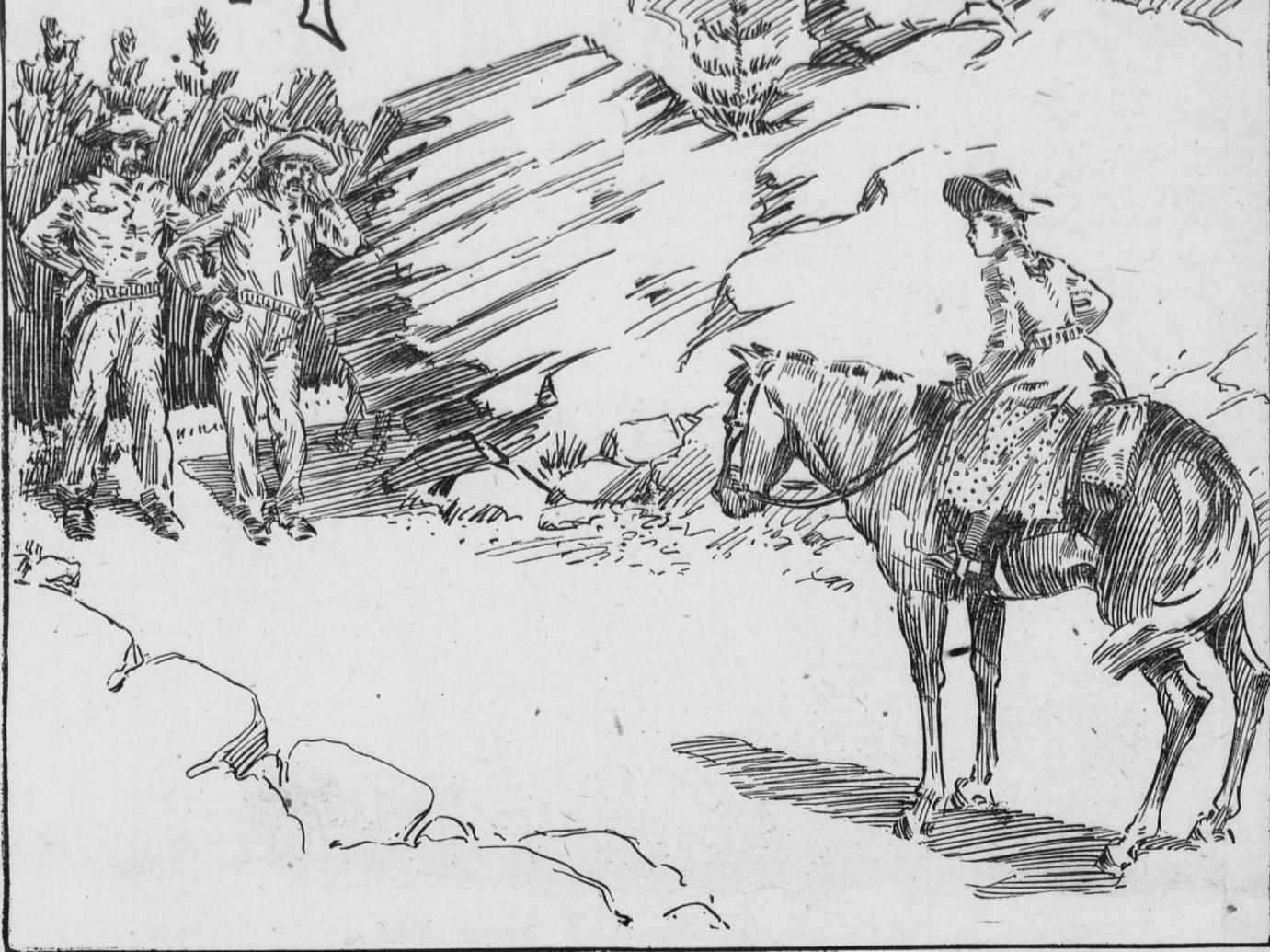


# THE EAGLE CLIFF MAIL



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**F**OR fourteen years, "Old Jed Prouty," as everybody called him, had carried the mail between the towns of Eagle Cliff and Graniteville, a distance of forty miles, and in all that time he had never lost a single trip, a record of which he was very proud.

He lived in a lonely gulch, half way between the two towns, and his daughter, Madge, 15 years old, had been his housekeeper since her mother had died—two years before the time our story opens.

She did not know what fear was. When she was but twelve years old her father had given her a little rifle, and had taught her how to use it.

Her father's trips were so arranged that he was at home every night with Madge. He would go to Graniteville in the morning, get the mail, and return to his cabin by night-fall, and the next day go on to Eagle Cliff, returning home in the afternoon with the mail for Graniteville.

He came home from Graniteville one night complaining of feeling "fagged out."

"I'd hardly strength to set in my saddle the last mile or two," he said, as he threw himself down on his bunk, under which he told Madge to put the bag of mail for Eagle Cliff. "I'll git right into bed and take some hot drinks and sleep it all off by morning," he said.

But when morning came, he was too sick and weak to hold up his head, and riding to Eagle Cliff was an utter impossibility to him. "I can't go," he said, with one hand pressed to his throbbing and burning brow—"I can't go, Madge; but that mail-bag's got to git to the Cliff somehow."

"I could take it, dad, if it wa'n't for leaving you," said Madge, promptly, "but I can't leave you alone, sick as you are."

"You needn't leave me alone, my girl," her father said. "You could stop at the Widder Barton's cabin and ask her to come up and do all there is to be done for me."

"Yesterday was pay day in Graniteville, and lots of the miners sent money home in registered letters, fer, you know, there ain't no other way of sending it from there; and them registered letters is all in that mail-bag. Then, some of the boys give me their money to buy money orders fer 'em at the Cliff, and others sent theirs over to the bank there."

"I've nearly five hundred dollars in my belt, Madge, and there's a paper with it tellin' jest who it all belongs to and what's to be done with it."

Madge did all she could for her father's comfort, and in twenty minutes she was on his trusty old horse, with the belt of money buckled tight around her slender waist under her dress, and the mail-bag securely strapped to the saddle behind her.

A second belt was around her waist outside her dress, but under the loose jacket she

wore, and from this there hung a pair of pistols she felt sure she could use if need be.

Stopping for a few minutes at the cabin of the Widow Barton, two miles distant, she secured her promise to take care of Jed Prouty that day, and then Madge rode swiftly away, determined to cover the eighteen miles between her and Eagle Cliff before noon, if possible.

She rode almost to the summit of the mountain without meeting a human being or seeing a living creature excepting the little snowbirds flying out and in among the branches of the trees and out across the snow.

Then she met a small, elderly man coming down the trail on a feeble-looking old mule.

Her right hand was laid firmly on the butt of one of her pistols, as he reined up when they met.

"How fur is it to the next cabin?" he asked.

"About ten miles," replied Madge.

"Where you bound fer?"

"Eagle Cliff."

"Alone?"

"Yes; excepting for my horse and these."

She threw open her packet as she spoke and revealed the shining handles of the pistols.

The man laughed harshly, but his voice was kindly enough as he said: "Gritty, ain't ye, little gal? Well, if nobody meant you any more harm 'n I do, you'd be safe without them little pertectors at yer belt. I got a little gal o' my own, 'bout your age, back in Missouri, an' I wouldn't harm you any more'n I would her. But I reckon it'd skeer her out of a year's growth ter find herself alone up here on this mountin'. Good-bye, an' the Lord bless ye."

His voice had a genuine ring that assured Madge of his sincerity, and she felt rather ashamed of the display she had made of her weapons.

"Good-bye, sir," she replied; "and I'm much obliged for your good wishes."

She had left the timber behind now, and was allowing old Bally to take his time in going up the steep and snowy trail, bringing them nearer and nearer to the summit of the mountain.

She jumped lightly down from his back when nearly to the summit and walked by his side, but when the summit was finally reached, she mounted again, and said:

"Now, old fellow, I'll give you five or ten minutes to rest in, and then you must take me flyin' down to the Cliff in less than—"

"Hello, miss!"

Madge whirled quickly around in her saddle. The mountain had on its summit many massive boulders, and from behind one of these, close to the roadside, two men had suddenly come.

Courageous as she was, Madge was taken so wholly by surprise that her face paled a

little and her voice trembled slightly as she said:

"How do you do?"

"Ain't you lost?" asked one of the men, staring boldly at her from under his bushy eyebrows.

"No, I'm not," Madge replied, in a firmer voice.

"Ain't trav'lin' round the 'country alone, be you?"

"I'm going to Eagle Cliff."

"Oh! ye be? And where mought ye hev come from?"

"From No Man's Gulch, a few miles back here. I live there."

"Oh, ye do, eh? Ye ain't the reg'lar mail-carrier?"

"No."

Madge felt her voice trembling again at this proof that they had noticed the mail-bag.

"My father is the mail-carrier, but he is sick today, and I'm carrying it for him. I must ride on, too, or I'll not get back home tonight. Good-bye."

And she rode on, not noting the significant looks of the men. But she instinctively felt them to be enemies, and breathed a long breath of relief as she rode around a curve in the trail which hid her from their view.

The descent of two miles brought Madge to a thick growth of timber.

Looking back as she entered it, she saw two men riding furiously down the trail behind her, and she felt confident that they were the men she had met on the mountain's summit.

"They're after me!" was Madge's immediate and correct conclusion. "They want the mail-bag. They wouldn't attack me up there on the summit for fear they'd be seen by some one going up or coming down. Get on, Bally! Get on, sir—on, on!"

Bally responded nobly to his young rider's command, and bounded into the gloomy woods.

Eagle Cliff was yet eight miles away, and the nearest cabin was six miles distant. Old Bally was past his prime, and he was still exhausted from his climb up the mountain, and Madge felt his speed decreasing before they had gone a mile.

Reining him up for an instant, she distinctly heard the horses of her pursuers coming on behind her, and she knew that they were riding faster than old Bally could carry her.

A deserted cabin stood a short distance within the wood, and Madge, hastily dismounting, ran into it, leading old Bally after her.

Three minutes later the two men rode swiftly by, urging their horses on at their utmost speed.

"But I'm afraid they'll discover my trick and come back to hunt me," said Madge, in

the midst of her momentary sense of relief.

She took the bag from old Bally's back as she spoke, and leaving the horse in the cabin, she started out to conceal herself and the bag.

She wandered about for nearly an hour, when she unexpectedly found himself standing in the road around a bend of which one of the men suddenly came on foot.

"Aha!" he said, exultingly. "I've ketched ye, hev I? Thought ye'd fool us, eh? But ye ye, hev I? Thought ye'd fool us, eh?"

He started toward her, when Madge, dropping the mail-bag behind her, stood in front of it with a pistol held out in either hand.

"Stop right where you are!" she said.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he roared. "Ye air plucky, ain't ye, little gal?"

They stood in a sharp curve in the road. A sound of hoofs was heard, and the man called out, jeeringly:

"Come on, Bill, fore I git riddled through an' through!"

"Oh, I'm comin', an' my name's Bill, too."

Madge turned to see the old white mule she had met on the other side of the mountain, and sitting astride its bony back was the man who had spoken so kindly to her.

"Good for you, sissy!" he said, as he saw her, pistol in hand. "You jist keep yer barkers p'inted fair at him while I git him into proper shape."

While Madge still covered the scoundrel with her pistols, the old man disarmed and bound him until he was utterly helpless.

"Now," he said, "we're ready to extend the right hand of fellowship to Brother Bill, an'—Here he is!"

The evil-looking fellow who had questioned Madge on the mountain now came hurrying around the curve.

"Up with yer hands!" cried the old man—"up with 'em instanter, or we'll both riddle you with bullets!"

Dazed with amazement, the second man was easily made a prisoner, when the old man said:

"Gosh! ain't I glad I did come back? I seen these fellers behind them boulders up on the mountin, an' I knowed that was mischief brewin', an' I put out fast as old Sol here would fetch me, an' glad I am to get here as I did."

A party of miners with a burro train, came along a few minutes later, and assisted in taking the hold-ups on to Eagle Cliff, where they were properly cared for in a way that kept them from doing any further harm.

The mail reached Eagle Cliff only a little behind time, and Madge was the heroine of the day.

The doctor offered to go in person to attend her father, and with him and the little old man as an escort, she rode home in safety and triumph, to hear her father say:

"I knowed I could trust ye to git the mail there, Madge."