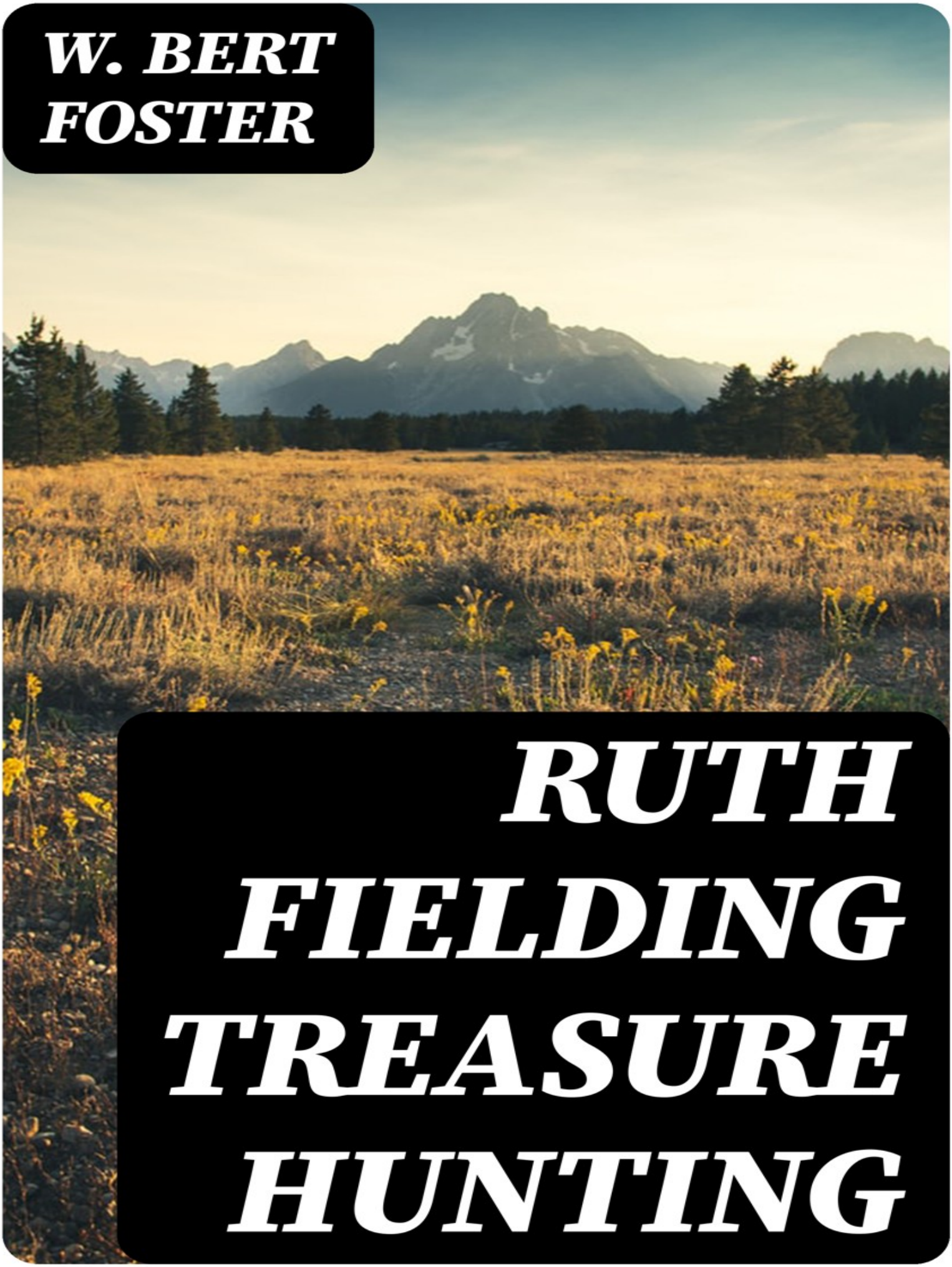
W. BERT FOSTER
RUTH FIELDING TREASURE HUNTING

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Ruth Fielding Treasure Hunting

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CHAPTER I
UNCLE JABEZ IS STUBBORN

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“There are just two times when a leaky roof needs mending, Niece Ruth,” said Jabez Potter of the old Red Mill with a touch of his usual grim humor.

“Indeed, Uncle?” returned Ruth Fielding, smiling quietly over the sewing in her lap. “And what are those two occasions, pray?”

“When it rains and when it don’t rain.” The miller chuckled. “But the difference is, it can’t be mended when it rains, while it can be mended when the weather’s dry.”

“But there will be other dry days, Jabez Potter,” spoke up little old Aunt Alvirah from her chair by Ruth, under the great elm in the door-yard of the mill farmhouse on the bank of the Lumano River. “Ben——”

“Now, don’t you interfere, Alvirah,” broke in the miller, yet not crossly, for he was never cross with his old housekeeper. “Ben’s got his own work to do. He got as far as he could with the job. He built the scaffolding up there, and set the ladders in place.”

He pointed as he spoke to a ladder which rested against the eaves-trough of the farmhouse itself, and which was connected with the gristmill, and then to the longer ladder that was firmly set upon the farmhouse roof, at its peak, making it possible for a more or less agile person to reach the much higher roof of the mill proper.

“Yes, them slates is up there, and they’ve got to be set in place before another shower. There’s one thing sure about a

gristmill, and you both ought to know it. It’s got to be kept dry.”

“I am afraid you will fall, Uncle Jabez,” said Ruth Fielding, not without real anxiety in her voice.

“You’ll get sunstruck, Jabez Potter!” cried the little old woman, beginning to rise carefully from her chair by the aid of her stick. “Oh, my back! and oh, my bones! I do wish you could make him stop it, my pretty.”

“You know nobody can stop Uncle Jabez when he is once determined,” said Ruth. “And he almost always is determined.”

“I know—I know,” agreed the old woman, watching the miller begin to mount the lower ladder. “It’s a task to get him to do anything at all out of the common. It certain sure is. Say, my pretty, is he going to help you do what you want to do in business?”

“I don’t know, Aunty. I am working on him,” and Ruth laughed. But she became grave the next moment. “I don’t know how it will turn out. But he can help me if he will—and he is already half convinced that the moving picture business is a big thing. But he calls it a gamble, and Uncle Jabez never gambled in his life. He has always invested in perfectly safe securities. You know that.”

“Dear me, child, I wish I had his wealth. I’d give it all to you to-morrow,” said Aunt Alvirah.

“I know you would, you dear,” returned the girl, smiling fondly at her. “But then, you are not a Potter. And if Uncle Jabez had owned your generous disposition perhaps he would not be a rich man.”

“And nobody—but Jabez himself—knows just how rich he is,” sighed Aunt Alvirah. “And him declaring only yesterday,” she added, with sudden sharpness, “that he can’t afford to buy one o’ them automobiles.”

Ruth was amused again. “No,” she said. “He did not say just that, Aunt Alvirah. He didn’t say he couldn’t afford to buy one; he said he couldn’t afford to keep one. Quite a different matter, I assure you.”

“Well—Here comes one now!” exclaimed the little old woman, who was looking down the road toward Cheslow.

But Ruth’s gaze was following the motions of the miller who had now reached the roof of the mill, having climbed the second ladder. Ben, the hired man, had made a plank walk along the roof just below the ridge board on this side of the peaked roof to the small scaffolding where the leak was. Ben would have finished his job, putting in the new slates, when he returned from town where he had gone with the mules and a load of grain. But impatient and stubborn Uncle Jabez would not wait.

It was a hot July day. There was not a breath of air stirring and the sun beat down fiercely upon the Red Mill and all that surrounded it. The shade of the great elms in the farmhouse yard was grateful indeed.

“Oh, it’s that nice Helen Cameron and her pretty car,” the old woman added, almost childish in her admiration of the smoothly running motor-car. “She’s coming here, my pretty. Perhaps she will take us for a drive.”

“I hope she will, Aunty,” said Ruth soothingly, “as you are so fond of automobiling.”

But she only glanced at the coming machine. The dust stirred by the swiftly turning wheels of the motor-car drifted sluggishly away behind it—like the tenuous wake of a ship's propellers at sea.

Ruth's gaze turned again to the mill roof and the miller now on his knees on the scaffolding, beginning to place the new slates. But when Helen Cameron arrived Ruth could no longer look at Uncle Jabez.

"Here we are!" cried Helen, who was a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl with a ready tongue and a ready laugh. "Isn't it hot? Why! I believe it is hotter driving than it is standing still. How cool you look there in the shade, you two."

"Come in here," said Ruth. "Your horse will stand."

Helen shut off the engine and jumped out of the car. Aunt Alvirah smiled at her.

"Maybe it is too hot to travel in an open car," she admitted. "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones! Come sit down, Helen. The cool of the day is the best time for riding, I do guess."

"And you guess just right," declared the girl, coming in briskly and stopping beside Aunt Alvirah's chair long enough to stoop and press her fresh lips to the old woman's wrinkled cheek. "You look fine to-day, Aunty."

"And I am fine," declared the old woman vigorously. "I'm a long way from being as bad off as Methuselah. I'm seventy-odd, while he was nine hundred and sixty-nine, I believe."

"No!" exclaimed Helen. "Was that his age? I always thought that was his telephone number. Well, Ruth, how goes the new picture?"

“Oh, my dear,” said her chum, with a little shrug, “you are looking much too far in advance. It isn’t a picture yet.”

“Well, then, what do you call it?”

“I don’t even call it,” and Ruth laughed outright. “It is not yet titled—not even with a working title. I’ve had an idea ——”

“But you had that idea—and a perfectly scrumptious one—when we were at the Thousand Islands. And we’ve been home more than a week.”

“My dear,” sighed Ruth, “I am at my wits’ end. I believe I have a fine background for a story, and the main thread of the plot, too. I can get Wonota and her father——”

“Dear me, Ruth, do you really believe in the possibilities of our little Indian princess as a screen star?”

“I have every faith in her if she is given the right part and is coached by me. Why! Even Mr. Hooley, the director, says so. But Mr. Hammond has lost faith—or he has too many other irons in the fire, or something.”

Ruth spoke rather hopelessly. Helen looked at her with thoughtful sympathy. She suspected, too, what her chum’s main trouble was.

“Is it money?” she asked softly.

“That is the main thing in picture making, my dear,” admitted Ruth more lightly. “Money is essential. And the sort of feature picture I want to make can’t be started until I have at least a hundred thousand dollars behind me.”

“My goodness!”

“I know it is a lot of money. And it may be that no such amount need be spent. But I have had Mr. Hooley help me make what they call the studio estimate (which is always

large enough, you may believe), and we have both agreed that, considering possible emergencies, breakdowns, retakes, salaries and hotel expenses, chartering boats of sufficient size, and buying outright some old hulk that must be wrecked——”

“Goodness me!” interrupted her chum, almost wild-eyed, “it sounds as though you were going to bring about a general cataclysm.”

“Mere detail,” said Ruth, waving her hand. “When you see a house burned or a railroad train wrecked on the screen nowadays, believe me, it is the real thing. It costs money—not as much as it seems to cost, or as it is advertised to cost, perhaps. But it costs a plenty. And the idea I have is a costly one. I will not make the ordinary five-reel program picture. There is no money in that for anybody but the big producers who have stock companies on salary, and who turn them out just as a factory turns out tailor-made frocks.

“Besides,” said the young and ambitious motion picture maker, “I must think of my star and of my own reputation. Wonota has made two big pictures—‘Bright-eyes’ and ‘The Long Lane’s Turning’. If she makes one with me it must be even a better and bigger picture than the two she made with the Alectrion Film Corporation.”

“But will Mr. Hammond——”

“Mr. Hammond is one of the best friends I ever had,” said Ruth, with enthusiasm. “And he wishes Wonota well, too. But he is perfectly willing I should take Wonota and her father, Chief Totantora, off his hands. In fact, I shall borrow them—and Director Hooley, too—if I make this picture I have in

mind. But, Helen, I shall really direct the picture myself. I want my own way about every little detail, and only by combining the character of director and producer can I do that."

"Dear me, Ruth!" Helen said, "it sounds big."

"It is a big thing—if I can do it."

"And I can see it will be a big disappointment if you can't do it."

Ruth nodded, wordlessly. Helen looked at her thoughtfully.

"Ruth," she said, "perhaps I might help you—with Tom."

Her friend shook her head vigorously. "No, no! I don't want friendly help. I want business help. Out and out business. That is my motto. No sentiment. If the money is lost, it is lost. I have told Uncle Jabez that——"

"Goodness, Ruth!" gasped Helen, almost laughing in her surprise, "you don't really think of trying to get Mr. Potter to back you? Never!"

"Yes, I do. And—listen Helen!—I believe I have almost succeeded."

"Never!"

"'Never' is a most significant negative," said Ruth. "But Uncle Jabez——"

"And you scorn sentiment?" interrupted Helen, in amazement. "You won't let Tom and me help you?"

"Let me tell you," her chum said with some emphasis, "if I get Uncle Jabez to back me there will not be an iota of sentiment about it. I have got to convince him that it is a sound business proposition, even if there is an element of speculation in it."

“Well!”

“Uncle Jabez draws a perfectly clear line between investment and speculation. He has obtained most of his fortune through investments, I grant you. But he is not averse to speculating when the chance of big returns seem reasonably sure.”

“I declare!” ejaculated Helen, emitting another long breath. “I never thought your uncle, who is a regular miser—excuse me, Ruth! But it is well known. I never thought he would do anything for you that might cost him real money. He never has. He appears in altogether a new light to me now. Let me look at him.”

She stepped briskly out from under the elm and looked up at the roof of the mill.

“He must have had a change of heart,” she giggled suddenly. “Maybe it shows on the outside—Ruth! There is something the matter with him!”

Ruth did not rise from her chair. She continued placidly sewing.

“Don’t try to make fun, dear. Poor Uncle Jabez——”

“Ruth! Come here! What is it?”

Helen was not in fun. She was looking upward at the roof, to which Uncle Jabez had climbed, with a startled expression of countenance. And her cry was earnest.

Even Aunt Alvirah was startled. She began to rise from her chair again with her always reiterated moan of “Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!” But Ruth jumped and ran into the hot sunshine.

“Look at him!” cried Helen again.

Uncle Jabez was no longer kneeling at work. He had fallen over on his side and half his body had slipped off the scaffolding. Something serious had certainly occurred up there on the roof of the Red Mill.

“Where’s Ben?” cried Aunt Alvirah. “Get Ben!”

But Ruth told her that Ben was in Cheslow. There was no other man around the Red Mill, or within call. Aunt Alvirah cried to Helen to go in her car for some neighbor. Ruth had, however, already run to the foot of the first ladder.

“What are you going to do, Ruth?” cried Helen. “You can never climb up there.”

“I can! I will!” gasped the girl, already scrambling up the lower rungs of the ladder. “He may slip off and come tumbling down long before you can get any man here.”

“You’ll fall! You’ll break your neck, Ruth Fielding!” wailed her chum.

But Ruth kept right on up the first ladder, and scrambled off to the roof of the kitchen ell.

CHAPTER II
AN IDLE DAY

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Excited as she was, Ruth Fielding had not lost her usual sense of caution. Uncle Jabez Potter's serious need on the roof of the Red Mill called for instant help; but Ruth stopped long enough on the ell roof of the farmhouse, having climbed one ladder, to discard the sports skirt that retarded her free movements.

"Oh, Ruth!" shrieked Helen again from below.

"Take care, my pretty!" wailed Aunt Alvirah, and then rose with her usual murmur of "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!" to hobble out into the sunshine, the better to see what Ruth was doing.

Ruth started up the second, and longer, ladder in her bloomers and found herself much less trammeled. But the ladder wabbled threateningly, although she knew Ben, the hired man, had placed it as firmly as a ladder could be placed. It was the length of the ladder that made it spring so.

She was a clear-headed and athletic girl. She had never shrunk from a hard task when it faced her. Indeed, Ruth, from the very time the reader first meets her in the initial volume of this series, entitled "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill," had proved herself a remarkably courageous person.

As an orphan she had come to her great-uncle's mill and home, and Jabez Potter had taken her in "out of charity" as he at first grudgingly expressed it. Many a time since that long-past occasion the miserly miller had admitted (secretly

if not openly) that he had been amply repaid for giving Ruth shelter.

Helen Cameron and her twin brother, Tom, had been Ruth's first young friends in this neighborhood. With Helen she had attended Briarwood Hall and, later still, Ardmore College. While the Great War was on both Ruth and Helen were in France and did more than their bit for humanity in the Red Cross service.

But before Ruth had gone to France and since she had returned, her heart and mind had been firmly fixed upon motion picture making. She had achieved no little success in writing scripts for pictures and, of late, had helped direct them.

She had, only the week before, returned from a seven-weeks' sojourn at the Thousand Islands, where she had been engaged, with a company from the Alectrion Film Corporation studios, in making a picture in which an Indian girl whom Ruth had befriended played a prominent part.

In this story, "Ruth Fielding on the St. Lawrence," the young woman had been more than ever convinced that if she was to make the kind of pictures she desired to make, she must have a free hand. Although Mr. Hammond, the president of the Alectrion Corporation, was her friend and had always treated her liberally, he now had so many irons in the fire that Ruth began to feel that she was merely one of his "hired hands."

As she had just now said to Aunt Alvirah, her uncle's old housekeeper, and to Helen, her chum, she wished to have her own producing company and to feel that her word was to be final in the making of the pictures she wrote. She had

the germ of a splendid idea for a feature film in her mind, she wanted to use Wonota, the Osage Indian girl in it. All she lacked was the financial backing that such an undertaking must have.

Thoughts of the picture and her financial situation were quite driven out of Ruth's mind, however, by Uncle Jabez Potter's peril on the roof of the old mill. He had fainted up there in the sun—or something even more serious had happened to him—and there was nobody near who could help the old man but Ruth.

The quivering of the long ladder to the peak of the mill roof made Ruth ascend very carefully. But she continued to look up and told herself over and over that the ladder would bear her weight a dozen times. At last she reached the roof and scrambled up on the board that Ben had laid to the scaffold where Uncle Jabez had been at work.

The old man lay with his legs half over the edge of the scaffold. She saw now that his position was more secure than she had thought. And before she reached him the old man began to move again, struggling to sit up.

"Uncle Jabez! Uncle Jabez! Wait!" cried Ruth. "Let me help you."

"I calkerlate somebody's got to help me," muttered the miller. "Ruth, that you? I declare I can't scurce see a thing. Guess your Aunt Alvirah was right. That sun struck me right in the pit of the stomach, seems so. All went black before my eyes. I don't see how I am going to get down off'n this roof, Niece Ruth."

"I am going to help you, Uncle Jabez," the girl said confidently. "This sun is awful!"

There was no use in telling him now that he had been warned. Nor was Ruth one of those “I-told-you-so” people. Besides, the old miller was in no condition to be scolded for his folly.

She helped him to his feet, but he was very uncertain on them, and for a minute or two Ruth feared she could not get him along the narrow plank to the top of the ladder. If he pitched off the board she knew she could not hold him, although he was not a heavy man.

If Uncle Jabez was stubborn in one thing, he was in all. He was determined to get down to the ground, and he did so. But he confessed that he never would have made it without his niece’s help!

From the ell roof of the house Ruth called impatiently to Helen to get into her car and go for the doctor. Uncle Jabez was too confused in his mind to veto the command, although at another time he would have thought instantly of the expense of the doctor’s visit.

He really had suffered a slight sunstroke. His age and physical condition doubtless had something to do with his present misfortune—and that the physician stated in so many words when he arrived. He had warned the miller more than a year before that he should retire from active work; and the fact that he had not done so added greatly to the danger of his present attack.

In any case, within a few hours it became evident to all about him that the old man would not be able to attend to business of any kind or to exert himself physically to any degree for a long time to come.

Aside from the alarm Ruth felt because of the miller's misfortune, there was a personal thought that rasped her mind continually. The matter of getting Uncle Jabez to back her financially in the making of her first independent picture had gone by the board.

He was forbidden to think of business. The mill would be run by Ben for a while, or until the present contracts were filled and the grain on hand made into flour or meal. Then the Red Mill, for the first time in many generations, would be shut down and—perhaps—the stones would never turn again.

In spite of her sympathy for Uncle Jabez and her fears for his future, Ruth Fielding could not keep her thoughts from dwelling on her own ill-fortune. The accident at this time seemed to be a calamity for her.

Tom Cameron was like his sister Helen—"as like as two peas in a pod," Aunt Alvirah Boggs often said. He had the same black hair and black eyes and the clear, olive complexion that was a legacy from his half-Spanish mother now long since dead. As Helen had intimated to Ruth, he had, too, his share of their mother's fortune and would have been glad to aid Ruth in her desire for a producing company had the girl of the Red Mill been willing to accept such help.

The latter, however, had a strong and deep-rooted objection to accepting any such help from any such quarter!

Not that Ruth did not consider Tom Cameron almost as much her chum as she did his sister. Indeed, it was exactly in that character that Ruth wished to think of Tom and have Tom think of her.