Ah was messin’ round fixin’ that fence long fore yo-all’s train hit the big city, I reckon, but that guess missed the heifer, so coil yer rope and throw again.”

Betsy chuckled. She was delighted with the old man, not only because he was such an interesting character but also because he was lovable.

“Hm’ let me see!” Babs pretended to think hard. “I recall now that Virginia wished she had a pond near the wind mill so that she might keep ducks.”

“Oh, but Uncle Tex wrote me that he had made a duck pond for me just as soon as spring rains were over, so that can’t be it.”

The old man’s head was shaking. “Yo-all ain’t teched it yet,” he was saying, when Virg uttered a little cry of joy. “Look ahead, Betsy, quick, if you want to get the very first glimpse of V. M.”

The little maid on the back seat stood up and peered between the two in front as the car reached the edge of the plateau nearest the ranch.

There in the valley was the big rambling low-built adobe house, beyond it were the bunk houses, the hen yard, the wrangling corral, the pens for the cattle that needed temporary sheltering, the small adobe house nearer the dry creek bottom in which lived the Mahoys, and towering above them all was the huge red windmill, the great wings of which were slowly turning in the gentle breeze that was blowing from the west.



There in the valley was the big rambling low-built adobe house.

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