

RIDING THE PONY EXPRESS

By Marion Garthwaite

SALLY MASON was baking cinnamon rolls. Her brother Randy, would relish something warm and good when he rode in late in the afternoon to change horses. It would be his last lap before he turned the mail over to the next Pony Express rider at Placerville.

Randy would stop only long enough to fling the saddle and its heavy pouches of mail from the tired horse to a fresh one, before he would hit leather and be off again. Mrs. Mason always had a cup of hot coffee for him, with cake or rolls to be taken along. But Sally's mother was away with a sick neighbor and twelve-year-old Sally was trying to take her place.

Sally pulled the pan of cinnamon rolls out of the oven just as a shadow appeared in the doorway. It was the Indian woman, Old Suzy, as broad as she was high. She was carrying a basket.

“Oh, Suzy!” cried sally, “you’re going for thimble berries. There’s time enough. I’ll get a pail and go with you.”

Sally put two of the hot rolls in the Indian woman’s basket. Old Suzy’s face crinkled up until her beady black eyes disappeared. Her face was burned almost black by years of mountain sun, and so wrinkled that it was hard to see the blue tattoo marks on her chin.

Old Suzy and Sally climbed the hill behind the stable. The wind was blowing in fitful gusts. Sally was panting, but Old Suzy climbed steadily upward, the full skirt of her dirty, gray Mother Hubbard caught up over her arm. They stopped at a high meadow.

Suzy’s basket was nearly full and Sally’s pail half full, when Old Suzy straightened her back and pointed.

“Rain come,” she said, and started down the mountain.

Sally followed. Old Suzy turned off below the meadow. In a clearing by the stream there was a tumble-down log cabin. As they reached it, the big drops of rain began to splash down on the shaky roof. In a few seconds the downpour was deafening, and Old Suzy shut the sagging door against it. It was dark in the cabin with only the light filtering through the cracks between the logs.

Old Suzy stood by the door looking through one of these chinks. Suddenly she caught Sally's arm and half pulled, half pushed her down into a corner, dragging an old packing box and a broken chair in front of them.

"Black Jack come," grunted Old Suzy. "Him bad."

Sally heard voices, and two men stumbled into the dark cabin.

"Lucky you knew this was here!" said the smaller of the two men.

"Pays to know good hideouts in these parts," answered the man, whom Sally knew as Black Jack, a reckless gambler.

The two men stood in the doorway.

"This is as good a place as any to talk," said Black Jack. "Randy Mason comes through here around four. I've heard he's carrying a lot of money this trip. I plan to stop him at the Arch Rock."

"But Jack," said the other man. "That's U.S mail."

"It's the money I'm after," said Black Jack. "If he hands that over, he can have the mail. If he doesn't . . ." Black Jack shrugged.

Sally stirred. Suzy's hard fingers pressed tight into her knee.

"I don't like it." The smaller man spat out into the rain.

"It's easy money," said Black Jack. "There's just one chance. That's why you're in on this. Randy may take the cut-off back of his place. 'Specially since this rain came. He might figger the ford's high. If he does, he'll come out just below the Gap. You wait there. Shoot him as he comes onto the trail. Or—if you're squeamish—stick him up and hold him till I get there. I may have trouble getting through the ford myself. If you let him get by, I'll cut out your gizzard."

"It's risky," whined the other man.

"So's pannin' gold. So's everything. Come on, the rain's lettin' up. You can cache your share here till the hullabaloo blows over."

After the two men had gone, Old Suzy held Sally back for several minutes. Then she let her go and Sally plunged down the mountain, forgetting her pail of berries. She built up the fire with trembling hands. She put on the coffee and slid the pan of rolls into the warm oven. It seemed no time at all before she heard the wild coyote yell Randy always gave as he came down the trail.

Sally met him at the corral. While he pulled his saddle and blanket from the heaving back of the foam-flecked pony and tossed it onto his fresh horse, Sally poured out her story. Randy gulped down the hot coffee and stuffed the rolls into a leather pouch slung over his deerskin shirt.

"Good Kid!" he said, with a grin. I'll take the cut-off. I meant to anyway after this storm. Besides, I'd rather face the other man on the upper trail than Black Jack at the Arch Rock. Black Jack is too good a shot. Now listen, Sally."

Sally put out a protesting hand, but he shook her off. "Listen carefully," he said. "The Express money is sewn into the saddle lining. The pouches that usually carry the mail are stuffed with old letters. The regular mail is rolled in my saddle blanket. I'll throw him the pouches and I may get through."

Randy handed Sally the empty mug. "You can see the Gap from here, Sal. Usually, I make it in twenty minutes. the mud will slow me down. Give me thirty minutes. Saddle your horse as soon as I leave. Come out here where you can see clearly. I'll wave my hat. If you don't see me ride through that Gap in thirty minutes, you're to take the cut-off and find out why."

With one motion he turned his horse, was in the saddle, and was gone down the tail in a splatter of mud.

"So long," he yelled, waving his hat as his pony plunged into the trees.

Sally saddled her horse. She changed her cotton print dress for a pair of Randy's doeskin trousers and a leather shirt. She tucked her curls into one of Randy's hats. She had kept careful track of the time. When there was just five minutes to go, she walked the horse out to the gate where she had a clear view of the Gap. In her hand was her father's little minute glass. She watched the Gap, keeping half an eye on the sifting sand. Five times she turned the little glass. Then she jumped on her horse and started up the cut-off trail.

She found Randy on the main trail below the Gap. The short man she had seen at the cabin lay face down in a puddle of mud. Randy's horse was dead. Randy lay on the ground beside his horse, frantically trying to get the saddle blanket untied. He had fastened a leather thong about his leg above where the leather pants were soaked with blood. As Sally rode onto the trail, he whirled away from the horse and snatched his gun from the ground beside him.

"Oh, Sal!" he cried in relief. "You're in time. Get this blanket off and onto your horse. Never mind anything else. We can't get the saddle off. The horse is lying on it. Ride for all your worth into Placerville. Turn the mail over to Rogers at the station."

"You're hurt!" said Sally. "I can't leave you here in this mud."

"You're going to do as I say," Randy ordered. "Change this blanket over. Get going."

A figure glided out of the woods. Sally thought I was Black Jack and her heart jumped.

"Old Suzy!" cried Randy. "Good Old Suzy!"

"How did you know where to come?" asked Sally.

"Suzy hear." The Indian woman stopped and lifted Randy like a sack of meal across her shoulder. She carried him into the woods. When she came back she had Randy's gun belt strapped about her broad waist. She stripped the saddle off Sally's horse. Then she heaved the dead horse off the stirrup and tugged until she had freed Randy's saddle. She and Sally put the saddle on Sally's horse. They tied the blanket securely behind. Sally worked frantically. She expected Black Jack to come down the trail any moment.

"Black Jack come by and by," said old Suzy.

"What's keeping him?" asked Sally.

Old Suzy shrugged. "Horse gone," she said. "He tie horse by tree. He go sit Arch Rock. Suzy chew reins off. Give him horse big slap." Her eyes were lost in a mass of crinkles.

Sally swung herself into the saddle. "Good Old Suzy!" she said. Suzy grunted. Sally dug her heels in her horse's flanks and started up the steep grade to the Gap.

Two hours later, she galloped into the mining town of Placerville and up to the Pony Express station.

"Thought you'd never git here," shouted the irate voice of the waiting rider. "Yer an hour late." And then, "I'll be garn swoggled! 'Tain't Mason. It's a gal. Who be ye?"

"I'm Sally, Randy's sister," said Sally, sliding out of the saddle. "It was a hold-up. Randy's hurt and can't ride. The money's sewn inside the saddle, and the mall is in the blanket." Her knees were trembling. She could hardly stand.

With a practiced hand, the rider slid the saddle onto his fresh horse.

"You gotta place to stay?" he asked. "This town's plenty rough for a gal."

"I'll stay with the Gearys. They're kind of Cousins."

He fastened the blanket behind his saddle, leapt upon the horse, and whirled away in a clatter of hoofs.

He waved. "Ye done all right fer a gal!" he shouted back to her. "Ridin' fer the Pony Express."