

TRAILS' END



AGNES LOUISE FROST

SEVENTH INSTALLMENT

She caught her breath sharply as the realization pressed home. There was no telephone at Trail's End. No car. Martha could do nothing, unless she could catch and saddle one of the old horses and find her way to Eagle's Perch.

A chill wind sent the tree tops whispering. Anne shivered and began looking around for a sheltered spot in which to spend the night.

On her left, half-way up the slope, there was a dark blotch which looked like a clump of close-growing evergreens. She made her way toward them cautiously.

There was a tiny clear space inside, shut in and ringed around by those shaggy branches.

One might even feel around for a comparatively soft spot and lie down, curled into a snug ball. Anything for rest.

Little by little, sheer weariness overcame her. The rustling sounds of the night lost their menace, and grew fainter and fainter. Anne slept.

It was not a peaceful sleep. Now and then she stirred restlessly tossed, sighed, and lay still again. A voice drifted down on the wind, calling "Anne! Anne!" but she did not hear it. From somewhere in the distance came a faint crack of sound, and from somewhere nearer by a single shot rang clear.

The sharp sound brought her to her feet, stumbling with sleep and fatigue. Another sound was beating lightly and steadily against her ears. The click of a horse's hoofs on rock. Going away from her!

"Anne! Anne!"

"I'm coming! Barry!" She began to run, slipping and sliding down the slope, smooth with fallen pine needles, forgetful of the impetus of her own rush and the sheer-dropping ledge at the foot.

That was when Barry saw her. There were, after all, to be more poignant moments in Barry Duane's life, but none that could so shrink time into its racing seconds.

Through the scattered pines he had caught sight of a small running figure, racing in headlong haste down a slippery incline. Going too fast, if she were going to pull up well inside the ledge . . . God! if she should go over!

His heart seemed to stand still as Captain's long legs pounded over the intervening space. He put Captain to the very edge, thrusting in between. Barry heard her say "Oh!" in a horrified voice, and caught her with one arm as he swung down.

"Anne, darling!"

"Oh, Barry!" she clung to him, jurying her face tightly against his shoulder. "I knew you would come soon!"

"Of course I'd come. There, it's all over."

"But I—I forgot the ledge, and then I couldn't stop. Only I'd been asleep, and I woke up and heard you going on—"

"I know. But you're safe now, precious. Everything's all right. Everything—"

He had both arms around her now. For a moment she lay there, close and still. Then, with a little quiver she raised her head, and her hands slid away from their drowning clutch of him.

"I ought to be scolded instead of comforted. She straightened up and laughed shakily. "If you hadn't come racing back in time, Barry—"

"If I hadn't life wouldn't mean much to me now."

She looked up at him with wide dark eyes, heavy with fatigue, and her head moved in a faint negation. He felt her slipping away from him, and he did not know just why.

It was no time for lover's importunities. Barry said "Steady, boy," to Captain and reached for something.

"I'd better signal Petry that the lost is found."

Two shots cracked and echoed. The answer came from far on the right. One shot and a pause, and then a staccato outburst of rejoicing. Barry laughed.

"Boone is happy. Now we're going back to Trail's End, and I am going to carry you. Here, put this on first."

"This" was his own coat.

"I won't!"

"Orders!"

He bent down and swept her up in front of him, swinging her across so that she lay like a child in his arms. She looked up to protest, but already they had started. Once he looked down and smiled, and after that she did not look up again.

Barry loved her, and she couldn't—she couldn't. . . She lay passively against him for mile after mile, with her cheek pressing his shoulder and a dull ache in her heart.

The next morning was an awakening to strange aches and unsuspected bruises. Martha ordered her so stay in bed.

At noon the autocrat permitted her to get up. Shortly after lunch Barry appeared, riding Captain and leading an unabashed Comet.

"Do you think you can forgive the little devil enough to give him another chance?"

"Of course. It was my fault that he started off in the first place. He's an imp, but I do love him."

That might have given him an opening, for light love-making at least, but Barry let it pass. His manner gave no suggestion that he remembered his checked ardor of the night before. Anne wandered over toward Comet to avoid that new look in his eyes.

The pinto was standing dutifully where he had been left, merely giving an impatient stamp now and then to remind them that motion was his business and he was all ready to go.

"Look at him! He doesn't know

how to be ashamed. Rascal, you just watch when we start out again! I won't get out of the saddle for a second without dropping those reins over your nose.

Barry watched her as she stroked the ingratiating muzzle.

"Then the morale is all right?" "Oh yes, or riding." She looked at him with a very small smile. "I still think that mountain hiking is a much over-rated sport, but that won't last."

"Then how about my coming down for you in a few days, as soon as you're feeling yourself again, for an all-day trip and lunch at the Perch?"

"All day? What about work?" "What you need now is play. Besides, if you don't come I shan't have any excuse to play around myself." He smiled.

Why shouldn't she? One didn't stop seeing a man because of a little fragmentary love-making.

"I'd really love to. Thursday?"

"Thursday. I'll come down for you right after breakfast. Now I shall have to get back. I'll put Comet in the corral first."

"Barry!"

"Yes?" He stopped and looked back, his eyes warming.

"I haven't even attempted to thank you. You understand, don't you?"

He gathered her hands into both of his and held them close together. "I don't want to be thanked. Just seeing you back here ought to be thanks enough for anybody . . . Good-bye."

He gave her fingers a quick squeeze and let them go. Then he was off with Comet to the corral.

They did not skirt the desert this time, but turned directly into the hills, until Anne had lost all sense of direction.

Late in the morning they were standing at the mouth of the pass, with tumbled ridges and beyond the ridges another blank stretch of desert sand and sparse vegetation. It lay in a rough triangle, bounded on two sides by hills.

"It looks like a little Junipero." Anne exclaimed. "A wicked little Junipero."

"That's the Pinos Valley, but it's larger than it looks. If you were down there, you might find an occasional surveyor's stake, or even the remains of a shack or two. That's all there is of the town of Duane. Ever heard of it?"

"No, I haven't."

"I'll tell you after we get up to the Perch. There's nothing more to see down there—it's just as dead as it looks."

His voice sounded hard. That was unusual for Barry. They turned their horses and went back through the pass again.

Presently Anne caught a sapphire gleam.

"Oh, beautiful! It that Eagle Lake?"

"I knew you'd like it."

It lay like a jewel at their feet. At the head of it, topping the pine-carpeted slope, was a two-storied house of peeled logs, built on broad, generous lines.

"Welcome to Eagle's Perch." Barry swung off quickly and held up both hands for her. "Make yourself at home while I put up the horses. Oh, Ling!" This as a bland yellow face appeared, hovering back of an open door. "See that Miss Cushing gets anything she wants. Miss Anne Cushing, this is Ling Foo, the best all-round cook west of the Atlantic. We'll eat on the veranda, Ling."

"Alli, boss." Ling grinned briefly at the compliment, said "How do" politely. Anne felt a bright and speculative eye taking her measure. "I shan't need anything, Ling Foo."

"Alli, Missy." The bright eyes were benevolent, Ling ducked his head and padded softly away, and Anne was free to explore.

She looked around the big living room with a faint sense of surprise. It was spacious and restful, furnished with a man's idea of comfort, but the things in it had never been bought in Marston, nor even in the more up and coming county seat. There were books and magazines scattered around. Some of the books looked technical and dry, others were more promising.

"Like it?" That was Barry's voice behind her.

"How could I help liking it?" It's perfect."

"That's a large order," he laughed. "My uncle was a collector of Indian rugs and things in a small way, and he picked up the Spanish stuff, too."

They went out, wandering over scented pine needles, down to the lake and up the slope again, answering the mellow music of a Chinese gong. Barry chuckled.

"You've made an impression on Ling. Usually he just sticks his head out of the door and yells 'Aleddy!'"

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