

***JESSIE GRAHAM
FLOWER***



***GRACE HARLOWE'S
OVERLAND RIDERS
ON THE GREAT
AMERICAN DESERT***

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CHAPTER I. WHEN THE COWBOYS LAUGHED

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"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, 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.

"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 today," 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.

"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.

"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. 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 cante, she braced herself to meet the shock that she knew was right at hand.

CHAPTER II. AN "OUTLAW" MEETS HIS MATCH

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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 beat 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.