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THE TEXAN STAR

THE STORY OF A GREAT FIGHT FOR LIBERTY

BY

JOSEPH A. ALTSHELER

AUTHOR OF
*THE QUEST OF THE FOUR, THE BORDER WATCH,
THE SCOUTS OF THE VALLEY, ETC.*



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PREFACE

"The Texan Star," while a complete story in itself, is the first of three, projected by the author, and based upon the Texan struggle for liberty against the power of Mexico. This revolution, epic in its nature, and crowded with heroism and great events, divides itself naturally into three parts.

The first phase begins in Mexico with the treacherous imprisonment of Austin, the Texan leader, the rise of Santa Anna and his attempt, through bad faith, to disarm the Texans and leave them powerless before the Indians. It culminates in the rebellion of the Texans, and their capture, in the face of great odds, of San Antonio, the seat of the Mexican power in the north.

The second phase is the coming of Santa Anna with an overwhelming force, the fall of the Alamo, the massacre of Goliad and the dark days of Texas. Yet the period of gloom is relieved by the last stand of Crockett, Bowie, and their famous comrades.

The third phase is the coming of light in the darkness, Houston's crowning victory at San Jacinto, and the complete victory of the Texans.

The story of the Texan fight for freedom has always appealed to the author, as one of the most remarkable of modern times.

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THE TEXAN STAR

CHAPTER I

THE PRISONERS

A boy and a man sat in a room of a stone house in the ancient City of Mexico, capital in turn of Aztec, Spaniard and Mexican. They could see through the narrow windows masses of low buildings and tile roofs, and beyond, the swelling shape of great mountains, standing clear against the blue sky. But they had looked upon them so often that the mind took no note of the luminous spectacle. The cry of a water-seller or the occasional jingle of a spur came from the street below, but these, too, were familiar sounds, and they were no longer regarded.

The room contained but little furniture and the door was of heavy oak. Its whole aspect indicated that it was a prison. The man was of middle years, and his face showed a singular blend of kindness and firmness. The pallor of imprisonment had replaced his usual color. The boy was tall and strong and his cheeks were yet ruddy. His features bore some resemblance to those of his older comrade.

"Ned," said the man at last, "it has been good of you to stay with me here, but a prison is no place for a boy. You must secure a release and go back to our people."

The boy smiled, and his face, in repose rather stern for one so young, was illumined in a wonderful manner.

"I don't want to leave you, Uncle Steve," he said, "and if I did it's not likely that I could. This house is strong, and it's a long way from here to Texas."

"Perhaps I can induce them to let you go," said the man. "Why should they wish to hold one so young?"

Edward Fulton did not reply because he saw that Stephen Austin was speaking to himself rather than his companion. Instead, he looked once more through the window and over the city at the vast white peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl silent and immutable, forever guarding the sky-line. Yet they seemed to call to him at this moment and tell him of freedom. The words of the man had touched a spring within him and he wanted to go. He could not conceal from himself the fact that he longed for liberty with every pulse and fiber. But he resolved, nevertheless, to stay. He would not desert the one whom he had come to serve.

Stephen Austin, the real founder of Texas, had now been in prison in Mexico more than a year. Coming to Saltillo to secure for the Texans better treatment from the Mexicans, their rulers, he had been seized and held as a criminal. The boy, Edward Fulton, was not really his nephew, but an orphan, the son of a cousin. He owed much to Austin and coming to the capital to help him he was sharing his imprisonment.

"They say that Santa Anna now has the power," said Ned, breaking the somber silence.

"It is true," said Stephen Austin, "and it is a new and strong reason why I fear for our people. Of all the cunning and ambitious men in Mexico, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna is the most cunning and ambitious. I know, too, that he is the most able, and I believe that he is the most dangerous to those of us who have settled in Texas. What a country is this Mexico! Revolution after revolution! You make a treaty with one president to-day and to-morrow another disclaims it! More than one of them has a touch of genius, and yet it is obscured by childishness and cruelty!"

He sighed heavily. Ned, full of sympathy, glanced at him but said nothing. Then his gaze turned back to the mighty peaks which stood so sharp and clear against the blue. Truth and honesty were the most marked qualities of Stephen Austin and he could not understand the vast web of intrigue in which the Mexican capital was continually involved. And to the young mind of the boy, cast in the same mold, it was yet more baffling and repellent.

Ned still stared at the guardian peaks, but his thoughts floated away from them. His head had been full of old romance when he entered the vale of Tenochtitlan. He had almost seen Cortez and the conquistadores in their visible forms with their armor clanking about them as they stalked before him. He had gazed eagerly upon the lakes, the mighty mountains, the low houses and the strange people. Here, deeds of which the world still talked had been done centuries ago and his thrill was strong and long. But the feeling was gone now. He had liked many of the Mexicans and many of the Mexican traits, but he had felt with increasing force that he could never reach out his hand and touch anything solid. He thought of volcanic beings on a volcanic soil.

The throb of a drum came from the street below, and presently the shrill sound of fifes was mingled with the steady beat. Ned stood up and pressed his head as far forward as the bars of the window would let him.

"Soldiers, a regiment, I think," he said. "Ah, I can see them now! What brilliant uniforms their officers wear!"

Austin also looked out.

"Yes," he said. "They know how to dress for effect. And their music is good, too. Listen how they play."

It was a martial air, given with a splendid lilt and swing. The tune crept into Ned's blood and his hand beat time on the stone sill. But the music increased his longing for liberty. His thoughts passed away from the narrow street and the marching regiment to the North, to the wild free plains beyond the Rio Grande. It was there that his heart was, and it was there that his body would be.

"It is General Cos who leads them," said Austin. "I can see him now, riding upon a white horse. It's the man in the white and silver uniform, Ned."

"He's the brother-in-law of Santa Anna, is he not?"

"Yes, and I fear him. I know well, Ned, that he hates the Texans—all of us."

"Perhaps the regiment that we see now is going north against our people."

Austin's brows contracted.

"It may be so," he said. "They give soft words all the time, and yet they hold me a prisoner here. It would be like them to strike while pretending to clear away all the troubles between us."

He sighed again. Ned watched the soldiers until the last of them had passed the window, and then he listened to the music, the sound of drum and fife, until it died away, and they heard only the usual murmur of the city. Then the homesickness, the longing for the great free country to the north grew upon him and became almost overpowering.

"Someone comes," said Austin.

They heard the sound of the heavy bar that closed the door being moved from its place.

"Our dinner, doubtless," said Austin, "but it is early."

The door swung wide and a young Mexican officer entered. He was taller and fairer than most of his race, evidently of pure Northern

Spanish blood, and his countenance was frank and fine.

"Welcome, Lieutenant," said Stephen Austin, speaking in Spanish, which he, as well as Ned, understood perfectly. "You know that we are always glad to see you here."

Lieutenant Alfonso de Zavala smiled in a quick, responsive way, but in a moment his face became grave.

"I announce a visitor, a most distinguished visitor, Mr. Austin," he said. "General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, President of the Mexican Republic and Commander-in-chief of its armies and navies."

Both Mr. Austin and the boy arose and bowed as a small man of middle years, slender and nervous, strode into the room, standing for a few moments near its center, and looking about him like a questing hawk. His was, in truth, an extraordinary presence. He seemed to radiate an influence that at once attracted and repelled. His dark features were cut sharply and clearly. His eyes, set closely together, were of the most intense black that Ned had ever seen in a human head. Nor were those eyes ever at rest. They roamed over everything, and they seemed to burn every object for the single instant they fell there. They never met the gaze of either American squarely, although they continually came back to both.

This man was clothed in a white uniform, heavy with gold stripes and gold epaulets. A small sword at his side had a gold hilt set with a diamond. He wore a three-cornered hat shaped like that of Napoleon, but instead of the Corsican's simple gray his was bright in color and splendid with plumage.

He was at once a powerful and sinister figure. Ned felt that he was in the presence of genius, but it belonged to one of those sinuous creatures, shining and terrible, that are bred under the vivid sun of the tropics. There was a singular sensation at the roots of his hair, but, resolved to show neither fear nor apprehension, he stood and gazed directly at Santa Anna.

"Be seated, Mr. Austin," said the General, "and close the door, de Zavala, but remain with us. Your young relative can remain, also. I have things of importance to say, but it is not forbidden to him, also, to hear them."

Ned sat down and so did Mr. Austin and young de Zavala, but Santa Anna remained standing. It seemed to Ned that he did so because he wished to look down upon them from a height. And all the time the black eyes, like two burning coals, played restlessly about the room.

Ned was unable to take his own eyes away. The figure in its gorgeous uniform was so full of nervous energy that it attracted like a magnet, while at the same time it bade all who opposed to beware. The boy felt as if he were before a splendid leopard with no bars of a cage between.

Santa Anna took three or four rapid steps back and forth. He kept his hat upon his head, a right, it seemed, due to his superiority to other people. He looked like a man who had a great thought which he was shaping into quick words. Presently he stopped before Austin, and shot him one of those piercing glances.

"My friend and guest," he said in the sonorous Spanish.

Austin bowed. Whether the subtle Mexican meant the words in satire or in earnest he did not know, nor did he care greatly.

"When I call you my friend and guest I speak truth," said Santa Anna. "It is true that we had you brought here from Saltillo, and we insist that you accept our continued hospitality, but it is because we know how devoted you are to our common Mexico, and we would have you help at our right hand for advice and help."

Ned saw Mr. Austin smile a little sadly. It all seemed very strange to the boy. How could one talk of friendship and hospitality to those whom he held as prisoners? Why could not these people say what they meant? Again he longed for the free winds of the plains.

"You and I together should be able to quiet these troublesome Texans," continued Santa Anna—and his voice had a hard metallic quality that rasped the boy's nerves. "You know, Stephen Austin, that I and Mexico have endured much from the people whom you have brought within our borders. They shed good Mexican blood at the fort, Velasco, and they have attacked us elsewhere. They do not pay their taxes or obey our decrees, and when I send my officers to make them obey they take down their long rifles."

Austin smiled again, and now the watching boy thought the smile was not sad at all. If Santa Anna took notice he gave no sign.

"But you are reasonable," continued the Mexican, and now his manner was winning to an extraordinary degree. "It was my predecessor, Farias, who brought you here, but I would not see you go, because I love you like a brother, and now I have come to you, that between us we may calm your turbulent Texans."

"But you must bear in mind," said Austin, "that our rights have been taken from us. All the clauses of our charter have been broken, and now your Congress has decreed that we shall have only one soldier to every five hundred inhabitants and that all the rest of us shall be disarmed. How are we, in a wild country, to protect ourselves from the Comanches, Lipans and other Indians who roam everywhere, robbing and murdering?"

Austin's face, usually so benevolent, flushed and his eyes were very bright. Ned looked intently at Santa Anna to see how he would take the daring and truthful indictment. But the Mexican showed no confusion, only astonishment. He threw up his hands in a vivid southern gesture and looked at Austin in surprised reproof.

"My friend," he said in injured but not angry tones, "how can you ask me such a question? Am I not here to protect the Texans? Am I not President of Mexico? Am I not head of the Mexican army? My gallant soldiers, my horsemen with their lances and sabers, will draw a ring around the Texans through which no Comanche or Lipan, however daring, will be able to break."

He spoke with such fire, such appearance of earnestness, that Ned, despite a mind uncommonly keen and analytical in one so young, was forced to believe for a moment. Texas, however, was far and immense, and there were not enough soldiers in all America to put a ring around the wild Comanches. But the impression remained longer with Austin, who was ever hoping for the best, and ever seeing the best in others.

Ned was a silent boy who had suffered many hardships, and he had acquired the habit of thought which in its turn brought observation and judgment. Yet if Santa Anna was acting he was doing it with consummate skill, and the boy who never said a word watched him all the time.

Santa Anna began to talk now of the great future that awaited the Texans under the banner of Mexico. He poured forth the words with so much Latin fervor that it was almost like listening to a song. Ned felt the influence of the musical roll coming over him again, but, with an effort of the will that was almost physical, he shook it off.

Santa Anna painted the picture of a dream, a gorgeous dream of many colors. Mexico was to become a mighty country and the Texans with their cool courage and martial energy would be no mean factor in it. Austin would be one of his lieutenants, a sharer in his greatness and reward. His eloquence was wonderful, and Ned felt once more the fascination of the serpent. This was a man to whom only the grand and magnificent appealed, and already he had achieved a part of his dream.

Ned moved a little closer to the window. He wished the fresh air to blow upon his face. He saw that Mr. Austin was fully under the spell. Santa Anna was making the most beautiful and convincing promises. He himself was going to Texas. He was the father of his people. He would right every wrong. He loved the Texans, these children of the north who had come to his country for a home. No one could ever say that he appealed in vain to Santa Anna for protection. Texans would be proud that they were a part of Mexico, they would be glad to belong to a nation which already had a glorious history, and to come to a capital which had more splendor and romance than any other in America.

Ned literally withdrew his soul within itself. He sought to shut out the influence that was radiating from this singular and brilliant figure, but he saw that Mr. Austin was falling more deeply under it.

"Look!" said Santa Anna, taking the man by the arm in the familiar manner that one old friend has with another and drawing him to the window. "Is not this a prospect to enchant? Is not this a capital of which you and I can well be proud?"

He lifted a forefinger and swept the half curve that could be seen from the window. It was truly a panorama that would kindle the heart of the dullest. Forty miles away the white crests of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl still showed against the background of burning blue, like pillars supporting the dome of heaven. Along the whole line of the half curve were mountains in fold on fold. Below the green of the valley showed the waters of the lake both fresh and salt gleaming with gold where the sunlight shot down upon them. Nearer rose the spires of the cathedral, and then the sea of tile roofs burnished by the vivid beams.

Santa Anna stood in a dramatic position, his finger still pointing. There was scarcely a day that Ned did not feel the majesty of this valley of Tenochtitlan, but Santa Anna deepened the spell. Could the world hold another place its equal? Might not the Texans indeed have a glorious future in the land of which this city was the capital? Poetry and romance appealed powerfully to the boy's thoughtful mind, and he felt that here in Mexico he was at their very heart. Nothing else had ever moved him so much.

"You are pleased! It impresses you!" said Santa Anna to Austin. "I can see it on your face. You are with us. You are one of us. Ah, my friend, how noble it is to have a great heart."

"Do I go with your message to the Texans?" asked Austin.

"I must leave now, but I shall come again soon, and I will tell you all. You shall carry words that will satisfy every one of them."

He threw his arms about Austin's shoulders, gave Ned a quick salute, and then left the room, taking young de Zavala with him, Ned heard the heavy bar fall in place on the outside of the door, and he knew that they were shut in as tightly as ever. But Mr. Austin was in a glow.

"What a wonderful, flexible mind!" he said, more to himself than to the boy. "I could have preferred a sort of independence for Texas, but since we're to be ruled from the City of Mexico, Santa Anna will do the best he can for us. As soon as he sweeps away the revolutionary troubles he will repair all our injuries."

Ned was silent. He knew that the generous Austin was still under Santa Anna's magnetic spell, but after his departure the whole room was changed to the boy. He saw clearly again. There were no mists and clouds about his mind. Moreover, the wonderful half curve before the window was changing. Vapors were rolling up from the south and the two great peaks faded from view. Trees and water in the valley changed to gray. The skies which had been so bright now became somber and menacing.

The boy felt a deep fear at his heart, but Mr. Austin seemed to be yet under the influence of Santa Anna, and talked cheerfully of their speedy return to Texas. Ned listened in silence and unbelief, while the gloom outside deepened, and night presently came over Anahuac. But he had formed his resolution. He owed much to Mr. Austin. He had come a vast distance to be at his side, and to serve him in prison, but he felt now that he could be of more use elsewhere. Moreover, he must carry a message, a warning to those who needed it sorely. One of the windows opened upon the north, and he looked intently through it trying to pierce, with the mind's eye at least, the thousand miles that lay between him and those whom he would reach with the word.

Mr. Austin had lighted a candle. Noticing the boy's gloomy face, he patted him on the head with a benignant hand and said:

"Don't be down of heart, Edward, my lad. We'll soon be on our way to Texas."

"But this is Mexico, and it is Santa Anna who holds us."

"That is true, and it is Santa Anna who is our best friend."

Ned did not dispute the sanguine saying. He saw that Mr. Austin had his opinion, and he had his. The door was opened again in a half hour and a soldier brought them their supper. Young de Zavala, who was their immediate guardian, also entered and stood by while they ate. They had never received poor food, and to-night Mexican hospitality exerted itself—at the instance of Santa Anna, Ned surmised. In addition to the regular supper there was an ice and a bottle of Spanish wine.

"The President has just given an order that the greatest courtesy be shown to you at all times," said de Zavala, "and I am very glad. I, too, have people in that territory of ours from which you come—Texas."

He spoke with undeniable sympathy, and Ned felt his heart warm toward him, but he decided to say nothing. He feared that he might betray by some chance word the plan that he had in mind. But Mr. Austin, believing in others because he was so truthful and honest himself, talked freely.

"All our troubles will soon be over," he said to de Zavala.

"I hope so, Señor," said the young man earnestly.

By and by, when de Zavala and the soldier were gone, Ned went again to the window, stood there a few moments to harden his resolution, and then came back to the man.

"Mr. Austin," he said, "I am going to ask your consent to something."

The Texan looked up in surprise.

"Why, Edward, my lad," he said kindly, "you don't have to ask my consent to anything, after the way in which you have already sacrificed yourself for me."

"But I am not going to stay with you any longer, Mr. Austin—that is, if I can help it. I am going back to Texas."

Mr. Austin laughed. It was a mellow and satisfied laugh.

"So you are, Edward," he said, "and I am going with you. You will help me to bear a message of peace and safety to the Texans."

Ned paused a moment, irresolute. There was no change in his determination. He was merely uncertain about the words to use.

"There may be delays," he said at last, "and—Mr. Austin, I have decided to go alone—and within the next day or two if I can."

The Texan's face clouded.

"I cannot understand you," he said. "Why this hurry? It would in reality be a breach of faith to our great friend, Santa Anna—that is, if you could go. I don't believe you can."

Ned was troubled. He was tempted to tell what was in his mind, but he knew that he would not be believed, so he fell back again upon his infinite capacity for silence. Mr. Austin read resolution in the closed lips and rigid figure.

"Do you really mean that you will attempt to steal away?" he asked.

"As soon as I can."

The man shook his head.

"It would be better not to do so," he said, "but you are your own master, and I see I cannot dissuade you from the attempt. But, boy, you will promise me not to take any unnecessary or foolish risks?"

"I promise gladly, and, Mr. Austin, I hate to leave you here."

Their quarters were commodious and Ned slept alone in a small room to the left of the main apartment. It was a bare place with only a bed and a chair, but it was lighted by a fairly large window. Ned examined this window critically. It had a horizontal iron bar across the middle, and it was about thirty feet from the ground. He pulled at the iron bar with both hands but, although rusty with time, it would not move in its socket. Then he measured the two spaces between the bar and the wall.

Hope sprang up in the boy's heart. Then he did a strange thing. He removed nearly all his clothing and tried to press his head and shoulders between the bar and the wall. His head, which was of the long narrow type, so common in the scholar, would have gone through the aperture, had it not been for his hair which was long, and which grew uncommonly thick. His shoulders were very thick and broad and they, too, halted him. He drew back and felt a keen thrill of disappointment.

But he was a boy who usually clung tenaciously to an idea, and, sitting down, he concentrated his mind upon the plan that he had formed. By and by a possible way out came to him. Then he lay down upon the bed, drew a blanket over him because the night was chill in the City of Mexico, and calmly sought sleep.

CHAPTER II

A HAIR-CUT

The optimism of Mr. Austin endured the next morning, but Ned was gloomy. Since it was his habit to be silent, the man did not notice it at first. The breakfast was good, with tortillas, frijoles, other Mexican dishes and coffee, but the boy had no appetite. He merely picked at his food, made a faint effort or two to drink his coffee and finally put the cup back almost full in the saucer. Then Mr. Austin began to observe.

"Are you ill, Ned?" he asked. "Is this imprisonment beginning to tell upon you? I had thought that you were standing it well. Can't you eat?"

"I don't believe I'm hungry," replied the boy, "but there is nothing else the matter with me. I'll be all right, Uncle Steve. Don't you bother about me."

He ate a little breakfast, about one half of the usual amount, and then, asking to be excused, went to the window, where he again stared

out at the tiled roofs, the green foliage in the valley of Mexico and the ranges and peaks beyond. He was taking his resolution, and he was carrying it out, but it was hard, very hard. He foresaw that he would have to strengthen his will many, many times. Mr. Austin took no further worry on Ned's account, thinking that he would be all right again in a day or two.

But at the dinner which was brought to them in the middle of the day Ned showed a marked failure of appetite, and Mr. Austin felt real concern. The boy, however, was sure that he would be all right before the day was over.

"It must be the lack of fresh air and exercise," said Mr. Austin. "You can really take exercise in here, Ned. Besides, you said that you were going to escape. If you fall ill you will have no chance at all."

He spoke half in jest, but Ned took him seriously.

"I am not ill, Uncle Steve," he said. "I really feel very well, but I have lost my appetite. Maybe I am getting tired of these Mexican dishes."

"Take exercise! take exercise!" said Mr. Austin with emphasis.

"I think I will," said Ned.

Physical exercise, after all, fitted in with his ideas, and that afternoon he worked hard at all the gymnastic feats possible within the three rooms to which they were confined. De Zavala came in and expressed his astonishment at the athletic feats, which Ned continued with unabated zeal despite his presence.

"Why do you do these things?" he asked in wonder.

"To keep myself strong and healthy. I ought to have begun them sooner. The Mexican air is depressing, and I find that I am losing my appetite."

De Zavala's eyes opened wide while Ned deftly turned a handspring. Then the young American sat down panting, his face flushed with as healthy a color as one could find anywhere.

"You'll have an appetite to-night," said Mr. Austin. But to his great amazement Ned again played with his food, eating only half the usual amount.

"You're surely ill," said Mr. Austin. "I've no doubt de Zavala would allow us to have a physician, and I shall ask him for one."

"Don't do it, Uncle Steve," begged Ned. "There's nothing at all the matter with me, and anyhow I wouldn't want a Mexican doctor fussing over me. I've probably been eating too much."

Mr. Austin was forced to accede. The boy certainly did not look ill, and his appetite was bound to become normal again in a few days. But it did not. As far as Mr. Austin could measure it, Ned was eating less and less. It was obvious that he was thinner. He was also growing much paler, except for a red flush on the cheek bones. Mr. Austin became alarmed, but Ned obstinately refused any help, always asserting with emphasis that he had no ailment of any kind. But the man could see that he had become much lighter, and he wondered at the boy's physical failure. De Zavala, also, expressed his sorrow in sonorous Spanish, but Ned, while thanking them, steadily disclaimed any need of sympathy.

The boy found the days hard, but the nights were harder. For the first time in his life he could not sleep well. He would lie for hours so wide awake that his eyes grew used to the dark, and he could see everything in his room. He was troubled, too, by bad dreams and in many of these dreams he was a living skeleton, wandering about and condemned to live forever without food. More than once he bitterly regretted the resolution he had taken, but having taken it, he would never alter it. His silent, concentrated nature would not let him. Yet he endured undoubted torture day by day. Torture was the only name for it.

"I shall send an application to President Santa Anna to have you allowed a measure of liberty," said Mr. Austin finally. "You are simply pining away here, Edward, my lad. You cannot eat, that is, you eat only a little. I have passed the most tempting and delicate things to you and you always refuse. No boy of your age would do so unless something were very much wrong with his physical system. You have lost many pounds, and if this keeps on I do not know what will happen to you. I shall not ask for more liberty for you, but you must have a doctor at once."

"I do not want any doctor, Uncle Steve," said the boy. "He cannot do me any good, but there is somebody else whom I want."

"Who is he?"

"A barber."

"A barber! Now what good can a barber do you?"

"A great deal. What I crave most in the world is a hair-cut, and only a barber can do that for me. My hair has been growing for more than three months, Uncle Steve, and you've seen how extremely thick it is. Now it is so long, too, that it's falling all about my eyes. Its weight is oppressing my brain. I feel a little touch of fever now and then, and I believe it's this awful hair."

He ran his fingers through the heavy locks until his head seemed to be surrounded with a defense like the quills of a porcupine. Beneath the great bush of hair his gray eyes glowed in a pale, thin face.

"There is a lot of it," said Mr. Austin, surveying him critically, "but it is not usual for anybody in our situation to be worrying about the length and abundance of his hair."

"I'm sure I'd be a lot better if I could get it cut close."

"Well, well, if you are taking it so much to heart we'll see what can be done. You are ill and wasted, Edward, and when one is in that condition a little thing can affect his spirits. De Zavala is a friendly sort of young fellow and through him we will send a request to Colonel Sandoval, the commander of the prisons, that you be allowed to have your hair cut."

"If you please, Uncle Steve," said Ned gratefully.

Mr. Austin was not wrong in his forecast about Lieutenant de Zavala. He showed a full measure of sympathy. Hence a petition to Colonel Martin Sandoval y Dominguez, commander of prisons in the City of Mexico, was drawn up in due form. It stated that one Edward Fulton, a Texan of tender years, now in detention at the capital, was suffering from the excessive growth of hair upon his head. The weight and thickness of said hair had heated his brain and destroyed his appetite. In ordinary cases of physical decline a physician was needed most, but so far as young Edward Fulton was concerned, a barber could render the greatest service.

The petition, duly endorsed and stamped, was forwarded to Colonel Martin Sandoval y Dominguez, and, after being gravely considered by him in the manner befitting a Mexican officer of high rank and pure Spanish descent, received approval. Then he chose among the barbers one Joaquin Menendez, a dark fellow who was not of pure Spanish descent, and sent him to the prison with de Zavala to accomplish the needed task.

"I hope you will be happy now, Edward," said Mr. Austin, when the two Mexicans came. "You are a good boy, but it seems to me that you have been making an undue fuss about your hair."

"I'm quite sure I shall recover fast," said Ned.

It was hard for him to hide his happiness from the others. He felt a thrill of joy every time the steel of the scissors clicked together and a lock of hair fell to the floor. But Joaquin Menendez, the barber, had a Southern temperament and the soul of an artist. It pained him to shear away—"shear away" alone described it—such magnificent hair. It was so thick, so long and so glossy.

"Ah," he said, laying some of the clipped locks across his hand and surveying them sorrowfully, "so great is the pity! What señorita could resist the young señor if these were still growing upon his head!"

"You cut that hair," said Ned with a vicious snap of his teeth, "and cut it close, so close that it will look like the shaven face of a man. I think you will find it so stated in the conditions if you will look at the permit approved in his own handwriting by Colonel Sandoval y Dominguez."

Joaquin Menendez, still the artist, but obedient to the law, heaved a deep sigh, and proceeded with his sad task. Lock by lock the abundant hair fell, until Ned's head stood forth in the shaven likeness of a man's face that he had wished.

"I must tell you," said Mr. Austin, "that it does not become you, but I hope you are satisfied."

"I am satisfied," replied Ned. "I have every cause to be. I know I shall have a stronger appetite to-morrow."

"You are certainly a sensitive boy," said Mr. Austin, looking at him in some wonder. "I did not know that such a thing could influence your feelings and your physical condition so much."

Ned made no reply, but that night he ate supper with a much better appetite than he had shown in many days, bringing words of warm approval and encouragement from Mr. Austin.

An hour or two later, when cheerful good-nights had been exchanged, Ned withdrew to his own little room. He lay down upon his bed, but he was fully clothed and he had no intention of sleep. Instead the boy was transformed. For days he had been walking with a weak and lagging gait. Fever was in his veins. Sometimes he became dizzy, and the walls and floors of the prison swam before him. But now the spirit had taken command of the thin body. Weakness and dizziness were gone. Every vein was infused with strength. Hope was in command, and he no longer doubted that he would succeed.

He rose from the bed and went to the window. The city was silent and the night was dark. Floating clouds hid the moon and stars. The ranges and the city roofs themselves had sunk into the dusk. It seemed to him that all things favored the bold and persevering. And he had been persevering. No one would ever know how he had suffered, what terrific pangs had assailed him. He could not see now how he had done it, and he was quite sure that he could never go through such an ordeal again. The rack would be almost as welcome.

Ned did not know it, but a deep red flush had come into each pale cheek. He removed most of his clothes, and put his head forward between the iron bar and the window sill. The head went through and the shoulders followed. He drew back, breathing a deep and mighty breath of triumph. Yet he had known that it would be so. When he first tried the space he had been only a shade too large for it. Now his head and shoulders would go between, but with nothing to spare. A sheet of paper could not have been slipped in on either side. Yet it was enough. The triumph of self-denial was complete.

He had thought several times of telling Mr. Austin, but he finally decided not to do so. He might seek to interfere. He would put a thousand difficulties in the way, some real and some imaginary. It would save the feelings of both for him to go quietly, and, when Mr. Austin missed him, he would know why and how he had gone.

Ned stood at the window a little while longer, listening. He heard far away the faint rattle of a saber, probably some officer of Santa Anna who was going to a place outside a lattice, the sharp cry of a Mexican upbraiding his lazy mule, and the distant note of a woman singing an old Spanish song. It was as dark as ever, with the clouds rolling over the great valley of Tenochtitlan, which had seen so much of human passion and woe. Ned, brave and resolute as he was, shivered. He was oppressed by the night and the place. It seemed to him, for the moment, that the ghosts of stern Cortez, and of the Aztecs themselves were walking out there.

Then he did a characteristic thing. Folding his arms in front of him he grasped his own elbows and shook himself fiercely. The effort of will and body banished the shapes and illusions, and he went to work with firm hands.

He tore the coverings from his bed into strips, and knotted them together stoutly, trying each knot by tying the strip to the bar, and pulling on it with all his strength. He made his rope at least thirty feet long and then gave it a final test, knot by knot. He judged that it was now near midnight and the skies were still very dark. Inside of a half hour he would be gone—to what? He was seized with an intense yearning to wake up Mr. Austin and tell him good-by. The Texan leader had been so good to him, he would worry so much about him that it was almost heartless to slip away in this manner. But he checked the impulse again, and went swiftly ahead with his work.

He kept on nothing but his underclothing and trousers. The rest he made up into a small package which he tied upon his back. He was sorry that he did not have any weapon. He had been deprived of even his pocket-knife, but he did have a few dollars of Spanish coinage, which he stowed carefully in his trousers pocket. All the while his energy endured despite his wasted form. Hope made a bridge for his weakness.

He let the line out of the window, and his delicate sense told him when it struck against the ground. Six or eight feet were left in his hand, and he tied the end firmly to the bar, knotting it again and again. Then he slipped through the opening and the passage was so close that his ears scraped as they went by. He hung for a few moments on the outside, his feet on the stone sill and his hands clasping the iron bar. He felt sheer and absolute terror. The spires of the cathedral were invisible and only a few far lights showed dimly. It seemed to him that he was suspended over a bottomless pit, and he shivered from head to foot.

But he recalled his courage. Such a black night was best suited to his task. The shivering ceased. Hope ruled once more. He knelt on the stone sill, and, grasping his crude rope with both hands, let himself down from the window. It required almost superhuman exertion to keep himself from dropping sheer away, and the rope burned his palms. But he held on, knowing that he must hold, and the stone wall felt cold to him, as he lay against it, and slid slowly down.

Perhaps his strength, which was more of the mind than of the body, partly gave way under such a severe strain, but he felt pains shooting through his arms, shoulders and chest. His most vivid recollections of the descent were the coldness of the wall against which he lay and the far tinkle of a mandolin which came to him with annoying distinctness. The frequent knots where he had tied the strips together were a help, and whenever he came to one he let his hands rest upon it a moment or two lest he slide down too rapidly.

He had been descending, it seemed to him, fully an hour, and he must have come down a mile, when he heard the rattle of a saber. It was so distinct and so near that it could not be imagination. He looked in the direction of the sound and saw two dark figures in the street. As he stared the two figures shaped themselves into two Mexican officers. Truth, not fancy, told him also that they were not moving. They had seen him escaping and they would come for him! He pressed his body hard against the stone wall, and with his hands resting upon one of the knots clung desperately to the rope. He was hanging in an alley, and the men were on the street at the mouth of it six or seven yards away. They were talking and it must be about him!

He saw them create a light in some manner, and his hands almost slipped from the rope. Then joy flooded back. They were merely lighting cigarettes, and, with a few more words to each other, they walked on. Ned slid slowly down, but when he came to the last knot his strength gave way and he fell. It seemed to him that he was plunging an immeasurable distance through depths of space. Then he struck and with the force of the blow consciousness left him.

When he revived he found himself lying upon a rough stone pavement and it was still dark. He saw above a narrow cleft of somber sky, and something cold and trailing lay across his face. He shivered with repulsion, snatched at it to throw it off, and found that it was his rope. Then he felt of himself cautiously and fearfully, but found that no bones were broken. Nor was he bruised to any degree and now he knew that he could not have fallen more than two or three feet. Perhaps he had struck first upon the little pack which he had fastened upon his back. It reminded him that he was shoeless and coatless and undoing the pack he re clothed himself fully.

He was quite sure that he had not lain there more than a quarter of an hour. Nothing had happened while he was unconscious. It was a dark little alley in the rear of the prison, and the buildings on the other side that abutted upon it were windowless. He walked cautiously to the mouth of the alley, and looked up and down the street. He saw no one, and, pulling his cap down over his eyes, he started instinctively toward the north, because it was to the far north that he wished to go. He was fully aware that he faced great dangers, almost impossibilities. Practically nothing was in his favor, save that he spoke excellent Spanish and also Mexican versions of it.

He went for several hundred yards along the rough and narrow street, and he began to shiver again. Now it was from cold, which often grows intense at night in the great valley of Mexico. Nor was his wasted frame fitted to withstand it. He was assailed also by a fierce hunger. He had carried self-denial to the utmost limit, and nature was crying out against him in a voice that must be heard.

He resolved to risk all and obtain food. Another hundred yards and he saw crouched in an angle of the street an old woman who offered tortillas and frijoles for sale. He went a little nearer, but apprehension almost overcame him. It might be difficult for him to pass for a Mexican and she would give the alarm. But he went yet nearer and stood where he could see her face. It was broad, fat and dark, more Aztec than Spaniard, and then he approached boldly, his speed increased by the appetizing aroma arising from some flat cakes that lay over burning charcoal.

"I will take these, my mother," he said in Mexican, and leaning over he snatched up half a dozen gloriously hot tortillas and frijoles. A cry of indignation and anger was checked at the old woman's lips as two small silver coins slipped from the boy's hands, and tinkled pleasantly together in her own.

Holding his spoils in his hands Ned walked swiftly up the street. He glanced back once, and saw that the old Aztec woman had sunk back into her original position. He had nothing to fear from any alarm by her, and he looked ahead for some especially dark nook in which he could devour the precious food. He saw none, but he caught a glimpse beyond of foliage, and he recalled enough of the city of Mexico to know what it was. It was the Zocalo or garden of the cathedral, the Holy Metropolitan Church of Mexico. Above the foliage he could see the dark walls, and above them he saw the dome, as he had seen it from the window of his prison. Over the dome itself rose a beautiful lantern, in which a light was now burning.

Ned entered the garden which contained many trees, and sat down in the thickest group of them. Then he began to eat. He was as ravenous as any wolf, but he had been cultivating the power of will, and he ate like a gentleman, knowing that to do otherwise would not be good for him. But, tempered by discretion, it was a glorious pursuit. It was almost worth the long period of fasting and suffering, for common Mexican food, bought on the street from an old Aztec woman, to taste so well. Strength flowed back into every vein and muscle. He would not now give way to fears and tremblings which were of the body rather than the mind. He stopped when half of the food was gone, put the remainder in his pocket, and stood up. Fine drops of water struck him in the face. It had begun to rain. And a raw wind was moaning in the valley.

Despite the warm food and his returning strength Ned felt the desperate need of shelter. It was growing colder, too. Even as he stood

there the fine rain turned to fine snow. It melted as it fell, but when it struck him about the neck and face it had an uncommonly penetrating power and the chill seemed to go into the bone. He must have shelter. He looked at the dark walls of the cathedral and then at the light in the slender lantern far up above the dome. What more truly a shelter than a church! It had been a sanctuary in the dark ages, and he might use it now as such.

He left the trees and stood for a little while by a stone, one of the 124 which formerly enclosed an atrium. Still seeing nothing and hearing nothing but the whistle of the wind which drove the cold drops of snow under his collar he advanced boldly again, sprang over the iron railing, and came to the walls of the old church, where he stood a moment.

Ned knew that in great Catholic cathedrals, like the one of Mexico, there were always side doors or little wickets used by priests or other high officials of the church, and he was hoping to find one that he could open. He passed half way around the building, feeling cautiously along the cold stone. Once he saw a watchman with sombrero, heavy cloak and lantern. He pressed into a niche, and the watchman went on his automatic way, little thinking that anyone was near.

The boy continued his circuit and presently he found a wooden door, which he could not force. A little further and he came to a second which opened to his pressure. It was so small an entrance that he stooped as he passed in. He shut it carefully behind him, and stood in what was almost total darkness, until his eyes grew used to the gloom.

Then he saw that he was in a vast interior, Doric in architecture, severe and simple. It was in the form of a Latin cross, with fluted columns dividing the aisles from the nave. Above him rose a noble dome.

He could make out nothing more for the present. It was very still, very imposing, and at another time he would have been awed, but now he had found sanctuary. The cold and the snow were shut out and a grateful warmth took their place. He walked down one of the aisles, careful that his footsteps should make no sound. He saw that there were rows of chapels, seven on either side of the church. It occurred to him that he would be safer in one of these rooms and he chose that which seemed to be used the least.

While on this search he passed the main altar in the center of the building. He noticed above the stalls a picture of the Virgin. He was a Protestant, but when he saw it he crossed himself devoutly. Was not her church giving him shelter and refuge from his enemies? He also passed the Altar of the Kings, beneath which now lie the heads of great Mexicans who secured the independence of their country from Spain. He looked a little at these before he entered the chapel of his choice.

It was a small room, lighted scarcely at all by a narrow window, and it contained a few straight wooden pews one of which had been turned about facing the wall. He lay down in his pew, and, even in daylight, he would have been hidden from anyone a yard away. The hard wood was soft to him. He put his cap under his head and stretched himself out. Then, without will, he relaxed completely. Nature could stand no more. His eyes closed and he floated off into the far and happy region of sleep.

CHAPTER III

SANCTUARY

Ned Fulton's sleep was that of exhaustion, and it lasted long. Although fine snow yet fell outside, and the raw wind blew it about, a pleasant warmth pervaded the snug alcove, made by the back of the pew in which he lay. He had been fortunate indeed to find such a place, because the body of the church was gloomy and cold. But he did not hear the winds, and no thought of the snow troubled him, as he slept on hour after hour.

The night passed, the light snow had ceased, no trace of it was left on the earth, and the brilliant sunshine flooded the ancient capital with warmth. People went about their usual pursuits. Old men and old women sold sweets, hot coffee, and tortillas and frijoles, also hot, in the streets. Little plaster images of the saints and the Virgin were exposed on trays. Donkeys loaded with vegetables, that had been brought across the lakes, bumped one another in the narrow ways. Many officers in fine uniforms and many soldiers in uniforms not so fine could be seen.

Whatever else Mexico might be it was martial. The great Santa Anna whom men called another Napoleon now ruled, and there was talk of war and glory. Much of it was vague, but of one thing they were certain. Santa Anna would soon crush the mutinous Texans in the wild north. Gringos they were, always pushing where they were not wanted, and, however hard their fate, they would deserve it. The vein of cruelty which, despite great virtues, has made Spain a by-word among nations, showed in her descendants.

But the boy, Edward Fulton, sleeping in the chapel of the great cathedral, knew nothing of it all. Nature, too long defrauded, was claiming payment of her debt, and he slept peacefully on, although the hours passed and noon came.

The church had long been open. Priests came and went in the aisles, and entered some of the chapels. Worshipers, most of them women, knelt before the shrines. Service was held at the high altar, and the odor of incense filled the great nave. Yet the boy was still in sanctuary, and a kindly angel was watching over him. No one entered the chapel in which he slept.

It was almost the middle of the afternoon when he awoke. He heard a faint murmur of voices and a pleasant odor came to his nostrils. He quickly remembered everything, and, stirring a little on his wooden couch he found a certain stiffness in the joints. He realized however that all his strength had come back.

But Ned Fulton understood, although he had escaped from prison and had found shelter and sanctuary in the cathedral, that he was yet in an extremely precarious position. The murmur of voices told him that people were in the church, and he had no doubt that the odor came from burning incense.

A little light from the narrow window fell upon him. It came through colored glass, and made red and blue splotches on his hands, at which he looked curiously. He knew that it was a brilliant day outside, and he longed for air and exercise, but he dared not move except to stretch his arms and legs, until the stiffness and soreness disappeared from his joints. Contact with Spaniard and Mexican had taught him the full need of caution.

He was very hungry again, and now he was thankful for his restraint of the night before. He ate the rest of the food in his pockets and waited patiently.

Ned knew that he had slept a long time, and that it must be late in the day. He was confirmed in his opinion by the angle at which the light entered the window, and he decided that he would lie in the pew until night came again. It was a trying test. School his will as he would he felt at times that he must come from his covert and walk about the chapel. The narrow wooden pew became a casket in which he was held, and now and then he was short of breath. Yet he persisted. He was learning very young the value of will, and he forced himself every day to use it and increase its strength.

In such a position and with so much threatening him his faculties became uncommonly keen. He heard the voices more distinctly, and also the footsteps of the priests in their felt slippers. They passed the door of the chapel in which he lay, and once or twice he thought they were going to enter, but they seemed merely to pause at the door. Then he would hold his breath until they were gone.

At last and with infinite joy he saw the colored lights fade. The window itself grew dark, and the murmur in the church ceased. But he did not come forth from his secure refuge until it was quite dark. He staggered from stiffness at first, but the circulation was soon restored. Then he looked from the door of the chapel into the great nave. An old priest in a brown robe was extinguishing the candles. Ned watched him until he had put out the last one, and disappeared in the rear of the church.

Then he came forth and standing in the great, gloomy nave tried to decide what to do next. He had found a night's shelter and no more. He had escaped from prison, but not from the City of Mexico, and his Texas was yet a thousand miles away.

Ned found the little door by which he had entered, and passed outside, hiding again among the trees of the Zocalo. The night was very cold and he shivered once more, as he stood there waiting. The night was so dark that the cathedral was almost a formless bulk. But above it, the light in the slender lantern shone like a friendly star. While he looked the great bell of Santa Maria de Guadalupe in the western tower began to chime, and presently the smaller bell of Dona Maria in the eastern tower joined. It was a mellow song they sang and they sang fresh courage into the young fugitive's veins. He knew that he could never again see this cathedral built upon the site of the great Aztec teocalli, destroyed by the Spaniards more than three hundred years before, without a throb of gratitude.

Ned's first resolve was to take measures for protection from the cold, and he placed his silver dollars in his most convenient pocket. Then he left the trees and moved toward the east, passing in front of the handsome church Sagrario Metropolitano, and entering a very narrow street that led among a maze of small buildings. The district was lighted faintly by a few hanging lanterns, but as Ned had hoped, some of the shops were yet open. The people who sat here and there in the low doorways were mostly short of stature and dark and broad of face. The Indian in them predominated over the Spaniard, and some were pure Aztec. Ned judged that they would not take any deep interest in the fortunes of their rulers, Spanish or Mexican, royalist or republican.

He pulled his cap over his eyes and a little to one side, and strolled on, humming an old Mexican air. His walk was the swagger of a

young Mexican gallant, and in the dimness they would not notice his Northern fairness. Several pairs of eyes observed him, but not with disapproval. They considered him a trim Mexican lad. Some of the men in the doorways took up the air that he was whistling and continued it.

He saw soon the place for which he was looking, a tiny shop in which an old Indian sold serapes. He stopped in the doorway, which he filled, took down one of the best and heaviest and held out the number of dollars which he considered an adequate price. The Indian shook his head and asked for nearly twice as much. Ned knew how long they bargained and chattered in Mexico and what a delight they took in it. After an hour's talk he could secure the serape, at the price he offered, but he dared not linger in one place. Already the old Indian was looking at him inquiringly. Doubtless he had seen that this was no Mexican, but Ned judged shrewdly that he would not let the fact interfere with a promising bargain.

The boy acted promptly. He added two more silver dollars to the amount that he had proffered, put the whole in the old Indian's palm, took down the serape, folded it over his arm, and with a "gracias, señor," backed swiftly out of the shop. The old Indian was too much astonished to move for at least a half minute. Then tightly clutching the silver in his hand he ran into the street. But the tall young señor, with the serape already wrapped around his shoulders, was disappearing in the darkness. The Indian opened his palm and looked at the silver. A smile passed over his face. After all, it was two good Spanish dollars more than he had expected, and he returned contentedly to his shop. If such generous young gentlemen came along every night his fortune would soon be made.

Ned soon left the shop far behind. It was a fine serape, very large, thick and warm, and he draped himself in it in true Mexican fashion. It kept him warm, and, wrapped in its folds, he looked much more like a genuine Mexican. He had but little money left, but among the more primitive people beyond the capital one might work his way. If suspected he could claim to be English, and Mexico was not at war with England.

He bought a sombrero at another shop with almost the last of his money, and then started toward La Viga, the canal that leads from the lower part of the city toward the fresh water lakes, Chalco and Xochimilco. He hoped to find at the canal one of the bergantins, or flat-bottomed boats, in which vegetables, fruit and flowers were brought to the city for sale. They were good-natured people, those of the bergantins, and they would not scorn the offer of a stout lad to help with sail and oar.

Hidden in his serape and sombrero, and, secure in his knowledge of Spanish and Mexican, he now advanced boldly through the more populous and better lighted parts of the city. He even lingered a little while in front of a café, where men were playing guitar and mandolin, and girls were dancing with castanets. The sight of light and life pleased the boy who had been so long in prison. These people were diverting themselves and they smiled and laughed. They seemed to have kindly feelings for everybody, but he remembered that cruel Spanish strain, often dormant, but always there, and he hastened on.

Three officers, their swords swinging at their thighs, came down the narrow street abreast. At another time Ned would not have given way, and even now it hurt him to do so, but prudence made him step from the sidewalk. One of them laughed and applied an insulting epithet to the "peon," but Ned bore it and continued, his sombrero pulled well down over his eyes.

His course now led him by the great palace of Yturbide, where he saw many windows blazing with light. Several officers were entering and chief among them he recognized General Martin Perfecto de Cos, the brother-in-law of Santa Anna, whom Ned believed to be a treacherous and cruel man. He hastened away from such an unhealthy proximity, and came to La Viga.

He saw a rude wharf along the canal and several boats, all with the sails furled, except two. These two might be returning to the fresh water lakes, and it was possible that he could secure passage. The people of the bergantins were always humble peons and they cared little for the intrigues of the capital.

It was now about eleven o'clock and the night had lightened somewhat, a fair moon showing. Ned could see distinctly the boats or bergantins as the Mexicans called them. They were large, flat of bottom, shallow of draft, and were propelled with both sail and oar. He was repulsed at the first, where a surly Mexican of middle age told him with a curse that he wanted no help, but at the next which had as a crew a man, a woman, evidently his wife, and two half-grown boys, he was more fortunate. Could he use an oar? He could. Then he might come, because there was little promise of wind, and the sails would be of no use. A strong arm would help, as it was sixteen miles down La Viga to the Lake of Xochimilco, on the shores of which they lived. The boys were tired and sleepy, and he would serve very well in their stead.

Ned took his place in the boat, truly thankful that in this crisis of his life he knew how to row. He saw that his hosts, or rather those for whom he worked, were an ordinary peon family, at least half Indian, sluggish of mind and kind of heart. They had brought vegetables and flowers to the city, and now they were thriftily returning in the night to their home on the lake that Benito Igarritos and his sons might not miss the next day from their work.

Igarritos and Ned took the oars. The two boys stretched themselves on the bottom of the boat and were asleep in an instant. Juana, the wife, spread a serape over them, and then sat down in Turkish fashion in the center of the bergantin, a great red and yellow reboso about her head and shoulders. Sometimes she looked at her husband, and sometimes at the strange boy. He had spoken to them in good Mexican, he dressed like a Mexican and he walked like a Mexican, but she had not been deceived. She knew that the Mexican part of him ended with the serape and sombrero. She wondered why he had come, and why he was anxious to go to the Lake of Xochimilco. But she reflected with the patience and resignation of an oppressed race that it was no business of hers. He was a good youth. He had spoken to her with compliments as one speaks to a lady of high degree, and he bent manfully on the oar. He was welcome. But he must have a name and she would know it.

"What do you call yourself?" she asked.

"William," he replied. "I come from a far country, England, and it is my pleasure to travel in new lands and see new peoples."

"Weel-le-am," she said gravely, "you are far from your friends."

Ned bent his head in assent. Her simple words made him feel that he was indeed far from his own land and surrounded by a thousand perils. The woman did not speak again and they moved on with an even stroke down the canal which had an uniform width of about thirty feet. They were still passing houses of stone and others of adobe, but before they had gone a mile they were halted by a sharp command from the shore. An officer and three soldiers, one of whom held a lantern, stood on the bank.

Ned had expected that they would be stopped. These were revolutionary times and people could not go in or out of the city unnoticed. Particularly was La Viga guarded. He knew that his fate now rested with Benito Igarritos and his wife Juana, but he trusted them. The officer was peremptory, but the bergantin was most innocent in appearance. Merely a humble vegetable boat returning down La Viga after a successful day in the city. "Your family?" Ned heard the officer say to Benito, as he flashed the lantern in turn upon every one.

Taciturn, like most men of the oppressed races, Benito nodded, while his wife sat silent in her great red and yellow reboso. Ned leaned carelessly upon the oar, but his face was well hid by the sombrero, and his heart was throbbing. When the light of the lantern passed over him he felt as if he were seared by a flame, but the officer had no suspicion, and with a gruff "Pass on" he withdrew from the bank with his men. Benito nodded to Ned and they pulled again into the center of La Viga. Neither spoke. Nor did the woman.

Ned bent on the oar with renewed strength. He felt that the greatest of his dangers was now passed, and the relief of the spirit brought fresh strength. The night lightened yet more. He saw on the low banks of the canal green shrubs and many plants with spikes and thorns. It seemed to him characteristic of Mexico that nearly everything should have its spikes and thorns. Through the gray night showed the background of the distant mountains.

They overtook and passed two other bergantins returning from the city and they met a third on its way thither with vegetables for the morning market. Benito knew the owners and exchanged a brief word with everyone as he passed. Ned pulled silently at his oar.

When it was far past midnight Ned felt a cool breeze rising. Benito began to unfurl the sail.

"You have pulled well, young señor," he said to Ned, "but the oar is needed no more. Now the wind will work for us. You will sleep and Carlos will help me."

He awoke the elder of the two boys. Ned was so tired that his arms ached, and he was glad to rest. He wrapped his heavy serape about himself, lay down on the bottom of the boat, pillowed his head on his arm, and went to sleep.

When he awoke, it was day and they were floating on a broad sheet of shallow water, which he knew instinctively was Xochimilco. The wind was still blowing, and one of the boys steered the bergantin. Benito, Juana and the other boy sat up, with their faces turned toward the rosy morning light, as if they were sun-worshipers. Ned also felt the inspiration. The world was purer and clearer here than in the city. In the early morning the grayish, lonely tint which is the prevailing note of Mexico, did not show. The vegetation was green, or it was tinted with the glow of the sun. Near the lower shores he saw the Chiampas or floating gardens.

Benito turned the bergantin into a cove, and they went ashore. His house, flat roofed and built of adobe, was near, standing in a field, filled with spiky and thorny plants. They gave Ned a breakfast, the ordinary peasant fare of the country, but in abundance, and then the woman, who seemed to be in a sense the spokesman of the family, said very gravely:

"You are a good boy, Weel-le-am, and you rowed well. What more do you wish of us?"

Benito also bent his dark eyes upon him in serious inquiry. Ned was not prepared for any reply. He did not know just what to do and on impulse he answered:

"I would stay with you a while and work. You will not find me lazy."

He waved his hand toward the spiky and thorny field. Benito consulted briefly with his wife and they agreed. For three or four days Ned toiled in the hot field with Benito and the boys and at night he slept on the floor of earth. The work was hard and it made his body sore. The food was of the roughest, but these things were trifles compared with the gift of freedom which he had received. How glorious it was to breathe the fresh air and to have only the sky for a roof and the horizon for walls!

Benito and the older boy again took the bergantin loaded with vegetables up La Viga to the city. They did not suggest that Ned go with them. He remained working in the field, and trying to think of some way in which he could obtain money for a journey. The wind was good, the bergantin traveled fast, and Benito and his boy returned speedily. Benito greeted Ned with a grave salute, but said nothing until an hour later, when they sat by a fire outside the hut, eating the tortillas and frijoles which Juana had cooked for them.

"What is the news in the capital?" asked Ned.

Benito pondered his reply.

"The President, the protector of us all, the great General Santa Anna, grows more angry at the Texans, the wild Americans who have come into the wilderness of the far North," he replied. "They talk of an army going soon against them, and they talk, too, of a daring escape."

He paused and contemplatively lit a cigarrito.

"What was the escape?" asked Ned, the pulse in his wrist beginning to beat hard.

"One of the Texans, whom the great Santa Anna holds, but a boy they say he was, though fierce, slipped between the bars of his window and is gone. They wish to get him back; they are anxious to take him again for reasons that are too much for Benito."

"Do you think they will find him?"

"How do I know? But they say he is yet in the capital, and there is a reward of one hundred good Spanish dollars for the one who will bring him in, or who will tell where he is to be found."

Benito quietly puffed at his cigarrito and Juana, the cooking being over, threw ashes on the coals.

"If he is still hiding within reach of Santa Anna's arm," said Ned, "somebody is sure to betray him for the reward."

"I do not know," said Benito, tossing away the stub of his cigarrito. Then he rose and began work in the field.

Ned went out with the elder boy, Carlos, and caught fish. They did not return until twilight, and the others were already waiting placidly while Juana prepared their food. None of them could read; they had little; their life was of the most primitive, but Ned noticed that they never spoke cross words to one another. They seemed to him to be entirely content.

After supper they sat on the ground in front of the adobe hut. The evening was clear and already many stars were coming into a blue sky. The surface of the lake was silver, rippling lightly. Benito smoked luxuriously.

"I saw this afternoon a friend of mine, Miguel Lampridi," he said after a while. "He had just come down La Viga from the city."

"What news did he bring?" asked Edward.

"They are still searching everywhere for the young Texan who went through the window—Eduardo Fulton is his name. Truly General Santa Anna must have his reasons. The reward has been doubled."

"Poor lad," spoke Juana, who spoke seldom. "It may be that the young Texan is not as bad as they say. But it is much money that they offer. Someone will find him."

"It may be," said Benito. Then they sat a long time in silence. Juana was the first to go into the house and to bed. After a while the two boys followed. Another half hour passed, and Ned rose.

"I go, Benito," he said. "You and your wife have been good to me, and I cannot bring misfortune upon you. Why is it that you did not betray me? The reward is large. You would have been a rich man here."

Benito laughed low.

"Yes, it would have been much money," he replied, "but what use have I for it? I have the wife I wish, and my sons are good sons. We do not go hungry and we sleep well. So it will be all the days of our life. Two hundred silver dollars would bring two hundred evil spirits among us. Thy face, young Texan, is a good face. I think so and my wife, Juana, who knows, says so. Yet it is best that you go. Others will soon learn, and it is hard to live between close stone walls, when the free world is so beautiful. I will call Juana, and she, too, will tell you farewell. We would not drive you away, but since you choose to go, you shall not leave without a kind word, which may go with you as a blessing on your way."

He called at the door of the adobe hut. Juana came forth. She was stout, and she had never been beautiful, but her face seemed very pleasant to Ned, as she asked the Holy Virgin to watch over him in his wanderings.

"I have five silver dollars," said Benito. "They are yours. They will make the way shorter."

But Ned refused absolutely to accept them. He would not take the store of people who had been so kind to him. Instead he offered the single dollar that he had left for a heavy knife like a machete. Benito brought it to him and reluctantly took the dollar.

"Do not try the northern way, Texan," he said, "it is too far. Go over the mountains to Vera Cruz, where you will find passage on a ship."

It seemed good advice to Ned, and, although the change of plan was abrupt, he promised to take it. Juana gave him a bag of food which he fastened to his belt under his serape, and at midnight, with the blessing of the Holy Virgin invoked for him again, he started. Fifty yards away he turned and saw the man and woman standing before their door and gazing at him. He waved his hand and they returned the salute. He walked on again a little mist before his eyes. They had been very kind to him, these poor people of another race.

He walked along the shore of the lake for a long time, and then bore in toward the east, intending to go parallel with the great road to Vera Cruz. His step was brisk and his heart high. He felt more courage and hope than at any other time since he had dropped from the prison. He had food for several days, and the possession of the heavy knife was a great comfort. He could slash with it, as with a hatchet.

He walked steadily for hours. The road was rough, but he was young and strong. Once he crossed the pedregal, a region where an old lava flow had cooled, and which presented to his feet numerous sharp edges like those of a knife. He had good shoes with heavy soles and he knew their value. On the long march before him they were worth as much as bread and weapons, and he picked his way as carefully as a walker on a tight rope. He was glad when he had crossed the dangerous pedregal and entered a cypress forest, clustering on a low hill. Grass grew here also, and he rested a while, wrapped in his serape against the coldness of the night.

He saw behind and now below him the city, the towers of the churches outlined against the sky. It was from some such place as this that Cortez and his men, embarked upon the world's most marvelous adventure, had looked down for the first time upon the ancient city of Tenochtitlan. But it did not beckon to Ned. It seemed to him that a mighty menace to his beloved Texas emanated from it. And he must warn the Texans.

He sprang to his feet and resumed his journey. At the eastern edge of the hill he came upon a beautiful little spring, leaping from the rock. He drank from it and went on. Lower down he saw some adobe huts among the cypresses and cactus. No doubt their occupants were sound asleep, but for safety's sake he curved away from them. Dogs barked, and when they barked again the sound showed they were coming nearer. He ran, rather from caution than fear, because if the dogs attacked he wished to be so far away from the huts that their owners would not be awakened.

Now he gave thanks that he had the machete. He thrust his hands under the serape and clasped its strong handle. It was a truly formidable weapon. He came to another little hill, also clothed in cypress, and began to ascend it with decreased speed. The baying of the dogs was growing much louder. They were coming fast. Near the summit he saw a heap of rock, probably an Aztec tumulus, six or seven feet high. Ned smiled with satisfaction. Pressed by danger his mind was quick. He was where he would make his defense, and he did not think it would need to be a long one.

He settled himself well upon the top of the tumulus and drew his machete. The dogs, six in number, coursed among the cypresses, and the leader, foam upon his mouth, leaped straight at Ned. The boy involuntarily drew up his feet a little, but he was not shaken from the crouching position that was best suited to a blow. As the hound was in mid-air he swung the machete with all his might and struck straight at the ugly head. The heavy blade crashed through the skull and the dog fell dead without a sound. Another which leaped also, but not so far, received a deep cut across the shoulder. It fell back and retreated with the others among the cypresses, where the unwounded dogs

watched with red eyes the formidable figure on the rocks.

But Ned did not remain on the tumulus more than a few minutes longer. When he sprang down the dogs growled, but he shook the machete until it glittered in the moonlight. With howls of terror they fled, while he resumed his journey in the other direction.

Near morning he came into country which seemed to him very wild. The soil was hard and dry, but there was a dense growth of giant cactus, with patches here and there of thorny bushes. Guarding well against the spikes and thorns he crept into one of the thickets and lay down. He must rest and sleep and already the touch of rose in the east was heralding the dawn. Sleep by day and flight by night. He was satisfied with himself. He had really succeeded better so far than he had hoped, and, guarded by the spikes and thorns, slumber took him before dawn had spread from east to west.

CHAPTER IV

THE PALM

Ned awoke about noon. The morning had been cold, but having been wrapped very thoroughly in the great serape, he had remained snug and warm all through his long sleep. He rose very cautiously, lest the spikes and thorns should get him, and then went to a comparatively open place among the giant cactus stems whence he could see over the hills and valleys. He saw in the valley nearest him the flat roofs of a small village. Columns of smoke rose from two or three of the adobe houses, and he heard the faint, mellow voices of men singing in a field. Women by the side of a small but swift stream were pounding and washing clothes after the primitive fashion.

Looking eastward he saw hills and a small mountain, but all the country in that direction seemed to be extremely arid and repellent. The bare basalt of volcanic origin showed everywhere, and, even at the distance, he could see many deep quarries in the stone, where races older, doubtless, than Aztecs and Toltecs, had obtained material for building. It was always Ned's feeling when in Mexico that he was in an old, old land, not ancient like England or France, but ancient as Egypt and Babylon are ancient.

He had calculated his course very carefully, and he knew that it would lead through this desert, volcanic region, but on the whole he was not sorry. Mexicans would be scarce in such a place. He remained a lad of stout heart, confident that he would succeed.

He ate sparingly and reckoned that with self-denial he had food enough to last three days. He might obtain more on the road by some happy chance or other. Then becoming impatient he started again, keeping well among cypress and cactus, and laying his course toward the small mountain that he saw ahead. He pressed forward the remainder of the afternoon, coming once or twice near to the great road that led to Vera Cruz. On one occasion he saw a small body of soldiers, deep in dust, marching toward the port. All except the officers were peons and they did not seem to Ned to show much martial ardor. But the officers on horseback sternly bade them hasten. Ned, as usual, had much sympathy for the poor peasants, but none for the officers who drove them on.

About sunset he came to a little river, the Teotihuacan he learned afterward, and he still saw before him the low mountain, the name of which was Cerro Gordo. But his attention was drawn from the mountain by two elevations rising almost at the bank of the river. They were pyramidal in shape and truncated, and the larger, which Ned surmised to be anywhere from 500 to 1000 feet square, seemed to rise to a height of two or three hundred feet. The other was about two-thirds the size of the larger, both in area and height.

Although there was much vegetation clinging about them Ned knew that these were pyramids erected by the hand of man. The feeling that this was a land old like Egypt came back to him most powerfully in the presence of these ancient monuments, which were in fact the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. There they stood, desolate and of untold age. The setting sun poured an intense red light upon them, until they stood out vivid and enlarged.

So far as Ned knew, no other human being was anywhere near. The loneliness in the presence of those tremendous ruins was overpowering. He longed for human companionship. A peon, despite the danger otherwise, would have been welcome. The whole land took on fantastic aspects. It was not normal and healthy like the regions from which he came north of the Rio Grande. Every nerve quivered.

Then he did the bravest thing that one could do in such a position, forcing his will to win a victory over weirdness and superstition. He crossed the shallow river and advanced boldly toward the Pyramid of the Sun. His reason told him that there were no such things as ghosts, but it told him also that Mexican peons were likely to believe in them. Hence it was probable that he would be safer about the Pyramid than far from it. The country bade fair to become too rough for night traveling and he would stop there a while, refreshing his strength.

Although the sun was setting, the color of the skies promised a bright night, and Ned approached boldly. As usual his superstitious fears became weaker as he approached the objects that had called them into existence. But before he reached the pyramids he found that he was among many ruins. They stood all about him, stone fragments of ancient walls, black basalt or lava, and, unless the twilight deceived him, there were also traces of ancient streets. He saw, too, south of the larger pyramids a great earthwork or citadel thirty or forty feet high enclosing a square in which stood a small pyramid. The walls of the earthwork were enormously thick, three hundred feet Ned reckoned, and upon it at regular intervals stood other small pyramids fourteen in number.

Scattered all about, alone or in groups, were tumuli, and leading away from the largest group of tumuli Ned saw a street or causeway, which, passing by the Pyramid of the Sun, ended in front of the Pyramid of the Moon, where it widened out into a great circle, with a tumulus standing in the center.

Despite all the courage that he had shown Ned felt a superstitious thrill as he looked at these ancient and solemn ruins. He and they were absolutely alone. Antiquity looked down upon him. The sun was gone now and the moon was coming out, touching pyramids and tumuli, earthworks and causeway with ghostly silver, deepening the effect of loneliness and far-off time.

While Ned was looking at these majestic remains he heard the sound of voices, and then the rattle of weapons. He saw through the twilight the glitter of uniforms and of swords and sabers. A company of Mexican soldiers, at least a hundred in number, had come into the ancient city and, no doubt, intended to camp there. Being so absorbed in the strange ruins he had not noticed them sooner.

As the men were already scattering in search of firewood or other needs of the camp Ned saw that he was in great danger. He hid behind a tumulus, half covered by the vegetation that had grown from its crevices. He was glad that his serape was of a modest brown, instead of the bright colors that most of the Mexicans loved. A soldier passed within ten feet of him, but in the twilight did not notice him. It was enough to make one quiver. Another passed a little later, and he, too, failed to see the fugitive. But a third, if he came, would probably see, and leaving the tumulus Ned ran to another where he hid again for a few minutes.

It was the boy's object to make off through the neighboring forest after passing from tumulus to tumulus, but he found soon that another body of soldiers was camping upon the far side of the ruined city. He might or might not run the gauntlet in the darkness. The probabilities were that he would not, and hiding behind a tumulus almost midway between the two forces he took thought of his next step.

The Pyramid of the Moon rose almost directly before him, its truncated mass spotted with foliage. Ned could see that its top was flat and instantly he took a bold resolution. He made his way to the base of the pyramid and began to climb slowly and with great care, always keeping hidden in the vegetation. He was certain that no Mexican would follow where he was going. They were on other business, and their incurious minds bothered little about a city that was dead and gone for them.

Up he went steadily over uneven terraces, and from below he heard the chatter of the soldiers. A third fire had been lighted much nearer the pyramid, and pausing a moment he looked down. Twenty or thirty soldiers were scattered about this fire. Their muskets were stacked and they were taking their ease. Discipline was relaxed. One man was strumming a mandolin already, and two or three began to sing. But Ned saw sentinels walking among the tumuli and along the Calle de los Muertos which led from the Citadel to the southern front of the Pyramid of the Moon. He was very glad now that he had sought this lofty refuge, and he renewed his climb.

As he drew himself upon another terrace he saw before him a dark opening into the very mass of the pyramid, which was built either of brick or of stone, he could not tell which. He thought once of creeping in and of hiding there, but after taking a couple of steps into the dark he drew back. He was afraid of plunging into some well and he continued the ascent. He was now about sixty or seventy feet up, but he was not yet half way to the top of the pyramid.

He was so slow and cautious that it took more than a half hour to reach the crest, where he found himself upon a platform about twenty feet square. It was an irregular surface with much vegetation growing from the crevices, and here Ned felt quite safe. Near him and sixty feet above him rose the crest of the Pyramid of the Sun. Beyond were ranges of mountains silvery in the moonlight. He walked to the edge of the pyramid and looked down. Four or five fires were burning now, and the single mandolin had grown to four. Several guitars were being plucked vigorously also, and the sound of the instruments joined with that of the singing voices was very musical and pleasant. These Mexicans seemed to be full of good nature, and so they were, with fire, food and music in plenty, but now that he had been their prisoner Ned never forgot how that dormant and Spanish strain of cruelty in their natures could flame high under the influence of passion. The dungeons of Spanish Mexico and of the new Mexico hid many dark stories, and he believed that he had read what lay behind the smiling mask of Santa Anna's face. He would suffer everything to keep out of Mexican hands.

He crept away from the edge of the pyramid, and chose a place near its center for his lofty camp. There was much vegetation growing out of the ancient masonry, and he had a fear of scorpions and of more dangerous reptiles, perhaps, but he thrashed up the grass and weeds well with his machete. Then he sat down and ate his supper. Fortunately he had drunk copiously at a brook before reaching the ruined city and he did not suffer from thirst.

Then, relying upon the isolation of his perch for safety, he wrapped himself in the invaluable serape and lay down. The night was cold as usual, and a sharp wind blew down from northern peaks and ranges, but Ned, protected by vegetation and the heavy serape, had an extraordinary feeling of warmth and snugness as he lay on the old pyramid. Held so long within close walls the wild freedom and the fresh air that came across seas and continents were very grateful to him. Even the presence of an enemy, so near, and yet, as it seemed, so little dangerous, added a certain piquancy to his position. The pleasant tinkle of the mandolins was wafted upward to him, and it was wonderfully soothing, telling of peace and rest. He inhaled the aromatic odors of strange and flowering southern plants, and his senses were steeped in a sort of luxurious calm.

He fell asleep to the music of the mandolin, and when he awoke such a bright sun was shining in his eyes that he was glad to close and open them again several times before they would tolerate the brilliant Mexican sky that bent above him. He lay still about five minutes, listening, and then, to his disappointment, he heard sounds below. He judged by the position of the sun that it must be at least 10 o'clock in the morning, and the Mexicans should be gone. Yet they were undoubtedly still there. He crept to the edge of the pyramid and looked over. There was the Mexican force, scattered about the ruined city, but camped in greatest numbers along the Calle de los Muertos. Their numbers had been increased by two hundred or three hundred, and, as Ned saw no signs of breaking camp, he judged that this was a rendezvous, and that there were more troops yet to come.

He saw at once that his problem was increased greatly. He could not dream of leaving the summit of the pyramid before the next night came. Food he had in plenty but no water, and already as the hot sun's rays approached the vertical he felt a great thirst. Imagination and the knowledge that he could not allay it for the present at least, increased the burning sensation in his throat and the dryness of his lips. He caught a view of the current of the Teotihuacan, the little river by the side of which the pyramids stand, and the sight increased his torments. He had never seen before such fresh and pure water. It sparkled and raced in the sun before him and it looked divine. And yet it was as far out of his reach as if it were all the way across Mexico.

Ned went back to the place where he had slept and sat down. The sight of the river had tortured him, and he felt better when it was shut from view. Now he resolved to see what could be accomplished by will. He undertook to forget the water, and at times he succeeded, but, despite his greatest efforts, the Teotihuacan would come back now and then with the most astonishing vividness. Although he was lying on the serape with bushes and shrubs all around, there was the river visible to the eye of imagination, brighter, fresher and more sparkling than ever. He could not control his fancy, but will ruled the body and he did not stir from his place for hours. The sun beat fiercely upon him and the thin bushes and shrubs afforded little protection. Toward the northern edge of the pyramid a small palm was growing out of a large crevice in the masonry, and it might have given some shade, but it was in such an exposed position that Ned did not dare to use it for fear of discovery.

How he hated that sun! It seemed to be drying him up, through and through, causing the very blood in his veins to evaporate. Why should such hot days follow such cold nights? When his tongue touched the roof of his mouth it felt rough and hot like a coal. Perhaps the Mexicans had gone away. It seemed to him that he had not heard any sounds from them for some time. He went to the edge of the pyramid and looked over. No, the Mexicans were yet there, and the sight of them filled him with a fierce anger. They were enjoying themselves. Tents were scattered about and shelters of boughs had been erected. Many soldiers were taking their siestas. Nobody was working and there was not the slightest sign that they intended to depart that day. Ned's hot tongue clove to the roof of his hot mouth, but he obstinately refused to look at the river. He did not think that he could stand another sight of it.

He went back to his little lair among the shrubs and prayed for night, blessed night with its cooling touch. He had a horrible apprehension which amounted to conviction that the troops would stay there for several days, awaiting some maneuver or perhaps making it a rallying point, and that in his hiding place on the pyramid he was in as bad case as a sailor cast on a desert island without water. Nothing seemed left for him but to steal down and try to escape in darkness. Thus night would be doubly welcome and he prayed for it again and with renewed fervor.

Some hours are ten times as long as others, but the longest of all come to an end at last. The sun began to droop in the west. The vertical glare was gone, yet the masonry where it was bare was yet hot to the touch. It, too, cooled soon. The sun dropped wholly down and darkness came over all the earth. Then the fever in Ned's throat died down somewhat, and the blood began to flow again in his veins. It seemed as if a dew touched his face, delicious, soothing like drops of rain in the burning desert.

He rose and stretched his stiffened limbs. Overhead spread the dark, cool sky, and the bright stars were coming out, one by one. After the first few moments of relief he heard the cry for water again. Despite the night and the coming chill he knew that it would make itself heard often and often, and he began to study the possibilities of a descent. But he saw the fires spread out again on all sides of the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon and flame thickly along the Calle de los Muertos. It did not seem that he could pass even on the blackest night.

He moved over toward the northern edge of the pyramid, and stood under the palm which he had noticed in the day. One of its broad green leaves, swayed by the wind, touched him softly on the face. He looked up. It was a friendly palm. Its very touch was kindly. He stroked the blades and then he examined the stem or body minutely. He was a studious boy who had read much. He had heard of the water palm of the Hawaiian and other South Sea Islands. Might not the water palm be found in Mexico also? In any event, he had never heard of a palm that was poisonous. They were always givers of life.

He raised the machete and slashed the stem of the palm at a point about five feet from the ground. The wound gaped open and a stream of water gushed forth. Ned applied his mouth at once and drank long and deeply. It was not poison, nor was it any bitter juice. This was the genuine water palm, yielding up the living fluid of its arteries for him. He drank as long as the gash gave forth water and then sat down under the blades of the palm, content and thankful, realizing that there was always hope in the very heart of despair.

Ned sat a long time, feeling the new life rushing into his veins. He ate from the food of which he had a plentiful supply and once more gave thanks to Benito and Juana. Then he stood up and the broad leaves of the palm waving gently in the wind touched his face again. He reached up his hand and stroked them. The palm was to him almost a thing of life. He went to the edge of the pyramid and strove for a sight of the Teotihuacan. He caught at last a flash of its waters in the moonlight and he shook his fist in defiance. "I can do without you now," was his thought. "The sight of you does not torture me."

He returned to his usual place of sleep. As long as he had a water supply it was foolish of him to attempt an escape through the Mexican lines. He was familiar now with every square inch of the twenty feet square of the crowning platform of the pyramid. It seemed that he had been there for weeks and he began to have the feeling that it was home. Once more, hunger and thirst satisfied, he sought sleep and slept with the deep peace of youth.

Ned awoke from his second night on the pyramid before dawn was complete. There was silvery light in the east over the desolate ranges, but the west was yet a dark blur. He looked down and saw that nearly all the soldiers were still asleep, while those who did not sleep were as motionless as if they were. In the half light the lost city, the tumuli and the ruins of the old buildings took on strange and fantastic shapes. The feeling that he was among the dead, the dead for many centuries, returned to Ned with overpowering effect. He thought of Aztec and Toltec and people back of all these who had built this city. The Mexicans below were intruders like himself.

He shook himself as if by physical effort he could get rid of the feeling and then went to the water palm in which he cut another gash. Again the fountain gushed forth and he drank. But the palm was a small one. There was too little soil among the crevices of the ancient masonry to support a larger growth, and he saw that it could not satisfy his thirst more than a day or two. But anything might happen in that time, and his courage suffered no decrease.

He retreated toward the center of the platform as the day was now coming fast after the southern fashion. The whole circle of the heavens seemed to burst into a blaze of light, and, in a few hours, the sun was hotter than it had been before. Many sounds now came from the camp below, but Ned, although he often looked eagerly, saw no signs of coming departure. Shortly after noon there was a great blare of trumpets, and a detachment of lancers rode up. They were large men, mounted finely, and the heads of their long lances glittered as they brandished them in the sun.

Ned's attention was drawn to the leader of this new detachment, an officer in most brilliant uniform, and he started. He knew him at once. It was the brother-in-law of Santa Anna, General Martin Perfecto de Cos, a man in whom that old, cruel strain was very strong, and whom Ned believed to be charged with the crushing of the Texans. Then he was right in his surmise that Mexican forces for the campaign were gathering here on the banks of the Teotihuacan!

More troops came in the afternoon, and the boy no longer had the slightest doubt. The camp spread out further and further, and assumed military form. Not so many men were lounging about and the tinkling of the guitars ceased. Ned could see General de Cos plainly, a heavy man of dark face, autocratic and domineering in manner.

Night came and the boy went once more to the palm. When he struck with his machete the water came forth, but in a much weaker stream. In reality he was yet thirsty after he drank the full flow, but he would not cut into the stem again. He knew that he must practice the severest economy with his water supply.

The third night came and as soon as he was safe from observation Ned slashed the palm once more. The day had been very hot and his thirst was great. The water came forth but with only half the vigor of the morning, which itself had shown a decrease. The poor palm, too, trembled and shook when he cut into it with the machete and the blades drooped. Ned drank what it supplied and then turned away regretfully. It was a kindly palm, a gift to man, and yet he must slay it to save his own life.

He lay down again, but he did not sleep as well as usual. His nerves were upset by the long delay, and the decline of the palm, and he was not refreshed when he awoke in the morning. His head felt hot and his limbs were heavy.

As it was not yet bright daylight he went to the palm and cut into it. The flow of water was only a few mouthfuls. Cautious and doubly economical now he pursed his lips that not a single drop might escape. Then, after eating a little food he lay down, protected as much as possible by the scanty bushes, and also sheltering himself at times from the sun with the serape which he drew over his head. He felt instinctively and with the power of conviction that the Mexicans would not depart. The coming of Cos had taken the hope from him. Cos! He hated the short, brusque name.

It was another day of dazzling brightness and intense heat. Certainly this was a vertical sun. It shot rays like burning arrows straight down. The blood in his veins seemed to dry up again. His head grew hotter. Black specks in myriads danced before his eyes. He looked longingly at his palm. When he first saw it, it stood up, vital and strong. Now it seemed to droop and waver like himself. But it would have enough life to fill its veins and arteries through the day and at night he would have another good drink.

He scarcely stirred throughout the day but spent most of the time looking at the palm. He paid no attention to the sounds below, sure that the Mexicans would not go away. He fell at times into a sort of fevered stupor, and he aroused himself from the last one to find that night had come. He took his machete, went to the tree, and cut quickly, because his thirst was very great.

The gash opened, but not a drop came forth.

CHAPTER V

IN THE PYRAMID

Ned stared, half in amazement, half in despair. Yet he had known all the while that this would happen. The palm had emptied every drop from its veins and arteries for him, giving life for life. He had cut so deeply and so often that it would wither now and die. He turned away in sadness, and suddenly a bitter, burning thirst assailed him. It seemed to have leaped into new life with the knowledge that there was nothing now to assuage it.

The boy sat down on a small projection of brickwork, and considered his case. He had been more than twelve hours without water under a fierce sun. His thirst would not increase so fast at night, but it would increase, nevertheless, and the Mexican force might linger below a week. Certainly its camp was of such a character that it would remain at least two or three days, and any risk was preferable to a death of thirst. He could wait no longer.

Now chance which had been so cruel flung a straw his way. The night was darker than usual. The moon and stars did not come out, and troops of clouds stalked up from the southwest. Ned knew that it was a land of little rain, and for a few moments he had a wild hope that in some manner he might catch enough water for his use on the crest of the pyramid. But reason soon drove the hope away. There was no depression which would hold water, and he resolved instead to make the descent under cover of the darkness.

When he had come to this resolution the thirst was not so fierce. Indecision being over, both his physical and mental courage rose. He ate and had left enough food to last for two days, which he fastened securely in a pack to his body. Then, machete in hand, he looked over the edge of the pyramid. There was some noise in the camp, but most of the soldiers seemed to be at rest. Lights flickered here and there, and the ruined city, showing only in fragments through the darkness, looked more ghostly and mournful than ever.

Ned waited a long time. Drops of rain began to fall, and the wind moaned with an almost human note around the pyramids and old walls. The rain increased a little, but it never fell in abundance. It and the wind were very cold, and Ned drew the serape very closely about his body. He was anxious now for time to pass fast, because he was beginning to feel afraid, not of the Mexicans, but of the dead city, and the ghosts of those vanished long ago, although he knew there were no such things. But the human note in the wind grew until it was like a shriek, and this shriek was to him a warning that he must go. The pyramid had been his salvation, but his time there was at an end.

He drew the sombrero far down over his eyes, and once more calculated the chances. He spoke Spanish well, and he spoke its Mexican variations equally well. If they saw him he might be able to pass for a Mexican. He must succeed.

He lowered himself from the crowning platform of the pyramid and began the descent. The cold rain pattered upon him and his body was weak from privation, but his spirit was strong, and with steady hand and foot he went down. He paused several times to look at the camp. Five or six fires still burned there, but they flickered wildly in the wind and rain. He judged that the sentinels would not watch well. For what must they watch, there in the heart of their own country?

But as he approached the bottom he saw two of these sentinels walking back and forth, their bayonets reflecting a flicker now and then from the flames. He saw also five or six large white tents, and he was quite sure that the largest sheltered at that instant Martin Perfecto de Cos, whom he wished very much to avoid. He intended, when he reached the bottom, to keep as close as he could in the shadow of the pyramid, and then seek the other side of the Teotihuacan.

The rain was still blown about by the wind, and it was very cold. But the influence of both wind and rain were inspiring to the boy. They were a tonic to body and mind, and he grew bolder as he came nearer to the ground. At last he stepped upon the level earth, and stood for a little while black and motionless against the pyramid.

He was aware that the cordon of Cos' army completely enclosed the Pyramid of the Moon, the Pyramid of the Sun, the Calle de los Muertos and the other principal ruins, and he now heard the sentinels much more distinctly as they walked back and forth. Straining his eyes he could see two of them, short, sallow men, musket on shoulder. The beat of one lay directly across the path that he had chosen, reaching from the far edge of the Pyramid of the Moon to a point about twenty yards away. He believed that when this sentinel marched to the other end of his beat he could slip by. At any rate, if he were seen he might make a successful flight, and he slipped his hand to the handle of the machete in his belt in order that he might be ready for resistance.

He saw presently two or three dark heaps near him, and as his eyes grew used to the darkness he made out camp equipage and supplies. The smallest heap which was also nearest to him, consisted of large metal canteens for water, such as soldiers of that day carried. His thirst suddenly made itself manifest again. Doubtless those canteens contained water, and his body which wanted water so badly cried aloud for it.

It was not recklessness but a burning thirst which caused him to creep toward the little heap of canteens at the imminent risk of being discovered. When he reached them he lay flat on the ground and took one from the top. He knew by its lack of weight that it was empty, and he laid it aside. Then he paused for a glance at the sentinel who was still walking steadily on his beat, and whom he now saw very clearly.

He was disappointed to find the first canteen empty, but he was convinced that some in that heap must contain water, and he would persevere. The second and third failed him in like manner, but he would yet persevere. The fourth was heavy, and when he shook it gently he heard the water splash. That thirst at once became burning and uncontrollable. The cry of his body to be assuaged overpowered his will, and while deadly danger menaced he unscrewed the little mouthpiece and drank deep and long. It was not cold and perhaps a little mud lurked at the bottom of the canteen, but like the gift of the water palm it brought fresh life and strength.

He put down the canteen half empty and took another from the heap. It, too, proved to be filled, and he hung it around neck and shoulder by the strap provided for that purpose. He could have found no more precious object for the dry regions through which he intended to make his journey.

Ned went back toward the pyramid, but his joy over finding the water made him a little careless. Great fragments of stone lay about everywhere, and his foot slipped on a piece of black basalt. He fell and the metal of his canteen rang against the stone.

He sprang to his feet instantly, but the sentinel had taken the alarm and as Ned's sombrero had slipped back he saw the fair face. He knew that it was the face of no Mexican, and shouting "Gringo!" he fired straight at him. Luckily, haste and the darkness prevented good aim, although he was at short range. But Ned felt the swish of the bullet so close to him that every nerve jumped, and he jumped with them. The first jump took him half way to the pyramid and the next landed him at its base. There the second nearest sentinel fired at him and he heard the bullet flatten itself against the stone.

Fortunately for Ned, the silent, thoughtful lad, he had often tried to imagine what he would do in critical junctures, and now, despite the terrible crisis, he was able to take control of his nerves. He remembered to pull the sombrero down over his face and to keep close to the pyramid. The shots had caused an uproar in the camp. Men were running about, lights were springing up, and officers were shouting

orders. A single fugitive among so many confused pursuers might yet pass for one of them. Chance which had been against him was now for him. The wind suddenly took a wilder sweep and the rain lashed harder. He left the pyramid and darted behind a tumulus. He stood there quietly and heard the uproar of the hunt at other points. Presently he slouched away in the manner of a careless peon, with his serape drawn about chin as well as body, for which the wind and the rain were a fitting excuse. He also shouted and chattered occasionally with others, and none knew that he was the Gringo at whom the two sentinels had fired.

Ned thought to make a way through the lines, but so many lights now flared up on all the outskirts that he saw it was impossible.

He turned back again to the side of the pyramid, where he was almost hidden by débris and foliage. Two or three false alarms had been sounded on the other side of the great structure, and practically the whole mob of searchers was drawn away in that direction. He formed a quick decision. He would reascend the pyramid. And he would take with him a water supply in the canteen that he still carried over his shoulder. He began to climb, and he noticed as he went up that it was almost the exact point at which he had ascended before.

He heard the tumult below, caught glimpses of lights flashing here and there, and he ascended eagerly. He was almost half way up when he came face to face with a Mexican soldier who carried in his hand a small lantern. The soldier, the only one perhaps who had suspected the pyramid as a place of refuge, had come at another angle, and there on a terrace the two had met.

They were not more than three feet apart. Ned had put his machete back in his belt that he might climb with more ease, but he hit out at once with his clenched right hand. The blow took the Mexican full between the eyes and toppling over backward he dropped the lantern. Then he slid on the narrow terrace and with an instinctive cry of terror fell. Ned was seized with horror and took a hasty glance downward. He was relieved when he saw that the man, grasping at projections and outgrowing vegetation, was sliding rather than falling, and would not be hurt seriously.

He turned to his own case. There lay the lantern on the stone, still glowing. Below rose the tumult, men coming to his side of the pyramid, drawn by his cry. He could no longer reach the top of the pyramid without being seen, but he knew another way. He snatched up the lantern, tucked it under his serape and made for the opening which he had noticed in the side of the pyramid at his first ascent. It was scarcely ten feet away, and he boldly stepped in, a thing that he would never have dared to do had it not been for the happy chance of the lantern.

His foot rested on solid stone, and he stood wholly in the dark. Yet the uproar came clearly to his ears. It was a certainty now that more soldiers would ascend the pyramid looking for him, but he believed that ignorance and superstition would keep them from entering it.

The air that came to his nostrils out of the unknown dark was cold and clean, but he did not yet dare to take out his lantern. He felt cautiously in front of him with one foot and touched a stone step below. He also touched narrow walls with his outstretched hand. He descended to the step, and then, feeling sure that the light of his lantern could not be seen from without, he took it from under his serape and held it as far in front of him as he could. A narrow flight of stone steps led onward and downward further than he could see, and, driven by imminent necessity, he walked boldly down them.

The way was rough with the decay of time from which stone itself cannot escape, but he always steadied himself with one hand against the wall. The stone was very cold and Ned had the feeling that he was in a tomb. Once more he had that overwhelming sense of old, old things, of things as old as Egypt. At another time, despite every effort of reason, he would have thrilled with superstitious terror, but now it was for his life, and down he went, step by step.

The air remained pure like that of great caves in the States, and Ned did not stop until a black void seemed to open almost before him when he drew back in affright. Calming himself he held up the lantern and looked at the void. It was a deep and square well, its walls faced as far as he could see with squared stones. His lantern revealed no water in the depths and he fancied that it had something to do with ceremonials, perhaps with sacrifice. There was a way around the well, but it was narrow and he chose to go no further. Instead he crouched on the steps where he was safe from a fall, and put the lantern beside him.

It was an oil lamp. Had he possessed any means of relighting it he would have blown it out, and sought sleep in the dark, but once out, out always, and he moved it into a little niche of the wall, where no sudden draught could get at it, and where its hidden light would be no beacon to any daring Mexican who might descend the stairway.

The sense of vast antiquity was still with the boy, but it did not oppress him now as it might have done at another time. His feeling of relief, caused by his escape from the Mexicans, was so great that it created, for the time at least, a certain buoyancy of the mind. The unknown depths of the ancient pyramid were at once a shelter and a protection. He folded the serape, in order to make as soft a couch as possible, and soon fell asleep.

When Ned awoke he was lying in exactly the same position on the steps, and the lantern was still burning in the niche. He had no idea how long he had slept, or whether it was day or night, but he did not care. He took the full canteen and drank. It was an unusually large canteen and it contained enough, if he used economy, to last him two days. The cool recesses of the pyramid's interior did not engender thirst like its blazing summit. Then he ate, but whether breakfast, dinner or supper he did not know, nor did he care.

He was tempted to go up to the entrance of the stairway and see what was going forward in the camp, but he resisted the impulse. For the sake of caution he triumphed over curiosity, and remained a long time on the steps, beside the niche in which his lamp sat. Then he began to calculate how much longer the oil would last, and he placed the time at about thirty hours. Surely some decisive event would happen in his favor before the last drop was burned.

After an interminable time the air on the stairway seemed to him to be growing colder, and he inferred that night had come. Taking the lantern he climbed the steps and peered out at the ancient doorway. He saw lights below, and he could discern dimly the shapes of tents. Disappointed, he returned to his place on the steps, and, after another long wait, fell asleep again. When he awoke he calculated by the amount of oil left in the lamp that at least twelve hours had passed since his previous awakening.

Once more he made a great effort of the will in order to achieve a conquest over curiosity and impatience. He would not return to the entrance until the oil had only an hour more to burn. Necessity had proved so stern a master that he was able to keep his resolution. Many long, long hours passed and sometimes he dozed or slept, but he did not go to the entrance. The oil at last marked the final hour, and, taking up the lamp, he went back to the entrance.

Ned looked out and then gave a cry of joy. It was broad daylight, but the army was gone, soldiers, horses, tents, everything. The Calle de los Muertos was once more what its name meant. Silence and desolation had regained the ruined city. He blew out the lantern and set it down at the opening. It had served him well. Then he went out and climbed again to the summit of the pyramid, from which he examined the valley long and well.

He saw no signs of human life anywhere. Traces of the camp remained in abundance, but the army itself had vanished. There were no lurking camp followers to make him trouble. He descended to the ground, and stood a while, drawing in deep draughts of the fresh daylight air. It had not been oppressive in the pyramid, but there is nothing like the open sky above. He went down to the Teotihuacan, and, choosing a safe place, bathed in its waters. Then he resumed the flight across the hills which had been delayed so long. He knew by the sun that it was morning not far advanced, and he wished to travel many miles before night. He saw abundant evidences on the great highway that the army was marching toward Vera Cruz, and as before he traveled on a line parallel with it, but at least a mile away. He passed two sheep herders, but he displayed the machete, and whistling carelessly went on. They did not follow, and he was sure that they took him for a bandit whom it would be wise to let alone.

Ned wandered on for two or three days. In one of his turnings among the mountains he lost the Vera Cruz highway, and came out again upon a wide, sandy plain, dotted with scattered cactus. As he was crossing it a Norther came up, and blew with great fierceness. Sand was driven into his face with such force that it stung like shot. The cold became intense, and if it had not been for the serape he might have perished.

The storm was still blowing when he reached the far edge of the plain, and came into extremely rough country, with patches of low, thorny forest. Here he found a dilapidated bark hut, evidently used at times by Mexican herdsmen, and, thankful for such shelter, he crept into it and fell asleep. When he awoke he felt very weak. He had eaten the last of his food seven or eight hours before.

Driven by desperate need, Ned ate wild fruits, and, for a while, was refreshed, but that night he fell ill, suffering greatly from internal pains. He was afraid at first that he had poisoned himself, and he knew that he had eaten something not used for food, but by morning the pains were gone, although he was much weaker than before.

Now he felt for the first time the pangs of despair. It was a full two hundred miles yet to Vera Cruz, and he was in the heart of a hostile country. He did not have the strength of a child left, and the chance that he could deliver his message of warning to the Texans seemed to have gone. He rambled about all that day, light-headed at times, and, toward evening, he fell into a stupor. Unable to go any further, he sank down beside a rock, and lapsed wholly into unconsciousness.

THE MARCH WITH COS

When Ned came to himself he was surrounded by men, and at first he thought he was back among his Texans. He was in a vague and dreamy state that was not unpleasant, although he was conscious of a great weakness. He knew that he was lying on the ground upon his own serape, and that another serape was spread over him. In a little while mind and vision grew more definite and he saw that the soldiers were Mexicans. After his long endurance and ingenuity on the pyramid he had practically walked into their hands. But such was his apathy of mind and body that it roused no great emotion in him. He closed his eyes for a little while, and then fresh strength poured into his veins. When he opened his eyes again his interest in life and his situation was of normal keenness.

They were in a little valley and the soldiers, lancers, seemed to number about two hundred. Their horses were tethered near them, and their lances were stacked in glittering pyramids. It was early morning. Several men were cooking breakfast for the whole troop at large fires. The far edge of the little valley was very rocky and Ned inferred that he had fallen there by a big outcropping of stone, and that the soldiers, looking around for firewood, had found him. But they had not treated him badly, as the serape spread over his body indicated.

Feeling so much better he sat up. The odor of the cooking made him realize again that he was fiercely hungry. A Mexican brought him a large tin plate filled with beans and meat chopped small. He ate slowly although only an effort of the will kept him from devouring the food like a famished wild animal. The Mexican who had brought him the plate stood by and watched him, not without a certain sympathy on his face. Several more Mexicans approached and looked at him with keen curiosity, but they did not say or do anything that would offend the young Gringo. Knowing that it was now useless, Ned no longer made any attempt to conceal his nationality which was evident to all. He finished the plate and handed it back to the Mexican.

"Many thanks," he said in the native tongue.

"More?" said the soldier, looking at him with understanding.

"I could, without hurting myself," replied Ned with a smile.

A second plate and a cup of water were brought to him. He ate and drank in leisurely fashion, and began to feel a certain relief. He imagined that he would be returned to imprisonment in the City of Mexico with Mr. Austin. At any rate, he had made a good attempt and another chance might come.

An officer dressed in a very neat and handsome uniform approached and the other Mexicans fell back respectfully. This man was young, not more than thirty-two or three, rather tall, fairer than most of his race, and with a singularly open and attractive face. His dress was that of a colonel, and the boy knew at once that he was commander of the troop. He smiled down at Ned, and Ned, despite himself, smiled back.

"I know you," said he, speaking perfect English. "You are Edward Fulton, the lad who was held in the prison with Stephen Austin, the Texan, the lad who starved himself that he might slip between the bars of his window. There was much talk at the capital about it, and you were not without admirers. You showed so much courage and resource that you deserved to escape, but we could not let you go."

"I got lost and I was without food."

"Rather serious obstacles. They have held many a boy and man. But since I know so much about you and you know nothing about me I will tell you who I am. My name is Juan Nepomuceno Almonte, and I am a colonel in the service of Mexico and of our great Santa Anna. I was educated in that United States of yours, Texan, though you call yourself. That is why I speak the English that you hear. I have friends, too, among your people."

"Well, Colonel Almonte," said Ned, "since I had to be recaptured, I'm glad I fell into your hands."

"I wish I could keep you in them," he said, "but I am under the command of General Cos, and I have to rejoin the main force which he leads."

Ned understood. Cos was a man of another type. But he resolved not to anticipate trouble. Almonte again looked at him curiously, and then leaning forward said confidentially:

"Tell me, was it you who knocked our soldier down on the side of the pyramid and took his lantern? If it is true, it can't do you any harm to acknowledge it now."

"Yes," replied Ned with some pride, "it was I. I came upon him suddenly and I was as much surprised as he. I hit out on the impulse of the moment, and the blow landed in exactly the right place. I hope he was not much hurt."

"He wasn't," replied Almonte, laughing with deep unction. "He was pretty well covered with bruises and scratches, but he forgot them in the awful fright you gave him. He took you to be some demon, some mysterious Aztec god out of a far and dim past, who had smitten him with lightning, because he presumed to climb upon a sacred pyramid. But some of us who were not so credulous, perhaps because we did not have his bruises and scratches, searched all the sides and the top of the pyramid. We failed to find you and we knew that you could not get through our lines. Now, will you tell me where you were?"

His tone was so intent and eager that Ned could not keep from laughing. Besides, the boy had a certain pride in the skill, daring and resource with which he had eluded the men of Cos.

"Did you look inside the pyramid?" he asked.

"Inside it?"

"Yes, inside. There's an opening sixty or seventy feet above the ground. I took your man's lantern when he dropped it and entered. There's a stairway, leading down to a deep, square well, and there's something beyond the well, although I don't know what. I stayed in there until your army went away. Before that I had been for two or three days on top of the pyramid, where a little water palm gave up its life to save me."

Almonte regarded him with wonder.

"I am not superstitious myself—that is, not unnecessarily so," he said, "but yours must be a lucky star. After all that, you should have escaped, and your present capture must be a mere delay. You will slip from us again."

"I shall certainly try," said Ned hopefully.

"It is bound to come true," said Almonte. "All the omens point that way."

Ned smiled. Almonte, young, brilliant and generous, had made him almost feel as if he were a guest and not a prisoner. He did not discern in him that underlying strain of Spanish cruelty, which passion might bring to the surface at any moment. It might be due to his youth, or it might be due to his American education.

"We march in an hour," said Almonte. "We are to rejoin General Cos on the Vera Cruz road, but that will not occur for two or three days. Meanwhile, as the way is rough and you are pretty weak, you can ride on a burro. Sorry I can't get you a horse, but our lancers have none to spare. Still, you'll find a burro surer of foot and more comfortable over the basalt and lava."

Ned thanked him for his courtesy. He liked this cheerful Mexican better than ever. In another hour they started, turning into the Vera Cruz road, and following often the path by which great Cortez had come. Ned's burro, little but made of steel, picked the way with unerring foot and never stumbled once. He rode in the midst of the lancers, who were full that day of the Latin joy that came with the sun and the great panorama of the Mexican uplands. Now and then they sang songs of the South, sometimes Spanish and sometimes Indian, Aztec, or perhaps even Toltec. Ned felt the influence. Once or twice he joined in the air without knowing the words, and he would have been happy had it not been for his thoughts of the Texans.

The courtesy and kindness of Almonte must not blind him to the fact that he was the bearer of a message to his own people. That message could not be more important because its outcome was life and death, and he watched all the time for a chance to escape. None occurred. The lancers were always about him, and even if there were an opening his burro, sure of foot though he might be, could not escape their strong horses. So he bided his time, for the present, and shared in the gayety of the men who rode through the crisp and brilliant southern air. All the time they ascended, and Ned saw far below him valley after valley, much the same, at the distance, as they were when Cortez and his men first gazed upon them more than three hundred years before. Yet the look of the land was always different from that to which he was used north of the Rio Grande. Here as in the great valley of Tenochtitlan it seemed ancient, old, old beyond all computation. Here and there were ruins of which the Mexican peons knew nothing. Sometimes these ruins stood out on a bare slope, and again they were almost hidden by vegetation. In the valleys Ned saw peons at work with a crooked stick as a plow, and once or twice they passed swarthy Aztec women cooking tortillas and frijoles in the open air.

The troop could not advance very rapidly owing to the roughness of the way, and Ned learned from the talk about him that they would not overtake Cos until the evening of the following day. About twilight they encamped in a slight depression in the mountain side. No tents were set, but a large fire was built, partly of dry stems of the giant cactus. The cactus burned rapidly with a light, sparkling blaze, and left

a white ash, but the heavier wood, mixed with it, made a bed of coals that glowed long in the darkness.

Ned sat beside the fire on his serape with another thrown over his shoulders, as the night was growing very chill with a sharp wind whistling down from the mountains. The kindness of his captors did not decrease, and he found a genuine pleasure in the human companionship and physical comfort. Almonte found a comfortable place, took a guitar out of a silken case, and hummed and played a love song. No American officer would have done it at such a time and place, but it seemed natural in him.

Ned could not keep from being attracted by the picture that he presented, the handsome young officer bending over his guitar, his heart in the song that he played, but ready at any instant to be the brave and wary soldier. Circumstance and place seemed to the boy so full of wild romance that he forgot, for the time, his own fate and the message that he wished to bear to those far Texans.

It was very cold that night on the heights, and, now and then, a little snow was blown about by the wind, but Ned kept warm by the fire and between the two serapes. He fell asleep to the tinkling of Almonte's guitar. They started again at earliest dawn, descended the slopes into a highway to Vera Cruz, and pushed on in the trail of Cos. Ned still rode his burro, which trotted along faithfully with the best, and he kept an eager eye for the road and all that lay along it. The silent youth had learned the value of keen observation, and he never neglected it.

Before noon Ned saw a dim, white cone rising on the eastern horizon. It was far away and misty, a thing of beauty which seemed to hang in the air above the clouds.

"Orizaba, the great mountain!" said Almonte.

Ned had seen Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, but this was a shade loftier and more beautiful than either, shooting up nearly four miles, and visible to sailors far out at sea. It grew in splendor as they approached. Great masses of oak and pine hung on its lofty sides, up the height of three miles, and above the forest rose the sharp cone, gleaming white with snow. The face of Juan Nepomuceno Almonte flushed as he gazed at it.

"It is ours, the great mountain!" he exclaimed. "And the many other magnificent mountains and the valleys and rivers of Mexico. Can you wonder, then, Edward Fulton, that we Mexicans do not wish to lose any part of our country? Texas is ours, it has always been ours, and we will not let the Texans sever it from us!"

"The Texans have not wished to do so," said Ned. "You have been kind to me, Colonel Almonte, and I do not wish to tell you anything but the truth. The Texans will fight oppression and bad faith. You do not know, the Mexicans do not know, how hard they will fight. Our charter has been violated and President Santa Anna would strip our people of arms and leave them at the mercy of savage Indians."

Almonte was about to make a passionate reply, but he checked himself suddenly and said in mild tones:

"It is not fair for me to attack you, a prisoner, even in words. Look how Orizaba grows! It is like a pillar holding up the heavens!"

Ned gazed in admiration. He did not wonder that Almonte loved this country of his, so full of the strange and picturesque. The great mountain grew and grew, until its mighty cone, dark below, and white above, seemed to fill the horizon. But much of the gayety of Almonte departed.

"Before night," he said, "we will be with General Cos, who is my commander. As you know, he is the brother-in-law of General Santa Anna, and—he is much inflamed against the Texans. I fear that he will be hard with you, but I shall do what I can to assuage his severity."

"I thank you, Colonel Almonte," said Ned with a gravity beyond his years. "You are a generous enemy, and chance may help me some day to return your kindness, but whatever treatment General Cos may accord me, I hope I shall be able to stand it."

In another hour they saw a column of dust ahead of them. The column grew and soon Ned saw lances and bayonets shining through it. He knew that this was the army of Cos, and, just as the eastern light began to fade, they joined it. Cos was going into camp by the side of a small stream, and, after a little delay, Almonte took the prisoner to him.

A large tent had been erected for General Cos, but he was sitting before it, eating his supper. A cook was serving him with delicate dishes and another servant filled his glass with red wine. His dark face darkened still further, as he looked at Ned, but he saluted Almonte courteously. It was evident to Ned that through family or merit, probably both, Almonte stood very high in the Mexican service.

"I have the honor to report to you, General Cos," said Almonte, "that we have retaken the young Texan who escaped through the bars of his prison at the capital. We found him in the mountains overcome by exhaustion."

General Cos' lips opened in a slow, cold smile,—an evil smile that struck a chill to Ned's heart. Here was a man far different from the gallant and gay young Almonte. That cruel strain which he believed was in the depths of the Spanish character, dormant though it might usually be, was patent now in General Cos. Moreover, this man was very powerful, and, as brother-in-law of Santa Anna, he was second only to the great dictator. He did not ask Ned to sit down and he was brusque in speech. The air about them grew distinctly colder. Almonte had talked with Ned in English, but Cos spoke Spanish:

"Why did you run away from the capital?" he asked, shortly. "You were treated well there."

"No man can be held in prison and be treated well."

General Martin Perfecto de Cos frowned. The bearing of the young Gringo did not please him. Nor did his answer.

"I repeat my question," he said, his voice rising. "Why did you run like a criminal from the capital? You were with the man Austin. You, like he, were the guest of our great and illustrious Santa Anna who does no wrong. Answer me, why did you slip away like a thief?"

"I slipped away, but it was not like a thief nor any other kind of criminal. And if you must know, General Cos, I went because I did not believe the words of the great and illustrious Santa Anna. He promises the Texans redress for their wrongs, and, at the same time, he orders them to give up their weapons. Do you think, and does General Santa Anna think, that the Texans are fools?"

Despite all his study and thought, Ned Fulton was only a boy and he did not have the wisdom of the old. The manner and words of General Cos had angered him, and, on impulse, he gave a direct reply. But he knew at once that it was impolitic. Cos' eyes lowered, and his lips drew back like those of an angry jaguar, showing his strong white teeth. There was no possible doubt now about that Spanish strain of cruelty.

"I presume," he said, and he seemed to Ned to bite each word, "that you meant to go to the Texans with the lying message that the word of the most illustrious General Santa Anna was not to be believed?"

"I meant to go with such a message," said Ned proudly, "but it would not be a lying one."

Knowing that he was already condemned he resolved to seek no subterfuge.

"The President cannot be insulted in my presence," said Cos ominously.

"He is only a boy, General," said Almonte appealingly.

"Boys can do mischief," said Cos, "and this seems to be an unusually cunning and wicked one. You are zealous, Colonel Almonte, I will give you that much credit, but you do not hate the Gringos enough."

Almonte flushed, but he bowed and said nothing. Cos turned again to Ned.

"You will bear no message to the Texans," he said. "I think that instead you will stay a long time in this hospitable Mexico of ours."

Ned paled a little. The words were full of menace, and he knew that they came straight from the cruel heart of Cos. But his pride would not permit him to reply.

"You will be kept under close guard," said the General. "I will give that duty to the men of Tlascalca. They are infantry and to-morrow you march on foot with them. Colonel Almonte, you did well to take the prisoner, but you need trouble yourself no longer about him."

Two men of the Tlascalcan company were summoned and they took Ned with them. The name "Tlascalca" had appealed to Ned at first. It was the brave Tlascalcan mountaineers who had helped Cortez and who had made possible his conquest of the great Mexican empire. But these were not the Tlascalans of that day. They were a mongrel breed, short, dirty and barefooted. He ate of the food they gave him, said nothing, and lay down on his serape to seek sleep. Almonte came to him there.

"I feared this," he said. "I would have saved you from General Cos had I been able."

"I know it," said Ned warmly, "and I want to thank you, Colonel Almonte."

Almonte held out his hand and Ned grasped it. Then the Mexican strode away. Ned lay back again and watched the darkness thin as the moon and stars came out. Far off the silver cone of Orizaba appeared like a spear point against the sky. It towered there in awful solemnity above the strife and passion of the world. Ned looked at it long, and gradually it became a beacon of light to him, his "pillar of flame" by

night. It was the last thing he saw as he fell asleep, and there was no thought then in his mind of the swart and menacing Cos.

They resumed the march early in the morning. Ned no longer had his patient burro, but walked on foot among the Tlascalans. Often he saw General Cos riding ahead on a magnificent white horse. Sometimes the peons stood on the slopes and looked at them but generally they kept far from the marching army. Ned surmised that they had no love of military service.

The way was not easy for one on foot. Clouds of dust arose, and stung nose and throat. The sharp lava or basalt cut through the soles of shoes, and at midday the sun's rays burned fiercely. Weakened already by the hardships of his flight Ned was barely able to keep up. Once when he staggered a horseman prodded him with the butt of his lance. Ned was not revengeful, but he noted the man's face. Had he been armed then he would have struck back at any cost. But he took care not to stagger again, although it required a supreme effort.

They halted about an hour at noon, and Ned ate some rough food and drank water with the Tlascalans. He was deeply grateful for the short rest, and, as he sat trying to keep himself from collapse, Almonte came up and held out a flask.

"It is wine," he said. "It will strengthen you. Drink."

Ned drank. He was not used to wine, but he had been so near exhaustion that he took it as a medicine. When he handed the flask back the color returned to his face and the blood flowed more vigorously in his veins.

"General Cos does not wish me to see you at all," said Almonte. "He thinks you should be treated with the greatest harshness, but I am not without influence and I may be able to ease your march a little."

"I know that you will do it if you can," said Ned gratefully.

Yet Almonte was able to do little more for him. The march was resumed under equally trying conditions, after the short rest. When night came and the detachment stopped, Ned ached in every bone, and his feet were sore and bleeding. Almonte was sent away in the morning on another service, and there was no one to interfere for him.

He struggled on all of the next day. Most of his strength was gone, but pride still kept him going. Orizaba was growing larger and larger, dominating the landscape, and Ned again drew courage from the lofty white cone that looked down upon them.

Late in the afternoon he heard a trumpet blow, and there was a great stir in the force of Cos. Men held themselves straighter, lines were re-formed, and the whole detachment became more trim and smart. General Cos on his white horse rode to its head, and he was in his finest uniform. Somebody of importance was coming! Ned was keen with curiosity but he was too proud to ask. The Tlascalans had proved a churlish lot, and he would waste no words on them.

The road now led down into a beautiful savanna, thick in grass, and with oaks and pines on all sides. Cos' companies turned into the grass, and Ned saw that another force entering at the far side was doing the same. All the men in the second force were mounted, the officer who was at their head riding a horse even finer than that of Cos. His uniform, too, was more splendid, and his head was surmounted by a great three-cornered hat, heavy with gold lace. He was compact of figure, sat his saddle well, and rode as if the earth belonged to him. Ned recognized him at once. It was the general, the president, the dictator, the father of his country, the illustrious Santa Anna himself.

The mellow trumpet pealed forth again, and Santa Anna advanced to meet his brother, Cos, who likewise advanced to meet him. They met in full view of both forces, and embraced and kissed each other. Then a shout came forth from hundreds of throats at the noble spectacle of fraternal amity. The two forces coalesced with much Latin joy and chatter, and camp was pitched in the savanna.

Ned stayed with the Tlascalans, because he had no choice but to do so. They flung him a tortilla or two, and he had plenty of water, but what he wanted most was rest. He threw himself on the grass, and, as the Tlascalans did not disturb him, he lay there until long after nightfall. He would have remained there until morning had not two soldiers come with a message that he was wanted by Santa Anna himself.

Ned rose, smoothed out his hair, draped his serape as gracefully as he could about his shoulders, and, assuming all the dignity that was possible, went with the men. He had made up his mind that boldness of manner and speech was his best course and it suited his spirit. He was led into a large tent or rather a great marquee, and he stood there for a few moments dazzled.

The floor of the marquee was spread with a thick velvet carpet. A table loaded with silver dishes was between the generals, and a dozen lamps on the walls shed a bright light over velvet carpet, silver dishes and the faces of the two men who held the fortunes of Mexico in the hollows of their hands. General Cos smiled the same cold and evil smile that Ned had noticed at their first meeting, but Santa Anna spoke in a tone half of surprise and half of pity.

"Ah, it is the young Fulton! And he is in evil plight! You would not accept my continued hospitality at the capital, and behold what you have suffered!"

Ned looked steadily at him. He could not fathom the thought that lay behind the words of Santa Anna. The man was always appearing to him in changing colors. So he merely waited.

"It was a pleasure to me," said Santa Anna, "to learn from General Cos that you had been retaken. Great harm might have come to you wandering through the mountains and deserts of the north. You could never have reached the Texans alive, and since you could not do so it was better to have come back to us, was it not?"

"I have not come willingly."

General Cos frowned, but Santa Anna laughed.

"That was frank," he said, "and we will be equally frank with you. You would go north to the Texans, telling them that I mean to come with an army and crush them. Is it not so?"

"It is," replied Ned boldly.

Santa Anna smiled. He did not seem to be offended at all. His manner, swift, subtle and changing, was wholly attractive, and Ned felt its fascination.

"Be your surmise true or not," said the dictator, "it is best for you not to reach Texas. I have discussed the matter with my brother, General Cos, in whom I have great confidence, and we have agreed that since you undertook to reach Vera Cruz you can go there. General Cos will be your escort on the way, and, as I go to the capital in the morning, I wish you a pleasant journey and a happy stay in our chief seaport."

It seemed to Ned that there was the faintest touch of irony in his last word or two, but he was not sure. He was never sure of Santa Anna, that complex man of great abilities and vast ambition. And so after his fashion when he had nothing to say he said nothing.

"You are silent," said Santa Anna, "but you are thinking. You of the north are silent to hide your thoughts, and we of the south talk to hide ours!"

Ned still said nothing, and Santa Anna examined him searchingly. He sent his piercing gaze full into the eyes of the boy. Ned, proud of his race and blood, endured it, and returned it with a firm and steady look. Then the face of Santa Anna changed. He became all at once smiling and friendly, like a man who receives a welcome guest. He put a hand on Ned's shoulder, and apparently he did not notice that the shoulder became rigid under his touch.

"I like you," he said, "I like your courage, your truth, and your bluntness. You Texans, or rather you Americans,—because the Texans are Americans,—have some of the ruder virtues which we who are of the Spanish and Latin blood now and then lack. You are only a boy, but you have in you the qualities that can make a career. The Texans belong to Mexico. Your loyalty is due to Mexico and to me. I have said that you would go to Vera Cruz and take the hospitality that my brother, Cos, will offer you, but there is an alternative."

He stopped as if awaiting a natural question, but still Ned did not speak. A spark appeared in the eye of Santa Anna, but it passed so quickly that it was like a momentary gleam.

"I would make of you," continued the dictator in his mellow, coaxing tone, "a promising young member of my staff, and I would assign to you an immediate and important duty. I would send you to the Texans with a message entirely different from the one you wish to bear. I would have you to tell them that Santa Anna means only their greatest good; that he loves them as his children; that he is glad to have these strong, tall, fair men in the north to fight for him and Mexico; that he is a man who never breaks a promise; that he is the father of his people, and that he loves them all with a heart full of tenderness. To show you how much I trust and value you I would take your word that you would bear such a message, and I would send you with an escort that would make your way safe and easy."

Again he sent his piercing gaze into the eyes of the boy, but Ned was still silent.

"You would tell them," said Santa Anna in the softest and most persuasive tones, "that you have been much with me, that you know me, and that no man has a softer heart or a more just mind."

"I cannot do it," said Ned.

"Why?"

"Because it is not so."

The change on the face of Santa Anna was sudden and startling. His eyes became black with wrath, and his whole aspect was menacing. The hand of Cos flew to the hilt of his sword, and he half rose from his chair. But Santa Anna pushed him back, and then the face of the dictator quickly underwent another transformation. It became that of the ruler, grave but not threatening.

"Softly, Cos, my brother," he said. "Bear in mind that he is only a boy. I offered too much, and he does not understand. He has put away a brilliant career, but, my good brother Cos, he has left to him your hospitality, and you will not be neglectful."

Cos sank back in his chair and laughed. Santa Anna laughed. The two laughs were unlike, one heavy and angry, and the other light and gay, but their effect upon Ned was precisely the same. He felt a cold shiver at the roots of his hair, but he was yet silent, and stood before them waiting.

"You can go," said Santa Anna. "You have missed your opportunity and it will not come again."

Ned turned away without a word. The Tlascalans were waiting at the door of the marquee, and he went with them. Once more he slept under the stars.

CHAPTER VII

THE DUNGEON UNDER THE SEA

Ned, early the next morning, saw Santa Anna with his brilliant escort ride away toward the capital, while General Cos resumed his march to Vera Cruz. Almonte did not reappear at all, and the boy surmised that he was under orders to join the dictator.

Ned continued on foot among the Tlascalans. Cos offered him no kindness whatever, and his pride would not let him ask for it. But when he looked at his sore and bleeding feet he always thought of the patient burro that he had lost. They marched several more days, and the road dropped down into the lowlands, into the tierra caliente. The air grew thick and hot and Ned, already worn, felt an almost overpowering languor. The vegetation became that of the tropics. Then, passing through marshes and sand dunes, they reached Vera Cruz, the chief port of Mexico, a small, unhealthy city, forming a semicircle about a mile in length about the bay.

Ned saw little of Vera Cruz, as they reached it at nightfall, but the approach through alternations of stagnant marsh and shifting sand affected him most unpleasantly. Offensive odors assailed him and he remembered that this was a stronghold of cholera and yellow fever. He ate rough food with the Tlascalans again, and then Cos sent for him.

"You have reached your home," said the General. "You will occupy the largest and most expensive house in the place, and my men will take you there at once. Do you not thank me?"

"I do not," replied Ned defiantly. Yet he knew that he had much to dread.

"You are an ungrateful young dog of a Texan," said Cos, laughing maliciously, "but I will confer my hospitality upon you, nevertheless. You will go with these men and so I bid you farewell."

Four barefooted soldiers took Ned down through the dirty and evil-smelling streets of the city. He wondered where they were going, but he would not ask. They came presently to the sea and Ned saw before him, about a half mile away, a somber and massive pile rising upon a rocky islet. He knew that it was the great and ancient Castle of San Juan de Ulua. In the night, with only the moon's rays falling upon its walls, it looked massive and forbidding beyond all description. That cold shiver again appeared at the roots of the boy's hair. He knew now the meaning of all this talk of Santa Anna and Cos about their hospitality. He was to be buried in the gloomiest fortress of the New World. It was a fate that might well make one so young shudder many times. But he said not a word in protest. He got silently into a boat with the soldiers, and they were rowed to the rocky islet on which stood the huge castle.

Not much time was wasted on Ned. He was taken before the governor, his name and age were registered, and then two of the prison guards, one going before and the other behind, led him down a narrow and steep stairway. It reminded him of his descent into the pyramid, but here the air seemed damper. They went down many steps and came into a narrow corridor upon which a number of iron doors opened. The guards unlocked one of the doors, pushed Ned in, relocked the door on him, and went away.

Ned staggered from the rude thrust, but, recovering himself stood erect, and tried to accustom his eyes to the half darkness. He stood in a small, square room with walls of hard cement or plaster. The roof of the same material was high, and in the center of it was a round hole, through which came all the air that entered the cell. In a corner was a rude pallet of blankets spread upon grass. There was no window. The place was hideous and lonely beyond the telling. He had not felt this way in the pyramid.

Ned now had suffered more than any boy could stand. He threw himself upon the blanket, and only pride kept him from shedding tears. But he was nevertheless relaxed completely, and his body shook as if in a chill. He lay there a long time. Now and then, he looked up at the walls of his prison, but always their sodden gray looked more hideous than ever. He listened but heard nothing. The stillness was absolute and deadly. It oppressed him. He longed to hear anything that would break it; anything that would bring him into touch with human life and that would drive away the awful feeling of being shut up forever.

The air in the dungeon felt damp to Ned. He was glad of it, because damp meant a touch of freshness, but by and by it became chilly, too. The bed was of two blankets, and, lying on one and drawing the other over him, he sought sleep. He fell after a while into a troubled slumber which was half stupor, and from which he awakened at intervals. At the third awakening he heard a noise. Although his other faculties were deadened partially by mental and physical exhaustion, his hearing was uncommonly acute, concentrating in itself the strength lost by the rest. The sound was peculiar, half a swish and half a roll, and although not loud it remained steady. Ned listened a long time, and then, all at once, he recognized its cause.

He was under the sea, and it was the rolling of the waves over his head that he heard. He was in one of the famous submarine dungeons of the Castle of San Juan de Ulua. This was the hospitality of Cos and Santa Anna, and it was a hospitality that would hold him fast. Never would he take any word of warning to the Texans. Buried under the sea! He shivered all over and a cold sweat broke out upon him.

He lay a long time until some of the terror passed. Then he sat up, and looked at the round hole in the cement ceiling. It was about eight inches in diameter and a considerable stream of fresh air entered there. But the pipe or other channel through which it came must turn to one side, as the sea was directly over his head. He could not reach the hole, and even could he have reached it, he was too large to pass through it. He had merely looked at it in a kind of vague curiosity.

Feeling that every attempt to solve anything would be hopeless, he fell asleep again, and when he awoke a man with a lantern was standing beside him. It was a soldier with his food, the ordinary Mexican fare, and water. Another soldier with a musket stood at the door. There was no possible chance of a dash for liberty. Ned ate and drank hungrily, and asked the soldier questions, but the man replied only in monosyllables or not at all. The boy desisted and finished in silence the meal which might be either breakfast, dinner or supper for all he knew. Then the soldier took the tin dishes, withdrew with his comrade, and the door was locked again.

Ned was left to silence and solitude. But he felt that he must now move about, have action of some kind. He threw himself against the door in an effort to shake it, but it did not move a jot. Then he remembered that he had seen cell doors in a row, and that other prisoners might be on either side of him. He kicked the heavy cement walls, but they were not conductors of sound and no answer came.

He grew tired after a while, but the physical exertion had done him good. The languid blood flowed in a better tide in his veins and his mind became more keen. There must be some way out of this. Youth could not give up hope. It was incredible, impossible that he should remain always here, shut off from that wonderful free world outside. The roll of the sea over his head made reply.

After a while he began to walk around his cell, around and around and around, until his head grew dizzy, and he staggered. Then he would reverse and go around and around and around the other way. He kept this up until he could scarcely stand. He lay down and tried to sleep again. But he must have slept a long time before, and sleep would not come. He lay there on the blankets, staring at the walls and not seeing them, until the soldiers came again with his food. Ned ate and drank in silence. He was resolved not to ask a question, and, when the soldiers departed, not a single word had been spoken.

The next day Ned had fever, the day after that he was worse, and on the third day he became unconscious. Then he passed through a time, the length of which he could not guess, but it was a most singular period. It was crowded with all sorts of strange and shifting scenes, some colored brilliantly, and vivid, others vague and fleeting as moonlight through a cloud. It was wonderful, too, that he should live again through things that he had lived already. He was back with Mr. Austin. He saw the kind and generous face quite plainly and recognized his voice. He saw Benito and Juana, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl; he was on the pyramid and in it, and he saw the silver cone of Orizaba. Then he shifted suddenly back to Texas and the wild border, the Comanche and the buffalo.

His life now appeared to have no order. Time turned backward. Scenes occurred out of their sequence. Often they would appear for a second or third time. It was the most marvelous jumble that ever ran through any kaleidoscope. His brain by and by grew dizzy with the swift interplay of action and color. Then everything floated away and blackness and silence came. Nor could he guess how long this period endured, but when he came out of it he felt an extraordinary weakness and a lassitude that was of both mind and body.

His eyes were only half open and he did not care to open them more. He took no interest in anything. But he became slowly conscious that he had emerged from somewhere out of a vast darkness, and that he had returned to his life in the dungeon under the sea.

His eyes opened fully by automatic process rather than by will, and the heavy dark of the dungeon was grateful then, because they, too, like all the rest of him, were very weak. Yet a little light came in as usual with the fresh air from above, and by and by he lifted one hand and looked at it. It was a strange hand, very white, very thin, with the blue veins standing out from the back.

It was almost the hand of a skeleton. He did not know it. Certainly it did not belong to him. He looked at it wondering, and then he did a strange thing. It was his left hand that he was holding before him. He put his right hand upon it, drew that hand slowly over the fingers, then the palm and along the wrist until he reached his shoulder. It was his hand after all. His languid curiosity satisfied he let the hand drop back by his body. It fell like a stone. After a while he touched his head, and found that his hair was cut closely. It seemed thin, too.

He realized that he had been ill, and very ill indeed he must have been to be so weak. He wondered a little how long it had been since he first lapsed into unconsciousness, and then the wonder ceased. Whether the time had been long or short it did not matter. But he shut his eyes and listened for the last thing that he remembered. He heard it presently, that low roll of the sea. He was quite sure of one thing. He was in the same submarine dungeon of the famous Castle of San Juan de Ulua.

His door was opened, and a man, not a soldier, came in with soup in a tin basin. He uttered a low exclamation, when he saw that Ned was conscious, but he made no explanations. Nor did Ned ask him anything. But he ate the soup with a good appetite, and felt very much stronger. His mind, too, began to wake up. He knew that he was going to get well, but it occurred to him that it might be better for him to conceal his returning strength. With a relaxed watch he would have more chance to escape.

The soup had a soothing effect, and his mind shared with his body in the improvement. It was obvious that they had not intended for him to die or they would not have taken care of him in his illness. The shaven head was proof. But he saw nothing that he could do. He must wait upon the action of his jailers. Having come to this conclusion he lay upon his pallet, and let vague thoughts float through his head as they would.

About three hours after they had brought him his soup he heard a scratching at the keyhole of his door. He was not too languid to be surprised. He did not think it likely that any of his jailers would come back so soon, and heretofore the key had always turned in the lock without noise.

Ned sat up. The scratching continued for a few moments, and the door swung open. A tall, thin figure of a man entered, the door closed behind him, and with some further scratching he locked it. Then the man turned and stared at Ned. Ned stared with equal intentness at him.

The figure that he saw was thin and six feet four; the face that he saw was thin and long. The face was also bleached to an indescribable dead white, the effect of which was heightened by the thick and fiery red hair that crowned a head, broad and shaped finely. His hair even in the dark seemed to be vital, the most vital part of him. Ned fancied that his eyes were blue, although in the dimness he could not tell. But he knew that this was no Mexican. A member of his own race stood before him.

"Well," said Ned.

"Well?" replied the man in a singularly soft and pleasant voice.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"To the first I am Obed White; to the second I want to talk to you, and I would append as a general observation that I am harmless. Evil to him that would evil do."

"The quotation is wrong," said Ned, smiling faintly. "It is 'evil to him who evil thinks.'"

"Perhaps, but I have improved upon it. I add, for your further information, that I am your nearest neighbor. I occupy the magnificent concrete parlor next door to you, where I live a life of undisturbed ease, but I have concluded at last to visit you, and here I am. How I came I will explain later. But I am glad I am with you. One crowded hour of glorious company is worth a hundred years in a solitary cell. I may have got that a little wrong, too, but it sounds well."

He sat down in Turkish fashion on the floor, folding a pair of extremely long legs beneath him, and regarded Ned with a slow, quizzical smile. For the life of him the boy could not keep from smiling back. With the nearer view he could see now that the eyes were blue and honest.

"You may think I'm a Mexican," continued the man in his mellow, pleasant voice, "but I'm not. I'm a Texan—by the way of Maine. As I told you, I live in the next tomb, the one on the right. I'm a watch, clock and tool maker by trade and a bookworm by taste. Because of the former I've come into your cell, and because of the latter I use the ornate language that you hear. But of both those subjects more further on. Meanwhile, I suppose it's you who have been yelling in here at the top of your voice and disturbing a row of dungeons accustomed to peace and quiet."

"It was probably I, but I don't remember anything about it."

"It's not likely that you would, as I see you've had some one of the seven hundred fevers that are customary along this coast. Yours must have been of the shouting kind, as I heard you clean through the wall, and, once when I was listening at the keyhole, you made a noise like the yell of a charging army."

"You don't mean to say that you've been listening at the keyhole of my cell."

"It's exactly what I mean. You wouldn't come to see your neighbor so he decided to come to see you. Good communications correct evil manners. See this?"

He held up a steel pronged instrument about six inches long.

"This was once a fork, a fork for eating, large and crude, I grant you, but a fork. It took me more than a month to steal it, that is I had to wait for a time when I was sure that the soldier who brought my food was so lazy or so stupid that he would not miss it. I waited another week as an additional precaution, and after that my task was easy. If the best watch, clock and instrument maker in the State of Maine couldn't pick any lock with a fork it was time for him to lie on his back and die. I picked the lock of my own door in a minute the first time by dead reckoning, but it took me a full two minutes to open yours, although I'll relock it in half that time when I go out. Where there's a will there will soon be an open door."

He flourished the fork, the two prongs of which now curved at the end, and grinned broadly. He had a look of health despite the dead whiteness of his face, which Ned now knew was caused by prison pallor. Ned liked him. He liked him for many reasons. He liked him because his eyes were kindly. He liked him because he was one of his own race. He liked him because he was a fellow prisoner, and he liked him above all because this was the first human companionship that he had had in a time that seemed ages.

Obed meanwhile was examining him with scrutinizing eyes. He had heard the voice of fever, but he did not expect to find in the "tomb" next to his own a mere boy.

"How does it happen," he asked, "that one as young as you is a prisoner here in a dungeon with the castle of San Juan de Ulua and the sea on top of him?"

Obed White had the mellowest and most soothing voice that Ned had ever heard. Now it was like that of a father speaking to the sick son whom he loved, and the boy trusted him absolutely.

"I was sent here," he replied, "by Santa Anna and his brother-in-law, Cos, because I knew too much, or rather suspected too much. I was held at the capital with Mr. Austin. We were not treated badly. Santa Anna himself would come to see us and talk of the great good that he was going to do for Texas, but I could not believe him. I was sure instead that he was gathering his forces to crush the Texans. So, I escaped, meaning to go to Texas with a message of warning."

"A wise boy and a brave one," said Obed White with admiration. "You suspected but you kept your counsel. Still waters run slowly, but they run."

Ned told all his story, neglecting scarcely a detail. The feeling that came of human companionship was so strong and his trust was so great that he did not wish to conceal anything.

"You've endured about as much as ought to come to one boy," said Obed White, "and you've gone through all this alone. What you need is a partner. Two heads can do what one can't. Well, I'm your partner. As I'm the older, I suppose I ought to be the senior partner. Do you

hereby subscribe to the articles of agreement forming the firm of White & Fulton, submarine engineers, tunnel diggers, jail breakers, or whatever form of occupation will enable us to escape from the castle of San Juan de Ulua?"

"Gladly," said Ned, and he held out a thin, white hand. Obed White seized it, but he remembered not to grasp it too firmly. This boy had been ill a long time, and he was white and very weak. The heart of the man overflowed with pity.

"Good-night, Ned," he said. "I mustn't stay too long, but I'll come again lots of times, and you and I will talk business then. The firm of White & Fulton will soon begin work of the most important kind. Now you watch me unlock that door. They say that pride goeth before a fall, but in this case it is going right through an open door."

Obviously he was proud of his skill as he had a full right to be. He inserted the hooked prongs of the fork in the great keyhole, twisted them about a little, and then the lock turned in its groove.

"Good-by, Ned," said Obed again. "It's time I was back in my own tomb which is just like yours. I hate to lock in a good friend like you, but it must be done."

He disappeared in the hall, the door swung shut and Ned heard the lock slide in the groove again. He was alone once more. The light that had seemed to illuminate his dungeon went with the man, but he left hope behind. Ned would not be alone in the spirit as long as he knew that Obed White was in the cell next to his.

He lay a while, thinking on the chances of fate. They had served him ill, for a long time. Had the turn now come? He did not know it, but it was the human companionship, the friendly voice that had raised such a great hope in his breast. He glided from thought into a peaceful sleep and slept a long time, without dreams or even vague, floating visions. His breath came long and full at regular intervals, and with every beat of his pulse new strength flowed into his body. While he slept nature was hard at work, rebuilding the strong young frame which had yielded only to overpowering circumstances.

Ned ate his breakfast voraciously the next day and wanted more. Dinner also left him hungry, but, carrying out his original plan, he counterfeited weakness, and, before the soldier left, lay down upon the pallet as if he were too languid to care for anything. He disposed of supper in similar fashion, and then waited with a throbbing pulse for the second call from the senior member of the firm of White & Fulton.

After an incredible period of waiting he heard the slight rasping of the fork in the keyhole. Then the door was opened and the older partner entered. Before speaking he carefully relocked the door.

"I believe you're glad to see me," he said to Ned. "You're sitting up. I don't think I ever before saw a boy improve so much in twenty-four hours. I'll just feel your pulse. It will be one of my duties as senior partner to practice medicine for a little while. Yes, it's a strong pulse, a good pulse. You're quite clear of fever. You need nothing now but your strength back again, and we'll wait for that. All things come to him who waits, if he doesn't die of old age first."

His talk was so rapid and cheerful that he seemed fairly to radiate vigor. It was a powerful tonic to Ned who felt so strong that he was prepared to attempt escape at once. But Obed shook his head when he suggested it.

"That strength comes from your feelings," he said. "All that glitters isn't gold or silver or any other precious metal. That false strength would break down under a long and severe test. We'll just wait and plan. For what we're going to undertake you're bound to have every ounce of vigor that you can accumulate."

"You've been able to go out in the hall when you chose, then why haven't you gone away already?" asked Ned.

"I didn't get my key perfected until a few days ago, and then as I heard you yelling in here I decided to find out about you. Two are company; one is none, and so we formed a partnership. Now when the firm acts both partners must act."

Ned did not reply directly. He did not know how to thank him for his generosity.

"Have you explored the hall?" he asked.

"It leads up a narrow stairway, down which I came some time ago when my Mexican brethren decided that I was too much of a Texan patriot. Doubtless you trod the same dark and narrow path. At the head of that is another door which I have not tried, but which I know I can open with this master key of mine. Beyond that I'm ignorant of the territory, but there must be a way out since there was one in. Now, Ned, we must make no mistake. We must not conceal from ourselves that the firm of White & Fulton is confronted by a great task. We must select our time, and have ready for the crisis every particle of strength, courage and quickness that we possess."

Ned knew that he was right, and yet, despite his youth and natural strength, his convalescence was slow. He had passed through too terrible an ordeal to recover entirely in a day or even a week. He would test his strength often and at night Obed White would test it, too, but always he was lacking in some particular. Then Obed would shake his head wisely and say: "Wait."

One night they heard the sea more loudly than ever before. It rolled heavily, just over their heads.

"There must be a great storm on the gulf," said Obed White. "I've lost count of time, but perhaps the period of gales is at hand. If so, I'm not sorry, it'll hide our flight across the water. You'll remember, Ned, that we're a half mile from the mainland."

Fully two weeks passed before they decided that Ned was restored to his old self. Meanwhile they had matured their plan.

"We came in as Texans," said Obed, "but we must go out as Mexicans. There is no other way. It's all simple in the saying, but we've got to be mighty quick in the doing. We must make the change right here in this cell of yours, because, you having been an invalid so long, they're likely to be careless about you."

Ned agreed with him fully, and they began to train their bodies and minds for a supreme effort. They were now able to tell the difference between night and day by the temperature. The air that came through the holes in the ceiling was a little cooler by night, enough for senses trained to preternatural acuteness by long imprisonment to tell it. The guard always came about eight o'clock with Ned's supper and they chose that time for the attempt.

Obed White entered Ned's cell about six o'clock. The boy could scarcely restrain himself and the man's blue eyes were snapping with excitement. But Obed patted Ned on the shoulder.

"We must both keep cool," he said. "The more haste the less likely the deed. The first man comes in with the tray carrying your food. I stand here by the door and he passes by without seeing me. I seize the second, drag him in and slam the door. Then the victory is to the firm of White & Fulton, if it prove to be the stronger. But we'll have surprise in our favor."

They waited patiently. Ned lay upon his pallet. Obed flattened himself against the wall beside the door. Their plan fully arranged, neither now spoke. Overhead they heard the slow roll of the sea, lashed by the waves sweeping in from the gulf. But inside the cell the silence was absolute.

Ned lay in an attitude apparently relaxed. His face was still white. It could not acquire color in that close cell, but he had never felt stronger. A powerful heart pumped vigorous blood through every artery and vein. His muscles had regained their toughness and flexibility, and above all, the intense desire for freedom had keyed him to supreme effort.

Usually he did not hear the soldier's key turn in the lock, but soon he heard it and his heart pumped. He glanced at White, but the gray figure, flattened against the wall, never moved. The door swung open and the soldier, merely a shambling peon, bearing the tray, entered. Behind him according to custom came the second man who stood in the doorway, leaning upon his musket. But he stood there only an instant. A pair of long, powerful arms which must have seemed to him at that moment like the antennae of a devil-fish, reached out, seized him in a fierce grip by either shoulder, and jerked him gun and all into the cell. The door was kicked shut and the grasp of the hands shifted from his shoulders to his throat. He could not cry out although the terrible face that bent over him made his soul start with fear.

The man with the tray heard the noise behind him and turned. Ned sprang like a panther. All the force and energy that he had been concentrating so long were in the leap. The soldier went down as if he had been struck by a cannon ball and his tray and dishes rattled upon him. But he was a wiry fellow and grasping his assailant he struggled fiercely.

"Now stop, my good fellow. Just lie still! That's the way!"

It was Obed White who spoke, and he held the muzzle of a pistol at the man's head. The other soldier lay stunned in the corner. It was from his belt that Obed had snatched the pistol.

"Get up, Ned," said White. "The first step in our escape from the Castle of San Juan de Ulua has been taken. Meanwhile, you lie still, my good fellow; we're not going to hurt you. No, you needn't look at your comrade. I merely compressed his windpipe rather tightly. He'll come to presently. Ned, take that gay red handkerchief out of his pocket and tie his arms. If I were going to be bound I should like for the deed to be done with just such a beautiful piece of cloth. Meanwhile, if you cry out, my friend, I shall have to blow the top of your head off with this pistol. It's not likely that they would hear your cry, but they might hear my pistol shot."

Ned bound the man rapidly and deftly. There was no danger that he would utter a sound, while Obed White held the pistol. Under the

circumstances he was satisfied with the status quo. The second man was bound in a similar fashion just as he was reviving, and he, too, was content to yield to like threats. Obed drew a loaded pistol from the first man's belt and handed it, too, to Ned. He also looked rather contemptuously at the musket that the guard by the door had dropped.

"A cheap weapon," he said. "A poor substitute for our American rifle, but we'll take it along, Ned. We may need it. You gather their ammunition while I stand handy with this pistol in case they should burst their bonds."

Ned searched the men, taking all their ammunition, their knives and also the key to the door. Then he and Obed divested the two of their outer clothing and put it upon themselves. Fortunately both soldiers had worn their hats and they pulled them down over their own faces.

"If we don't come into too bright a light, Ned," said White, "you'll pass easily for a Mexican. Mexican plumage makes a Mexican bird. Now how do I look?"

"I could take you for Santa Anna himself," said Ned, elated at their success.

"That promises well. There's another advantage. You speak Spanish and so do I."

"It's lucky that we do."

"And now," said Obed White to the two Mexicans, "we will leave you to the hospitality of Cos and Santa Anna, which my young friend and I have enjoyed so long. We feel that it is time for you to share in it. We're going to lock you in this cell, where you can hear the sea rolling over your head, but you will not stay here forever. It's a long lane that does not come somewhere to a happy ending, and your comrades will find you by to-morrow. Farewell."

He went into the hall and they locked the door. They listened beside it a little while but no sound came from within.

"They dare not cry out," said Obed. "They're afraid we'll come back. Now for the second step in our escape. It's pretty dark here. Those fellows must have known the way mighty well to have come down as they did without a lantern."

"There are other prisoners in these cells," said Ned. "Shouldn't we release them? You can probably open any of the doors with your key."

White shook his head.

"I'm sure that we're the only Texans or Americans in San Juan de Ulua, and we couldn't afford to be wasting time on Mexicans whether revolutionaries or criminals. There would merely be a tumult with every one of us sure to be recaptured."

The two now advanced down the passage, which was low and narrow, walled in with massive stone. It was so dark here that they held each other's hands and felt the way before every footstep.

"I think we're going in the right direction," whispered White, "As I remember it this is the way I came in."

"I'm sure of it," Ned whispered back. "Ah, here are more steps."

They had reached the stairway which led down to the hall of the submarine cells, and still feeling their way they ascended it cautiously. As they rose the air seemed to grow fresher, as if they were nearing the openings by which it entered.

"Those fellows who took our places must have left a lamp or a lantern standing somewhere here at the top of these steps," whispered White. "The man who carried the tray could not have gone down them without a light."

"It's probably here," said Ned, "burned out or blown out by a draught of wind."

He smelled a slight smoke and in a niche carved in the stone he found the lamp. The wick was still smoking a little.

"We'll leave it as it is," said Obed White. "Somebody may relight it for those men when they come back again, but that won't be for several hours yet."

Three more steps and they reached the crest of the flight, where they were confronted by a heavy door of oak, ribbed with iron. Obed gently tried the key that they had seized, but it did not fit.

"They must have banged on the door for it to be opened whenever they came back," said Obed. "Now I shall use my fork which is sure to turn the lock if I take long enough. I wasn't the best watch and key maker in Maine for nothing. If first you don't succeed, then keep on trying till you do."

Ned sat down on the steps while White inserted the fork. He could hear it scratching lightly for a minute and then the bolt slid. The boy rose and the man stepped back by his side.

"Draw your pistol and have it ready," he said, "and I'll do as much with the old musket. We don't know what's on the other side of the door but whatever it is we've got to meet it. Thrice armed is he who hath his weapon leveled."

Ned needed no urging. He drew the pistol and held it ready for instant use. What, in truth, was on the other side of the door? His whole fate and that of his comrade might depend upon the revelation. Obed pushed gently and the door opened without noise three or four inches. A shaft of light from the room fell upon them but they could not yet see into the room. They listened, and, hearing nothing, Obed pushed more boldly. Then they saw before them a large apartment, containing little furniture, but with some faded old uniforms hanging about the walls. Evidently it was used as a barracks for soldiers. At the far end was a door and on the side to the right were two windows.

Ned went to the window and looked out. He saw across a small court a high and blank stone wall, but when he looked upward he saw also a patch of sky. It was a black sky, across which clouds were driving before a whistling wind, but it was the most beautiful sight that he had ever seen. The sky, the free, open sky curving over the beautiful earth, was revealed again to him who had been buried for ages in a dungeon under the sea. He would not go back. In the tremendous uplift of feeling he would willingly choose death first. He beckoned to White who joined him and who looked up without being bid.

"It's out there that we're going," he said. "We'll have to cross a stormy sea before we reach freedom, but Ned, you and I are keyed up just high enough to cross. We'll put it to the touch and win it all. Now for the next door."

The second door was not locked and when they pushed it open they entered a small room, furnished handsomely in the Spanish fashion. A lamp burned on a table, at which an officer sat looking over some papers. He heard the two enter and it was too late for them to retreat, as he turned at once and looked at them, inquiry in his face.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We are the soldiers who have charge of the two Texans in the cells," replied Obed White boldly. "We have just taken them their food and now we are going back to our quarters."

"I have no doubt that you tell the truth," replied the officer, "but your voice has changed greatly since yesterday. You remember that I gave you an order then about the man White."

"Quite true," replied Obed quickly, raising his musket and taking aim, "and now I'm giving the order back to you. It's a poor rule that won't work first one way and then the other. Just you move or cry out and I shoot. I'd hate to do it, because you're not bad looking, but necessity knows the law of self-preservation."

"You need not worry," said the officer, smiling faintly. "I will not move, nor will I cry out. You have too great an advantage, because I see that your aim is good and your hand steady. I surmise that you are the man White himself."

"None other, and this is my young friend, Edward Fulton, who likes San Juan de Ulua as a castle but not as a hotel. Hence he has decided to go away and so have I. Ned, look at those papers on his desk. You might find among them a pass or two which would be mighty useful to us."

"Do you mind if I light a cigarette?" asked the officer. "You can see that my hands and the cigarettes alike are on the table."

"Go ahead," said Obed hospitably, "but don't waste time."

The officer lighted the cigarette and took a satisfied whiff. Ned searched among the papers, turning them over rapidly.

"Yes, here is a pass!" exclaimed he joyfully, "and here is another and here are two more!"

"Two will be enough," said Obed.

"I'll take this one made out to Joaquin de la Barra for you and one to Diego Fernandez for me. Ah, what are these?"

He held up four papers, looking at them in succession.

"What are they?" asked Obed White.

"Death warrants. They are all for men with Mexican names, and they are signed with the name of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, General-in-chief and President of the Mexican Republic."

The officer took the cigarette from his mouth and sent out a little smoke through his nostrils.

"Yes, they are death warrants," he said. "I was looking over them when you came in, and I was troubled. The men were to have been executed to-morrow."

"Were to have been?" said Ned. Then a look passed between him and the officer. The boy held the death warrants one by one in the flame of the lamp and burned them to ashes.

"I cannot execute a man without a warrant duly signed," said the officer.

"Which being the case, we'd better go or we might have to help at our own executions," said Obed White. "Now you just sit where you are and have a peaceful and happy mind, while we go out and fight with the storm."

The officer said nothing and the two passed swiftly through the far door, stepping into a paved court, and reaching a few yards further a gate of the castle. It was quite dark when they stepped once more into the open world, and both wind and rain lashed them. But wind and rain themselves were a delight to the two who had come from under the sea. Besides, the darker the better.

Two sentinels were at the gate and Ned thrust the passes before their eyes. They merely glanced at the signatures, opened the gate, and in an instant the two were outside the castle of San Juan de Ulua.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLACK JAGUAR

It was so dark that the two could see but a narrow stretch of masonry on which they stood and a tossing sea beyond. Behind them heaved up the mass of the castle, mighty and somber. A fierce wind was blowing in from the gulf, and it whistled and screamed about the great walls. The rain, bitter and cold, lashed against them like hail. Shut off so long from the outer air they shivered now, but the shiver was merely of the air. Their spirit was as high as ever and they faced their crisis with undaunted souls.

Yet they were far from escape. The wind was of uncommon strength, seeming to increase steadily in power, and a half mile of wild waters raced between them and the town. Weaker wills would have yielded and turned back to prison, but not they. They ran eagerly along the edge of the masonry, pelted by rain and wind.

"There must be a boat tied up somewhere along here," exclaimed Ned. "The castle, of course, keeps communication with the town!"

"Yes, here it is!" said Obed. "Fortune favors the persistent. It's only a small boat, and it's a big sea before us, but, Ned, my lad, we've got to try it. We can't look any further. Listen! That's the alarm in the castle."

They heard shouts and clash of arms above the roaring of the wind. They picked in furious haste at the rope that held the boat, cast it loose, and sprang in, securing the oars. The waves at once lifted them up and tossed them wildly. It was perhaps fortunate that they lost control of their boat for a minute or two. Two musket shots were fired at them, but good aim in the darkness at such a bobbing object was impossible. Ned heard one of the bullets whistle near, and it gave him a queer, creepy feeling to realize that for the first time in his life someone was firing at him to kill.

"Can you row, Ned?" asked White.

"Yes."

"Then pull with all your strength. Bend as low as you can at the same time. They'll be firing at us as long as we are in range."

They strove for the cover of the darkness, but they were compelled to devote most of their efforts to keeping themselves afloat. The little boat was tossed here and there like a bit of plank. Spray from the sea was dashed over them, and, in almost a moment, they were wet through and through. The captured musket lay in the bottom and rolled against their feet. The wind shrieked continually like some wild animal in pain.

Many torches appeared on the wharf that led up to the castle, and there was a noise of men shouting to one another. The torches disclosed the little boat rising and falling with the swell of the sea, and numerous shots were now fired, but all fell short or went wild.

"I don't think we're in much danger from the muskets," said Obed, "so we won't pay any more attention to them. But in another minute they'll have big boats out in pursuit. We must make for the land below the town, and get away somehow or other in the brush. If we were to land in the town itself we'd be as badly off as ever. Hark, there goes the alarm!"

A heavy booming report rose above the mutter of the waters and the screaming of the wind. One of the great guns on the castle of San Juan de Ulua had been fired. After a brief interval it was followed by a second shot and then a third. The reports could be heard easily in Vera Cruz, and they said that either a fresh revolution had begun, or that prisoners were escaping. The people would be on the watch. White turned the head of the boat more toward the south.

"Ned," he said, "we must choose the longer way. We cannot run any risk of landing right under the rifles of Santa Anna's troops. Good God!"

Some gunner on the walls of San Juan de Ulua, of better sight and aim than the others, had sent a cannon ball so close that it struck the sea within ten feet of them. They were deluged by a water spout and again their little vessel rocked fearfully. Obed White called out cheerfully:

"Still right side up! They may shoot more cannon balls at us, Ned, but they won't hit as near as that again!"

"No, it's not likely," said Ned, "but there come the boats!"

Large boats rowed by eight men apiece had now put out, but they, too, were troubled by the wind and the high waves, and the boat they pursued was so small that it was lost to sight most of the time. The wind and darkness while a danger on the one hand were a protection on the other. Fortunately both current and wind were bearing them in the direction they wished, and they struggled with the energy that the love of life can bring. All the large boats save one now disappeared from view, but the exception, having marked them well, came on, gaining. An officer seated in the prow, and wrapped in a long cloak, hailed them in a loud voice, ordering them to surrender.

"Ned," said Obed White, "you keep the boat going straight ahead and I'll answer that man. But I wish this was a rifle in place of a musket."

He picked up the musket and took aim. When he fired the leading rower on the right hand side of the pursuing boat dropped back, and the boat was instantly in confusion. White laid down the musket and seized the oar again.

"Now, Ned," he exclaimed, "if we pull as hard as we can and a little harder, we'll lose them!"

The boat, driven by the oars and the wind, sprang forward. Fortune, as if resolved now to favor fugitives who had made so brave a fight against overwhelming odds, piled the clouds thicker and heavier than ever over the bay. The little boat was completely concealed from its pursuers. Another gun boomed from San Juan de Ulua, and both Ned and Obed saw its flash on the parapet, but, hidden under the kindly veil of the night, they pulled straight ahead with strong arms. The sea seemed to be growing smoother, and soon they saw an outline which they knew to be that of the land.

"We're below the town now," said Obed. "I don't know any particular landing place, but it's low and sandy along here. So I propose that we ride right in on the the highest wave, jump out of the boat when she strikes and leave her."

"Good enough," said Ned. "Yes, that's the land. I can see it plainly now, and here comes our wave."

The crest of the great wave lifted them up, and bore them swiftly inland, the two increasing the speed with their oars. They went far up on a sandy beach, where the boat struck. They sprang out, Obed taking with him the unloaded musket, and ran. The retreating water caught them about the ankles and pulled hard, but could not drag them back. They passed beyond the highest mark of the waves, and then dropped, exhausted, on the ground.

"We've got all Mexico now to escape in," said Obed White, "instead of that pent-up castle."

The alarm gun boomed once more from San Juan de Ulua, and reminded them that they could not linger long there. The rain was still falling, the night was cold, and, after their tremendous strain, they would need shelter as well as refuge.

"They'll be searching the beach soon," said Obed, "and we'd best be off. It's against my inclination just now to stay long in one place. A rolling stone keeps slick and well polished, and that's what I'm after."

"I think our safest course is to travel inland just as fast and as far as we can," said Ned.

"Correct. Good advice needs no bush."

They started in the darkness across the sand dunes, and walked for a long time. They knew that a careful search along the beach would be made for them, but the Mexicans were likely to feel sure when they found nothing that they had been wrecked and drowned.

"I hope they'll think the sea got us," said Ned, "because then they won't be searching about the country for us."

"We weren't destined to be drowned that time," said Obed with great satisfaction. "It just couldn't happen after our running such a gauntlet before reaching the sea. But the further we get away from salt water the safer we are."

"It was my plan at first," said Ned, "to go by way of the sea from Vera Cruz to a Texan port."

"Circumstances alter journeys. It can't be done now. We've got to cut across country. It's something like a thousand miles to Texas, but I think that you and I together, Ned, can make it."

Ned agreed. Certainly they had no chance now to slip through by the way of Vera Cruz, and the sea was not his element anyhow.

The rain ceased, and a few stars came out. They passed from the sand dunes into a region of marshes. Constant walking kept their blood warm, and their clothes were drying upon them. But they were growing very tired and they felt that they must rest and sleep even at the risk of recapture.

"There's a lot of grass growing on the dry ground lying between the marshes," said Ned, "and I suppose that the Mexicans cut it for the Vera Cruz market. Maybe we can find something like a haystack or a windrow. Dry grass makes a good bed."

They hunted over an hour and persistence was rewarded by a small heap of dry grass in a little opening surrounded by thorn bushes. They spread one covering of it on the ground, covered themselves to the mouth with another layer, and then went sound asleep, the old, unloaded musket lying by Obed White's side.

The two slept the sleep of deep exhaustion, the complete relaxation of both body and mind. Boy and man they had passed through ordeals that few can endure, but, healthy and strong, they suffered merely from weariness and not from shattered nerves. So they slept peacefully and their breathing was long and deep. They were warm as they lay with the grass above and below them like two blankets. It had not rained much here, and the grass had dried before their coming, so they were free from danger of cold.

The night passed and the brilliant Mexican day came, touching with red and gold the town that curved about the bay, and softening the tints of the great fortress that rose on the rocky isle. All was quiet again within San Juan de Ulua and Vera Cruz. It had become known in both castle and town that two Texans, boy and man, had escaped from the dungeons under the sea only to find a grave in the sea above. Their boat had been found far out in the bay where the returning waves carried it, but the fishes would feed on their bodies, and it was well, because the Texans were wicked people, robbers and brigands who dared to defy the great and good Santa Anna, the father of his people.

Meanwhile, the two slept on, never stirring under the grass. It is true that the boy had dreams of a mighty castle from which he had fled and of a roaring ocean over which he had passed, but he landed happily and the dream sank away into oblivion. Peons worked in a field not a hundred yards away, but they sought no fugitives, and they had no cruel thoughts about anything. That Spanish strain in them was wholly dormant now. They had heard in the night the signal guns from San Juan de Ulua and the tenderest hearted of them said a prayer under his breath for the boy whom the storm had given to the sea. Then they sang together as they worked, some soft, crooning air of love and sacrifice that had been sung among the hills of Spain before the Moor came. Perhaps if they had known that the boy and man were asleep only a hundred yards away, the tenderest hearted among them at least would have gone on with their work just the same.

Ned was the first to awake and it was past noon. He threw off the grass and stood up refreshed but a little stiff. He awoke Obed, who rose, yawning tremendously and plucking wisps of grass from his hair. The droning note of a song came faintly, and the two listened.

"Peons at work in a field," said the boy, looking through the trees. "They don't appear to be very warlike, but we'd better go in the other direction."

"You're right," said Obed. "It's best for us to get away. If we tempt our fate too much it may overtake us, but before we go let's take a last view of our late home, San Juan de Ulua. See it over there, cut out in black against the blue sky. It's a great fortress, but I'm glad to bid it farewell."

"Shall we take the musket?" asked Ned. "It's unloaded, and we have nothing with which to load it."

"I think we'll stick to it," replied Obed, "we may find a use for it, but the first thing we want, Ned, is something to eat, and we've got to get it. Curious, isn't it, how the fear of recapture, the fear of everything, melts away before the demands of hunger."

"Which means that we'll have to go to some Mexican hut and ask for food," said Ned. "Now, I suggest, since we have no money, that we offer the musket for as much provisions as we can carry."

"It's not a bad idea. But our pistols are loaded and we'll keep them in sight. It won't hurt if the humble peon takes us for brigands. He'll trade a little faster, and, as this is a time of war so far as we are concerned, we have the right to inspire necessary fear."

They started toward the north and west, anxious to leave the tierra caliente as soon as they could and reach the mountains. Ned saw once more the silver cone of Orizaba now on his left. It had not led him on a happy quest before, but he believed that it was a true beacon now. They walked rapidly, staying their hunger as best they could, not willing to approach any hut, until they were a considerable distance from Vera Cruz. It was nearly nightfall when they dared a little adobe hut on a hillside.

"We'll claim to be Spaniards out of money and walking to the City of Mexico," said Obed. "They probably won't believe our statements, but, owing to the sight of these loaded pistols, they will accept them."

It was a poor hut with an adobe floor and its owner, a surly Mexican, was at home, but it contained plenty of food of the coarsest Mexican type, and Obed White stated their requests very plainly.

"Food we must have," he said, "sufficient for two or three days. Besides, we want the two serapes hanging there on the wall. I think they are clean enough for our use. In return we offer you this most excellent musket, a beautiful weapon made at Seville. Look at it. It is worth twice what we demand for it. Behold the beautifully carved stock and the fine steel barrel."

The Mexican, a dark, heavy-jawed fellow, regarded them maliciously, while his wife and seven half-naked children sat by in silence, but watching the strangers with the wary, shifting eyes of wild animals.

"Yes, it is a good musket," he said, "but may I inquire if it is your own?"

"For the purposes of barter and sale it is my own," replied Obed politely. "In this land as well as some others possession is ten points of the law."

"The words you speak are Spanish but your tone is Gringo."

"Gringo or Spanish, it does not change the beauty and value of the musket."

"I was in Vera Cruz this morning. Last night there was a storm and the great guns at the mighty Castle of San Juan de Ulua were firing."

"Did they fire the guns to celebrate the storm?"

"No. They gave a signal that two prisoners, vile Texans, were escaping from the dungeons under the sea. But the storm took them, and buried them in the waters of the bay. I heard the description of them. One was a very tall man, thin and with very thick, red hair. The other was a boy, but tall and strong for his age. He had gray eyes and brown hair. Wretched infidel Texans they were, but they are gone and may the Holy Virgin intercede for their souls."

He lifted his heavy lashes, and he and Obed White looked gravely into the eyes of each other. They and Ned, too, understood perfectly.

"You were informed wrongly," said Obed. "The man who escaped was short and fat, and he had yellow hair. The boy was very dark with black hair and black eyes. But the statement that they were drowned in the bay is correct."

"One might get five hundred good silver pesos for bringing in their bodies."

"One might, but one won't, and you, amigo, are just concluding an excellent bargain. You get this fine, unloaded musket, and we get the food and the serapes for which we have so courteously asked. The entire bargain will be completed inside of two minutes."

The blue eyes and the black eyes met again and the owner of each pair understood.

"It is so," said the Mexican, evenly, and he brought what they wished.

"Good-day, amigo," said Obed politely. "I will repeat that the musket is unloaded, and you cannot find ammunition for it any nearer than Vera Cruz, which will not trouble you as you are here at home in your castle. But our pistols are loaded, and it is a necessary fact for my young friend and myself. We purpose to travel in the hills, where there is great danger of brigands. Fortunately for us we are both able and willing to shoot well. Once more, farewell."

"Farewell," said the Mexican, waving his hand in dignified salute.

"That fellow is no fool," said Obed, as they strode away. "I like a man who can take a hint. A word to the wise is like a stitch in time."

"Will he follow us?"

"Not he. He has that musket which he craved, and at half its value. He does not desire wounds and perhaps death. The chances are ninety-nine out of a hundred that he will never say a word for fear his government will seize his musket."

"And now for the wildest country that we can find," said Ned. "I'm glad it doesn't rain much down here. We can sleep almost anywhere, wrapped in our serapes."

They ate as they walked and they kept on a long time after sunset, picking their way by the moonlight. Two or three times they passed peons in the path, but their bold bearing and the pistols in their belts always gave them the road. Brigands flourished amid the frequent revolutions, and the humbler Mexicans found it wise to attend strictly to their own business. They slept again in the open, but this time on a hill in a dense thicket. They had previously drunk at a spring at its base, and lacking now for neither food nor water they felt hope rising continually.

Ned had no dreams the second night, and both awoke at dawn. On the far side of the hill, they found a pool in which they bathed, and with breakfast following they felt that they had never been stronger. Their food was made up in two packs, one for each, and they calculated that with economy it would last two days. They could also reckon upon further supplies from wild fruits, and perhaps more frijoles and tortillas from the people themselves. When they had summed up all their circumstances, they concluded that they were not in such bad condition. Armed, strong and bold, they might yet traverse the thousand miles to Texas.

Light of heart and foot they started. Off to the left the great silver head of Orizaba looked down at them benignantly, and before them they saw the vast flowering robe of the tierra caliente into which they pushed boldly, even as Cortez and his men had entered it.

Ned was almost overpowered by a vegetation so grand and magnificent. Except on the paths which they followed, it was an immense and tangled mass of gigantic trees and huge lianas. Many of the lianas had wound themselves like huge serpents about the trees and had gradually pulled them, no matter how strong, into strange and distorted shapes. Overhead parrots and paroquets chattered amid the vast and gorgeous bloom of red and pink, yellow and white. Ned and Obed were forced to keep to the narrow peon paths, because elsewhere one often could not pass save behind an army of axes.

The trees were almost innumerable in variety. They saw mahogany, rosewood, Spanish cedar and many others that they did not know. They also saw the cactus and the palm, turned by the struggle for existence in this tremendous forest, into climbing plants. Obed noted these facts with his sharp eye.

"It's funny that the cactus and the palm have to climb to live," he said, "but they've done it. It isn't any funnier, however, than the fact that the whale lived on land millions of years ago, and had to take to the water to escape being eaten up by bigger and fiercer animals than himself. I'm a Maine man and so I know about whales."

They came now and then to little clearings, in which the peons raised many kinds of tropical and semitropical plants, bananas, pineapples, plantains, oranges, cocoa-nuts, mangoes, olives and numerous others. In some places the fruit grew wild, and they helped themselves to it. Twice they asked at huts for the customary food made of Indian corn, and on both occasions it was given to them. The peons were stolid, but they seemed kind and Ned was quite sure they did not care whether the two were Gringos or not. Two or three times, heavy tropical rains gushed down in swift showers, and they were soaked through and through, despite their serapes, but the hot sun, coming quickly afterward, soon dried them out again. They were very much afraid of chills and fever, but their constitutions, naturally so strong, held them safe.

Deeper and deeper they went into the great tropical wilderness of the tierra caliente. Often the heat under the vast canopy of interlacing vines and boughs was heavy and intense. Then they would lie down and rest, first threshing up grass and bushes to drive away snakes, scorpions and lizards. Sometimes they would sleep, and sometimes they would watch the monkeys and parrots darting about and chattering overhead. Twice they saw fierce ocelots stealing among the tree trunks, stalking prey hidden from the man and boy. The first ocelot was a tawny yellow and the second was a reddish gray. Both were marked with black spots in streaks and in lengthened rings. The second was rather the larger of the two. He seemed to be slightly over four feet in length, of which the body was three feet and the tail about a foot.

Ned and Obed were lying flat upon the ground, when the second ocelot appeared, and, as the wind was blowing from him toward them, he did not detect their presence. At the distance the figure of the great cat was enlarged. He looked to them almost like a tiger and certainly he was a ferocious creature, as he stalked his prey. Neither would have cared to meet him even with weapons in hand. Suddenly he darted forward, ran up the trunk of a great tree and disappeared in the dense foliage. As he did not come down again they inferred that he had caught what he was pursuing and was now devouring it.

Ned shivered a little and put his hand on the butt of his loaded pistol.

"Obed," he said, "I don't like the jungle, and I shall be glad when I get out of it. It's too vast, too bewildering, and its very beauty fills me with fear. I always feel that fangs and poison are lurking behind the beauty and the bloom."

"You're not so far wrong, Ned. I believe I'd rather be on the dusty deserts of the North. We'll go through the tierra caliente just as quickly as we can."

The next day they became lost among the paths, and did not regain their true direction until late in the afternoon. Sunset found them by the banks of a considerable creek, the waters of which were cold, as if its source were in the high mountains. Being very tired they bathed and arranged couches of grass on the banks. After the heat and perplexity of the jungle they were very glad to see cold, running water. The sight and the pleasant trickle of the flowing stream filled Ned with desires for the north, for the open land beyond the Rio Grande, where cool winds blew, and you could see to the horizon's rim. He was sicker than ever of the jungle, the beauty of which could not hide from him its steam and poison.

"How much longer do you think it will be before we leave the tierra caliente?" he asked.

"We ought to reach the intermediate zone between the tierra caliente and the higher sierras in three or four days," replied Obed. "It's mighty slow traveling in the jungle, but to get out of it we've only to keep going long enough. Meanwhile, we'll have a good snooze by the side of this nice, clean little river."

As usual after hard traveling, they fell asleep almost at once, but Ned was awakened in the night by some strange sound, the nature of which he could not determine at first. The jungle surrounded them in a vast, high circle, wholly black in the night, but overhead was a blue rim of sky lighted by stars. He raised himself on his elbow. Obed, four or five feet away, was still sleeping soundly on his couch of grass. The little river, silver in the moonlight, flowed with a pleasant trickle, but the trickle was not the sound that had awakened him.

The forest was absolutely silent. Not a breath of wind stirred, but the boy, although awed by the night and the great jungle, still listened intently.

The sound rose again, a low, hoarse rumble. It was distant thunder. A storm was coming. He heard it a third time. It was not thunder. It was the deep growl of some fierce, wild animal. For a moment the boy was afraid. Then he remembered the heavy pistol that never left his belt. It still carried the original load, a large bullet with plenty of gunpowder behind it.

The sounds were repeated and they were nearer. They were like a long drawn p-u, p-u, p-u. The tone was of indescribable ferocity. Ned was brave, but he shivered all over and there was a prickly sensation at the roots of his hair. He felt like some primeval youth who with club alone must face the rush of the saber-toothed tiger. But he drew upon his reserves of pride which were large. He would not awaken Obed, but, drawing the pistol and holding his fingers on trigger and hammer, he walked a little distance down the bank of the stream. That terrible p-u, p-u, p-u, suddenly sounded much closer at hand, and Ned shrank back, stiffening with horror.

A great black beast, by far the largest wild animal that he had ever seen, came silently out of the jungle and stood before the boy. He was a good seven feet in length, black as a coal, low but of singularly thick and heavy build. His shoulders and paws were more powerful than those of a tiger. As he stood there before Ned, black and sinister as Satan, he opened his mouth, and emitted again that fearful, rumbling p-u, p-u, p-u.

Ned could not move. All his power seemed to have gone into his eyes and he only looked. He saw the red eyes, the black lips wrinkling back from the long, cruel fangs, and the glossy skin rippling over the tremendous muscles. Ned suddenly wrenched himself free from this paralysis of the body, leveled the pistol and fired at a mark midway between the red eyes.

There was a tremendous roar and the animal leaped. Ned sprang to one side. The huge beast with blood pouring from his head turned and would have been upon him at the second leap, but a long barrel and then an arm was projected over Ned's shoulder. A pistol was fired almost in his ear. The monster's spring was checked in mid-flight, and he fell to the earth, dead. Ned too, fell, but in a faint.

CHAPTER IX

THE RUINED TEMPLES

Ned revived and sat up. Cold water which Obed had brought in his hat from the river was dripping from his face. At his feet lay a huge black animal, terrible even in death. There was one wound in his head, where Ned's bullet had gone in, and another through the right eye, where Obed's had entered, reaching the brain. Ned's strength now returned fully and the color came back to his face. He stood up, but he shuddered nevertheless.

"Obed," he said gratefully, "you came just in time."

"I surely did," said that cheerful artisan. "A bullet in time saved a life like thine. But you had already given him a bad wound."

"What is he, Obed?"

"About the biggest and finest specimen of a black jaguar that ever ravaged a Mexican jungle. I always thought the black kind was found only in Paraguay and the regions down there, but I'm quite sure now that at least one of them has been roaming up here, and he is bound to have kin, too. Ned, isn't he a terror? If he'd got at you he'd have ripped you in pieces in half a minute."

Ned shuddered again. Even in death the great black jaguar was capable of inspiring terror. He had never before seen such a picture of magnificent and sinister strength. He was heavier and more powerful than a tiger, and he knew that the jaguar often became a man-eater.

"I'd like to have that skin to lay upon the parlor of my palatial home, if I ever have one," said Obed, "and I reckon that you and I had better stick pretty close together while we are in this jungle. Our pistols are not loaded now, and we have no more ammunition."

They did not dare to sleep again in the same place, fearing that the jaguar might have a mate which would seek revenge upon them, but, a couple of hundred yards further down, they found in the river a little island, twelve or fifteen feet square. Here they felt that the water would somehow give them security, and they lay down once more.

Ned was awakened a second time by that terrifying pu-pu-pu. It approached through the forest but it stopped at the point where the dead body of the black giant lay. He knew that it was the voice of the mate. He listened a long time, but he did not hear it again, and he concluded that the second jaguar, after the brief mourning of animals, had gone away. He fell asleep again, and did not awaken until day.

They were now practically unarmed, but they kept the pistols, for the sake of show in case any peons of the jungle should offer trouble, and pressed forward, with all the speed possible in so dense a tangle of forest. In the deep shade of trees and bushes Ned continually saw the shadows of immense black jaguars. He knew that it was only nerves and imagination, but he did not like to be in a condition that enabled fancy to play him such tricks. He longed more than ever for the open plains, even with dust and thirst.

Already they saw the mountains rising before them, terrace after terrace, and, three days after the encounter with the jaguar, they began to ascend the middle slopes between the tierra caliente and the lofty sierras. The whole character of the country changed. The tropical jungle ceased. They now entered magnificent forests of oak, pine, plane tree, mimosas, chestnut and many other varieties. They also saw the bamboo, the palm and the cactus. The water was fresher and colder, and they felt as if they had come into a new world.

But the question of food supply returned. They had used the wild fruits in abundance, always economizing strictly with their tortillas and frijoles. Now they had eaten the last of these and a diet of fruit alone would not do.

"We'll have to sell a pistol in the way that we sold the musket," said Ned.

"I hate to do it," said Obed, "but I don't see anything else that we can do. We might seize our food at the first hut we find, but whatever may be the quarrels between the Mexicans and Texans, I'm not willing to rob any of these poor peons."

"Nor I," said Ned with emphasis. "My pistol goes first."

They found the usual adobe hut in a pleasant valley, and the noble señor, the proprietor, was at home playing a mandolin. He did not suspect them to be Gringos, but he was quite sure that they were brigands and he made the exchange swiftly and gladly. Two days later the other pistol went in the same way, and they began to think how they could acquire new weapons and plenty of ammunition for them. They sat in the shade of a great oak while they discussed the question. It was certainly a vital one. Dangerous enough at any time, the long journey through Mexico would become impossible without arms.

"If we could loot them from the soldiers I wouldn't mind at all," said Obed. "The soldiers are to act against Texas, according to the tale you tell, and the tale is true. All's fair in flight and war, and if such a chance comes our way I'm going to take it."

"So am I," said Ned.

But such a chance was in no hurry to present itself. They went on for a number of days and came now to the region, bordering the high sierras, passing through vast forests of oak and pine, and seeing scarcely any habitation. Here, as they walked toward twilight along one of the narrow paths, a voice from the bushes cried: "Halt!"

Ned saw several gun barrels protruding from the foliage, and was obedient to the command. He also threw up his hands and Obed White was no slower than he. Ned judged from the nature of the ambush that they had fallen among brigands, then so prevalent in Mexico, and the thought gave him relief. Soldiers would carry him back to Santa Anna, but surely brigands would not trouble long those who had nothing to lose.

"It is well, friends, that you obey so quickly," said a man in gaudy costume as he stepped from the bushes followed by a half dozen others, evil looking fellows, all carrying guns and pistols. Ned noticed that two of the guns were rifles of long and slender barrel, undoubtedly of American make.

"Good-evening, Captain," said Obed White in his smoothest tones. "We were expecting to meet you, as we learned that we are in the territory which you rule so well."

The man frowned and then smiled.

"I see that you are a man of humor, amigo," he said, "and it is well. Your information is correct. I rule this territory. I am Captain Juan Carossa and these are my men. We collect tribute from all who pass this way."

"A worthy task and, I have no doubt, a profitable one."

"Always worthy but not always profitable. However, I trust that you can make it worth our while."

A look of sadness passed over the expressive features of Obed White.

"You look like a brave and generous man, Señor Juan Carossa," he said sorrowfully, "and it grieves both my young friend and myself to the very center of our hearts to disappoint you. We have nothing. There is not a cent of either gold or silver upon us. Jewels we admire, but we have them not. You may search."

He held wide his arms and Ned did likewise. Carossa gave an order to one of his men, a tall fellow, swathed in a red serape, to make the search, and he did so in such a rapid and skillful manner that Ned marveled. He felt hands touching him here and there, as light as the fall of a leaf. Obed was treated in the same fashion, and then the man in the red serape turned two empty and expressive palms to his chief.

Carossa swore fluently, and bent a look of deep reproach upon Ned and Obed.

"Señors," he said, "this is an injustice, nay more, it is a crime. You come upon the territory over which we range. You put us to the trouble of stopping you, and you have nothing. All our risk and work are wasted."

Obed shook his head in apology.

"It is not our fault," he said. "We had a little money, but we spent it for food. We had some arms also, but they went for food too, so you see, good kind Captain Carossa, we had nothing left for you."

"But you have two good serapes," said the Captain. "Had you money we would not take them from you, but it must not be said of Captain Carossa and his men that they went away with nothing. I trust, señor, that you do not think me unreasonable."

Obed White considered. Captain Carossa was a polite man. So was he.

"We can ill afford to part with these cloaks or serapes," he said, "but since it must be we cannot prevent it. Meanwhile, we ask you to offer us your hospitality. We are on the mountains now, and the nights are cold. We would be chilled without our cloaks. Take us with you, and, in the morning, when the warm sunshine comes we will proceed."

Carossa laughed and pulled his long black mustaches. "Santiago, but you have a spirit," he said, "and I like it. You shall have your request and you may come with us but to-morrow you go forth stripped and shorn. My men cannot work for nothing. Spanish or Mexican, English or Gringo you must pay. Gringo you are, but for that I do not care. It is in truth the reason why I yield to your little request, because you can never bring the soldiers of Santa Anna down upon us."

Obed White smiled. The look upon his face obviously paid tribute to the craft and courage of Juan Carossa, the great, and Carossa therefore was pleased. The brigand captain did not abate one whit from his resolution to have their serapes and their coats too, but he would show them first that he was a gentleman. He spoke to his men, and the fellow with the red serape led the way along a narrow path through a forest of myrtle oaks. They went in single file, the Captain about the middle, and just behind him Obed, with Ned following. Ned as usual was silent, but Obed talked nearly all the time and Carossa seemed to like it. Ned saw that the brigand leader was vain, eager to show his power and resource, but he was sure that, at bottom, he was cruel, and that he would turn them forth stripped and helpless in the forest.

Night came down suddenly, but the man in front lighted a small lantern that he took from under his serape, and they continued the march with unabated speed. The forest thinned, and about nine o'clock they came into an open space. The moon was now out and Ned saw a group of four rectangular buildings, elevated on mounds. The buildings, besides being rectangles themselves, were so placed that the group made a rectangle. The structures of stone were partly ruined, and of great age. They followed the uniform plan of those vast and mysterious ruins found so often in Southern and Central Mexico. The same race that erected the pyramids on the Teotihuacan might have raised these buildings.

"My home! The quarters of myself and my men," said Carossa, dramatically, pointing to the largest of the buildings. "We do not know who built it. It goes far beyond the time of Cortez, but it serves us now. The peon will not approach it, because Carossa is there and maybe ghosts too."

"I'm not afraid of ghosts," said Obed White. "Lead on, most noble captain. We appreciate your hospitality. We did not know that you were taking us to a palace."

Captain Carossa deigned to be pleased again with himself, and, taking the lantern from the man in the red serape, he led the way. He entered the large building by means of a narrow passageway in one of the angles, passed through an unroofed room, and then came to a door at which both Ned and Obed gazed with the most intense curiosity. The doorway was made of only three stones, two huge monolithic door jambs, each seven feet high, nearly as wide and more than two feet thick. Upon them rested a lintel also monolithic, but at least twenty feet in length, with a width of five feet and a thickness of three feet. It was evident to Ned that mighty workmen had once toiled here.

"Is not that an entrance fit for a king?" said the brigand captain, again making a dramatic gesture.

"It is fit for Captain Juan Carossa, which is more," said Obed White with suave courtesy.

Captain Carossa bowed. Once more he deigned to be pleased with himself. Then he led through the doorway and Ned uttered a little cry of admiration. They stood in a great room with a magnificent row of monolithic pillars running down the center. A stone roof had once covered the room, but it had long since fallen in. The interior of the walls was plain, made of stones and mortar, once covered with cement, deep blood red in color, of which a few fragments remained. But the walls on the outside were covered with splendid panels of mosaic work varied now and then by sculptured stones. The stone used on the outside was of a light cream color. But the boy did not see the mosaic panels until later.

Silent and studious, these vast ruins of a mysterious race made a great appeal to Ned. He forgot the rough brigands for a moment, and stood there looking at the walls and great columns, upon which the moon was pouring a flood of beams. What were these outlaws to those mighty builders whom the past had swallowed up so completely?

The brigands were already lighting a fire beside one of the huge monoliths, and Carossa lay down on a serape. The fire blazed up, but it did not detract from the weird effect of the Hall of Pillars. One of the men warmed food which he brought from another of the ruined houses, and Carossa told his prisoners to eat.

"What I give you to-night, and what I shall give you to-morrow morning may be the last food that you will have for some time," he said, "so enjoy it as best you may."

He smiled, his lips drawing back from his white teeth, and in some singular way he made Ned think of the black jaguar and his black lips writhing back from his great fangs. Why had Obed spoken of coming with them? Better to have been stripped in the path, and to have gone on alone. But he ate the food, as the long marching had made him hungry, and lay down within the rim of the firelight.

The men also ate, and Ned saw that they were surly. Doubtless they had endured much hardship recently and had secured little spoil. He heard muttered sounds which he knew were curses. He became more uneasy than ever. Certainly little human kindness lurked in the hearts of such as these, and he believed that Carossa was playing with them for his own amusement, just as a trainer with a steel bar makes the animals in a cage do their tricks.

The mutterings among the men increased. Carossa spoke to one of them, who brought forth a stone jar from a recess in the wall. Tin cups were produced and all, including Carossa, drank pulque made from the maguey plant. They offered it also to Ned and Obed, but both declined.

The pulque did not make the men more quarrelsome, but seemed to plunge them into a lethargy. Two or three of them hummed doleful songs, as if they were thinking of homes to which they could not go. One began to weep, but finally spread out his serape, lay down on it and went to sleep. Three or four others soon did the same. Two sat near the great monolithic doorway, with muskets across their knees. Undoubtedly they were intended to be sentinels, but Ned noted that their heads drooped.

"I shall sleep now, my Gringo guests," said Carossa, "and I advise you to do the same. You cannot alter anything, and you will need the strength that sleep brings."

"Your advice is good," said Obed, "and we thank you, Captain Carossa, for your advice and courtesy. Manners are the fine finish of a man."

His serape had not yet been taken from him, and he rolled himself in it. Ned was already in his, lying with his feet to the smoldering fire. The boy did not wish to sleep, nor could he have slept had he wished. But he saw that Carossa soon slumbered, and the sentinels by the doorway seemed, at least, to doze. He turned slightly on his side, and looked at Obed who lay about eight feet away. He could not see the man's face, but his body did not stir. Perhaps Obed also slept.

A wind was now rising and it made strange sounds among the vast ruins. It was a moan, a shriek and a hoarse sigh. Perhaps the peons were not so far wrong! The ghosts did come back to their old abodes. Ned was glad that he was not alone. Even without Obed the company of brigands would have been a help. He lay still a long time.

The coals of the fire went out, one by one, and where they had glowed only black ashes lay. The wind among the ruins played all kinds of strange variations, and Ned was never more awake in his life. He took a last look at the sentinels, and he was sure that they slept, sitting, with their muskets across their laps. Then he rose to his knees and with difficulty checked a cry of astonishment when he saw Obed rising at the same time. They remained on their knees a moment or two looking at each other and then, simultaneously they rose to their feet. Their comprehension was complete.

Ned looked down at Carossa. The brigand chief slept soundly and his face in repose was wholly evil. The gayety and courtesy that they had seen upon it awake were only a mask.

Obed stepped lightly to one of the pillars and Ned followed him. He knew what Obed was seeking. Here was the great chance. The brigands, careless from long immunity, had stacked their guns against the pillar, and Ned and Obed promptly selected the two American rifles that Ned had noticed. Hung by each was a large supply of powder and bullets to fit which they also took. Two of the best machetes were chosen too, and then they were ready to go. With the rifle in his hand, the great weapon with which the pioneer made his way from ocean to ocean, Ned had strength and courage. He believed that Obed and he could defeat the entire force of brigands, but he awaited the signal of his older comrade.

Standing close together behind the massive pillar they could not now see the sentinels at the doorway. Ned was quite sure that they were sleeping and that he and his comrade could steal past them. But Obed turned in another direction and Ned followed without a word. The man had caught a glimpse of a second entrance at the opposite side of this hall of pillars, and the two darted into it.

They found themselves in a passage less than the height of a man, and only about three feet wide, but Obed led on boldly, and Ned, with

equal boldness, followed. The wall was about five feet thick, and they came out into a court or patio surrounded by four ruined buildings. The floor of the patio was cement, upon which their footsteps made no noise, and, going through the great apertures in one of the ruined buildings, they stood entirely on the outside of the mass of ancient temples, or whatever it may have been.

"Ned," whispered Obed, "we ought to go right down on our knees and give thanks. We've not only escaped from Carossa and his cutthroats, but we've brought with us two American rifles; good enough for anybody and two or three hundred rounds of ammunition, the things that we needed most of all."

"It must have been more than chance," said Ned with emotion. "It must have been a hand leading us."

"When I proposed to go with them I thought we might have a chance of some kind or other. Well, Captain Carossa, you meant us evil, but you did us good. Come, Ned, the faster we get away from these ghosts the better. Besides, we've got more to carry now."

They had also brought away with them their packs of food, but they did not mind the additional weight of the weapons, which were worth more to them than gold or jewels. They listened a minute or two to see if any alarm had been raised, but no sound came from the Hall of Pillars, and with light steps and strong hearts they began another march on their northward journey.

They traveled by the moon and stars, and, as they were not hindered now by any great tangle of undergrowth, they made many miles before dawn, although they were ascending steadily. They had come upon the edge of the great central plateau of Mexico, which runs far into the north and which includes much of Texas. Before them lay another and great change in the country. They were now to enter a land of little rain, where they would find the ragged yucca tree, the agave and the cactus, the scrubby mesquite bush and clumps of coarse grass. But they had passed through so much that they did not fear it.

They hunted for an hour after sunrise, before they found a small brook, at which they drank, and, in spirit, returned the thanks which Obed had said so emphatically were due. Then, wrapped in the useful serapes, they went to sleep once more in a thicket. They had been sure that the Mexicans could not trail them, and their confidence was justified. When they awoke in the afternoon no human being was in sight, and their loaded rifles lay undisturbed beside them.

Then they entered upon the plain, plodding steadily on over a dusty gray landscape, but feeling that their rifles would be ample protection against anything that they might meet. The sun became very hot, and they longed at times for the shade of the forest that they had left behind, but they did not cease their march. Off to their left they saw towering mountains with a green film along their slopes that they knew to be forests of oak and pine; and such was the nature of man that they looked at them regretfully. Obed White, glancing at Ned, caught Ned glancing at him, and both laughed.

"That's it," said Obed. "How precious is the thing that slips away. When we were in the forest we wanted the open country, but now in the open country we want the forest. But we're making progress, Ned. Don't forget that."

"I don't," said Ned. "But when we get further North into the vast stretches of the arid plateau, we must have something more to carry—water bottles."

"That's so. We can't do without them. Maybe, too, Ned, we can pick up a couple of good horses. They'd be a wonderful help."

"We'll hope for everything we need," said Ned cheerfully. "Now I wonder, Obed, if the attack has been made on Texas. Do you think we can yet get there in time?"

"I hope so," replied Obed thoughtfully. "You were a long time in San Juan de Ulua, but armies move slowly, and they have plenty of troubles of their own here in Mexico. I would wager almost anything that no Mexican force in great numbers has yet crossed the Rio Grande."

"Then we may be in time. Obed, we'll push for the north with every ounce of strength we have."

"That's just what we'll do. Courage defeats a multitude of sins."

They traveled now for nearly a week in a direction north slightly by west, suffering at times from heat, and once from a tropical rain storm that deluged them. While the rain poured upon them, they kept their serapes wrapped around their powder, and let their bodies take the worst. The rain, for a while, was very cold, but the powder was precious, and after a while the sun came out, drying and warming them again. They were compelled to swim two narrow but deep rivers, a most difficult task, as they had arms, ammunition and food to carry with them.

They noticed stretches of forest again, and passed both scattered houses and villages. Their knowledge of Spanish and their rifles were their protection. But in some places the people seemed to care nothing either about Santa Anna or those who might oppose him. They were content to lead lives in a region which furnished food almost of its own accord. Just before approaching one of these villages Ned shot another jaguar. It was not black like the first, nor so large. It was about five feet in length, and yellowish in color, with a splendid skin, which, at Obed's suggestion, they removed for purposes of barter. It was a wise idea, as they traded it in the village for two large water bottles. The people there were so indifferent to their identity that they sat in the plaza in the evening, and watched the young people dance the fandango.

It was only a crude little village in the Mexican wilderness. The people were more Indian than Mexican. There was not much melody in their music, and not much rhythm in their dance, but they were human beings, enjoying themselves after labor and without fear. Both Ned and Obed, sitting outside the circle of light with their rifles across their knees, felt it. The sense of human companionship, even of strangers, was very pleasant. The music and the glowing faces appealed very strongly to the boy. Silent, thoughtful, and compelled by circumstances to live a hard life, he was nevertheless young with all the freshness of youth. Obed saw, and he felt a deep sympathy for this lad who had wrapped himself like a younger brother around his heart.

"Just you wait, Ned," he said, "until we reach our own people across the Rio Grande. Then we'll have lots of friends and they'll be friends all the stronger, because you will be the first to bring them news of the treacherous attack that is to be made upon them."

"If we get there in time," said Ned, "and, Obed, I am beginning to believe that we will get there in time."

They passed for hunters, and that night they slept in the village, where they received kindness, and departed again the next morning on the long, long journey that always led to the north.

CHAPTER X

CACTUS AND MEXICANS

They now came upon bare, wind-swept plains, which alternated with blazing heat and bitter cold. Once they nearly perished in a Norther, which drove down upon them with sheets of hail. Fortunately their serapes were very thick and large, and they found additional shelter among some ragged and mournful yucca trees. But they were much shaken by the experience, and they rested an entire day by the banks of a shallow little brook.

"Oh, for a horse, two horses!" said Obed. "I'd give all our castles in Spain for two noble Barbary steeds to take us swiftly o'er the plain."

"I think we'll keep on walking," said Ned.

"At any rate, we're good walkers. We must be the very best walkers in the world judging from the way we've footed it since we left the castle of San Juan de Ulua."

They refilled their water bottles, despite the muddiness of the stream, and went on for three or four days over the plain, having nothing for scenery save the sandy ridges, the ragged yuccas, dwarfed and ugly mesquite bushes, and the deformed cactus.

It was an ugly enough country by day, but, by night, it had a sort of weird charm. The moonlight gave soft tints to the earth. Now and then the wind would pick up the sand and carry it away in whirling gusts. The wind itself had a voice that was almost human and it played many notes. Lean and hungry wolves now appeared and howled mournfully, but were afraid to attack that terrible creature, man.

They saw sheep herders several times, but the herders invariably disappeared over the horizon with great speed. Neither Ned nor Obed meant them any harm, and they would have liked to exchange a few words with human beings.

"They think of course that we're brigands," said Obed. "It's what anybody would take us for. Evil looks corrupt good intentions."

The next day Obed was lucky enough to shoot an antelope, and they had fresh food. It was a fine fat buck, and they jerked and dried the remainder of the body in the sun, taking a long rest at the same time. Obed was continually restraining Ned's eagerness to hurry on.

"The race is to the swift if he doesn't break down," he said, "but you've got to guard mighty well against breaking down. I think we're

going to enter a terrible long stretch of dry country, and we want our muscles to be tough and our wind to be good."

Obed was partially right in his prediction as they passed for three days through an absolutely sterile region. It was not sandy, however, but the soil was hard and baked like a stone. Then they saw on their left high but bare and desolate mountains, and soon they came to a little river of clear water, apparently flowing down from the range. The stream was not over twenty feet wide and two feet deep, but its appearance was inexpressibly grateful to both. They sat down on its banks and looked at each other.

"Ned," said Obed, "how much dust of the desert do you think I am carrying upon me? Let your answer be without prejudice. Friendship in this case must not stand in the way of truth."

"Do you mean by weight or by area?"

"Both."

"Answering by guess I should say about three square yards, or about three pounds. Wouldn't you say about the same for me?"

"Just about the same. I should say, too, that we carry at least twelve or fifteen kinds of dirt. It is well soaked in our hair and also in our clothes, and, as we may not get another good chance for a bath in a month, we'd better use our opportunity."

They reveled in the cool waters. They also washed out all their clothing, including their serapes, and let the garments dry in the sun. It was the most luxurious stop that they had made and they enjoyed it to the full. Ned, scouting a little distance up the stream, shot a fine fat deer among the bushes, and that night they had a feast of tender steaks. Obed had obtained flint and steel at the Indian village, at which they had seen the fandango, and he could light a fire with them, a most difficult thing to do. Their fire was of dried cactus, burning rapidly, but it lasted long enough for their cooking. After the heartiest meal that they had eaten in a long time, they stretched out by the river, listening to its pleasant flow. The remainder of the deer they had hung high in the branches of a myrtle oak about forty yards away.

"We haven't got our horses," said Obed, "but we're making progress. Time and tide will carry man with them if he's ready with his boat."

"Perhaps we've been lucky, too," said Ned, "in passing through what is mostly a wilderness."

"That's so. The desert is a hard road, but in our case it keeps enemies away."

They were lying on their serapes, the waters sang softly, the night was dark but very cool and pleasant, and they were happy. But Ned suddenly saw something that made him reach out and touch his companion.

"Look!" he whispered, pointing a finger.

They saw a dark figure creep on noiseless feet toward the tree, from a bough of which hung their deer. It was only a shadow in the night, but they knew that it was a cougar, drawn by the savor of the deer.

"Don't shoot," whispered Obed. "He can't get our meat, but we'll watch him try."

They lay quite still and enjoyed the joke. The cougar sprang again and again, making mighty exertions, but always the rich food swung just out of his reach. Once or twice his nose nearly touched it, but the two or three inches of gulf which he could never surmount were as much as two or three miles. He invariably fell back snarling, and he became so absorbed in the hopeless quest that there was no chance of his noticing the man and boy who lay not far away.

The humor of it appealed strongly to Ned and Obed. The cougar, after so many vain leaps, lay on the ground for a while panting. Then he ran up the tree, and as far out on the bough as he dared. He reached delicately with a forefoot, but he could not touch the strips of bark with which the body was tied. Then he lay flat upon the bough and snarled again and again.

"That's a good punishment for a rascally thief," whispered Obed. "I don't blame him for trying to get something to eat, but it's our deer. Let him go away and do his own hunting."

The cougar came back down the tree, but his descent was made with less spirit than his ascent. Nevertheless he made another try at the jumping. Ned saw, however, that he did not do as well as before. He never came within six inches of the deer now. At last he lay flat again on the ground and panted, staying there a full five minutes. When he got up he made one final and futile jump, and then sneaked away, exhausted and ashamed.

"Now, Ned," said Obed, "since the comedy is over I think we can safely go to sleep."

"Especially as we know our deer is safe," said Ned.

Both slept soundly throughout the remainder of the night. Toward morning the cougar came back and looked longingly at the body of the deer hanging from the bough of the tree. He thought once or twice of leaping for it again, but there was a shift of the wind and he caught the human odor from the two beings who lay forty yards away. He was a large and strong beast of prey, but this odor frightened him, and he slunk off among the trees, not to return.

Ned and Obed stayed two days beside the little river, taking a complete rest, bathing frequently in the fresh waters, and curing as much of the deer as possible for their journey. Then, rather heavily loaded, they started anew, always going northward through a sad and rough land. Now they entered another bare and sterile region of vast extent, walking for five days, without seeing a single trace of surface water. Had it not been for their capacious water bottles they would have perished, and, even with their aid, it was only by the strictest economy that they lived. The evaporation from the heat was so great that after a mouthful or two of water they were invariably as thirsty as ever, inside of five minutes.

They passed from this desert into a wide, dry valley between bare mountains, and entered a great cactus forest, one of the most wonderful things that either of them had ever seen. The ground was almost level, but it was hard and baked. Apparently no more rain fell here than in the genuine desert of shifting sand, and there was not a drop of surface water. Ned, when he first saw the mass of green, took it for a forest of trees, such as one sees in the North, but so great was his interest that he was not disappointed, when he saw that it was the giant cactus.

The strange forest extended many miles. The stems of the cactus rose to a height of sixty feet or more, with a diameter often reaching two feet. Sometimes the stems had no branches, but, in case they did, the branches grew out at right angles from the main stem, and then curving abruptly upward continued their growth parallel to the parent stock.

The stems of these huge plants were divided into eighteen or twenty ribs, within which at intervals of an inch or so were buds, with cushions, yellow and thick, from which grew six or seven large, and many smaller spines.

Most of the cactus trees were gorgeous with flowers, ranging from a deep rich crimson through rose and pink to a creamy white.

The green of the plants and the delicate colors of the flowers were wonderfully soothing to the two who had come from the bare and burning desert. There their eyes had ached with the heat and glare. They had longed for shade as men had longed of old for the shadow of a rock in a weary land. In truth they found little shade in the cactus forest, but the green produced the illusion of it. They expected to find flowing or standing water, but they went on for many miles and the soil remained hard and baked, as it can bake only in the rainless regions of high plateaus.

They found the forest to be fully thirty miles in length and several miles in width. Everywhere the giant cactus predominated, and on its eastern border they found two Indian men and several women and children gathering the fruit, from which they made an excellent preserve. The Indians were short in stature and very dark. All started to run when they saw the white man and boy, both armed with rifles, approaching, but Ned and Obed held up their hands as a sign of amity and, after some hesitation, they stopped. They spoke a dialect which neither Ned nor Obed could understand, but by signs they made a treaty of peace.

They slept that night by the fire of their new friends and the next day they were fortunate enough to shoot a deer, the greater part of which they gave to the Indians. The older of the men then guided them out of the forest at the northern end, and indicated as nearly as he could, by the same sign language, the course they should pursue in order to reach Texas. They had gone too far to the west, and by coming back toward the east they would save distance, as well as pass through a better country. Then he gravely bade them farewell and went back to his people.

Ned and Obed now crossed a low but rugged range of mountains, and came into good country where they were compelled to spend a large part of their time, escaping observation. It was only the troubled state of the people and the extreme division of sentiment among them that saved the two from capture. But they obtained news that filled both with joy. Fighting had occurred in Texas, but no great Mexican army had yet gone into the north.

Becoming bold now from long immunity and trusting to their Mexican address and knowledge of Spanish and its Mexican variants, they turned into the main road and pursued their journey at a good pace. They were untroubled the first day but on the second day they saw a cloud of dust behind them.

"Sheep being driven to market," said Obed.

"I don't know," replied Ned, looking back. "That cloud of dust is at least a mile away, but it seems to me I saw it give out a flash or two."

"What kind of a flash do you mean?"

"Bright, like silver or steel. There, see it!"

"Yes, I see it now, and I think you know what makes it, Ned."

"I should say that it is the sun striking on the steel heads of long lances."

"So should I, and I say also that those lances are carried by Mexican cavalrymen bound for Texas. It may not be a bad guess either that this is the vanguard of the army of Cos. I infer from the volume of dust that it is a considerable force."

"Therefore it is wise for us to leave the road and hide as best we can."

"Correctly spoken. The truth needs no bush. It walks without talking."

They turned aside at once, and entered a field of Indian corn, where they hoped to pass quietly out of sight, but some of the lancers came on very fast and noticed the dusty figures at the far edge of the field. Many of the Mexicans were skilled and suspicious borderers, and the haste with which the two were departing seemed suspicious to them.

Ned and Obed heard loud and repeated shouts to halt, but pretending not to hear passed out of the field and entered a stretch of thin forest beyond.

"We must not stop," said Obed. "Being regular soldiers they will surely discover, if they overtake us, that we are not Mexicans, and two or three lance thrusts would probably be the end of us. Now that we are among these trees we'll run for it."

A shout came from the lancers in the corn field as soon as they saw the two break into a run. Ned heard it, and he felt as the fox must feel when the hounds give tongue. Tremors shook him, but his long and silent mental training came to his aid. His will strengthened his body and he and Obed ran rapidly. Nor did they run without purpose. Both instinctively looked for the roughest part of the land and the thickest stretches of forest. Only there could they hope to escape the lancers who were thundering after them.

Ned more than once wished to use his rifle, but he always restrained the impulse, and Obed glanced at him approvingly. He seemed to know what was passing in the boy's mind.

"Our bullets would be wasted now, even if we brought down a lancer or two," he said, "so we'll just save 'em until we're cornered—if we are. Then they will tell. Look, here are thorn bushes! Come this way."

They ran among the bushes which reached out and took little bits of their clothing as they passed. But they rejoiced in the fact. Horses could never be driven into that dense, thorny growth, and they might evade pursuers on foot. The thorn thicket did not last very long, however. They passed out of it and came into rough ground with a general trend upward. Both were panting now and their faces were wet with perspiration. The breath was dry and hot and the heart constricted painfully. They heard behind them the noise of the pursuit, spread now over a wide area.

"If only these hills continue to rise and to rise fast," gasped Obed White, "we may get away among the rocks and bushes."

There was a rapid tread of hoofs, and two lancers, with their long weapons leveled, galloped straight at them. Obed leaped to one side, but Ned, so startled that he lost command of himself, stopped and stood still. He saw one of the men bearing down upon him, the steel of the lance head glittering in the sunlight, and instinctively he closed his eyes. He heard a sharp crack, something seemed to whistle before his face, and then came a cry which he knew was the death cry of a man. He had shut his eyes only for a moment, and when he opened them he saw the Mexican falling to the ground, where he lay motionless across his lance. Obed White stood near, and his rifle yet smoked. Ned instantly recovered himself, and fired at the second lancer who, turning about, galloped away with a wound in his shoulder.

"Come Ned," cried Obed White. "There is a time for all things, and it is time for us to get away from here as fast as we can."

He could not be too quick for Ned, who ran swiftly, avoiding another look at the silent and motionless figure on the ground. The riderless horse was crashing about among the trees. From a point three or four hundred yards behind there came the sound of much shouting. Ned thought it to be an outburst of anger caused by the return of the wounded lancer.

"We stung 'em a little," he panted.

"We did," said Obed White. "Remember that when you go out to slay you may be slain. But, Ned, we must reload."

They curved about, and darting into a thick clump of bushes put fresh charges in their rifles. Ned was trembling from excitement and exertion, but his anger was beginning to rise. There must always come a time when the hunted beast will turn and rend if it can. Ned had been the hunted, now he wanted to become the hunter. Obed and he had beaten off the first attack. There were plenty more bullets where the other two had come from, and he was eager to use them. He peered out of the bushes, his face red, his eyes alight, his rifle ready for instant use. But Obed placed one hand on his shoulder:

"Gently, Ned, gently!" he said. "We can't fight an entire Mexican army, but if we slip away to some good position we can beat off any little band that may find us."

It was evident that the Mexicans had lost the trail, for the time being. They were still seeking the quarry but with much noise and confusion. A trumpet was blown as if more help were needed. Officers shouted orders to men, and men shouted to one another. Several shots were fired, apparently at imaginary objects in the bushes.

"While they're running about and bumping into one another we'll regain a little of our lost breath which we'll need badly later," said Obed. "We can watch from here, and when they begin to approach then it's up and away again."

Those were precious minutes. The ground was not good for the lancers who usually advanced in mass, and, after the fall of one man and the wounding of another, the soldiers on foot were not very zealous in searching the thickets. The breathing of the two fugitives became easy and regular once more. The roofs of their mouths were no longer hot and dry, and their limbs did not tremble from excessive exertion. Ned had turned his eyes from the Mexicans and was examining the country in the other direction.

"Obed," he said, "there's a low mountain about a mile back of us, and it's covered with forest. If we ever reach it we can get away."

"Yes—if we reach it," said Obed, "and, Ned, we'll surely try for it. Ah, there they come in this direction now!"

A squad of about twenty men was approaching the thicket rapidly. Ned and Obed sprang up and made at top speed for the mountain. The soldiers uttered a shout and began to fire. But they had only muskets and the bullets did not reach. Ned and Obed, having rested a full ten minutes, ran fast. They were now descending the far side of the hill and meant to cross a slight valley that lay between it and the mountain. When they were near the center of this valley they heard the hoofs of horsemen, and again saw lancers galloping toward them. These horsemen had gone around the hill, and now the hunt was in full cry again.

Ned and Obed would have been lost had not the valley been intersected a little further on by an arroyo seven or eight feet deep and at least fifteen feet wide. They scrambled down it, then up it and continued their flight among the bushes, while the horsemen, compelled to stop on the bank, uttered angry and baffled cries.

"The good luck is coming with the bad," said Obed. "The foot soldiers will still follow. They know that we're Texans and they want us. Do you see anybody following us now, Ned?"

"I can see the heads of about a dozen men above the bushes."

"Perhaps they are delegated to finish the work. The whole army of Cos can't stop to hunt down two Texans, and when we get on that mountain, Ned, we may be able to settle with these fellows on something like fair terms."

"Let's spurt a little," said Ned.

They put on extra steam, but the Mexicans seemed to have done the same, as presently, appearing a little nearer, they began to shout or fire. Ned heard the bullets pattering on the bushes behind him.

"A hint to the wise is a stitch in time," said Obed White. "Those fellows are getting too noisy. I object to raucous voices making loud outcries, nor does the sound of bullets dropping near please me. I shall give them a hint."

Wheeling about he fired at the nearest Mexican. His rifle was a long range weapon and the man fell with a cry. The others hesitated and the fugitives increased their speed. Now they were at the base of the mountain. Now they were up the slope which was densely clothed with trees and bushes.

Then they came to a great hollow in the stone side of the ridge, an indentation eight or ten feet deep and as many across, while above them the stone arched over their heads at a height of seventy or eighty feet.

"We'll just stay here," said Obed White. "You can run and you can run, but the time comes when you can run no more. They can't get at us from overhead, and they can't get at us from the sides. As for the front, I think that you and I, Ned, can hold it against as many Mexicans as may come."

"At least we'll make a mighty big try," said Ned, whose courage rose high at the sight of their natural fort. They had their backs to the wall, but this wall was of solid stone, and it also curved around on either side of them. Moreover, he had a chance to regain his breath which was once more coming in hot and painful gasps from his chest.

"Let's lie down, Ned," said Obed, "and pull up that log in front of this."

Near them lay the stem of an oak that had fallen years before. All the boughs had decayed and were gone, so it was not a very difficult task to drag the log in front of them, forming a kind of bar across the alcove. As it was fully a foot in diameter it formed an excellent fortification behind which they lay with their rifles ready. It was indeed a miniature fort, the best that a wilderness could furnish at a moment's notice, and the fighting spirit of the two rose fast. If the enemy came on they were ready to give him a welcome.

But the two heard nothing in the dense forest in front of them. The pursuers evidently were aware of the place, in which they had taken refuge, and knew the need of cautious approach. Mexicans do not lack bravery, but both Obed and Ned were sure there would be a long delay.

"I think that all we've got to do for the present," said Obed, "is to watch the woods in front of us, and see that none of them sneaks up near enough for a good shot."

Nearly an hour passed, and they neither saw nor heard anything in the forest. Then there was a rushing sound, a tremendous impact in front of them and something huge bounded and bounded again among the bushes. It was a great rock that had been rolled over the cliff above, in the hope that it would fall upon them, but the arch of stone over their heads was too deep. It struck fully five feet in front of them. Both were startled, although they knew that they were safe, and involuntarily they drew back.

"More will come," said Obed. "Just as one swallow does not make a summer, one stone does not make a flight. Ah, there it is now!"

They heard that same rushing sound through the air, and a boulder weighing at least half a ton struck in front of their log. It did not bound away like the first, but being so much heavier buried half its weight in the earth and lay there. Obed chuckled and regarded the big stone with an approving look.

"It's an ill stone that doesn't fall to somebody's good," he said. "That big fellow is squarely in the path of anybody who advances to attack us, and adds materially to our breastwork. If they'll only drop a few more they'll make an impregnable fortification for us."

The third came as he spoke, but being a light one rolled away. The fourth was also light, and alighting on the big one bounded back into the alcove, striking just between Ned and Obed. It made both jump and shiver, but they knew that it was a chance not likely to happen again in a hundred times. The bombardment continued for a quarter of an hour without any harm to either of the two, and then the silence came again. Ned and Obed pushed the rock out of the alcove, leaving it in front of them and now their niche had a formidable stone reinforcement.

"They'll be slipping up soon to look at our dead bodies," whispered Obed, "and between you and me, Ned, I think there will be a great surprise in Mexico to-day."

They lay almost flat and put the muzzles of their rifles across the log. Both, used to life on the border, where the rifle was a necessity, were fine shots and they were also keen of eye and ear. They waited for a while which seemed interminably long to Ned, but which was not more than a quarter of an hour, and then he heard a slight movement among the trees somewhat to their left. He called Obed's attention to it and the man nodded:

"I hear it, too," he whispered. "Those investigators are cautious, but they'll have to come up in front before they can get at us, and then we can get at them, too. We'll just be patient."

Ned was at least quiet and contained, although it was impossible to be patient. They heard the rustling at intervals on their right, then it changed to their front, and he saw a black head, covered with a sombrero, peep from behind a tree. The head came a little farther, disclosing a shoulder, and Obed White fired. They heard a yell of pain, and a thrashing among the bushes, but the sound rapidly moved farther and farther away.

"That fellow was stung badly," said Obed White with satisfaction, "and he won't come back. I'm glad to see, Ned, that you held your fire, keeping ready for any other who might come."

Ned glowed at the compliment. He had cocked his rifle, and was ready but he remained cool, wasting no shot.

"I fancy that they now know we are here," said Obed, who loved to talk, "and that we have not been demolished by the several tons of rock that they have sent down from above. A shot to the wise is sufficient. Keep down, Ned! Keep down!"

From a point sixty or seventy yards away Mexicans, lying among the trees or in the undergrowth, suddenly opened a heavy fire upon the rocky fort. The Mexicans were invisible but jets of smoke arose in the brush. Bullets thudded on the log or stones, or upon the stone wall above the two, but both Ned and Obed were sheltered well and they were not touched. Nevertheless it was uncomfortable. The impact of the bullets made an unpleasant sound, and there was always a chance that one of them might angle off from the stone and strike a human target. Obed however was cheerful.

"They're wasting good ammunition," he said. "They'll need that later on when they attack the Texans. After all, Ned, we're serving a good purpose when we induce the Mexicans to shoot good powder and lead here, and not against our people."

Encouraged by the failure of the besieged to reply to their fire the Mexicans came closer and grew somewhat incautious. Ned saw one of them sheltered but partially by a bush and he fired. The man uttered a cry and fell. Ned saw the bush moving and he hoped the man was not slain, but he never knew.

The volleys from the Mexicans ceased, and silence came again in the woods. Wisps of smoke floated here and there among the trees, but a light wind soon caught them and carried them away. Ned and Obed, rolling into easier positions, talked cheerfully.

"I don't think they'll try to rush us," said Obed. "The Mexicans are not afraid to charge breastworks, but they'll hardly think we two are worth the price they would have to pay. Perhaps they'll try to starve us out."

"And that they can't do because we have provisions for several days."

"But they don't know it. Nor do we want to stay here for several days, Ned. Texas is calling to us, and we should be traveling northward instead of lying under a rock besieged by Mexicans."

But they were compelled anew to make heavy drafts upon their patience. The Mexicans kept quiet a long time. Finally a shot fired from some high point grazed Ned's cap, and flattened against the rock behind him. The boy involuntarily ducked against the earth. Obed also lay lower.

"Some Mexican must have climbed a tree," said the Maine man. "He's where he can look over our fortifications and that gives him an advantage. It also gives him a disadvantage because it will be harder for him to come down out of that tree unaided than it was for him to go up in it. We'll stick as close as we can under the log, until he sends in the second shot."

They waited about ten minutes until the Mexican fired again. He was in the boughs of a great oak about fifty yards away, and following the flash of his weapon they saw his chest and shoulders as he leaned forward to take aim and pull the trigger. Obed fired and the soldier dropped to the ground. There was a noise in the underbrush, as if his comrades were dragging him away and then the great silence came again. As Obed reloaded he said grimly:

"I think we're done with the tree-climbers. Evil to him who evil does. They're cured of that habit."

It was now mid-afternoon and the sun was blazing down over the cliffs and forest. It grew very hot in the alcove. No breath of wind reached them there, and they began to pant for air.

"I hope night will come soon," said Ned.

"It will be here before long," said Obed, "but something else will arrive first."

"What is that?"

"Look, there to the right over the trees. See the dark spot in the sky. Ned, my boy, a storm is coming and it is for you and me to say 'let it come.'"

"What will it do for us?"

"Break up the siege, or at least I think so. Unless it drives directly in our faces we will be sheltered out here, but the Mexicans will have

no such protection. And, Ned, if you will listen to one who knows, you will understand that storms down here can be terrific."

"Then the more terrific it is the better for us."

"Just so. See, Ned, how that black spot grows! It is a cloud of quite respectable size. Before long it will cover all the skies, and you notice too that there is absolutely no wind."

"It is so. The stillness is so great that I feel it. It oppresses me. It is hard for me to draw my breath."

"Exactly. I feel just the same way. The storm is coming fast and it is going to be a big one. The sun is entirely hidden already, and the air is growing dark. We'll crouch against the wall, Ned, and keep our rifles, powder and ourselves as dry as possible. There goes the thunder, growling away, and here's the lightning! Whew, but that made me jump!"

An intense flash of lightning burned across the sky, and showed the forest and hills for one blazing moment. Then the darkness closed in, thick and black. The two, wrapped closely in their serapes, crouched against the stone wall and watched the storm gather in its full majesty and terror.

CHAPTER XI

THE LONG CHASE

Ned, despite his brave heart and strong will, felt a deep awe. Storms on the great uplands of North America often present aspects which are sublime and menacing to the last degree. The thunder which had been growling before now crashed continually like batteries of great guns, and the lightning flashed so fast that there was a rapid alternation of dazzling glare and impervious blackness. Once, the lightning struck in the forest near them with a terrible, rending crash, and trees went down. Far down in the gorges they heard the fierce howl of the wind.

Ned shrank closer and closer against the rocky wall, and, now and then, he veiled his eyes with one hand. If one were to judge by eye and ear alone it would seem that the world was coming to an end. Cast away in the wilderness, he was truly thankful for the human companionship of the man, Obed White, and it is likely that the man, Obed White, was just as thankful for the companionship of the boy, Edward Fulton.

All thought of another attack by the Mexicans passed for the present. They knew that the besiegers themselves would be awed, and would flee for refuge, particularly from the trees falling before the strokes of lightning. It was at least two miles to any such point of safety, and Ned and Obed saw a coming opportunity. Both lightning and thunder ceased so abruptly that it was uncanny. The sudden stillness was heavy and oppressive, and after the continued flare of the lightning, the darkness was so nearly impenetrable that they could not see ten yards in front of them.

Then the rain came in a tremendous cataract, but it came from the south, while they faced the north. Hence it drove over and past their alcove and they remained dry. But it poured so hard and with such a sweep and roar that Obed was forced to shout when he said to Ned:

"I've never been to Niagara and of course I've never been behind the falls there but this must be like it. The luck has certainly turned in our favor, Ned. The Mexicans could never stand it out there without shelter."

"I don't see how it can last long," shouted Ned in reply.

"It can't. It's too violent. But it's the way down here, rushing from one extreme to another. As soon as it begins to ease up, we'll move."

The darkness presently began to thin rapidly, and the heavy drumming of the rain on the rocks and forest turned to a patter.

"I think it's a good time to go, Ned," said Obed. "In fifteen minutes it will stop raining entirely and the Mexicans, if they are not drowned, may come back for us. We can't keep ourselves dry, but we'll protect our rifles and ammunition. We've got a good chance to escape now, especially since night will soon be here."

They left the overhanging cliff which had guarded them so well in more ways than one, and entered the forest, veering off to the left, and picking their way carefully through the underbrush. Ned suddenly sprang aside, shuddering. A Mexican, slain in the battle, lay upon his side. But Obed was practical.

"I know it's unpleasant to touch him," he said, "but he may have what we need. Ah, here is a pistol and bullets for it, and a flask of powder which his own body has helped to keep dry. It's likely that we'll have use for these before we get through, and so I'll take 'em."

He quickly secured the pistol and ammunition, and they went on, traveling rapidly westward. The rain ceased entirely in twenty minutes, and all the clouds passed away, but night came in their place, covering their flight with its friendly mantle. They were wet to the waist and the water dripped from the trees upon them, but these things did not trouble them. They felt all the joy of escape. Ned knew that neither of them, if taken, could expect much mercy from the brutal Cos.

They came after a while to a gorge, through which a torrent rushed, cutting off their way. It was midnight now. They saw that the stream was very muddy and that it bore on its current much débris.

"We'll just sit down here and rest," said Obed. "This is nothing more than a brook raised to a river by the storm, and, in another hour or two, it will be a brook again. Rise fast, fall fast holds true."

They sat on a log near the stream and watched it go down. As their muscles relaxed they began to feel cold, and had it not been for the serapes they would have been chilled. In two hours the muddy little river was a muddy little brook and they walked across. All the while now, a warm, drying wind was blowing, but they kept on for some time longer in order that the vigorous circulation of the blood might warm their bodies. Then, seeking the best place they could find, they lay down among the bushes, despite the damp, and slept.

Ned was the first to awake the next day, and he saw, by a high sun, that they were on a slope, leading to a pretty valley well grown in grass. He took a few steps and also stretched both arms. He found that his muscles were neither stiff nor sore and his delight was great. Obed still slumbered peacefully, his head upon his arm.

Ned walked a little further down the slope. Then he jumped back and hid behind a bush. He had caught a glimpse of a horse saddled and bridled in the Mexican manner, and it was his first thought that a detachment from the army of Cos was riding straight toward them. But as he stood behind the bush, heart beating, eyes gazing through the leaves, he saw that it was only a single horse. Nor was it coming toward him. It seemed to be moving about slowly in a circle of very limited area. Then, leaving the bush, he saw that the horse was riderless. He watched a long time to see if the owner would appear, and as none came he went back and awakened Obed White.

"What! What!" said Obed, opening his eyes slowly and yawning mightily. "Has the day come? Verily, it is a long night that has no ending. And so you have seen a horse, Ned, a horse saddled and bridled and with no owner! It can't be the one that King Richard offered his kingdom for, and since it isn't we'll just see why this caparisoned animal is there grazing in our valley."

The two went down the slope. The horse was still there, grazing in his grassy circle, and as the two approached he drew away a little but did not seem to be frightened. Then Ned understood, or at least his belief was so strong that it amounted to conviction.

"It's the horse of the soldier whom you shot yesterday," he said. "You remember that he galloped away among the bushes. No doubt, too, he was driven a long distance by the storm. He can't be accounted for in any other manner."

"There are some guesses so good that you know at once they're right," said Obed, "and yours is one of them, Ned. Now that is a valuable horse. One of the most valuable that ever grazed in a valley of Mexico or any other valley. He's so precious because we want him, and we want him so bad that he's worth a million dollars to us."

"That one of us may ride him to Texas."

"Yes, and we may be able to secure another. You stay here, Ned, and let me catch him. Horses like me better than some men do."

Ned sat down and Obed advanced warily, holding out his hand and whistling gently. It was a most persuasive whistle, soft and thrilling and the horse raised his head, looked contemptively out of large lustrous eyes at the whistler. Obed advanced, still whistling, in the most wonderful, enticing manner. Ned felt that if he were a horse he could not resist it, that he would go to the whistler, expecting to receive oats, corn, and everything else that a healthy horse loves. It seemed to have some such effect upon the quarry that Obed coveted, because the horse, after withdrawing a step, advanced toward the man.

Obed stopped, but continued to whistle, pouring forth the most beautiful and winning trills and quavers. The horse came and Obed, reaching out, seized the bridle which hung loose. He stroked the horse's head and the animal rubbed his nose against his shoulder. The conquest was complete. Bridle in hand, Obed led the way and Ned met him.

"I think our good horse here was lonesome," said Obed, "Horses that are used to human beings miss 'em for a while when they lose 'em, and we're not enslaving our friend by taking him. Here's a lariat coiled at the saddle bow; we'll just tether him by that, and let him go on with his grazing, while we get our breakfast. You will notice, too, Ned, that we've taken more than a horse. See this pair of holster pistols swung across the saddle and ammunition to fit. The enemy is still supplying us with our needs, Ned."

As they ate breakfast they resolved to secure another horse. Obed was of the opinion that the army of Cos was not far away, and he believed that he could steal one. At least, he was willing to try on the following night, and, if he succeeded, their problem would be simplified greatly.

They remained nearly all the morning in the little valley and devoted a large part of the time to developing their acquaintance with the horse, which was a fine animal, amenable to good treatment, and ready to follow his new masters.

"He looks like an American horse," said Obed, with satisfaction, "and maybe he is one, stolen from the Texans. He'll carry one of us over many miles of sand and cactus, and he'll be none the worse for it. But he needs a friend. Horse was not made to live alone. It's my sympathy for him as much as the desire for another mount that drives me to the theft we contemplate."

Ned laughed and lolled on the grass which was now dry.

"You stay here with Bucephalus or Rosinante or whatever you choose to call him," continued Obed, "and I think I'll cross the hills, and see if Cos is near. If we're going to capture a horse, we must first know where the horse is to be found."

"Suppose I go along, too."

"No, it would be easier for the Mexicans to see two than one, and we shouldn't take unnecessary risks. Be sure you stay in the valley, Ned, because I want to know where to find you when I come back. I've an idea that the Mexican army isn't far, as we wound around a good deal during the storm and darkness, and covered no great distance, if it were counted in a straight line. At least I think so."

"You'll find me here."

Obed went toward the east, and Ned continued to make himself comfortable on the grass, which was so long and thick that it almost hid his body. But it was truly luxurious. It seemed that after so much hardship and danger he could not get enough rest. He felt quite safe, too. It would take a careful observer to see him lying there in the deep grass. It was warm and dry where he lay, and the little valley was well hemmed in by forest in which crotons, mimosas, myrtle oaks, okote pine and many other trees grew. Some had large rich blossoms and he admired their beauty.

His eyes wandered back from the forest to their new friend, the horse. Besides being an animal of utility the horse added to their comradeship. Ned felt that he still had a friend with him, although Obed was away. Obed had spoken truly. It was a fine horse, a bay, tall, strong and young, grazing with dignified content, at the end of a lariat about forty feet in length.

Ned watched the horse idly, and soon he saw him raise his head, stand perfectly still for a moment or two, and then sniff the wind. The next instant an extraordinary manifestation came from him. He whirled about and galloped so fast to the end of his tether that he was thrown down by the sharp jerk. He regained his feet and stood there, trembling all over. His great eyes were distended. Ned had never before seen such a picture of terror.

The boy raised himself a little in the grass, but not so high that he would be seen by an enemy. It was his first idea that Mexicans had come, but the horse would not show such fright at the presence of human beings. He looked in the direction opposite to the spot on which the horse was standing. At first he saw nothing, but with intent looking he detected a great body crouched in the grass and stealing forward slowly. It was their old enemy, the jaguar, not a black one but tawny in color.

Ned's rage rose. First a jaguar had attacked him, and now another was stalking their horse. He felt pity for the poor animal which was tied, and which could not escape. Now man who had tied him must save him. Ned knew that if he cut the lariat the horse in its terror might run away and never be retaken. A shot might be heard by the Mexicans, but he believed that the probabilities were against it, and he decided to use the rifle.

He raised himself just a little more, careful to make no noise, and watched the jaguar stealing through the tall grass, so intent on the horse that it failed to notice the most dangerous of all enemies who lay near. But Ned waited until the flank of the animal was well presented, and, taking a sure aim, fired.

The jaguar shot up into the air, as if an electric spring had been released, then came down with a thump and was dead. The horse neighed in terror at sight of his leaping foe and trembled more violently than ever. Ned went to him first, and tried to soothe him which was a long and difficult task. At last, he untethered the horse and led him to the far end of the valley, where he tethered him again at least two hundred yards from the dead body of the jaguar. Returning he looked at the fallen animal, and marked with pleasure the correctness of his aim. He had shot the jaguar squarely through the heart. Then he went back to his place in the grass, but he did not doze or dream. The Mexicans might come, drawn by his shot, and even if they did not, a member of the unpleasant jaguar tribe might take a notion to stalk the only available human being in that grassy little valley.

But no Mexicans appeared, nor did he observe any other jaguar. When the sun set, he began to feel a little uneasy about Obed. His uneasiness increased with the darkness, but he was finally reassured by a whistle from the head of the valley. Then he saw Obed's tall figure striding down the slope in the dusk, and he went forward to meet him.

"I suppose you've spent the afternoon sleeping," said Obed.

"I might have done so, but we had a visitor."

"A visitor? What kind of a visitor?"

"A jaguar. He wanted to eat our horse and as the horse could not get away, being tethered strongly, I had to shoot his jaguarship."

He showed Obed the body, and his comrade approved highly of the shot.

"And now for the history of my own life and adventures during the afternoon," said Obed. "The country to the eastward is not rough, and I made good time through it. Sure enough the army of Cos is there, about five miles away, camped in a plain. It was beaten about a good deal by the storm, and it keeps poor guard, because it is in its own country far from any expected foe, and because the Mexicans are Mexicans. I think, Ned, that we can lift a horse without great trouble or excessive danger. We'll go over there about midnight."

"And we'd better take our present horse with us," said Ned, "or other jaguars may come."

They remained in their own valley until the appointed time, and then set out on a fairly dark night, each taking his turn at riding the horse. They halted at the crest of a low hill, from which they saw the flash of camp fires.

"That's Cos and his army," said Obed. "They're down there, sprawled all about the valley, and I imagine that by this time they're all asleep, including a majority of the sentinels, and that's our opportunity."

They tethered their own horse and crept down the slope. Soon they came to the edge of the woods and saw the camp fires more plainly. All had burned low, but they made out the shapes of tents, and, nearer by, a dark mass which they concluded to be the horses belonging to the lancers and other cavalry. They approached within a hundred yards, and saw no sentinels by the horses, although they were able to discern several moving figures farther on.

"Now, Ned," said Obed, "you stay here and I'll try to cut out a horse, the very best that I can find. Sit down on the ground, and have your rifle ready. If I'm discovered and have to run for it you shoot the first of my pursuers."

Ned obeyed and Obed stole down toward the horses. Ned knew his comrade's skill, and he believed he would employ the soft whistle that had been so effective with the first horse. He watched the dark figure stealing forward, and he admired Obed's skill. It would be almost impossible for anyone to notice so faint a shadow in the darkness. Nevertheless, his heart beat heavily. Despite all that Obed had said it was a dangerous task, requiring both skill and luck.

The faint shadow reached the black blur of the horses and disappeared. Ned waited five minutes, ten, fifteen minutes, while the little pulses beat hard in his temples. Then he saw a shadow detach itself from the black blur. It was the figure of a man and he was on horseback. Obed had succeeded.

Ned remained kneeling, rifle in hand, to guard against any mistake. The man on horseback rode toward him, while the sprawling army of Cos still slept. Then Ned saw clearly that it was Obed, and that he rode a magnificent black horse, sixteen hands high, as fiery as any that could be found in all Mexico.

In another moment Obed was by his side, looking down from the height of his horse. In the moonlight Ned saw that his face was glowing.

"Isn't he a beauty?" he said. "And I think, too, that he likes me. There were three or four sentinels down there by the horses, but all of

them were fast asleep, and I had time to pick. I've also brought away a roll of blankets, two for each of us, and I never woke a man. Now, Ned, we're furnished complete, and we're off to Texas with your message."

"The first thing, I suppose, is to introduce our horses to each other."

"Correct. You and I are friends, Ned, and so must our horses be."

They took a last look at the sleeping camp and went away through the woods. Obed dismounted, and led his horse to the place where the second was tied. The two horses whinnied and rubbed noses.

"It's all right," said Obed. "When horse and man agree who can stop us?"

Ned mounted the first, the bay, while Obed retained the black. Then they rode all through the night, coming about dawn to a plain which turned to sand and cactus, as they advanced further into the north. There was no water here, but they had rilled their water bottles at the last brook and they had no fear of perishing by thirst. Although they had passed the army of Cos they did not fail to keep a vigilant watch. They knew that patrols of Mexicans would be in the north, and the red men were also to be feared. They were coming into regions across which mounted Indians often passed, doing destruction with rifle and lance, spear and arrow. Both had more apprehension now about Indians than Mexicans.

At noon of that day they saw four horsemen on their left who shaped their course toward theirs in such a manner that if they moved at an equal pace they would meet at the point of a triangle. But the horses that Ned and Obed rode were powerful animals, far superior to the ordinary Mexican mounts, and they rode steadily ahead, apparently taking no notice of the four on their flank.

"They're Mexican scouts," said Obed, "I'm sure of it, but I don't believe that they'll come too close. They see that we have rifles, and they know the deadly nature of the Texan rifle. If we are friends it's all right, if we are Texans it will be wise to keep at a good distance."

Obed was a good prophet. The Mexicans, at a distance of almost a quarter of a mile, raised a great shout. The two took no notice of it, but rode on, their faces toward the north.

"I can talk good Spanish or Mexican," said Obed, "and so can you, but I'm out riding now and I don't feel like stopping for conversation. Ah, there they are shouting again, and as I live, Ned, they're increasing their speed. We'll give 'em a sign."

Obed and Ned wheeled about and raised their rifles. The four Mexicans, who were galloping their ponies, stopped abruptly. Obed and Ned turned and rode on.

"We gave 'em a sign," said Obed, "and they saw it. We're in no danger, Ned. We could beat 'em either in a fight or a run. The battle is sometimes to the strong and the race to the swift."

It was obvious that the Mexicans, who were probably only scouts, did not want a fight with formidable Texans who carried such long rifles. They dropped back until Ned, taking a final look, could not tell their distant figures from the stem of the lonesome cactus.

"Horses and rifles are mighty useful in their place," said Obed. "Add to them wood and water and what little more a man needs he should be able to find."

"It's wood and water that we ought to hunt now."

"We may strike both before night, but if not we'll ride on a while anyhow, and maybe we'll find 'em."

They went deeper into the great upland which was half a desert and half a plain. Occasionally they saw besides the cactus, mesquite and yucca and some clumps of coarse grass.

"Bunch grass," said Obed, "like that which you find further north, and mighty good it is, too, for cattle and horses. We'll have plenty of food for these two noble steeds of ours, and I shouldn't be surprised, too, if we ran across big game. It's always where the bunch grass grows."

They did not reach wood and water by nightfall, but, riding two hours longer in a clear twilight, they found both. The plain rose and fell in deep swells, and in the deepest of the swells to which they had yet to come they found a trickling stream of clear water, free from alkali, fringed on either shore with trees of moderate size.

"Here we are," said Obed, "and here we stay till morning. You never know how fine water looks until you've been a long time without it."

They let their horses drink first, and then, going further up the stream, drank freely of the water themselves. They found it cold and good, and they were refreshed greatly. There was also a belt of excellent grass, extending a hundred yards back on either side of the stream, and, unsaddling and tethering their horses, they let them graze. Both Ned and Obed would have liked a fire, but they deemed it dangerous, and they ate their food cold. After supper, Obed walked up the stream a little distance, examining the ground on either side of the water. When he came back he said to Ned:

"I saw animal tracks two or three hundred yards up the creek, and they were made by big animals. Buffalo range about here somewhere, and we may see 'em before we get through."

"I wouldn't mind having a shot at a fine buffalo," said Ned. But he was not very eager about it. He was thinking more than of sleep. Obed, while thinking of sleep also, was thinking of other things, too, and he was somewhat troubled in his mind. But he bore himself as a man of cheerful countenance.

"Now, Ned," he said, "you and I cannot go forever without sleep. We've been through a good deal and we haven't closed our eyes for thirty-six hours. I feel as if I had pound weights tied to my eyelids."

"Two-pound weights are tied to mine."

"Then we'll prove the value of my foresight in obtaining the two sets of blankets by using them at once."

Each lay down between his blankets, and Ned was soon asleep, but Obed, by a violent effort, kept his eyes open. He could never remember a time when it seemed sweeter to sleep, but he struggled continually against it. When he saw that Ned's slumber was deep he rose and walked up and down the stream again, going a half mile in either direction.

At one point where there was a break in the fringe of trees the imprints of the mighty hoofs were numerous, and, mingled with them, were tracks made by horses' hoofs. It was these that worried Obed so much. They were made by unshod hoofs, but evidently they were two or three days old, and, after all, the riders might have passed on, not to return. Smothering his anxiety as much as possible he went back to their little camp, crept between his two blankets which felt very warm, and began to watch with his eyes and ears, vowing to himself that he would not sleep.

Yet within two hours he slept. Exhausted nature triumphed over will and claimed her own. He was not conscious of any struggle. He was awake and then he was not. The two tethered horses, having eaten all they wanted, also settled themselves comfortably and slept.

But while the two, or rather the four slept, something was moving far out on the plain.

It was an immense black mass with a front of more than a mile, and it was coming toward Ned and Obed. This mass had been disturbed by a great danger and it advanced with mighty heavings and trappings. Ned and Obed slept calmly for a long time, but as the black front of the moving mass drew closer to the creek and its thin lines of trees, the boy stirred in his blankets. A vague dream came and then a state that was half an awakening. He was conscious in a dim way of a low, thundering sound that approached and he sprang to his feet. The next instant a neigh of terror came from one of the horses and Obed, too, awoke.

"Listen!" exclaimed Ned. "Hear that roar! And it's drawing near, too!"

"Yes, it's a buffalo herd!" said Obed. "We're far enough north now to be within the buffalo ranges, and they're coming down on us fast. But they must be scared or be drawn on by something, because it's not yet dawn."

"All of which means that it's time for us to go."

"Or be trodden to death."

Naturally, they had slept in their clothes and they quickly gathered up their arms and baggage. Then they released their frightened horses, sprang upon their backs and galloped toward the north. They felt secure now, so far as the herd was concerned. Their horses could easily take them out of its reach.

"Maybe they'll stop at the creek," said Ned. "I should think that the water would hold anything in this thirsty land."

Obed shook his head, but offered no further answer. The thunder of the hoofs now filled their ears, and, as the sound advanced steadily, it was evident that the creek had not stopped the buffalo herd.

The dawn suddenly came up sharp and clear after the manner of southern lands. The heavens turned blue, and a rosy light suffused the

prairie. Then Ned saw the front of the buffalo herd extending two or three miles to right and to left. And he saw more. He saw the cause of the terror that had smitten the herd.

Brown men, almost naked and on horseback, darted in and out among the buffaloes, shooting and stabbing. They were muscular men, fierce of countenance, and their long black hair streamed out behind them. Some carried rifles and muskets, and others carried lances and bows and arrows.

"Lipans," said Obed, "one of the fiercest of all the southwestern tribes. They belong mostly across the Rio Grande, but I suppose they've come for the buffalo. Ned, we're not wanted here."

After the single look they were away toward the north, moving at a smooth and easy gallop. They were truly thankful now that the horses they rode were so large and powerful, evidently of American breed. It was not difficult to increase the distance between them and the herd, and they hoped to slip away before they were seen by any of the Lipans. But a sudden shout behind them, a long, piercing whoop showed that they had reckoned wrong.

The two looked back. A group of warriors had gathered in advance of the band, and it was obvious, as they galloped on, that they had seen the two fugitives. Two or three shook their long lances, and pointed them straight at Ned and Obed. Then uttering that long, menacing whoop again, the group, about twenty in number, rode straight for the two, while the rest continued their work with the herd.

"It's a chase," said Obed. "Those fellows want scalps and they don't care whether we're Texans or Mexicans. Besides, they may have better horses than the Mexican ponies. But it's a long chase that has no turning, and if our horses don't stumble we'll beat them. Look out for potholes and such places."

They rode knee to knee, not yet putting the horses to their full speed, but covering the ground, nevertheless, at a great rate. It seemed play for their fine horses, which arched their necks and sped on, not a drop of perspiration yet staining their glossy skins. Ned felt the thrill, as the ground spun back under his horse's feet, and the air rushed past his face. It did not occur to him that the Lipans could overtake them, and their pursuit merely added a fresh spice to a magnificent ride.

He took another look back. The Lipans, although they had lost ground, were still following. They came in a close group, carrying, besides their arms, shields, made of layers of buffalo hide. Several wore magnificent war bonnets. Otherwise all were naked save for the breech-cloth, and their brown bodies were glistening with war paint. Behind them, yet came the black front of the buffalo herd, but it was a full mile away.

Obed looked also, and his heart smote him. Older and more experienced than Ned, he knew that with the fierce Lipans the most powerful of all lures was the lure of scalps. Just as the wolf can trail down the moose at last, they could follow for days on their tough mustangs. But as he shifted his good rifle a bit he felt better. Both he and Ned were splendid marksmen, and if the chase were a success for the Lipans there would also be a bitter fight at the end of it.

Now he and Ned ceased to talk, the sun blazed down on the plain, and on sped the chase, hour after hour.

CHAPTER XII

THE TRIAL OF PATIENCE

The hours of the afternoon trailed slowly away, one by one. Perspiration appeared at last upon the glossy skins of the horses, but their stride did not abate. The powerful muscles still worked with their full strength and ease. Ned never felt a tremor in the splendid horse beneath him. But when he looked back again there were the Lipans, a little further away, but hanging on as grimly as before, still riding in a close group.

Ned began to understand now the deadly nature of the pursuit. These Lipans would follow not merely for hours, but into the night, and if he and Obed were lost to sight in the darkness they would pick up the trail the next day by the hoof prints on the plain. He felt with absolute certainty that chance had brought upon them one of the deadliest dangers they had yet encountered.

"It's growing a little cooler, Obed," he said.

"So it is. The evening wanes. But, Ned, do you see any sign of forest or high hills ahead?"

"I do not, Obed. There is nothing but the plain which waves like the ripples on a lake, the bunches of buffalo grass here and there, and now and then an ugly yucca."

"You see just what I see, Ned, and as there is no promise of shelter we'd better ease our horses a little. Our lives depend upon them, and even if the Lipans do regain some of their lost ground now it will not matter in the end."

They let the horses drop into a walk, and finally, to put elasticity back into their own stiffened limbs, they dismounted and walked awhile.

"If the Lipans don't rest their horses now they will have to do it later," said Obed, "but as they're mighty crafty they'll probably slow down when we do. Do you see them now, Ned?"

"Yes, there they are on the crest of a swell. They don't seem to gain on us much. I should say they are a full mile away."

"A mile and a half at least. The air of these great uplands is very deceptive, and things look much nearer than they really are."

"Look how gigantic they have grown! They stand squarely in the center of the sun now."

The sun was low and the Lipans coming out of the southwest were silhouetted so perfectly against it that they seemed black and monstrous, like some product of the primitive world. The fugitives felt a chill of awe, but in a moment or two they threw it off, only to have its place taken a little later by the real chill of the coming night. A wind began to moan over the desolate plain, and their faces were stung now and then by the fine grains of sand blown against them. But as the Lipans were gaining but little, Ned and Obed still walked their horses.

They went on thus nearly an hour. The night came, but it was not dark, and they could yet see the Lipans following as certain as death. Before them the plain still rolled away, bare and brown. There was not a sign of cover. Ned's spirits began to sink. The silent and tenacious pursuit weighed upon him. It was time to rest and sleep. The Lipans had been pursuing for seven or eight hours now, and if they could not catch fugitives in that time they ought to turn back. Nevertheless, there they were, still visible in the moonlight and still coming.

Ned and Obed remounted and rode at a running walk, which was easy but which nevertheless took them on rapidly. But it became evident that the Lipans had increased their pace in the same ratio, as the distance of a mile and a half named by Obed did not decrease. Ned looked up longingly at the sky. There was not a cloud. The moon, round and full, never shone more brightly, and it seemed that countless new stars had arrived that very night. He sighed. They might as well have been riding in broad daylight.

Toward midnight the swells and dips of the plain became accentuated, and they lost sight of the pursuing Lipans. But there was yet no forest to hide them, only the miserable mesquite and the ragged yucca. Save for them the plain stretched away as bare and brown as ever. Two hours more with the Lipans still lost to view, Obed called a halt.

"The Lipans will pick up our trail in the morning," he said. "Though lost to sight we are to their memory dear, and they will hang on. But our horses are faster than theirs, and as they cannot come near us on this bare plain, without being seen we can get away. Whereas, I say, and hence and therefore we might as well rest and let our good steeds rest, too."

"What time would you say it is?"

"About two o' the morning by the watch that I haven't got, and it will be four or five hours until day. Ned, if I were you I'd lie down between blankets. You can relax more comfortably and rest better that way."

Ned did not wish to do it, but Obed insisted so strongly, and was so persuasive that he acceded at last. They had chosen a place on a swell where they could see anything that approached a quarter of a mile away, and Obed stood near the recumbent boy, holding the bridles of the two horses in one hand and his rifle in the other.

The man's eyes continually traveled around the circle of the horizon, but now and then he glanced at the boy. Ned, brave, enduring and complaining so little, had taken a great hold upon his affection. They were comrades, tried by many dangers, and no danger yet to come could induce him to desert the boy.

The moon and stars were still very bright, and Obed, as his eyes traveled the circle of the horizon, saw no sign of the Indian approach. But that the Lipans would come with the dawn, or some time afterward, he did not have the slightest doubt. He glanced once more at Ned

and then he smiled. The boy, while never meaning it, was sleeping soundly, and Obed was very glad. This was what he intended, relying upon Ned's utter exhaustion of body and mind.

All through the remaining hours of the night the man, with the bridles of the two horses in one hand and the rifle in the other, kept watch. Now and then he walked in a circle around and around the sleeping boy, and once or twice he smiled to himself. He knew that Ned when he awoke would be indignant because Obed let him sleep, but the man felt quite able to stand such reproaches.

Obed, staunch as he was, felt the weirdness and appalling loneliness of time and place. A wolf howled far out on the plain, and the answering howl of a wolf came back from another point. He shivered a little, but he continued his steady tread around and around the circle.

Dawn shot up, gilding the bare brown plain with silver splendor for a little while. Obed awoke Ned, and laughed at the boy's protests.

"You feel stronger and fresher, Ned," he said, "and nothing has been lost."

"What of you?"

"I? Oh, I'll get my chance later. All things come to him who works while he waits. Meanwhile, I think we'd better take a drink out of our water bottles, eat a quick breakfast and be off before we have visitors."

Once more in the saddle, they rode on over a plain unchanged in character, still the same swells and dips, still the same lonesome yuccas and mesquite, with the occasional clumps of bunch grass.

"Don't you think we have shaken them off?" asked Ned.

"No," replied Obed. "They would scatter toward dawn and the one who picked up the trail would call the others with a whoop or a rifle shot."

"Well, they've been called," said Ned, who was looking back. "See, there, on the highest ridge."

A faint, dark blur had appeared on a crest three or four miles behind them, one that would have been wholly invisible had not the air been so clear and translucent. It was impossible at the distance to distinguish shapes or detach anything from the general mass, but they knew very well that it was the Lipans. Each felt a little chill at this pursuit so tenacious and so menacing.

"I wish that we had some sort of a place like that in which we faced the Mexicans, where we could put our backs to the wall and fight!" exclaimed Ned.

"I know how you feel," said Obed, "because I feel the same way myself, but there isn't any such place, Ned, and this plain doesn't ever give any sign of producing one, so we'll just ride on. We'll trust to time and chance. Something may happen in our favor."

They strengthened their hearts, whistled to their horses and rode ahead. As on the day before the interminable pursuit went on hour after hour. It was another hot day, and their water bottles were almost emptied. The horses had had nothing to drink since the day before and the two fugitives began to feel for them, but about noon they came to a little pool, lying in a dip or hollow between the swells. It was perhaps fifty feet either way, less than a foot deep and the water was yellowish in color, but it contained no alkali nor any other bitter infusion. Moreover, grass grew around its edges and some wild ducks swam on its surface. It would have been a good place for a camp and they would have stayed there gladly had it not been for that threat which always hung on the southern horizon.

The water was warm, but the horses drank deeply, and Ned and Obed refilled their bottles. The stop enabled the pursuing Lipans to come within a mile of them, but, moving away at an increased pace, they began to lengthen the gap.

"The Lipans will stop and water their ponies and themselves just as we have done," said Obed. "Everything that we have to endure they have to endure, too. It's a poor rule that doesn't work for one side as well as the other."

"It would all look like play," said Ned, "if we didn't know that it was so much in earnest. Just as you said, Obed, they're stopping to drink at the pond."

A shadow seemed to pass between himself and the blazing glare of the sun. He looked up. It was a shadow thrown by a great bird, with black wings, flying low. Others of the same kind circled higher. Ned saw with a shiver that they were vultures. Obed saw them, too, and he also saw Ned's face pale a little.

"You take it as an omen," he said, "and maybe it is, but it's a poor omen that won't work both ways. They're flying back now towards the Indians, so I guess the Lipans had better look out."

Nevertheless, both were depressed by the appearance of the vultures and the heat that afternoon grew more intense than ever. The horses, at last, began to show signs of weariness, but Ned reflected that for every mile they traveled the Lipans must travel one also, and he recalled the words of Obed that chance might come to their aid.

Another night followed, clear and bright, with the great stars dancing in the southern skies, and Ned and Obed rode long after nightfall. Again the Lipans sank from sight, and, as before, the two stopped on one of the swells.

"Now, Obed," said Ned, "it is your time to sleep and mine to watch. I submitted last night and you must submit to-night. You know that you can't go on forever without sleep."

"Your argument is good," said Obed, "and I yield. It isn't worth while for me to tell you to watch well, because I know you'll do it."

He stretched himself out, folded between his blankets, and was soon asleep. The horses tethered to a lonesome yucca found a few blades of grass on the swell, which they cropped luxuriously. Then they lay down. Ned walked about for a long time rifle on shoulder. It turned colder and he wrapped his serape around his shoulders and chest. Finally he grew tired of walking, and sat down on the ground, holding his rifle across his lap. He sat on the highest point of the swell, and, despite the night, he could see a considerable distance.

His sight and hearing alike were acute, but neither brought him any alarm. He tried to reconstruct in his mind the Lipan mode of procedure. With the coming of the night and the disappearance of the fugitives from their sight they would spread out in a long line, in order that they might not pass the two without knowing it, and advance until midnight, perhaps. Then they, too, would rest, and pick up the trail again in the morning.

Ned did not know that time could be so long. He had not been watching more than three or four hours, and yet it seemed like as many days. But it was not long until dawn, and then it would be time for them to be up and away again. The horses reposed by the yucca, and, down the far side of the swell, close to the bottom of the dip, was another yucca. Ned's glance wandered toward the second yucca, and suddenly his heart thumped.

There was a shadow within the shadow of the yucca. Then he believed that it must be imagination, but nevertheless he rose to his feet and cocked his rifle. The shadow blended with the shadow of the yucca just behind its stern, but Ned, watching closely, saw in the next instant the two shadows detach and separate. The one that moved was that of a Lipan warrior, naked save for the breech-cloth and horrible with war paint. Ned instantly raised his rifle and fired. The Lipan uttered a cry and fell, then sprang to his feet, and ran away down the dip. In answer to the shot came the fierce note of the war whoop.

"Up, Obed, up!" cried Ned. "The Lipans are coming down upon us. I just shot at one of them in the bush!"

But Obed was up already, running toward the alarmed horses, his blankets under one arm and his rifle under the other. Ned followed, and, in an instant, they were on their horses with their arms and stores. From the next swell behind them came a patter of shots, and, for the second time, the war cry. But the two were now galloping northward at full speed.

"Good work, Ned, my lad," cried Obed. "I didn't have time to see what you shot, but I heard the yell and I knew it must have been a Lipan."

"He was stalking us, a scout, I suppose, and I just got a glimpse of him behind a yucca. I hit him."

"Good eyes and good hand. You saved us. They must have struck our trail in some manner during the night and then they thought they had us. Ah, they still think they have us!"

The last remark was drawn by a shout and another spatter of shots. Two or three bullets struck alarmingly close, and they increased the speed of their horses, while the Lipans urged their ponies to their best.

"They're too eager," said Obed. "It's time to give them a hint that their company is not wanted."

He wheeled and executed with success that most difficult of feats, a running shot. A Lipan fell from his horse, and the others drew back a little for fear of Ned, the second marksman.

"They've taken the hint," said Obed grimly, as he accomplished a second difficult feat, that of reloading his rifle while they were at full gallop. The Lipans did not utter another war cry, but settled down into a steady pursuit.

"I think I'll try a shot, Obed," said Ned.

"All right," said Obed, "but be sure that you hit something. Never waste a good bullet on empty air."

Ned fired. He missed the Lipan at whom he aimed, but he killed the pony the warrior was riding. The Indian leaped on the pony that had been ridden by the warrior slain by Obed and continued in the group of pursuers. Ned looked somewhat chagrined, and Obed noticed it.

"You did very well, Ned," he said. "Of course, no one likes to kill a horse, but it's the horses that bring on the Lipans, and the fewer horses they have the better for us."

Ned also reloaded as they galloped and then said:

"Don't you think they're dropping back a little?"

"Yes, they want to keep out of range. They know that our rifles carry farther than theirs, and they will not take any more risk until they finally corner us, of which they feel sure."

"But of which we are not so sure."

"No, and we are going to be hidden from them, for a while, by something. You haven't noticed, Ned, that the country is rapidly growing much worse, and that we are now in what is practically a sandy desert. You don't see even a yucca, but you do see something whirling there in the southwest. That's a 'dust devil,' and there's a half dozen more whirling in our direction. We're going to have a sand storm."

Ned looked with interest. The "dust devils," rising up like water spouts, danced over the surface of the sand. They were a half dozen, then a dozen, then twenty. A sharp wind struck the faces of the two fugitives, and it had an edge of fine sand that stung. All the "dust devils" were merged and the air darkened rapidly. The cloud of dust about them thickened. They drew their sombreros far down over their eyes, and rode very close together. They could not see twenty yards away, and if they became separated in the dust storm it was not likely that they would ever see each other again. But they urged their horses on at a good rate, trusting to the instinct of the animals to take them over a safe course.

Ned had not only pulled the brim of his sombrero down over his eyes, but he reinforced it with one hand to keep from being blinded, for the time, by the sand, but it was hard work. As a final resort he let the lids remain open only enough for him to see his comrade who was but three feet away. Meanwhile, he felt the sand going down his collar, and entering every opening of his clothing, scratching and stinging his skin. The wind all the time was roaring in his ears, and now and then the horses neighed in alarm. But they kept onward. Ned knew that they were passing dips and swells, but he knew nothing else.

The storm blew itself out in about three hours. Ned and Obed emerged from an obscurity as great as that of night. The wind ceased shrieking and was succeeded by a stillness that was almost deathly in comparison. The sun came out suddenly, and shone brightly over the dips and swells. But Ned and Obed looked at each other and laughed. Both were so thickly plastered with sand and dust that they had little human semblance.

Ned shook himself, and a cloud of dust flew from him, but so much remained that he could not tell the difference.

"I think we'd better take a drink out of our water bottles," said Obed. "I'd like mighty well to have a bath, too, but I don't see a bath tub convenient. Is there any sign of our friends, the enemy, Ned?"

"None," replied Ned, examining the horizon line. "There is absolutely nothing within view on the plains."

"Don't you fret about 'em. They'll come. They'll spread out and pick up our trail just as they do every morning."

Obed spoke dispassionately, as if he and Ned were not concerned in it. His predictions were justified. Before night they saw the Lipans coming as usual in a close group, now at a distance of about three miles. Ned could not keep from shuddering. They were as implacable as fate. Night, the storm and bullets did not stop them. They could not shake them off in the immense spaces of plain and desert. A kind of horror seized him. Such tenacity must triumph. Was it possible that Obed and he would fall victims after all? At least it seemed sure that in the end they would be overtaken, and Ned began to count the odds in a fight. Anything seemed better than this interminable flight.

They were cheered a little by the aspect of the country, which began to change considerably for the better. The cactus reappeared and then a few trees, lonesome and ragged, but trees, nevertheless. It is wonderful how much humanity a tree has in a sad and sandy land. The soil grew much firmer and soon they saw clumps of buffalo grass. Several small groups of buffalo were also visible.

"There's better country ahead, as you see," said Obed. "Besides, I've been along this way before. We'll strike water by dark."

They reached a tiny brook just as the twilight came, at which both they and their horses drank. They also took the time to wash their hands and faces, but they dared not delay any longer for fear of being overtaken by the Lipans. The night and the following day passed in the same manner as the others, and the horses of Ned and Obed, splendid animals though they were, began to show signs of fatigue. One limped a little. The dreaded was happening. The Indian ponies made only of bone and muscle were riding them down.

On the other hand, the character of the country now encouraged the fugitives. The yucca and the mesquite turned into oak. They passed through large groves and they hoped that they might soon enter a great forest in which they could hide their trail wholly from the Lipans. They crossed two considerable streams, knee deep on the horses, and then they entered the forest for which they had hoped so much. It was of oaks without much undergrowth and the ground was hilly. They rode through it until past midnight. Then they stopped by the edge of a blue pool, and while the other watched with the rifle each took the bath that he had coveted so long.

"I feel that I can fight battles and also run better now that I've got rid of ten pounds of sand and dust," said Obed, "and I guess you feel the same way, Ned. I suppose you've noticed that the other horse has gone lame, too?"

"Yes, I noticed it. I don't believe either could make much speed to-morrow."

"They certainly couldn't unless they had a long rest, and here we stay. There need be no secrets between you and me, Ned, about this pursuit. I think it's likely that we'll have a fight in the morning, and we might as well choose our fort."

The horses were panting and both now limped badly. It was quite evident that they were spent. Beyond the pool was a tiny valley or glade with a good growth of grass, and, after tying the reins to the pommels of the saddles, they released the two faithful beasts there. Obed thought once of tethering them but he reflected that to do so would make them sure targets of the Indian bullets or arrows. They, too, deserved a chance to escape.

Then he and Ned looked around for the fort, of which they had spoken, and they found it beyond the pool in an opening which would have been called a little prairie in the far north. In the center of this opening grew a rather thick cluster of trees, and there was some fallen wood. A rifle bullet would not reach from any point of the forest to the cluster.

They drew up all the fallen wood they could find, helping to turn the ring of trees into a kind of fortification, refilled their water bottles from the pool, and sat down to wait, with their rifles and pistols ready.

Ned felt a kind of relief, the relief that comes to one who, having faced the worst so long, now knows that it has been realized. The terrible chase had gone on for nights and days. Always the Lipans were behind them. Well, if they were so fond of pursuing, now let them come. By the aid of the dead wood they were fairly well protected from a fire in any direction, and the light was sufficient for them to see an enemy who attempted to cross the open. There was a certain grim pleasure in the situation.

"They've run us down at last," said Obed, "but they haven't got us yet. Before you scalp your man just catch him is a proverb that I would recommend to the Lipans. Now, Ned, suppose we eat a little, and brace ourselves for the arrival of the pursuit."

They ate with a good appetite and then lay propped on their elbows, where they could look just over the logs at the circling forest. It was very quiet. Nothing stirred among the trees. Their eyes, used now to the half dusk, could see almost as well as if it were daylight. Ned finally noticed some dark objects on the boughs of the trees and called Obed's attention to them.

"Wild turkeys," said Obed, after a long look. "The first we've seen and we can't take a shot at them. They must know it or they wouldn't sit there so quiet and easy."

A half hour later, Ned saw something move among the trees at the nearest point of the forest. It looked like a shadow and was gone in an instant. But his heart leaped. He felt sure that it was a Lipan, and told Obed of his suspicion.

"Of course you're right," said the Maine man. "They may have been there in the woods for an hour spying us out. They've dismounted and have left their horses further back among the trees. Suppose you watch to the right while I face to the left. I think the two of us together can cover a whole circle."

Ned felt a singular composure. It seemed to him that he had passed through so many emotions that he had none left now but calm and expectancy. As the night was somewhat cold he even remembered to throw one of the blankets over his body, as he lay behind the log. Obed noticed it and his sharp eyes brightened with approval. It was obvious that the Lipans were now in the woods about them, and that the long chase was at an end, but the boy was as steady as a rock.

Ned looked continually for the second appearance of the shadows. Nothing within the range of his half circle escaped him. He saw the wild turkeys unfold their wings, and fly heavily away, which was absolute proof of the presence of the Lipans. He finally saw the shadow for the second time, and, at almost the same moment, a pink dot appeared in the woods. The crack of a rifle followed, and a bullet knocked up a little dust at least fifty yards short of them. Obed sniffed contemptuously.

"One good bullet wasted," he said, "and one good bullet, I suppose, deserves another, but they won't fire again—yet. It shows that they know we're on guard. They won't rush us. They'll wait for time, thirst and starvation."

Obed was right. Not another shot was fired, nor did any of the Lipans show themselves. Day came, and the forest was as quiet and peaceful as if it were a park. Some little birds of brilliant plumage sang as heralds of dawn, and sunlight flooded the trees and the opening. Ned and Obed moved themselves into more comfortable positions and waited.

They were to have another terrible trial of Indian patience. No attack was made. The two lay behind the logs and watched the circle of the forest, until their eyes grew weary. The silence and peace that had marked the dawn continued through all the hours of the morning. Although the wild turkeys had flown away, the birds that lived in this forest seemed to take no alarm. They hopped peacefully from bough to bough, and sang their little songs as if there were no alien presence. But Ned and Obed had been through too many dangers to be entrapped into a belief that the Lipans had gone. They matched patience with patience. The sun went slowly up toward the zenith, and the earth grew hot, but they were protected from the fiery rays by the foliage of the trees. Yet Ned grew restless. He was continually poking the muzzle of his rifle over the log and seeking a target, although the forest revealed no human being. Finally Obed put his hand upon his arm.

"Easy, now, easy, Ned," he said. "Don't waste your strength and nerves. They can't charge us, at least in the daylight, without our seeing them, and, when they come, we want to be as strong of body and brain as possible. We won't take the fight to them. They must bring it to us."

Ned blushed. Meanwhile the afternoon dragged on, slow and silent, as the morning had been.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TEXANS

Late in the afternoon Ned's nerves began to affect him again. Once more, the old longing for action took such strong hold upon him that he could not cast it off for a long time. But he hid his face from Obed. He did not want his older comrade to see that he was white and trembling. Finally, he took some food from his pack and bit fiercely upon it, as he ate. It was not for the food that he cared, but it was a relief to bring his teeth together so hard. Obed looked at him approvingly.

"You're setting a good example, Ned," he said, "and I'll follow it."

He too ate, and then took a satisfactory drink from his water bottle. Meanwhile the sun was setting in a cloudless sky, and both noticed with satisfaction that it would be a clear night. Eyes, trained like theirs, could see even in the dusk an enemy trying to creep upon them.

"Do you think you could sleep a while, Ned?" said Obed, persuasively. "Of course, I'll awake you at the first alarm, if the alarm itself doesn't do it. Sleep knits us up for the fray, and a man always wants to be at his best when he goes into battle."

"How could a fellow sleep now?"

"Only the brave and resolute can do it," replied Obed, cunningly. "Napoleon slept before Austerlitz, and while no Austerlitz is likely to happen down here in the wilderness of Northern Mexico there is nothing to keep those who are able from copying a great man."

The appeal to Ned's pride was not lost.

"I think I'll try it," he said.

He lay down behind the log with his rifle by his side, and closed his eyes. He had no idea that he could go to sleep, but he wished to show Obed his calmness in face of danger. Yet he did sleep, and he did not awaken until Obed's hand fell upon his shoulder. He would have sprung up, all his faculties not yet regained, but Obed's hand pressed him down.

"Don't forget where you are, Ned," said the Maine man, "and that we are still besieged."

Yet the night was absolutely still and Ned, from his recumbent position, looked up at a clear sky and many glittering stars.

"Has anything happened?" he asked.

"Not a thing. No Lipan has shown himself even among the trees."

"About what time do you think it is?"

"Two or three hours after midnight, and now I'm going to take a nap while you watch. Ned, do you know, I've an idea those fellows are going to sit in the woods indefinitely, safe, beyond range, and wait for us to come out. Doesn't it make you angry?"

"It does, and it makes me angry also to think that they have our horses. Those were good horses."

Obed slept until day, and Ned watched with a vigilance that no creeping enemy could pass. The Lipans made no movement, but the siege, silent and invisible, went on. Ned had another attack of the nerves, but, as his comrade was sleeping soundly, he took no trouble to hide it, and let the spell shake itself out.

The day was bright, burning and hot, and it threatened to pass like its predecessor, in silence and inaction. Ned and Obed had been lying down or sitting down so long that they had grown stiff, and now, knowing that they were out of range they stood up and walked boldly about, tensing and flexing their muscles, and relieving the bodily strain. Ned thought that their appearance might tempt the Lipans to a shot or some other demonstration, but no sound came from the woods, and they could not see any human presence there. "Maybe they have gone away after all," said Ned hopefully.

"If you went over there to the woods you'd soon find out that they hadn't."

"Suppose they really went away. We'd have no way of knowing it and then we'd have to sit here forever all the same."

Obed laughed, despite the grimness of their situation.

"That is a problem," he said, "but if you can't work a problem it will work itself if you only give it enough time."

The morning was without result, but in the afternoon they saw figures stirring in the wood and concluded that some movement was at hand.

"Ned," said Obed, "I think we've either won in the contest of patience, or that something else has occurred to disturb the Lipans. Don't you see horses as well as Indians there among the trees?"

"I can count at least five horses, and I've no doubt there are others."

"All of which to my mind indicates a rush on horseback. Perhaps they think they can gallop over us. We'd better lay our pistols on the logs, where we can get at 'em quick, and be ready."

Ned's sharp eye caught sight of more horses at another point.

"They're coming from all sides," he said.

"You face to the right and I'll face to the left," said Obed, "and be sure your bullet counts. If we bring down a couple of them they will stop. Indians are not fond of charging in the open, and, besides, it will be hard for them to force their horses in among these logs and trees of ours."

Ned did not answer, but he had listened attentively. The muzzle of his rifle rested upon the log beside his pistol, and, with his eye looking down the sights, he was watching for whatever might come.

A sharp whistle sounded from the wood. At the same instant, three bands of Lipans galloped from the trees at different points, and converged upon the little fortress. They were all naked to the waist, and the sun blazed down upon their painted bodies, lighting up their lean faces and fierce eyes. They uttered shout after shout, as they advanced, and as they came closer, bent down behind the shoulders of their ponies or clung to their sides.

The tremor of the nerves seized Ned again, but it was gone in a moment. Then a fierce passion turned the blood in his veins to fire. Why were these savages seeking his life? Why had they hung upon his trail for days and days? And why had they kept up that silent and invincible siege so long? Yet he did not forget his earlier resolution to watch for a good shot, knowing that his life hung upon it. But it was hard to hold one's fire when the thud of those charging hoofs was coming closer.

The horsemen in front of him were four in number, and the leader who wore a brilliant feathered headdress, seemed to be a chief. Ned chose him for his target, but for a few moments the Lipan made his pony bound from side to side in such a manner that he could not secure a good aim. But his chance came. The Lipan raised his head and opened his mouth to utter a great shout of encouragement to his followers. The shout did not pass his lips, because Ned's bullet struck him squarely in the forehead, and he fell backward from his horse, dead before he touched the ground.

Ned heard Obed's rifle crack with his own, but he could not turn his head to see the result. He snatched up his pistol and fired a second shot which severely wounded a Lipan rider, and then all three parties of the Lipans, fearing the formidable hedge, turned and galloped back, leaving two of their number lifeless upon the ground.

Obed had not fired his pistol, but he stood holding it in his hand, his eyes flashing with grim triumph. Ned was rapidly reloading his rifle.

"If we didn't burn their noble Lipan faces then I'm mightily mistaken," said Obed, as he too began to reload his rifle. "A charge that is not pressed home is no charge at all. Hark, what is that?"

There was a sudden crash of rifle shots in the forest, the long whining whoop of the Lipans and then hard upon it a deep hoarse cheer.

"White men!" exclaimed Ned.

"And Texans!" said Obed. "Such a roar as that never came from Mexican throats. It's friends! Do you hear, Ned, it's friends! There go the Indians!"

Across the far edge of the open went the Lipans in wild flight, and, as they pressed their mustangs for more speed, bullets urged them to efforts yet greater. Fifteen or twenty men galloped from the trees, and Ned and Obed, breaking cover, greeted them with joyous shouts, which the men returned in kind.

"You don't come to much," exclaimed Ned, "but we can say to you that never were men more welcome."

"Which I beg to repeat and emphasize," said Obed White.

"Speak a little louder," said the foremost of the men, leaning from his horse and couching one hand behind his ear.

Ned repeated his words in a much stronger tone, and the man nodded and smiled. Ned looked at him with the greatest interest. He was of middle age and medium size. Hair and eyes were intensely black, and his complexion was like dark leather. Dressed in Indian costume he could readily have passed for a warrior. Yet this man had come from the far northern state of New York, and it was only the burning suns of the Texas and North Mexican plains that had turned him to his present darkness.

"Glad to meet you, my boy," he said, leaning from his horse and holding out a powerful hand, burnt as dark as his face. "My name's Smith, Erastus Smith."

Ned grasped his hand eagerly. This was the famous "Deaf" Smith—destined to become yet more famous—although they generally pronounced it D-e-e-f in Texas.

"Guess we didn't come out of season," said Smith with a smile.

"You certainly didn't," broke in Obed. "There's a time for all things, and this was your time!"

"I believe they're real glad to see us. Don't you think so, Jim?" said Smith with a smile.

The man whom he called Jim had been sitting on his horse, silent, and he remained silent yet, but he nodded in reply. Ned's gaze traveled to him and he was certainly a striking figure. He was over six feet in height, with large blue eyes and fair hair. His expression was singularly gentle and mild, but his appearance nevertheless, both face and figure, indicated unusual strength. Obed had not noticed him before, but now he exclaimed joyfully:

"Why, it's Colonel Jim Bowie! Jim, it's me, Obed White! Shake hands!"

"So it is you, Obed," said the redoubtable Bowie, "and here we shake."

The hands of the two met in a powerful clasp. Then they all dismounted and another man, short and thick, shook Obed by the hand and called him by his first name. He was Henry Karnes, the Tennessean, great scout and famous borderer of the Texas plains.

Ned looked with admiration at these men, whose names were great to him. On the wild border where life depended almost continually upon skill and quickness with weapons, "Deaf" Smith, Jim Bowie and Henry Karnes were already heroes to youth. Ned thrilled. He was here with his own people, and with the greatest of them. He had finished his long journey and he was with the Texans. The words shaped themselves again and again in his brain, the Texans! the Texans! the Texans!

"You two seem to have given the Lipans a lot of trouble," said Bowie, looking at the two fallen warriors.

"We were putting all the obstacles we could in the way of what they wanted," said Obed modestly, "but we don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come. Those fellows had been following us for days, and they must have had some idea that you were near, or they would have waited still longer."

"They must not have known that we were as near as we were," said Bowie, "or they would not have invited our attack. We heard the firing and galloped to it at once. But you two need something better than talk."

He broke off suddenly, because Ned had sat down on one of the logs, looking white and ill. The collapse had come after so many terrible trials and privations, and not even his will could hold him.

"Here, you take a drink of this water, it's good and cold," said "Deaf" Smith kindly as he held out a canteen. "I reckon that no boy has ever passed through more than you have, and if there's any hero you are one."

"Good words," said Bowie.

Ned smiled. These words were healing balm to his pride. To be praised thus by these famous Texans was ample reward. Besides, he had great and vital news to all, and he knew that Obed would wait for him to tell it.

"I think," said Bowie, "that we'd better camp for the night in the clump of trees that served you two so well, and, before it's dark, we'll look around and see what spoil is to be had."

They found three rifles that had been dropped by slain or wounded Lipans, and they were well pleased to get them, as rifles were about to become the most valuable of all articles in Texas. They also recovered Ned and Obed's horses, which the Indians had left in the valley, evidently expecting to take them away, when they secured the scalps of the two fugitives.

Ned, after the cold water and a little rest, fully recovered his strength and poise, but the men would not let him do any work, telling him that he had already done his share. So he sat on his log and watched them as they prepared camp and supper. Besides being the Texans and his own people, to whom he had come after the long journey of perils, they made a wonderful appeal. These were the bold riders, the dauntless, the fearless. He would not find here the pliancy, the cunning, the craft and the dark genius of Santa Anna, but he would find men who talked straight, who shot straight, and who feared nobody.

They were sixteen in number, and all were clad wholly in buckskin, with fur caps upon their heads. They were heavily armed, every man carrying at least a rifle, a pistol, and a formidable knife, invented by Bowie. All were powerful physically, and every face had been darkened by the sun. Ned felt that such a group as this was a match for a hundred Mexicans or Lipans.

They worked dextrously and rapidly, unsaddling their horses and tethering them where they could graze in the open, drawing up the dead wood until it made a heap which was quickly lighted, and then cooking strips of venison over the coals. There was so much life, so much cheerfulness, and so much assurance of strength and invincibility that Ned began to feel as if he did not have a care left. All the men already called him Ned, and he felt that every one of them was his friend.

Karnes put a strip of venison on the sharp end of a stick, and broiled it over the blaze. It gave out a singularly appetizing odor, and when it was done he extended it to the boy.

"Here, Ned," he said, "take this on the end of your knife and eat it. I'll wager that you haven't had any good warm victuals for a week, and it will taste mighty well."

Ned ate it and asked for more. He would have done his own cooking, but they would not let him. They seemed to take a pleasure in

helping him, and, used as they were to hardships and danger, they admired all the more the tenacity and courage that had brought a boy so far.

"We can promise you one thing, Ned," said "Deaf" Smith. "We'll see that you and Obed have a full night's good sleep and I guess you'll like that about as much as a big supper."

"We certainly will," said Obed. "Sleep has got a lot of knitting to do in my case."

"The same is true of me," said Ned, who had now eaten about all he wanted, "but before I roll up in the blankets I want to say something to you men."

His voice had suddenly become one of great gravity, and, despite his youth, it impressed them. The darkness had now come, but the fire made a center of light. They had put themselves in easy attitudes about it, while the horses grazed just beyond them.

"I come from Texas myself," said Ned, "although I was born in Missouri. My parents are dead, and I thought I could make my way in Texas. I met Mr. Austin who is related to me, and he was good to me more than once. When he went to Mexico to talk with the rulers there about our troubles I went with him. I was a prisoner with him in the City of Mexico, and I often saw the dictator, Santa Anna, and his brother-in-law, General Cos."

Ned paused and a deep "Ah!" came from the men. They felt from his face and manner that he was telling no idle tale.

"They said many fine words to Mr. Austin," said Ned, "and always they promised that they were going to do great things for Texas. But much time passed and they did nothing. Also they kept Mr. Austin a prisoner. Then I escaped. I believed that they were preparing to attack Texas. I was right. I was recaptured and both President Santa Anna and General Cos told me so. They told me because they did not believe I could escape again, as they sent me to one of the submarine dungeons under the castle of San Juan de Ulua. But even under the sea I found a friend, Obed here, and we escaped together. We have since seen the army of General Cos, and it is marching straight upon Texas. Santa Anna means to crush us and to execute all our leaders."

Again came that deep murmurous "Ah!" and now it was full of anger and defiance.

"You say you saw the army of Cos?" asked Bowie.

"Yes," replied Ned, "I saw it before I was taken to the castle of San Juan de Ulua and afterward in Northern Mexico, marching straight toward Texas. It is a large force, cannon and lancers, horse and foot."

"And so Santa Anna has been lulling us with promises, while sending an army to destroy us."

Bowie's tone, so gentle and mild before, grew hard and bitter. The firelight flickered across his face and to Ned the blue eyes looked as cold and relentless as death. He had heard strange stories of this man, tales of desperate combats in Mississippi and Louisiana, and he believed now that they were true. He could see the daring and determined soul behind the blue eyes.

While Ned was talking "Deaf" Smith was leaning forward with his hand behind his ear. When the story was finished the dark face grew still darker, but he said nothing. The others, too, were silent but Ned knew their minds. It was a singular little company drawn from different American states, some from the far north, but all alike in their devotion to the vague region then known as Texas.

"I think, Ned," said Bowie, "that you have served Texas well. We have been divided among ourselves. Many have believed in propitiating Santa Anna and Mexico, but how can you propitiate a tiger that is about to devour you? We cannot trust Mexico, and we cannot trust Santa Anna. Your message settles all doubt and gives us time to arm. Thank God we refused to give up our rifles, because we are going to need them more than anything else on earth. It was surely more than luck that brought us this way. We came down here, Ned, on an expedition, half for hunting and half for scouting, and we've found more than we expected. We must start for Texas in the morning. Is it not so, boys?"

"Yes," they answered all together.

"Then, Ned," said Bowie, "you can tell your story to Sam Houston and all our leaders, and I think I know what they will say. We are few, but Santa Anna and all Mexico cannot ride over Texas. And now it's time for you and Obed to go to sleep. I should think that after being chased nearly a week you'd be glad to rest."

"We are," said Obed, answering for them both, "and once more we want to thank you. If you hadn't come the Lipans would certainly have got us."

The night, as usual, was chilly, and Ned spread his blankets in front of the fire. His saddle formed a pillow for his head, and with one blanket beneath him, another above him, and the stalwart Texans all about him, he felt a deep peace, nay more, a great surge of triumph. He had made his way through everything. Santa Anna and Cos could not attack the Texans, unwarned. Neither Mexicans nor Lipans, neither prisons nor storms nor deserts had been able to stop him.

After the triumphant leap of his blood the great peace possessed him entirely. His mind and body relaxed completely. His eyelids drooped and the flames danced before him. The figures of the men became dusky. Sometimes he saw them and sometimes he did not. Then everything vanished, and he fell into a long and sound sleep.

While Ned and Obed slept, the Texans conferred earnestly. They knew that every word Ned had told was true, and they felt that the trouble between Texas and Mexico had now come to a head. It must be war. They were fully aware of the fearful odds, but they did not believe the Texans would flinch. Three or four rode a long distance around the camp and scouted carefully. But, as they had expected, they saw no sign of the Lipans, who undoubtedly were still fleeing southward, carrying in their hearts a healthy fear of the long rifles of the Texans.

After the scouts came back most of the men went to sleep, but Bowie and "Deaf" Smith watched all through the night. Ned moved a little toward the morning and displaced the blanket that lay over him. Bowie gently put it back.

"He's a good boy as well as a brave one," he said to Smith, "and we owe him a lot."

"Never a doubt of that," said Smith, "and he'll be with us in the coming struggle."

When Ned awoke the dawn was barely showing, but all the horses, including his own, were saddled and ready. They ate a brief breakfast, and then they galloped northward over a good country. They did not trouble to look for the army of Cos, as they knew that it was coming and it was their object to spread the alarm as soon as possible through all the Texas settlements. Ned, refreshed and strong, was in the center of the troop and he rode with a light heart. Obed was on one side of him, and "Deaf" Smith on the other.

"To-night," said Smith, "we water our horses in the Rio Grande."

"And then ho for Texas!" said Obed.

On they sped, their even pace unbroken until noon, when they made a short rest for food and water. Then they sped north once more, Bowie, Smith and Karnes leading the way. They said very little now, but every one in the group was thinking of the scattered Texans, of the women and children in the little cabins beyond the Rio Grande, harried already by Comanches and Lipans and now threatened by a great Mexican force. They had come from different states and often they were of differing counsels, but a common danger would draw them together. It was significant that Smith, the New Yorker, and Bowie, the Georgian, rode side by side.

All through the hot sun of the afternoon they rode on. Twilight found them still riding. Far in the night they waded and swam the Rio Grande, and the next morning they stood on the soil that now is Texas.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RING TAILED PANTHER

Texas was then a vague and undetermined name in the minds of many. It might extend to the Rio Grande or it might extend only to the Nueces, but to most the Rio Grande was the boundary between them and Mexico. So felt Ned and all his comrades. They were now on the soil which might own the overlordship of Mexico, but for which they, the Texans, were spending their blood. It was strange what an attachment they had for it, although not one of them was born there. Beyond, in the outer world, there was much arguing about the right or wrong of their case, but they knew that they would have to fight for their lives, and for the homes they had built in the wilderness on the faith of promises that had been broken. That to them was the final answer and to people in such a position there could be no other.

The sight of Texas, green and fertile, with much forest along the streams was very pleasant to Ned, and those rough frontiersmen in buckskin who rode with him were the very men whom he had chosen. He had been in a great city, and he had talked with men in brilliant uniforms, but there everything seemed old, so far away in thought and manner from the Texans, and he could never believe the words of

the men in brilliant uniforms. There, the land itself looked ancient and worn, but here it was fresh and green, and men spoke the truth.

They rode until nearly noon, when they stopped in a fine grove of oaks and pecans by the side of a clear creek. The grass was also rich and deep here, and they did not take the trouble to tether their horses. Ned was exceedingly glad to dismount as he was stiff and sore from the long ride, and he was also as hungry as a wolf.

"Lay down on the grass, Ned, an' stretch yourself," said Karnes. "When you're tired the best way to rest is to be just as lazy as you can be. The ground will hold you up an' let your lungs do their own breathin'. Don't you go to workin' 'em yourself."

Ned thought it good advice and took it. It was certainly a great luxury to make no physical exertion and just to let the ground hold him up, as Karnes had said. Obed imitated his example, stretching himself out to his great thin length on the soft turf.

"Two are company and twenty are more so," he said, "especially if you're in a wild country. My burden of care isn't a quarter as heavy since we met Jim Bowie, and all the rest of these sure friends and sure shots. This isn't much like San Juan de Ulua is it, Ned? You wouldn't like to be back there."

The boy looked up at the vast blue dome of the heavens, then he listened a moment to the sigh of the free wind which came unchecked a thousand miles and he replied with so much emphasis that his words snapped:

"Not for worlds, Obed!"

Obed White laughed and rolled over in the grass.

"I do believe you mean that, Ned," he said, "and the sentiments that you speak so well are also mine own."

Smith and Karnes went a little distance up the creek, and found some buffalo feeding. They shot a young cow, and in an incredibly short space tender steaks were broiling over a fire. After dinner all but two went to sleep. They understood well the old maxim that the more haste the less speed, and that the sleep and rest through the hours of the afternoon would make them fit for the long riding that was yet before them.

At five o'clock they were in the saddle again, and rode until midnight. The next morning the party separated. The men were to carry the blazing torch throughout the settlements, telling all the Texans that the Mexicans were coming and that they were bringing war with them. But Bowie, "Deaf" Smith and Karnes kept on with Ned and Obed.

"We're taking you to Sam Houston," said Bowie to Ned. "He's to be the general of all the Texan forces, we think, and we want you to tell him what you've told us."

They began now to see signs of settlements in the river bottoms where the forests grew. There were stray little log cabins, almost hidden among the oaks and pecans. Women and children came forth to see the riders go by. The women were tanned like the men, and often they, too, were clothed in buckskin. The children, bare of foot and head, seemed half wild, but all, despite the sun, had the features of the Northern races.

Ned could not keep from waving his hand to them. These were his people, and he was thankful that he should have so large a part in the attempt to save them. But he only had fleeting glimpses because they rode very fast now. He was going to Sam Houston, famous throughout all the Southwest, and Houston was at one of the little new settlements some distance away. He would tell his story again, but he knew that the Texans were already gathering. The messengers detached from the group had now carried the alarm to many a cabin.

Several times at night they saw points of fire on the horizon and they would pause to look at them.

"That's the Texans signaling to one another," said "Deaf" Smith. "They're passing the word westward. They're calling in the buffalo hunters and those who went out to fight the Comanches and Lipans."

Ned had alternations of hope and despondency. He saw anew how few the Texans were. Their numbers could be counted only in thousands, while the Mexicans had millions. Moreover, the tiny settlements were scattered widely. Could such a thin force make a successful defense against the armies of Cos and Santa Anna? But after every moment of despair, the rebound came, and he saw that the spirit of the people was indomitable.

At last, they rode into a straggling little village by the side of a wide and shallow river. All the houses were built of logs or rough boards, and Ned and his companions dismounted before the largest. They had already learned that Sam Houston was inside. Ned felt intense curiosity as they approached. He knew the history of Houston, his singular and picturesque career, and the great esteem in which he was held by the Texans. A man with a rifle on his shoulder stood by the door as guard, but he recognized Smith and Karnes, and held the door open for the four, who went inside without a word.

Several men, talking earnestly were sitting in cane-bottomed chairs, and Ned, although he had never seen him before, knew at once which was Houston. The famous leader sat in the center of the little group. He was over six feet high, very powerful of build, with thick, longish hair, and he was dressed carefully in a suit of fine dark blue cloth. He rose and saluted the four with great courtesy. Despite his long period of wild life among the Indians his manners were distinguished.

"We welcome you, Smith and Karnes, our faithful scouts," he said, "and we also welcome those with you who, I presume, are the two escaped from the City of Mexico."

It was evident that the story of Ned and Obed had preceded them, but Karnes spoke for them.

"Yes, General," he said. "They are the men, or rather the man and the boy. These are Obed White and Ned Fulton, General Houston."

Houston's glance ran swiftly over them. Evidently he liked both, as he smiled and gave each a hearty hand.

"And now for your story," he said.

Obed nodded toward Ned.

"He's the one who saw it all," he said, "and he's the one who brings the warning."

Ned was a little abashed by the presence of Houston and the other important Texans, but he told the tale once more rapidly and succinctly. Every one listened closely. They were the chief members of the temporary Texan government, but the room in which they met was all of the frontier. Its floor was of rough boards. Its walls and ceilings were unplastered. There was not a single luxury and not all of the necessities.

When Ned finished, Houston turned to the others and said quietly:

"Gentlemen, we all know that this is war. I think there need be no discussion of the point. It seems necessary to send out more messengers gathering up every Texan who will fight. Do you agree with me?"

All said yes.

"I think, too," said Houston, "that Santa Anna may now send Mr. Austin back to us. He does not know how well informed we are, and doubtless he will believe that such an act will keep us in a state of blindness."

"And you, my brave and resourceful young friend, what do you want to do?"

"Fight under you."

Houston laughed and put his hand affectionately on the boy's shoulder.

"I see that there is something of the courtier in you, too," he said. "It is not a bad quality sometimes, and you shall have the chance that you ask, later on. But meanwhile, you and Mr. White would better rest here, a while. You may have some scouting and skirmishing to do first. We must feel our way."

Ned and Obed now withdrew, and received the hospitality of the little town which was great, at least so far as food was concerned. They longed for action, but the rest was really necessary. Both body and spirit were preparing for greater deeds. Meanwhile, Houston, the scouts and the Texan government went away, but Ned and Obed stayed, awaiting the call. They knew that the signals had now passed through all Texas and they did not think that they would have to remain there long.

They heard soon that Houston's prediction in regard to Austin had come true. Santa Anna had released him, and he had arrived in Texas. But he had not been cajoled. His eyes had been opened at last to the designs of the dictator and immediately upon his return to Texas he had warned his countrymen in a great speech. Meanwhile, the army of Cos was approaching San Antonio, preceded by the heralds of coming Texan ruin.

Ned and Obed sat under the shade of some live oaks, when a horseman came to the little village. He was a strange man, great in size, dressed in buckskin, very brown of countenance and with long hair, tied as the western Indians would wear it. He was something of a

genial booster, was this man, and he was known up and down the Texas border as the Ring Tailed Panther although his right name was Martin Palmer. But he had lived long among the Osage, Kiowa and Pawnee Indians, and he was renowned throughout all the Southwestern country for his bravery, skill and eccentricity. An Indian had killed a white man and eaten his heart. He captured the Indian and compelled him to eat until he died. When his favorite bear dog died he rode sixty miles and brought a minister to preach a sermon over his body. A little boy was captured on the outskirts of a settlement by some Comanche Indians. He followed them alone for three hundred miles, stole the boy away from them in the night, and carried him back safely to his father and mother.

Such was the Ring Tailed Panther, a name that he had originally given to himself and which the people had adopted, one who boasted that he feared no man, the boast being true. He was heavily armed and he rode a black and powerful horse, which he directed straight toward the place where Ned and Obed were sitting.

"You are Ned Fulton an' Obed White, if report tells no lie?" he said in a deep growling voice.

"We are," said Ned, who did not know the identity of their formidable visitor.

"So I knew. I just wanted to see if you'd deny it. Glad to meet you, gentlemen. As for me, I'm the Ring Tailed Panther."

"The Ring Tailed Panther?"

"Exactly. Didn't you hear me say so? I'm the Ring Tailed Panther, an' I can whip anything livin', man or beast, lion or grizzly bear. That's why I'm the Ring Tailed Panther."

"Happy to know you, Mr. Ring Tailed Panther," said Ned, "and having no quarrel with you we don't wish to fight you."

The man laughed, his broad face radiating good humor.

"And I don't want to fight you, either," he said, "'cause all of us have got to fight somebody else. See here, your name's Obed an' yours is Ned, and that's what I'm goin' to call you. No Mistering for me. It don't look well for a Ring Tailed Panther to be givin' handles to people's names."

"Ned and Obed it is," said Ned with warmth.

"Then, Ned an' Obed, it's Mexicans. I've been fightin' Indians a long time. Besides bein' a Ring Tailed Panther, I'm three parts grizzly bear an' one part tiger, an' I want you both to come with guns."

"Is it fighting?" asked Ned, starting up.

"It's ridin' first an' then fightin'. Our people down at Gonzales have a cannon. The Mexicans are comin' to take it away from them, an' I think there's goin' to be trouble over the bargain. The Texans got the gun as a defense against the Indians an' they need it. Some of us are goin' down there to take a hand in the matter of that gun, an' you are goin' with us."

"Of course we are!" said Ned and Obed together. In five minutes they were riding, fully armed, with the Ring Tailed Panther over the prairie. He gave them more details as they rode along.

"Some of our people had been gatherin' at San Felipe to stop the march of Cos if they could," he said, "but they've been drawn off now to help Gonzales. They're comin' from Bastrop, too, an' other places, an' if there ain't a fight then I'm the Ring Tailed Panther for nothing. If we keep a good pace we can join a lot of the boys by nightfall."

"We'll keep it," said Ned. The boy's heart was pounding. Somehow he felt that an event of great importance was at hand, and he was glad to have a share in it. But the three spoke little. The Panther led the way. Ned saw that despite his boasting words he was a man of action. Certainly he was acting swiftly now, and it was quite evident that he knew what he was doing. At last he turned to Ned and said:

"You're only a boy. You know what you're goin' into, of course?"

"A fight, I think."

"And you may get killed?"

"I know it. One can't go into a fight without that risk."

"You're a brave boy. I've heard of what you did, an' you don't talk much. I'm glad of that. I can do all the talkin' that's needed by the three of us. The Lord created me with a love of gab."

The man spoke in a whimsical tone and Ned laughed.

"You can have all my share of the talking, Mr. Palmer," he said.

"The Ring Tailed Panther," corrected the man. "I told you not to be Misterin' me. I like that name, the Ring Tailed Panther. It suits me, because I fit an' I fight till they get me down, then I curl my tail an' I take another round. Once in New Orleans I met a fellow who said he was half horse, half alligator, that he could either claw to death the best man living, stamp him to pieces or eat him alive. I invited him to do any one of these things or all three of them to me."

"What happened?" asked Ned.

A broad smile passed over the man's brown face.

"After they picked up the pieces an' put him back together," he said, "I told him he might try again whenever he felt like it, but he said his challenge was directed to human beings, not to Ring Tailed Panthers. Him an' me got to be great friends an' he's somewhere in Texas now. I may run acrost him before our business with the Mexicans is over, which I take it is goin' to last a good while."

It was now late in the afternoon, and dismounting at a clump of trees the Panther lighted the end of a dead stick and waved the torch around his head many times.

"Watch there in the west for another light like this," he said.

Ned, who sat on his horse, was the first to see the faint circling light far down under the horizon. It was so distant that he could not have seen it had he not been looking for it, but when he pointed it out the Panther ceased to whirl his own torch.

"It's some friends," he said, "an' they're answerin'. They're sayin' that they've seen us an' that they're waitin'. When they get through we'll say that we understand an' are comin'."

The whirling torch on the horizon stopped presently. The Panther whirled his own for half a minute, then he sprang back upon his horse and the three rode rapidly forward.

The sight of the lights sparkling in the twilight so far across the prairie thrilled Ned. He felt that he was in very truth riding to a fight as the Panther had said. Perhaps it was a part of the force of Cos that was coming to Gonzales. Cos himself had turned from the land route with a part of his force and, coming by sea, had landed at Copano about two weeks before. Ned, having full cause, hated this brutal man, and he hoped that the Texans would come to grips with him.

The night was at hand when they reached four men sitting on horseback and waiting for them. They greeted the Ring Tailed Panther with few words but with warmth. They gave to Ned and Obed, too, the strong handclasp which men in danger give to friends who come. Ned thrilled once more with pride that he should be associated with heroes in great deeds. Such they undoubtedly were to him.

"The Mexicans will be at Gonzales to-morrow," said one of the men. "The place, as you know, has refused to give up its cannon and has defied them, but it's almost bare of men. I don't think they have a dozen there."

"The battle is generally to the strong if they get there in time," said Obed, "and here are seven of us on good horses."

"Not countin' the fact that one of us is a Ring Tailed Panther with claws a foot long an' two sets of teeth in his mouth," said Palmer. "Ride on, boys, an' ride hard."

They urged their horses into a gallop and sped over the prairie. At midnight they clattered into the tiny village of Gonzales on the Guadalupe River, where everybody except the little children was awake and watching. Lights flared from the cabins, and the alarm at first, lest they were Mexicans, changed to joy when they were disclosed as Texans.

But the armed force of the place, though stout of heart, was pitifully small. They found only eleven men in Gonzales capable of bearing arms, and no more help could be expected before the Mexicans came the next day. But eleven and seven make eighteen, and now that they were joined, and communicating spirit and hope to one another, the eighteen were more than twice as strong as the eleven had been. The Ring Tailed Panther poured forth a stream of cheer and encouragement. He grew more voluble at the approach of danger. Never had his teeth and claws been longer or sharper.

"I'm afraid of nothin' except that they won't come," he said. "If they don't, my health will give way. I'll be a-droopin' an' a-pinin' an' I'll have to go off an' fight the Comanches an' Lipans to get back my strength."

But he was assured that his health would not suffer. Mexican cavalry, a hundred strong, were coming under a captain, Castenada, sent by Ugartchea, the Mexican commander at San Antonio de Bexar. Scouts had brought that definite news. They were riding from the west and they would have to cross the Guadalupe before they could enter Gonzales. There were fords, but it would be a dangerous task to attempt their passage in face of the Texan rifles.

The ferryboat was tied safely on the Gonzales side, and then the eighteen, every one a fine marksman, distributed themselves at the fords. Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther stayed together. They did not anticipate the arrival of the Mexican forces before dawn, but Castenada might send spies ahead, and the Mexican scouts were full of wiles and stratagems.

"At any rate," said the Panther, "if we catch any Mexican prowling around here we'll throw him into the river."

"All things, including Mexicans, come to him who waits," said Obed, "and speaking for myself I'd rather they wouldn't come until day. It's more comfortable to sit quiet in the dark."

These three and six others had taken a position under a great oak tree, where they were well shaded but could easily see anyone who approached the ford on the opposite side. Back of them a few lights burned in the little town, where the anxious women watched, but no noise came from it or the second ford, where the other half of the eighteen were on guard. Their horses were tethered some distance in the rear and they, too, rested in quiet.

The tree sent up a great gnarled root and Ned sat on the ground, leaning against it. It just fitted into the curve of his back and he was very comfortable. But he did not allow his comfort to lull him into lethargy. Always he watched the river and the farther shore. He had now become no mean scout and sentinel. The faculties develop fast amid the continuous fight for life against all kinds of dangers. Above all, that additional sense which may be defined as prescience, and, which was a development of the other five, was alive within him, ready to warn him of a hostile presence.

But Ned neither saw nor heard anything, nor did his sixth sense warn him that an enemy was near. The Guadalupe, wide, yellow and comparatively shallow like most of the Texas rivers, flowed slowly and without sound. Now and then Obed and the Panther walked down to the other ford, where all, too, was quiet, but Ned kept his place against the root. Toward morning the Panther sat down beside him there.

"Waitin's hard," he said. "I like to jump on the enemy with claws an' nails an' have it out right there an' then. I like to roar an' bite. That's why I'm a Ring Tailed Panther."

Ned laughed.

"If Castenada is coming, and they say he surely is," he said, "we'll soon have use for all our claws and teeth."

"Patience will bring our Mexicans," said Obed White.

At daylight women from the cabins brought them all coffee and warm food, for which they were very grateful. Then the sun rose, and the morning was fresh and crisp, it now being autumn. The men remained by the river, still watching intently and Ned caught a sudden sharp glint which was not that of the sun, far out on the prairie. He knew that it was a brilliant ray reflected from the polished head of a lance, and he said as he pointed a finger:

"The Mexicans are coming."

"So they are," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "I see a horseman, an' another, an' another, an' now a lot of 'em. They must be a hundred at least. It's the troop of Castenada, an' they're after that cannon. Well, I'm glad."

The man seemed to swell and his eyes darkened. He was like some formidable beast about to spring. The boaster was ready to make good his boast.

"Run down to the other ford, Ned," said Palmer, "an' tell the men there that the Mexicans are at hand."

Ned did his errand, but returned very quickly. He was anxious to see the advance of Castenada's troop. The Mexicans, about half of whom were lancers and the rest armed with muskets, came on very steadily. An officer in fine uniform, whom Ned took to be Castenada himself, rode at their head. When they came within rifle shot a white flag was hoisted on a lance.

"A white flag! This is no time for white flags," growled the Ring Tailed Panther. "Never have any faith in a Mexican comin' under a white flag. What we've got to do now is to roar an' rip an' claw."

"Still," said Obed, "it's evil to him who evil does, and we've got to wait till these Mexicans do it. First we've got to hear what they say, and if the saying isn't to our liking, as I'm thinking it won't be, then it's ripping and roaring and clawing and all the other 'ings' to our taste as long as we can stand it."

"Go ahead," growled the Ring Tailed Panther, "I'm not much on talkin'. Fightin's more in my line an' when it's that I come with a hop, a skip an' a jump, teeth an' claws all ready."

"Ned," said Obed, "you speak the best Spanish, so go down there to the bank of the river, and hear what they have to say. Just remember that we're not giving up the cannon, and clothe the answers in what fine words you please. There isn't any rock here, but sooner this rock shall fly from its firm base than the Texans will yield their cannon when they are sure to be attacked by Indians and maybe Mexicans too."

Ned walked down to the edge of the river and the officer, whom he rightly supposed to be Castenada, dismounting, came to the shore at an opposite point.

"What do you want?" cried Ned in pure Spanish across the water.

"Are you empowered to speak for the people of Gonzales?"

"You hear me speaking and you see the other Texans listening."

"Then I have to say that on the order of General Cos I demand your cannon in the name of General Santa Anna and Mexico."

"We've made up our minds to keep it. We're sure to need it later on."

"This is insolent. If you do not give it we shall come and take it."

"Tell him, Ned," growled the Ring Tailed Panther, "that we just hope he'll come an' try to take it, that I'm here roarin' all the time, that I've filed my teeth an' nails 'till they're like the edge of a razor, an' that I'm just hungerin' to rip an' claw."

"The men of Gonzales mean to defend their cannon and themselves," called Ned across the river. "If you come to take the gun it means war. It means more, too. It means that you will lose many of your soldiers. The Texans, as you know, are both able and willing to shoot."

"This is rebellion and treason!" cried Castenada. "The great Santa Anna will come with a mighty force, and when he is through not a Texan will trouble the surface of the earth."

A roar of approval came from the men behind the Mexican captain, but Ned replied:

"Until the earth is rid of us we may make certain spots of it dangerous for you. So, I warn you to draw back. Our bullets carry easily across this river."

Captain Castenada, white with rage, retired with his troop beyond the range of the Texan rifles.

CHAPTER XV

THE FIRST GUN

"Well, Ned, it's sometimes ask and ye shall not receive, isn't it?" said Obed White, looking at the retreating Mexicans.

But the Ring Tailed Panther growled between his shut teeth. Then he opened his mouth and gave utterance to his dissatisfaction.

"It's a cheat, a low Mexican trick," he said, "to come here an' promise a fight an' then go away. I'm willin' to bet my claws that them Mexicans will hang around here two or three days, without tryin' to do a thing."

"An' won't that be all the better for us?" asked Ned. "We're only eighteen and we surely need time for more."

"That's so," admitted the Ring Tailed Panther, "but when you've got all your teeth and claws sharpened for a fight you want it right then an' not next week."

The Mexicans tethered their horses and began to form camp about a half mile from the river. They went about it deliberately, spreading tents for their officers and lighting fires for cooking. The Texans could see them plainly and the Mexicans showed the carelessness and love of pleasure natural to children of the sun. Some lay down on the grass and three or four began to strum mandolins and guitars.

There was a sterner manner on the Texan side of the Guadalupe. The watch at the fords was not relaxed, but Ned went back into the little town to carry the word to the women and children. Most of the women, like the men, were dressed in deerskin and they, too, volunteered to fight if they were needed. Ned told them what Castenada had asked, and he also told them the reply which was received with grim satisfaction. The women were even more bitter than the men against the Mexicans.

Ned passed a long day by the Guadalupe, keeping his place most of the time at the ford with the Ring Tailed Panther, who was far less patient than he.

"My teeth an' claws will shorely get dull with me a-settin' here an' doin' nothin'," said Palmer. "I can roar an' I can keep on roarin' but what's the good of roarin' when you can't do any bitin' an' tearin'?"

"Patience will have its perfect fight," said Obed, giving one of his misquotations. "I've always heard that every kind of panther would lie very quiet until the chance came for him to spring."

The Ring Tailed Panther growled between his shut teeth.

The sight of the Mexican force in the afternoon became absolutely tantalizing. Although it was early autumn the days were still very hot at times and Castenada's men were certainly taking their ease. Ned could see many of them enjoying the siesta, and through a pair of glasses he saw others lolling luxuriously and smoking cigarettes. It was especially irritating to the Ring Tailed Panther, who grew very red in the face but who now only emitted growls between his shut teeth.

It was evident that the Mexicans were going to make no demonstration just yet and the night came, rather dark and cloudy. Now the anxiety in Gonzales increased since the night can be cover for anything, and, besides guarding the fords, several of the defenders were placed at intermediate points.

Ned took a station with Obed in a clump of oaks that grew to the very edge of the Guadalupe. There they sat a long time and watched the surface of the river grow darker and darker. The Mexican camp had been shut from sight long since, and no sounds now came from it. Ned appreciated fully the need of a close watch. The Mexicans might swim the river on their horses in the darkness, and gallop down on the town. So he never ceased to watch, and he also listened with ears which were rapidly acquiring the delicacy and sensitiveness peculiar to those of expert frontiersmen.

Ned was not warlike in temper. He knew, from his reading, all the waste and terrible passions of war, but he was heart and soul with the Texans. He was one of them, and to him the coming struggle was a fight for home and liberty by an oppressed people. With the ardor of youth flaming in him he was willing for that struggle to begin at once.

Night on the Guadalupe! He felt that the darkness was full of omens and presages for Texas and for him, too, a boy among its defenders. His pulses quivered, and a light moisture broke out on his face. His prescience, the gift of foresight, was at work. It was telling him that the time, in very truth, had come. Yet he could not see or hear a single thing that bore the remotest resemblance to an enemy.

The boy stepped from a clump of trees in order that he might get a better look down the river. There was a crack on the farther shore, a flash of fire, and a bullet sang past his ear. He caught a hasty glimpse of a Mexican with a smoking rifle leaping to cover, and he, too, sprang back into the shelter of the trees.

It was the first shot of the great Texan struggle for independence!

Ned felt all of its significance even then, and so did Obed.

"You saw him?" asked the Maine man.

"I did, and I felt the breath of his bullet on my face, but he gained cover too quick for me to return his fire."

"The first shot was theirs and it was at you. It seems odd, Ned, that you should have been used as a target for the opening of the war."

"I'm proud of the honor."

"So would I be in your place."

Others came, drawn by the shot.

"Was it a Mexican?" asked the Ring Tailed Panther eagerly. "Tell me it was a Mexican and make me happy."

"You can be happy," said Obed. "It was a Mexican and he was shooting with what the law would define as an intent to kill. He sent a rifle bullet across the Guadalupe, aimed at our young friend, Edward Fulton. Ned did not see the bullet, but his sensitiveness to touch showed that it passed within an inch of his face."

Now the Ring Tailed Panther roared, but it was not between his shut teeth.

"By the great horn spoon, I'm glad!" he said, "All the waitin' an' backin' an' fillin' are over. We do our talkin' now with cannon an' rifles."

But not another shot was fired that night. It was merely some scout or skirmisher who had sent the fugitive bullet across the river, but it was enough. The Mexican intentions were now evident.

Ned went off duty toward morning and slept a few hours in one of the cabins. When he awoke he ate a hearty breakfast and went back to the river. About half of the eighteen had taken naps, but they were all gathered once more along the Guadalupe. Ned observed the Mexican camp and saw some movement there. Presently all the soldiers rode out, with Castenada at their head.

"They're comin' to our ford! By the great horn spoon, they are comin'!" roared the Ring Tailed Panther.

It seemed that he was right as the Mexicans were approaching at a gallop, making a gallant show, their lances glittering in the sun.

"Lay down, all!" said the Ring Tailed Panther. "The moment they strike the water turn loose with your rifles an' roar an' scratch an' claw!"

But when they were within one hundred yards of the Guadalupe the Mexicans suddenly sheered off. Evidently they did not like the looks of the Texan rifles which they could plainly see. The defenders of the fords uttered a derisive shout, and some of the Mexicans fired. But their bullets fell short, only a single one of them coming as far as the edge of the Guadalupe. The Texans did not reply. They would not waste ammunition in any such foolish fashion.

The Mexicans stopped, when four or five hundred yards away, and began to wave their lances and utter taunting shouts. The Texans only laughed, all except the Ring Tailed Panther, who growled.

"You see, Ned," said Obed, "that one charge does not make a passage. It appears to me that our friend Castenada does not want his uniform or himself spoiled by our good Texas lead. Now, I take it, we can rest easy awhile longer."

He lay down in the grass under the trees and Ned did likewise, but the Ring Tailed Panther would not be consoled. An opportunity had been lost, and he hurled strange and miscellaneous epithets at the distant Mexicans. Standing upon a little hillock he called them more bad names than Ned had ever before heard. He aspersed the character of their ancestors even to the eighth generation and of their possible descendants also to the eighth generation. He issued every kind of challenge to any kind of combat, and at last, red and panting, descended the hillock.

"Do you feel better?" asked Obed.

"I've whispered a few of my thoughts. Yes, I can re'lly say that the state of my health is improvin'."

"Then sit down and rest. It's never too late to try, try again. Remember that the day is long and the Mexicans may certainly have a chance."

The Ring Tailed Panther growled, but sat down.

In the afternoon the Mexicans again formed in line and trotted down toward the other ford, but as before they did not like the look of the Texan rifles and turned away, after shouting many challenges, brandishing lances and firing random shots. But the Texans contented themselves again with a grim silence, and the Mexicans rode back to their camp. The disgust of the Ring Tailed Panther was so deep that he could not utter a word. But Obed was glad.

"More men will come to-night," he said to Ned. "You know that requests for help were sent in all directions by the people of Gonzales, and if I know our Texans, and I think I do, they'll ride hard to be here. Castenada, in a way, is besieging us now, but—well, the tables may be turned and he'll turn with 'em."

Just at twilight a great shout arose from the women in the village. There was a snorting of horses, a jingling of spurs and embroidered bridle reins, and twenty lean, brown men, very tall and broad of shoulder, rode up. They were the vanguard of the Texan help, and they rejoiced when they found that the Mexican force was still on the west side of the Guadalupe.

Their welcome was not noisy but deep. The eighteen were now the thirty-eight, and to-morrow they would be a hundred or more. The twenty had ridden more than a hundred miles, but they were fresh and zealous for the combat. They went down to the river, and, in the darkness, looked at the Mexican camp fires, while the Ring Tailed Panther roared out his opinion.

"The Mexicans won't bring the fight to us," he said, "so we must carry it to them. They've galloped down here twice an' they've looked at the river an' they've looked at us, an' they've galloped back again. We can't let 'em set over there besiegin' us, we must cross an' besiege them an' get to roarin' an' rippin' an' clawin'."

"To-morrow," said Obed, "more of our friends will be here and when we all get together we will discuss it and make a decision."

"Of course we'll discuss it!" roared the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' then we'll come to a decision, an' there's only one decision that we can come to. We'll cross the river an' mighty quick we'll make them Mexicans wish they'd chose a camp a hundred miles from Gonzales."

The others laughed, but after all, the Ring Tailed Panther had stated their position truly. Every man agreed with him. The watch at the river that night was as vigilant as ever, and the next morning parties of Texans arrived from different points, swelling their numbers to more than one hundred and fifty men, fully equaling the company of Castenada, after allowing for reinforcements received by the Mexican captain.

With one of the Texan troops came a quiet man of confident bearing, dressed like the others in buckskin, but with more authority in his manner. The Ring Tailed Panther greeted him with great warmth, shaking his hand and saying:

"John! John! We're awful glad you've come 'cause there's to be a lot of roarin' an' tearin' an' clawin' to be done."

The man smiled and replied in his quiet tones:

"We know it and that's why we've come. Now, I suggest that while we leave ten men at each ford, we hold a meeting in the village. Everything we have is at stake and as one Texan is as good as another we ought to talk it over."

"Who is he?" asked Ned of Obed.

"That's John Moore. He's been a great Indian fighter and one of the defenders of the frontier. I think it likely that he'll be our leader in whatever we undertake. He's certainly the man for the place."

"Oyez! Oyez!" roared the Ring Tailed Panther with mouth wide open. "Come all ye upon the common, an' hear the case of Texas against Mexico which is now about to be debated. The gentlemen representin' the other side are on the west shore of the river about a mile from here, an' after decidin' upon our argyment an' the manner of it we'll communicate it to 'em later whether they like our decision or not."

They poured upon the common in a tumultuous throng, the women and children forming a continuous fringe about them.

"I move that John Moore be made the Chairman of this here meetin' an' the leader in whatever it decides to do, 'specially as we know already what it's goin' to decide," roared the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' wherever he leads we will follow."

Ned said nothing, but his pulses were leaping. Perhaps the silent boy appreciated more than any other present that this was the beginning of a great epic in the American story. The young student, his head filled with completed dramas of the past, could look further into the future than the veteran men of action around him.

The debate was short. In truth it was no debate at all, because all were of one mind. Since the Mexicans had already fired upon them and would not go away they would cross the river and attack Castenada. As Obed had predicted, Moore was unanimously chosen leader, the title of Colonel being bestowed upon him, and they set to work at once for the attack.

Ned and Obed walked together to the cluster of oaks in which the two had spent so much time. Both were grave, appreciating fully the fact that they were about to go into battle.

"Ned," said Obed, "you and I have been through a lot of dangers together and we're not afraid to talk about dangers to come. In case anything should happen to you is there any word you want sent anybody?"

"To nobody except Mr. Austin. He's been very good to me here and in Mexico. I suppose I've got some relatives in Missouri, but they are so distant I've forgotten who they are, and probably they never knew anything about me. If it's the other way about, Obed, what word shall I send?"

"Nothing to nobody. I had a stepfather in Maine, who didn't like me, and my mother died five years after her second marriage. I'm a Texan, Ned, same as if I were born on this soil, and my best friends are around me. I'll live and die with 'em."

The two, the man and the boy, shook hands, but made no further display of feeling. The force was organized in the village, beyond the sight of the Mexicans, who were lounging in the grass, although they had posted sentinels. Every Texan was well armed, carrying a rifle, pistol and knife. Some had in addition the Indian tomahawk.

It was the first day of October and the coolness of late afternoon had come. A fresh breeze was blowing from the southwest. The little command, silent save for the hoof beats of their horses, rode down to the river. The women and children looked after them and they, too, were silent. A strange Indian stoicism possessed them all.

Ned and Obed were side by side. The breeze cooled the forehead and cheeks of the boy, but his pulses beat hard and fast. He looked back at Gonzales and he knew that he would never forget that little village of little log cabins. Then he looked straight before him at the yellow river, and the shore beyond, where the Mexican camp lay.

It was now seven o'clock and the twilight was coming.

"Isn't it late to make an attack?" he said to Obed.

"It depends on what happens. Circumstances alter battles. If we surprise them there'll be time for a fine fight. If they discover our advance it may be better to wait until morning."

They rode into the water twenty abreast, and made for the farther shore. So many horses made much splashing, and Ned expected bullets, but none came. Dripping, they reached the farther shore and went straight toward the Mexican camp. Then came sudden shouts, the flash of rifles and the singing of bullets. The Mexican sentinels had discovered the Texan advance.

Moore ordered his men to halt, and then he held a short conference with the leaders. It was very late, and they would postpone the attack until morning. Hence, they tethered their horses in sight of the Mexican camp, set many sentinels and deliberately began to cook their suppers.

It was all very strange and unreal to Ned. Having started for a battle it was battle he wanted at once and the wait of a night rested heavily upon his nerves.

"Take it easy, Ned," said Obed, who observed him. "Willful haste makes woeful fight. Eat your supper and then you'd better lie down and sleep if you can. I'd rather go on watch toward morning if I were you, because if anything happens in the night it will happen late."

Ned considered it good advice and he lay down in his blankets, having been notified that he would be called at one o'clock in the morning to take his turn. Once more he exerted will to the utmost in the effort to control nerves and body. He told himself that he was now surrounded by friends, who would watch while he slept, and that he could not be surprised. Slumber came sooner than he had hoped, but at the appointed hour he was awakened and took his place among the sentinels.

Ned found the night cold and dark, but he shook off the chill by vigorous walking to and fro. He discovered, however, that he could not see any better by use, as the darkness was caused by mists rather than clouds. Vapors were rising from the prairie, and objects, seen through them, assumed thin and distorted shapes. He saw west of him and immediately facing him flickering lights which he knew were those of the Mexican camp. The heavy air seemed to act as a conductor of sound, and he heard faintly voices and the tread of horses' hoofs. They were on watch there, also.

He walked back and forth a long time, and the air continued to thicken. A heavy fog was rising from the prairie, and it became so dense that he could no longer see the fires in the Mexican camp. Everything there was shut out from the eye, but he yet heard the faint noises.

It seemed to him toward four o'clock in the morning that the noises were increasing, and curiosity took hold of him. But the sentinel on the left and the sentinel on the right were now hidden by the fog, and, since he could not confer with them at once, he resolved to see what

this increase of noise meant.

He cocked his rifle and stole forward over the prairie. He could not see more than ten or fifteen yards ahead, but he went very near to the Mexican camp, and then lay down in the grass. Now he saw the cause of the swelling sounds. The Mexican force, gathering up its arms and horses, was retreating.

Ned stole back to the camp with his news.

"You have done well, Ned, lad," said Moore. "I think it likely, however, that they are merely withdrawing to a stronger position, but they can't escape us. We'll follow 'em, and since they wanted that cannon so badly we'll give 'em a taste of it."

The cannon, a six-pounder, had been brought over on the ferryboat in the night and was now in the Texan camp.

"Ned," said Moore, "do you, Obed and the Panther ride after those fellows and see what they do. Then come back and report."

It was a dangerous duty, but the three responded gladly. They advanced cautiously through the fog and the Ring Tailed Panther roared softly.

"Runnin' away?" he said. "I'd be ashamed to come for a cannon an' then to slink off with tail droopin' like a cowardly coyote. By the great horn spoon, I hope they are merely seekin' a better position an' will give us a fight. It would be a mean Mexican trick to run clean away."

"The Mexicans are not cowards," said Ned.

"Depends on how the notion strikes 'em," said the Panther. "Sometimes they fight like all creation an' sometimes they hit it for the high grass an' the tall timber. There's never any tellin' what they'll do."

"Hark!" said Obed, "don't you hear their tramp there to our left?"

The three stopped and listened, and they detected sounds which they knew were made by the retreating force. But they could see nothing through the heavy white fog which covered everything like a blanket of snow.

"Suppose we ride parallel with them," whispered Ned. "We can go by the sounds and by the same means we can tell exactly what they do."

"A good idea," said Obed. "We are going over prairie which affords easy riding. We've got nothing to fear unless some lamb strays from the Mexican flock, and blunders upon us. Even then he's more likely to be shorn than to shear."

They advanced for some time, guided by the hoofbeats from the Mexican column. But before the sun could rise and dispel the fog the sound of the hoofbeats ceased.

"They've stopped," whispered the Ring Tailed Panther, joyously. "After all they're not goin' to run away an' they will give us a fight. They are expectin' reinforcements of course, or they wouldn't make a stand."

"But we must see what kind of a position they have taken up," said Obed. "Seeing is telling and you know that when we get back to Colonel Moore we've got to tell everything, or we might as well have stayed behind."

"You're the real article, all wool an' a yard wide, Obed White," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "Now I think we'd better hitch our horses here to these bushes an' creep as close as we can without gettin' our heads knocked off. They might hear the horses when they wouldn't hear us."

"Good idea," said Obed White. "Nothing risk, nothing see."

They tethered the horses to the low bushes, marking well the place, as the heavy, white fog was exceedingly deceptive, distorting and exaggerating when it did not hide. Then the three went forward, side by side. Ned looked back when he had gone a half dozen yards, and already the horses were looming pale and gigantic in the fog. Three or four steps more and they were gone entirely.

But they heard the sounds again in front of them, although they were now of a different character. They were confined in one place, which showed that the Mexicans had not resumed their march, and the tread of horses' hoofs was replaced by a metallic rattle. It occurred to Ned that the Mexicans might be intrenching and he wondered what place of strength they had found.

The boy had the keenest eyes of the three and presently he saw a dark, lofty shape, showing faintly through the fog. It looked to him like an iceberg clothed in mist, and he called the attention of his comrades to it. They went a little nearer, and the Ring Tailed Panther laughed low between his shut teeth.

"We'll have our fight," he said, "an' these Mexicans won't go back to Cos as fine as they were when they started. The tall an' broad thing that you see is a big mound on the prairie an' they're goin' to make a stand on it. It ain't a bad place. A hundred Texans up there could beat off a thousand Mexicans."

They went a little nearer and saw that a fringe of bushes surrounded the base of the mound. Further up the Mexicans were digging in the soft earth with their lances as best they could and throwing up a breastwork. The horses had been tethered in the bushes. Evidently they felt sure that they would be attacked by the Texans. They knew the nature of these riders of the plains.

"I think we've seen enough," said Obed. "We'll go back now to Colonel Moore and the men."

They found their horses undisturbed and were about to gallop back to the main body with the news that the Mexicans were on the mound, when some Mexican sentinels saw them and uttered a shout. The three exchanged shots with them but knowing that a strong force would be upon them in an instant returned to their original intention and went at full speed toward the camp. It was lucky that the fog still held, as the pursuing bullets went wide, but Ned heard more than one sing. The Mexicans showed courage and followed the three until they reached the Texan camp. As Ned and his comrades dismounted they shouted that the Mexicans were on a hill not far away and were fortifying.

Moore promptly had his men run forward that bone of contention, the cannon, and a solid shot was sent humming toward those who had pursued the three. The heavy report came back in sullen echoes from the prairie, and the stream of fire split the fog asunder. But in a moment the mists and vapors closed in again, and the Mexicans were gone. Then the little army stood for a few moments, motionless, but breathing heavily. The cannon shot had made the hearts of everyone leap. They were inured to Indian battle and every kind of danger, but this was a great war.

"Boys," said Moore, "we are here and the enemy is before us."

A deep shout from broad chests and powerful lungs came forth. Then by a single impulse the little army rushed forward, led by Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther, who took them straight toward the mound. As they ran, the great Texan sun proved triumphant. It seemed to cleave the fog like a sword blade, and then the mists and vapors rolled away on either side, to right and to left of the Texans. The whole plain, dewy and fresh, sprang up in the light of the morning.

They saw the steep mound crowned by the Mexicans, and men still at work on the hasty trench. Again that full-throated cheer came from the Texans and they quickened their pace, but Captain Castenada came down from the mound and a soldier came with him bearing a white flag.

"Now, what in thunder can he want?" growled the Ring Tailed Panther to Ned and Obed. "Shorely he ain't goin' to surrender. He's jest goin' to waste our time in talk."

Deep disgust showed on his face.

"By waiting we will see," quoth Obed oracularly. "Now, Panther, don't you be too impatient. Remember that the tortoise beat the hare in the great Greek horse race."

Moore waved his hand and the Texans halted. Castenada on foot came on. Moore also dismounted, and, calling to Ned and Obed to accompany him, went forward to meet him. Ned and Obed, delighted, sprang from their horses, and walked by his side. The Ring Tailed Panther growled between his teeth that he was glad to stay, that he would have no truck with Mexicans.

Castenada, with the soldier beside him, came forward. He was rather a handsome young man of the dark type. As the two little parties met midway between the lines, the forces on the hill and on the plain were alike silent. Every trace of the fog was now gone, and the sun shone with full splendor upon brown faces, upon rifles and lances.

Castenada saluted in Mexican fashion.

"What do you want?" he asked in Spanish, which all understood.

"Your surrender," replied Moore coolly, "either that or the sworn adherence of you and your men to Texas."

Castenada uttered an angry exclamation.

"This is presumption carried to the last degree," he said. "My own honor and the honor of Mexico will not allow me to do either."

"It is that or fight."

"I bid you beware. General Cos is coming with a force that all Texas cannot resist, and after him comes our great Santa Anna with another yet greater. If the Texans make war they will be destroyed. The buffalo will feed where their houses now stand."

"You have already made war. Accept our terms or fight. We deal with you now. We deal with Cos and Santa Anna later on."

"There is nothing more to be said," replied Castenada with haughtiness. "We are here in a strong position and you cannot take us."

He withdrew and Moore turned back with Ned and Obed.

"I don't think he ever meant this parley for anything except to gain time," said Moore. "He's expecting a fresh Mexican force, but we'll see that it comes too late."

Then raising his voice, he shouted to his command:

"Boys, they've chosen to fight, and they are there on the hill. A man cannot rush that hill with his horse, but he can rush it with his two legs."

The face of the Ring Tailed Panther became a perfect full moon of delight. Then he paled a little.

"Do you think there can yet be any new trick to hold us back?" he asked Obed anxiously.

"No," replied Obed cheerfully. "Time and tide wait for no Mexicans, and the tide's at the flood. We charge within a minute."

Even as he spoke, Moore shouted:

"Now, boys, rush 'em!"

For the third time the Texans uttered that deep, rolling cheer. The cannon sent a volley of grape shot into the cluster on the mound and then the Texans rushed forward at full speed, straight at the enemy.

The Mexicans opened a rapid fire with rifles and muskets and the whole mound was soon clothed in smoke. But the rush of the Texans was so great that in an instant they were at the first slope. They stopped to send in a volley and then began the rush up the hill, but there was no enemy.

The Mexicans gave way in a panic at the very first onset, ran down the slope to their horses, leaped upon them and galloped away over the prairie. Many threw away their rifles and lances, and, bending low on the necks of their horses, urged them to greater speed.

Ned had been in the very front of the rush, Obed on one side and the Ring Tailed Panther on the other. His heart was beating hard and there was a fiery mist before his eyes. He heard the bullets whiz past, but once more Providence was good to him. None touched him, and when the first tremors were over he was as eager as any of them to reach the crest of the mound, and come to grips with the enemy. Suddenly he heard a tremendous roar of disgust. The Ring Tailed Panther was the author of it.

"Escaped after all!" he cried. "They wouldn't stay an' fight, when they promised they would!"

"At least, the Mexicans ride well," said Obed.

Ned gazed from the crest of the mound at the flying men, rapidly becoming smaller and smaller as they sped over the prairie.

CHAPTER XVI

THE COMING OF URREA

Many of the Texans were hot for pursuit, but Moore recalled them. His reasons were brief and grim. "You will not overtake them," he said, "and you will need all your energies later on. This is only the beginning."

A number of the Mexicans had been slain, but none of the Texans had fallen, the aim of their opponents being so wild. The triumph had certainly been an easy one, but Ned perhaps rejoiced less than any other one present. The full mind again projected itself into the future, and foresaw great and terrible days. The Texans were but few, scattered thinly over a long frontier, and the rage of Cos and Santa Anna would be unbounded, when they heard of the fight and flight of their troops at Gonzales.

"Obed," he said to his friend, "we are victorious to-day without loss, but I feel that dark days are coming."

The Maine man looked curiously at the boy. He already considered Ned, despite his youth, superior in some ways to himself.

"You've been a reader and you're a thinker, Ned," he said, "and I like to hear what you say. The dark days may come as you predict, because Santa Anna is a great man in the Mexican way, but night can't come until the day is ended and it's day just now. We won't be gloomy yet."

After the fallen Mexicans had been buried, the little force of voluntary soldiers began to disperse, just as they had gathered, of their own accord. The work there was done, and they were riding for their own little villages or lone cabins, where they would find more work to do. The Mexicans would soon fall on Texas like a cloud, and every one of them knew it.

Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther rode back to Gonzales, where the women and children welcomed the victors with joyous acclaim.

The three sat down with others to a great feast, spread on tables under the shade of oaks, and consisting chiefly of game, buffalo, deer, squirrels, rabbits and other animals which had helped the early Texans to live. But throughout the dinner Ned and Obed were rather quiet, although the Ring Tailed Panther roared to his heart's content. It was Ned who spoke first the thought that was in the minds of both Obed and himself. Slowly and by an unconscious process he was becoming the leader.

"Obed," he said, "everybody can do as he pleases, and I propose that you and I and the Ring Tailed Panther scout toward San Antonio. Cos and his army are marching toward that town, and while the Texan campaign of defense is being arranged and the leaders are being chosen we might give a lot of help."

"Just what I was thinking," said Obed.

"Jest what I ought to have thought," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

San Antonio was a long journey to the westward, and they started at twilight fully equipped. They carried their usual arms, two blankets apiece, light but warm, food for several days, and double supplies of ammunition, the thing that they would now need most. Gonzales gave them a farewell full of good wishes. Some of the women exclaimed upon Ned's youth, but Obed explained that the boy had lived through hardships and dangers that would have overcome many a veteran pioneer of Texas.

They forded the Guadalupe for the second time on the same day. Then they rode by the mound on which the Mexicans had made their brief stand. The three said little. Even the Ring Tailed Panther had thoughts that were not voiced. The hill, the site of the first battle in their great struggle, stood out, clear and sharp, in the moonlight. But it was very still now.

"We'll date a good many things from that hill," said Ned as they rode on.

They followed in the path of the flying Mexicans who, they were quite sure, would make for Cos and San Antonio. The Ring Tailed Panther knew the most direct course and as the moon was good they could also see the trail left by the Mexicans. It was marked further by grim objects, two wounded horses that had died in the flight, and then by a man succumbing, who had been buried in a grave so shallow that no one could help noticing it.

A little after midnight they saw a light ahead, and they judged by the motions that a man was waving a torch.

"It can't be a trap," said Obed, "because the Mexicans would not stop running until they were long past here."

"An' there ain't no cover where that torch is," added the Ring Tailed Panther.

"Then suppose we ride forward and see what it means," said Ned.

They cocked their rifles, ready for combat if need be, and rode forward slowly. Soon they made out the figure of a man standing on a swell of the prairie, and vigorously waving a torch made of a dead stick lighted at one end. He had a rifle, but it leaned against a bush beside him. His belt held a pistol and knife, but his free hand made no movement toward them, as the three rode up. The man himself was

young, slender, and of olive complexion with black hair and eyes. He was a Mexican, but he was dressed in the simple Texan style. Moreover, there were Mexicans born in Texas some of whom, belonging to the Liberal party, inclined to the Texan side. This man was distinctly handsome and the look with which he returned the gaze of the three was frank, free and open.

"I saw you from afar," he said in excellent English. "I climbed the cottonwood there in order to see what might be passing on the prairie, and as my eyes happen to be very good I detected three black dots in the moonlight, coming out of the east. As I saw the men of Santa Anna going west as fast as hoofs would carry them I knew that only Texans could be riding out of the east."

He laughed, threw his torch on the ground and stamped out the light.

"I felt that sooner or later someone would come upon Castenada's track," he said, "and you see that I was not wrong."

He smiled again. Ned's impression was distinctly favorable, and when he glanced at Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther he saw that they, too, were attracted.

"Who are you, stranger?" asked Palmer. "People who meet by night in Texas in these times had best know the names and business of one another."

"Not a doubt of it," replied the young Mexican. "My name is Francisco Urrea, and I was born on the Guadalupe. So, you see, I am a Texan, perhaps more truly a Texan than any of you, because I know by looking at you that all three of you were born in the States. As for my business?"

He grew very serious and looked at the three one after another.

"My business," he said, "is to fight for Texas."

"Well spoke, by the great horn spoon," roared the Ring Tailed Panther.

"Yes, to fight for Texas," resumed young Urrea. "I was on my way to Gonzales to join you. I was too late for the fight, but I saw the men of Castenada, with Castenada himself at their head, flying across the prairie. I assure you there was no delay on their part. First they were here and then they were gone. The prairie rumbled with their hasty tread, their lances glittered for only a single instant, and then they were lost over the horizon."

He laughed again, and his laugh was so infectious that the three laughed with him.

"I know most people in Texas," rumbled the Ring Tailed Panther, "though there are some Mexican families I don't know. But I've heard of the Urreas, an' if you want to go with us an' join in tearin' an' chawin' we'll be glad to have you."

"So we will," said Ned and Obed together, and Obed added: "Three are company, four are better."

"Very well, then," said Urrea, "I shall be happy to become one of your band, and we will ride on together. I've no doubt that I can be of help if you mean to keep a watch on Cos. My horse is tied here in a clump of chaparral. Wait a moment and I will rejoin you."

He came back, riding a fine horse, and he was as well equipped as the Texans. Then the four rode on toward San Antonio de Bexar. They found that Urrea knew much. Cos himself would probably be in San Antonio within a week, and heavy reinforcements would arrive later. The three in return gave him a description of the fight at the mound, and they told how the Texans afterward had scattered for different points on the border.

They were not the only riders that night. Men were carrying along the whole frontier the news that the war had begun, that the death struggle was now on between Mexico and Texas, the giant on one side and the pigmy on the other.

But the ride of the four in the trail of Castenada's flying troop was peaceful enough. About three hours after midnight they stopped under the shelter of some cottonwoods. The Ring Tailed Panther took the watch while the other three slept. Ned lay awake for a little while between his blankets, but he saw that Urrea, who was not ten feet away, had gone sound asleep almost instantly. His olive face lighted dimly by the moon's rays was smooth and peaceful, and Ned was quite sure that he would be a good comrade. Then he, too, entered the land of slumber.

The Ring Tailed Panther stalked up and down, his broad powerful figure becoming gigantic in the moonlight. Belligerent by nature and the born frontiersman, he was very serious now.

He knew that they were riding toward great danger and he glanced at the face of the sleeping boy. The Ring Tailed Panther had a heart within him, and the temptation to make Ned go back, if he could, was very strong. But he quickly dismissed it as useless. The boy would not go. Besides, he was skillful, strong and daring.

The Ring Tailed Panther tramped on. Coyotes howled on the prairie, and the deeper note of a timber wolf came from the right, where there was a thick fringe of trees along a creek. But he paid no attention to them. All the while he watched the circle of the horizon, narrow by night, for horsemen. If they came he believed that his warning must be quick, because they were likely to be either Mexicans or Indians. He saw no riders but toward daylight he saw horses in the west. They were without riders and he walked to the nearest swell to look at them.

He looked down upon a herd of wild horses, many of them clean and fine of build. At their head was a great black stallion and when the Ring Tailed Panther saw him he sighed. At another time, he would have made a try for the stallion's capture, but now there was other business afoot.

The wind shifted. The stallion gave a neigh of alarm and galloped off toward the south, the whole herd with streaming manes and tails following close behind. The Ring Tailed Panther walked back to the cottonwoods and awoke his companions, because it was now full day.

"I saw some wild horses grazing close by," he said, "an' that means that nobody else is near. Mebbe we can ride clean to San Antonio without anybody to stop us."

"And gain great information for the Texans," said Urrea quickly. "Houston is to command the forces of Eastern Texas, and he will be glad enough to know just what Cos is doing."

"And glad will we be to take such news to him," said Ned. "I've seen him and talked with him, Don Francisco. He is a great man. And I've ridden, too, with Jim Bowie and 'Deaf' Smith and Karnes."

Urrea smiled pleasantly at Ned's boyish enthusiasm.

"And they are great men, too," he said, "Bowie, Smith and Karnes. I should not want any one of them to send his bullet at me."

"Jim Bowie is best with the knife," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "but I guess no better shots than 'Deaf' Smith and Hank Karnes were ever born."

"A horseman is coming," said Ned who was in advance. The boy had shaded his eyes from the sun, and his uncommonly keen sight had detected the black moving speck before any of the others could see it.

"It's sure to be a Texan," said Obed. "You won't find any Mexican riding alone on these plains just now."

They rode forward to meet him and the horseman, who evidently had keen eyes, too, came forward with equal confidence. It soon became obvious that he was a Texan as Obed had predicted. His length of limb and body showed despite the fact that he was on horseback, and the long rifle that he carried across the saddle bow was of the frontier type.

"My name is Jim Potter," he said as he came within hailing distance.

"You're welcome, Jim Potter," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "The long, red-headed man here on my right is Obed White, the boy is Ned Fulton; our young Mexican friend, who is a good Texan patriot, is Don Francisco Urrea, an' as for me, I'm Martin Palmer, better an' more properly known as the Ring Tailed Panther."

"I've heard of you, Panther," said Potter, "and you and your friends are just the people I want."

He spoke with great eagerness, and the soul of the Ring Tailed Panther, foreseeing an impending crisis of some kind, responded.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A crowd is gathering to march on Goliad," replied Potter. "The Mexican commander there is treating the people with great cruelty and he is sending out parties to harass lone Texan homes. We mean to smite him."

Potter spoke with a certain solemnity of manner and he had the lean, ascetic face of the Puritan. Ned judged that he was from one of the Northern States of New England, but Obed, a Maine man, was sure of it.

"Friend," said Obed, "from which state do you come, New Hampshire or Vermont? I take it that it is Vermont."

"It is Vermont as you rightly surmise," replied Potter, "and the accent with which you speak, if I mistake not is found only in Maine."

"A good guess, also," said Obed, "but we are both now Texans, heart and soul; is it not so?"

"It is even so," replied Potter gravely. Then he and Obed reached across from their horses and gave each other a powerful clasp.

"You will go with us to Goliad and help smite the heathen?" said Potter.

Obed glanced at his comrades, and all of them nodded.

"We were riding to San Antonio," said the Maine man, "to find out what was going on there, but I see no reason why we should not turn aside to help you, since we seem to be needed."

"Our need of you is great," said Potter in his solemn, unchanging tones, "as we are but few, and the enemy may be wary. Yet we must smite him and smite him hard."

"Then lead the way," said Obed. "It's better to be too soon than too late."

Without another word Potter turned his horse toward the south. He was tall and rawboned, his face burned well by the sun, but he had an angularity and he bore himself with a certain stiffness that did not belong to the "Texans" of Southern birth. Ned did not doubt that he would be most formidable in combat.

After riding at least two hours without anyone speaking a word, Potter said:

"We will meet the remainder of our friends and comrades about nightfall. We will not exceed fifty, and more probably we shall be scarcely so many as that, but with the strength of a just cause in our arms it is likely that we shall be enough."

"When we charged at Gonzales they stayed for but one look at our faces," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "Then they ran so fast that they were rippin' an' tearin' up the prairie for the next twenty-four hours."

"I have heard of that," said Potter with a grave smile. "The grass so far from growing scarcely bent under their feet. Still, the Mexicans at times will fight with the greatest courage."

Here Urrea spoke.

"My friends," he said, "I must now leave you. I have an uncle and cousins on the San Antonio River, not far above Goliad. Like myself they are devoted adherents of the Texan cause, and it is more than likely that they will suffer terribly at the hands of some raiding party from Goliad, if they are not warned in time. I have tried to steel my heart and go straight with you to Goliad, but I cannot forget those who are so dear to me. However, it is highly probable that I can give them the warning to flee, and yet rejoin you in time for the attack."

"We hate to lose a good man, when there's rippin' an' tearin' ahead of us," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

"But if people of his blood are in such great danger he must even go," said Potter.

Urrea's face was drawn with lines of mental pain. His expressive eyes showed great doubt and anguish. Ned felt very sorry for him.

"It is a most cruel quandary," said Urrea. "I would go with you, and yet I would stay. Texas and her cause have my love, but to us of Mexican blood the family also is very, very dear."

His voice faltered and Latin tears stood in his eyes.

"Go," said Obed. "You must save your kin, and perhaps, as you hope, you can rejoin us in time."

"Farewell," said Urrea, "but you will see me again soon."

He spurred his horse, a powerful animal, and went ahead at a gallop. Soon he disappeared over the swells of the prairie.

"I hate to see him go," growled the Ring Tailed Panther. "Mexicans are uncertain even when they are on your side. But he's a big strong fellow, an' he'd be handy in the fight for which we're lookin'."

But he kept Ned's sympathy.

"He must save his people," said the boy.

Obed and Potter said nothing. At twilight they found the other men waiting for them in a thicket of mesquite, and the total, including the four, was only forty. But with Texan daring and courage they made straight for Goliad, and Ned did not doubt that they would have a fight. Life was now moving fast for him, and it was crowded with incident.

The troop in loose formation rode swiftly, but the hoofs of their horses made little sound on the prairie. The southern moon rode low, and the night was clear. They crossed two or three creeks, and also went through narrow belts of forest, but they never halted or hesitated. Potter and several others knew the way well, and night was the same as day to them.

At midnight Ned saw a wide but shallow stream, much like the Guadalupe. Trees and reeds lined its banks. Potter informed him that this was the San Antonio River, and that they were now below the town of Goliad, where they meant to attack the Mexican force.

"And if Providence favors us," said Potter, "we shall smite them quick and hard."

"Providence favors those who hit first and hard," said Obed, mixing various quotations.

The men forded the river, and, after a brief stop began to move cautiously through thickets of mesquite and chaparral toward the town, the lights of which they could not yet see. At one point the mesquite became so thick that Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther dismounted, in order to pick their way and led their horses.

Ned, who was in advance, heard a noise, as of something moving in the thicket. At first he thought it was a deer, but the sounds ceased suddenly, as if whatever made them were trying to seek safety in concealment rather than flight. Ned's experience had already made him skillful and daring. The warrior's instinct, born in him, was developing rapidly, and flinging his bridle to Obed he asked him to hold it for a moment.

Before the surprised man could ask why, Ned left him with the reins in his hand, cocked his rifle and crept through the mesquite toward the point whence the sounds had come. He saw a stooping shadow, and then a man sprang up. Quick as a flash Ned covered him with his rifle.

"Surrender!" he cried.

"Gladly," cried the man, throwing up his hands and laughing in a hysterical way. "I yield because you must be a Texan. That cannot be the voice of any Mexican."

Obed and the others came forward and the man strode toward them. He was tall, but gaunt and worn, until he was not much more than a skeleton. His clothing, mere rags, hung loosely on a figure that was now much too narrow for them. Two bloodshot eyes burned in dark caverns.

"Thank God," he cried, "you are Texans, all of you!"

"Why, it's Ben Milam," said Potter. "We thought you were a prisoner at Monterey in Mexico."

"I was," replied Milam, one of the Texan leaders, "but I escaped and obtained a horse. I have ridden nearly seven hundred miles day and night. My horse dropped dead down there in the chaparral and I've been here, trying to take a look at Goliad, uncertain about going in, because I do not know whether it is held by Texans or Mexicans."

"It is held by Mexicans at present," replied Potter, solemnly. "But I think that within an hour or two it will be held by Texans."

"If it ain't there'll be some mighty roarin' an' rippin' an' tearin'," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

"Give me a bite to eat and something to drink," said Milam; "and I'll help you turn Goliad from a Mexican into a Texan town."

Exhausted and nearly starved, he showed, nevertheless, the dauntless spirit of the Texans. Food and drink were given to him and the little party moved toward the town. Presently they saw one or two lights. Far off a dog howled, but it was only at the moon. He had not scented them. By and by the ground grew so rough and the bushes so thick that all dismounted and tethered their horses. Then they crept into the very edge of the town, still unseen and unheard. Potter pointed to a large building.

"That," he said, "is the headquarters of Colonel Sandoval, the commandant, and if you look closely you will see a sentinel walking up and down before the door."

"We will make a rush for that house," said the leader of the Texans, "and call upon the sentinel to yield."

They slipped from the cover and ran toward the house, shouting to the Mexican on guard to surrender. But he fired at them point blank, although his bullet missed, and a shot from one of the Texans slew him. The next moment they were thundering at the door of the house, in which were Sandoval and the larger part of his garrison. The door held fast, and shots were fired at them from the windows.

Some of the Texans ran to the neighboring houses, obtained axes and smashed in the door. Then they poured in, every man striving to be first, and most of the Mexicans fled through the back doors or the windows, escaping in the darkness into the mesquite and chaparral. Sandoval himself, half dressed, was taken by the Ring Tailed Panther and Obed. He made many threats, but Obed replied:

"You have chosen war and the Texans are giving it to you as best they can. Our bullets fall on all Mexicans, whether just or unjust."

Sandoval said no more, but finished his interrupted toilet. It was clear to Ned, watching his face, that the Mexican colonel considered all the Texans doomed, despite their success of the moment. Sandoval was still in his quarters. His arms had been taken away but he suffered no ill treatment. Despite the rapid flight of the Mexican soldiers twenty-five or thirty had been taken and they were held outside. The Texans not knowing what to do with them decided to release them later on parole.

Ned was about to leave Sandoval's room when he met at the door a young man, perspiring, wild of eye and bearing all the other signs of haste and excitement. It was Francisco Urrea.

"I am too late!" he cried. "Alas! Alas! I would have had a share in this glorious combat! I should like to have taken Sandoval with my own hand! I have cause to hate that man!"

Sandoval was sitting on the edge of his bed, and the eyes of the two Mexicans flashed anger at each other, Urrea went up, and shook his hand in the face of Sandoval. Sandoval shook his in the face of Urrea. Wrath was equal between them. Fierce words were exchanged with such swiftness that Ned could not understand them. He judged that the young Mexican must have some deep cause for hatred of Sandoval. But the Ring Tailed Panther interfered. He did not like this trait of abusing a fallen foe which he considered typically Mexican.

"Come away, Don Francisco," he said. "The rippin' an' tearin' are over an' we can do our roarin' outside!"

He took Urrea by the arm and led him away. Ned preceded them. Outside he met Obed who was in the highest spirits.

"We've done more than capture Mexicans," he said. "It never rains but it turns into a storm. We've gone through the Mexican barracks and we've made a big haul here. Let's take a look."

Ned went with him, and, when he saw, he too exulted. Goliad had been made a place of supply by the Mexicans, and, stored there, the Texans had taken a vast quantity of ammunition, rounds of powder and lead to the scores of thousands, five hundred rifles and three fine cannons. Some of the Texans joined hands in a wild Indian dance, when they saw their spoils, and the eyes of Ned and Obed glistened.

"Unto the righteous shall be given," said Obed. "We've done far better to-night than we hoped. We'll need these in the advance on Cos and San Antonio."

"They will be of the greatest service," said Urrea who joined them at that moment. "How I envy you your glory!"

"What happened to you, Don Francisco?" asked Obed.

"I carried the warning to my uncle and his family," replied Urrea. "I was just in time. Guerrillas of Cos came an hour later, and burned the house to the ground. They destroyed everything, the stables and barns, and they even killed the horses and the cattle. Ah, what a ruin! I rode back by there on my way to Goliad."

The young Mexican pressed his hands over his eyes and Ned thrilled with sympathy.

"What became of your uncle and his family?" asked the boy.

"They rode north for San Felipe de Austin. They will be safe but they lose all."

"Never mind," said Obed, "we'll make the Mexicans pay it back, when we drive 'em out of Texas. I don't believe that any good patriot will suffer."

"Nevertheless," said Urrea, "my uncle is willing to lose and endure for the cause."

Ned slept half through the morning in one of the little adobe houses, and at noon he, Obed, the Ring Tailed Panther and others rode toward San Antonio. They slept that night in a pecan grove, and the next day continued their journey, meeting in the morning a Texan who informed them that Cos with a formidable force was in San Antonio. He also confirmed the information that the Texans were gathering from all points for the attack upon this, the greatest Mexican fortress in all Texas. Mr. Austin was commander-in-chief of the forces, but he wished to yield the place to Houston who would not take it.

Late in the afternoon they saw horsemen and rode toward them boldly. The group was sixty or eighty in number and they stopped for the smaller body to approach. Ned's keen eyes recognized them first, and he uttered a cry of joy.

"There's Mr. Bowie," he said, "and there are Smith and Karnes, too! They are all on their way to San Antonio."

He took off his hat and waved it joyously. Smith and Karnes did the same and Bowie smiled gravely as the boy rode up.

"Well, Ned," he said, "we meet again and I judge that we ride on the same errand."

"We do. To San Antonio."

"An' there'll be the biggest fight that was ever seen in Texas," said the Ring Tailed Panther, who knew Bowie well. "If Mexicans an' Texans want to get to roarin' an' rippin' they'll have the chance."

"They will, Panther," said Bowie, still smiling gravely. Then he looked inquiringly at Urrea.

"This is Don Francisco Urrea," said Obed. "He was born in Texas, and he is with us heart and soul. By a hard ride he saved his uncle and family from slaughter by the guerrillas of Cos, and he reached Goliad just a few minutes too late to take part in the capture of the Mexican force."

"Some of the Mexicans born in Texas are with us," said Bowie, "and before we are through at San Antonio, Don Francisco, you will have a good chance to prove your loyalty to Texas."

"I shall prove it," said Urrea vehemently.

"The place for the gathering of our troops is on Salado Creek near San Antonio," said Bowie, "and I think that we shall find both Mr. Austin and General Houston there."

Bowie was extremely anxious to be at a conference with the leaders, and taking Ned, Obed, the Ring Tailed Panther and a few others he rode ahead. Ned suggested that Urrea go too, but Bowie did not seem anxious about him, and he was left behind.

"Maybe he would not be extremely eager to fire upon people of his own blood if we should happen to meet the Mexican lancers," said Bowie. "I don't like to put a man to such a test before I have to do it."

Urrea showed disappointment, but, after some remonstrance, he submitted with a fair grace.

"I'll see you again before San Antonio," he said to Ned.

Ned shook his hand, and galloped away with the little troop, which all told numbered only sixteen. Bowie kept them at a rapid pace until sundown and far after. Ned saw that the man was full of care, and he too appreciated the importance of the situation. Events were coming to a crisis and very soon the Texans and the army of Cos would stand face to face.

They slept on the open prairie, and were in the saddle again before dawn. Bowie now curved a little to the North. They were coming into country over which Mexicans rode, and he did not wish a clash. But the Ring Tailed Panther was not sanguine about a free passage, nor did he seem to care.

"It's likely that the Mexican bands are out ridin'," he said. "Cos ain't no fool, an' he'll be on the lookout for us. There's more timber as you come toward San Antonio, an' there'll be a lot of chances for ambushes."

"I believe you are hoping for one," said Ned.

The Ring Tailed Panther did not answer, but he looked upon this young friend of his of whom he thought so much, and his dark face parted in one of the broadest smiles that Ned had ever seen.

"I ain't runnin' away from the chance of it," he replied.

They saw a little later a belt of timber to their right. Ned's experience told him that it masked the bed of a creek, probably flowing to the San Antonio River, and he noticed, although they were at some distance, that the trees seemed to be of unusually fine growth. This fact first attracted his attention, but he lost sight of it when he saw a glint of unusually bright light among the trunks. He looked more closely. Here again experience was of value. It was the peculiar kind of light that he had seen before, when a ray from the sun struck squarely on the steel head of a lance.

"Look!" he said to Obed and Bowie.

They looked, and Bowie instantly halted his men. The face of the Ring Tailed Panther suddenly lighted up. He too had good eyes, and he said in tones of satisfaction:

"Figures are movin' among the trees, an' they are those of mounted men with lances. Texans don't carry lances an' I think we shall be attacked by a Mexican force within a few minutes, Colonel Bowie."

"It is altogether probable," replied Bowie. "See, they are coming from the wood, and they number at least sixty."

"Nearer seventy, I think," said Obed.

"Whether sixty or seventy, they are not too many for us to handle," said Bowie.

The Mexicans had seen the little group of Texans and they were coming fast. The wind brought their shouts and they brandished their long lances. Ned observed with admiration how cool Bowie and all the men remained.

"Ride up in a line," said Bowie. "Here, Ned, bring your horse by me and all of you face the Mexicans. Loosen your pistols, and when I give the word to fire let 'em have it with your rifles."

They were on the crest of one of the swells and the sixteen horses stood in a row so straight that a line stretched across their front would have touched the head of every one. They were trained horses, too, and the riders dropped the reins on their necks, while they held their rifles ready.

It was hard for Ned to keep his nerves steady, but Obed was on one side of him and Bowie on the other, while the Ring Tailed Panther was just beyond Obed. Pride as well as necessity kept him motionless and taut like the others.

Doubtless the Mexicans would have turned, had it not been for the smallness of the force opposed to them, but they came on rapidly in a long line, still shouting and brandishing their weapons. Ned saw the flaming eyes of the horses, and he marked the foam upon their jaws. For what was Bowie waiting! Nearer they came, and the beat of the hoofs thundered in his ears. It seemed that the flashing steel of the lances was at his throat. He had already raised his rifle and was taking aim at the man in front of him, all his nerves now taut for the conflict.

"Fire!" cried Bowie, and sixteen rifles were discharged as one.

Not a bullet went astray. The Mexican line was split asunder, and horses and men went down in a mass. A few, horses and men, rose, and ran across the plain. But the wings of the Mexican force closed in, and continued the charge, expecting victory, now that the rifles were empty. But they forgot the pistols. Ned snatched his from the holster, and fired directly into the evil face of a lancer who was about to crash into him. The Mexican fell to the ground and his horse, swerving to one side, galloped on.

The pistols cracked all around Ned, and then, the Mexicans, sheering off, fled as rapidly as they had charged. But they left several behind who would never charge again.

"All right, Ned?" said the cheery voice of Obed.

"Not hurt at all," replied the boy. But as he spoke he gazed down at the face of the man who had tried to crash into him, and he shuddered. He knew that face. At the first glance it had seemed familiar, and at the second he had remembered perfectly. It was the face of the man who had struck him with the butt of a lance on that march in Mexico, when he was the prisoner of Cos. It seemed a vengeance dealt out by the hand of fate. He who had received the blow had given it in return, although not knowing at the time. Ned recognized the justice of fate, but he did not rejoice. Nor did he speak of the coincidence to anyone. It was not a thing of which he wished to talk.

"They're gone," said the Ring Tailed Panther, speaking now in satisfied tones. "They came, they stayed half a minute, an' then they went, but there was some rippin' an' tearin' an' chawin'."

"Yes, they've gone, and they've gone to stay," said Bowie. "It was a foolish thing to do to charge Texans armed with rifles on the open prairie."

Ned was looking at the last Mexican as he disappeared over the plain.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OLD CONVENT

The Texans gathered up the arms of the fallen Mexicans, except the lances for which they had no use, finding several good rifles and a number of pistols of improved make which were likely to prove of great value, and then they rode on as briskly as if nothing had happened.

The next day they drew near to San Antonio and entered the beautiful valley made by the San Antonio River and the creek to which the Mexicans gave the name San Pedro. Ned found it all very luxuriant and very refreshing to eyes tired of the prairies and the plains. Despite the fact that it was the middle of October the green yet endured in that southern latitude. Splendid forests still in foliage bounded both creek and river. They rode through noble groves of oak and tall pecans. They saw many fine springs spouting from the earth, and emptying into river and creek.

It was a noble land, but, although it had been settled long by Spaniard and Mexican, the wilderness still endured in many of its aspects. Now and then a deer sprang up from the thickets, and the wild turkeys still roosted in the trees. Churches and other buildings, many of massive stone adorned with carved and costly marbles, extended ten or twelve miles down the river, but most of them were abandoned and in decay. The Comanche and his savage brother, the Apache, had raided to the very gates of San Antonio. The deep irrigation ditches, dug by the Spanish priests and their Indian converts, were abandoned, and mud and refuse were fast filling them up. Already an old civilization, sunk in decay, was ready to give place to another, rude and raw, but full of youth and vigor.

It was likely that Ned alone felt these truths, as they reached the lowest outskirts of the missions, and stopped at an abandoned stone convent, built at the very edge of the San Antonio, where the waters of the river, green and clear, flowed between banks clothed in a deep and luxuriant foliage. Half of the troop entered the convent, while the others watched on the horses outside. It impressed Ned with a sense of desolation fully equal to that of the ancient pyramid or the lost city. Everything of value that the nuns had not taken away had been stripped from the place by Comanche, Apache or Lipan.

It was nearly night when they arrived at the convent. The Texan camp still lay some miles away, their horses were very tired, and Bowie decided to remain in the ruined building until morning. The main portion of the structure was of stone, two stories high, but there were some extensions of wood, from one of which the floor had been taken away by plunderers. It was Ned who discovered this floorless room and he suggested that they lead the horses into it, especially as the night was turning quite cold, and there were signs of rain.

"A good thought," said Bowie. "We'll do it."

The horses made some trouble at the door, but when they were finally driven in, and unsaddled and unbridled they seemed content. Two windows, from which the glass was long since gone, admitted an abundance of air, and Ned and several others, taking their big bowie knives, went out to cut grass for them.

On foot, Ned was impressed more than ever by the desolation and loneliness of the place. The grounds had been surrounded by an adobe wall, now broken through in many places. On one side had been a little flower garden, and on the other a larger kitchen garden. One or two late roses bloomed in the flower garden, but most of it had been destroyed by weather.

Ned and the others cut armfuls of grass in a little meadow, just beyond the adobe wall, and they hastened the work. They did not like the looks of the night. The skies were darkening very fast, and they saw occasional flashes of lightning in the far southwest. Ned looked back at the convent. It was now an almost formless bulk against the somber sky, its most prominent feature being the cupola in which a bronze bell still hung.

The wind rose and cold drops of rain struck him. He shivered. It promised to be one of those raw, cold nights frequent in the southwest, and he knew that the rain would be chill and penetrating. He was glad that they had found the convent.

They gave the grass to the horses, and then they went into the main portion of the convent, where Bowie and the rest were already at work. Here the ruin was not so great, as the Spaniards had built in a solid manner, according to their custom. They found a large room, with an open fireplace, in which Ned would have been glad to see wood blazing, but Bowie did not consider it worth while to gather materials for a fire. Adjoining this room was a chapel, in which a pulpit, a desecrated image of the Virgin, and some frames without the pictures, yet remained. Anger filled Ned's heart that anyone should plunder and spoil such a place, and he turned sorrowfully away.

Back of the large rooms were workrooms, kitchen and laundry, all stripped of nearly everything. The narrow stairway that led to the upper floor was in good condition, and, when Ned mounted it, he saw rows of narrow little cell-like rooms in which the nuns had slept. All were bleak and bare, but, from a broken window at the end of the corridor, he looked out upon the San Antonio and the forests of oak and pecan. He could barely see the river, the night had grown so dark. The cold rain increased and was lashed against the building by a moaning wind. Once more Ned shivered, and once more he was glad that they had found the old convent. He was glad to return to the main room, where Bowie and the others were gathered.

The room had been lighted by two windows, facing the San Antonio and two on the side. They had been closed originally by shutters, which were now gone, but as the windows were narrow the driving rain did not enter far. One or two of the men, sharing Ned's earlier feeling, spoke up in favor of a fire. They wanted the cheerfulness that light and warmth give. But Bowie refused again.

"Not necessary," he said. "We are here in the enemy's country, and we do not want to give him warning of our presence. We met the lancers to-day, and we have no desire to meet them again to-night."

"Right," the Ring Tailed Panther roared gently to Ned. "When you're makin' war you must fight first an' take your pleasure afterward."

It was warm enough in the room and the open windows gave them all the air they needed. Every man, except those detailed for the guard, spread his blankets and went to sleep. Ned was on the early watch. He, too, would have liked sleep. He could have felt wonderfully fine rolled in the blankets with the cold rain pattering on the walls outside. But he was chosen for the first watch, and his time would come later.

Ned was posted at a broken door that led to the extension in which the horses were sheltered. The remaining sentinels, three in number, including the Ring Tailed Panther, were stationed in different parts of the building. The boy from his position in the broken doorway could see into the room where his comrades slept, and, when he looked in the other direction, he could also see the horses, some of which were now lying down.

It was all very still in the old convent. So deep was this silence that Ned began to fancy that he heard the breathing of his sleeping comrades. It was only fancy. The horses had ceased to stir. Perhaps they were as glad as the men that they had found shelter. But outside Ned heard distinctly the moaning of the wind, and the lashing of the cold rain against roof and walls.

On the right where the extension had been connected with the main building of stone there was a great opening, and through this Ned looked down toward the adobe wall and the San Antonio. He saw dimly across the river a dark waving mass which he knew to be the pecan trees, bending in the wind, but on his own side of the stream he could distinguish nothing. But he watched there unceasingly, save for occasional glances at the horses or his sleeping comrades.

He could now see objects very well within the room. He was able to count his comrades sleeping on the floor. He saw two empty picture frames on the wall, and, near by, a rope, which he surmised led to the bell in the cupola, and which some chance had allowed to remain there. Now and then Ned and one of his comrades of the watch met and exchanged a few words, but they always spoke in whispers, lest they awaken the sleeping men. After these brief meetings Ned would return to his watch at the opening.

The character of the night did not change as time trailed its slow length away. One solid black cloud covered the sky from horizon to horizon. The wind out of the southwest never ceased to moan, and the cold rain blew steadily upon the walls and roof of the ruined convent. It was not a night when either Texans or Mexicans would wish to be abroad, and, as the chill grew sharper and more penetrating, Ned wrapped one of his blankets about his shoulders.

As the night advanced, Ned's sense of oppression deepened. He felt once more as he had felt at the pyramid, that he was among old dead things. Ghosts could walk here as truly as they could walk on the banks of the Teotihuacan. Sometimes as the great cloud lightened the least bit he caught glimpses of the grass and weeds that grew between him and the broken adobe wall which was about fifteen yards away.

Only an hour more, and the second watch would come on. Ned began to think of his place on the floor, and of the deep and dreamless sleep that he knew would be his. Then he was attracted by a glimpse of the adobe wall. It seemed to him that he had seen a projection, where there was none before. He looked a second time, and he did not see it. Fancy played strange tricks at midnight in the enemy's country, and in the desolate silence.

Ned shook himself. Although a vivid imagination might be excusable at such a time even in a man, a veteran of many campaigns, he was essentially an uncompromising realist, and he wished to see facts exactly as they were. The work upon which he was engaged allowed no time for the breeding of fancy.

He looked again and there were two projections where he had seen only one before. They resembled knobs on the adobe wall, rising perhaps half a foot above it, and the sight troubled Ned. Was fancy to prove too strong, when he had drilled himself so long to see the real? Was he to be played with by the imagination, as if he had no will of his own?

He thought once of speaking to the sentinels at the other doors, but he could not compel himself to do it. They would laugh at him, and it is a bitter thing to be laughed at. So he kept his watch, and while he looked the projections appeared, disappeared and appeared once more.

He could stand it no longer. Putting his rifle under his blanket in order to keep the weapon dry he stepped out of doors, but flattened himself against the wall of the convent. The rain and wind whipped him unmercifully, and the cold ran through him, but he was resolved to see what was happening by the adobe wall. The projections were there and they had increased to four. They did not go away.

Ned was now convinced that it was not fancy. His mind had obeyed his will, and he was the true realist, no victim of the imagination. He was about to kneel down in the grass, and crawl toward the wall, when something caused him to change his mind. One of the projections suddenly extended a full yard above the wall, and resolved itself into the shape of a man. But what a man! The body from the waist up was naked, and above it rose a head crested with long hair, black and coarse. Other heads and bodies also savage and naked rose up beside it on the wall. Ned knew in an instant and springing back within the convent he cried:

"Comanches! Comanches! Up men, up!"

At the same moment, acting on impulse, he seized the rope that hung by the wall and pulled it hard, fast and often. Above in the cupola the great bronze bell boomed forth a tremendous solemn note that rose far over the moaning of the wind. From the adobe wall came a fierce yell, a sinister cry that swelled until it became a high and piercing volume of sound, and then died away in a menacing note like the howl of wolves. But Ned, impulse still his master, never ceased to pull the bell.

All the Texans were on their feet at once, wide awake, rifles in their hands.

"Lie down, men, by the doors!" cried Bowie, "and shoot anything that tries to come in. Ned, let go the rope, you are in range there, and lie down with us! But you have done well, boy! You have done well! You have saved us all from being scalped, and perhaps the booming of the big bell will bring us help that we may need badly!"

Ned threw himself on the floor just in time to avoid a bullet that sang in at the open doorway. But no other shot was fired then. The Comanches in silence sank back into the darkness and the rain. The defenders lay on the floor, guarding the doorways with open rifles. They could not see much, but they could hear well, and since Ned had given the warning in time every one of the little party felt that they held a fortress.

Ned's pulses were still leaping, but great pride was in his heart. It was he, not one of the veterans, who had saved them, and Bowie had instantly spoken words of high approval. He was now lying flat on the floor, but he looked out once more at the same opening. There were certainly no projections on the wall now, but he could not tell whether the Comanches were inside it or outside. If they crept to the sides of the convent's stone walls the riflemen could not reach them there. He wondered how many they were and how they had happened to raid so near to San Antonio at this time.

Then ensued a long and trying period of silence. Less experienced men than the Texans might have thought that the Comanches had gone away after the failure of their attempt at surprise, but these veterans knew better. Bowie and all of them were trying to divine their point of attack and how to meet it. For the present, they could do nothing but watch the doorways, and guard themselves against a sudden rush of their dangerous foe.

"Panther," said Obed White, "it seems to me that you're getting all the ripping and tearing and chawing that you want on this trip."

"It ain't what you might call monotonous," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "I agree to that much."

It had been fully an hour now since Ned had rung the great bell, and they had heard no noises save the usual ones of that night, the wind

and the rain. He surmised at last that the Comanches had taken advantage of the war between the Texans and Mexicans to make a raid on the San Antonio Valley, expecting to gallop in, do their terrible work, and then be away. Doubtless it had not occurred to them that they would meet such a group as that led by Bowie and the Ring Tailed Panther.

"Ned," said Bowie, "creep across the floor there to that rope and ring the bell again. Ring it a long time. Either it will hurry the Comanches into action, or friends of ours will hear it. It's likely that all the Mexicans have now withdrawn into San Antonio, and that only Texans, besides this band of Comanches, are abroad in the valley."

Ned wormed himself across the floor, and then, pressing himself against the wall, reached up for the rope. A strange thought darted into his brain. He had a deep feeling for music, and he could play both the violin and piano. He could also ring chimes. He was keyed to the utmost, every pulse and vein surcharged with the emotion that comes from a desperate situation and a great impulse to save it.

The great bell suddenly began to peal forth the air of The Star Spangled Banner. Some of the notes may have gone wrong, there may have been errors of time and emphasis, but the old tune, then young, was there. Every man lying on the floor, every one of whom was born in the States, knew it, and every heart leaped. Elsewhere it might have been a commonplace thing to do, but there in the night and the storm, surrounded by enemies, on a vast and lonely frontier it was an inspiration. Every Texan in the valley who heard it would know that it was the call of a friend asking for help, and he would come.

Not a Texan moved, but they breathed heavily. Overhead the great bell boomed solemnly on, and Ned, his hand on the rope, put all his heart and strength into the task. A rifle cracked and a bullet entered the doorway, but it passed over the heads of the Texans, and flattened against the stone wall beyond. A rifle inside cracked in response, and a Comanche in the grass and weeds uttered a death yell.

"I was watchin' for just such a chance," said the Ring Tailed Panther in satisfied tones. "I saw him when he rose to fire. Just as you thought, Mr. Bowie, the bell is makin' their nerves raw, an' they feel that they must do somethin' right away."

"What a queer note that was in Ned's tune!" suddenly exclaimed Obed.

Bowie laughed.

"An angry Comanche shot at the bell and hit it. That's what happened," he said. "They can waste as many bullets as they please that way."

But the Comanches wasted no more just then. A noise came from the horses. The shots evidently had alarmed them, and they were beginning to stamp and rear. Four men, at the order of Bowie, slipped into the improvised stable and sought to quiet them. They also remained there to keep a guard at the broken windows. Ned, unconscious how much time had passed, was still ringing the bell.

"You can rest now, Ned," said Bowie. "That was a good idea of yours and you can repeat it later on. I'm thinking that the Comanches will soon act, if they are going to act at all."

But nothing occurred for nearly an hour, when the horses began to rear and stamp again. Two or three of them also uttered shrill neighs. Bowie, with Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther joined the four already in the improvised stable. The horses would not be quieted. It was quite evident that instinct was warning them of something that human beings could not yet detect.

Ned wondered. He put his hand on the neck of his own horse which knew him well, yet the beast trembled all over, and uttered a sudden shrill neigh. It was quite dark in the place, only a little light coming through the broken windows, yet Ned was quite sure that no Comanches had managed to get inside, and lie in hiding there.

A few moments later the Ring Tailed Panther uttered a fierce cry.

"I smell smoke!" he cried. "That's why the horses are so scared. The demons have managed to set fire to this place which is wood. That's why they've been so quiet!"

Ned, too, now smelt the strong odor of smoke, and a spurt of fire appeared at a crack between two of the planks at the far end of the place. The struggles of the horses increased. They were wild with fright.

Ned instantly recognized the danger. The burning wooden building would fill the stone convent itself with flame and smoke, and make it untenable. The sparks already had become many, and the odor of smoke was increasing. Their situation, suddenly become desperate, was growing more so every instant. But they were Texans, inured to every kind of danger. Bowie shouted for more men to come from the convent, leaving only five or six on guard there.

Then the Texans began to bring method and procedure out of the turmoil. Some held the horses, others, led by Bowie, kicked loose the light planks where the fire had been started, and hurled them outward. They were nearly choked by the smoke but they worked on.

The Comanches, many of whom were hugging the wall, shouted their war cry, and began to fire into the opening that Bowie and his men had made. They could not take much aim, because of the smoke, but their bullets wounded two Texans. Despite the danger Bowie and most of his men were still compelled to work at the fire. The room was full of smoke, and behind them the horses were yet struggling with those who held them.

The Ring Tailed Panther lay down and resting himself on one elbow took aim with his rifle. He was almost clear of the smoke which hung in a bank above him. Ned noticed him and imitated him. He saw a dusky figure outside and when he fired it fell. The Ring Tailed Panther did as well, and Obed joined them. While Bowie and the others were dashing out the fire, three great marksmen were driving back the Comanches who sought to take advantage of the diversion.

"Good! good!" cried Bowie, as they knocked out the last burning plank.

"That ends the fire," said Obed, "and now we've got a hole here which is not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a barn door, but I do not think it will suffice for our friends, the Comanches."

All the men turned their attention to the enemy, and, lying on the ground, they took as good aim as the darkness would permit. The Texan rifles cracked fast and, despite the darkness, the bullets often found the chosen targets. The Comanches had been shouting the war whoop continuously, but now their cries began to die, and their fire died with it. Never a very good marksman, the Indian was no match for the Texans, every one of whom was a sharpshooter, armed with a fine rifle of long range.

The Texans also fired from the shelter of the building, and, as the great cloud was now parting, letting through shafts from the moon, the Comanches were unable to find good hiding in the weeds and grass. The bullets pursued them there. No matter how low they lay the keen eye of some Texan searched them out, and sent in the fatal or wounding bullet. Soon they were driven to the shelter of the adobe wall, where they lay, and for a little while returned a scattering fire which did no harm. After it ceased no Comanche uttered a war whoop and there was silence again, save for the rain which now trickled down softly.

Bowie distributed sentinels at the openings, including the new one made by the fire, and then the Texans took count of themselves. They had not escaped unscathed. One lying on the floor had received a bullet in his head and had died in silence, unnoticed in the battle. Two men had suffered wounds, but they were not severe, and would not keep them from taking part in a renewal of the combat, should it come.

All this reckoning was made in the dusk of the old convent, and with the weariness of both body and soul that comes after a period of great and prolonged exertion. Within the two rooms that they had defended, the odor of burned gunpowder was strong, stinging throat and nostrils. Eddies of smoke hung between floor and ceiling. Many of the men coughed, and it was long before they could reduce the horses to entire quiet.

They wrapped the dead man in his blankets and laid him in the corner. They bound up the hurts of the others, as best they could and then, save for the watching, they relaxed completely. Ned, his back against the wall, sat with his friends Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther. He was utterly exhausted, and even in the dusk the men noticed it.

"Here, Ned," said Obed, "take a chew of this. You may not feel that you need it, but it will be a good thing for you."

He extended a strip of dried venison. Ned thanked him and ate, although he had not felt hungry. By and by he grew stronger, and then Bowie called to him.

"Ned," he said, "crawl across the floor again. Be sure you do not raise your head until you reach the wall. Then ring the bell, until I tell you to stop. I've a notion that somebody will come by morning. Boys, the rest of you be ready with your rifles. It was the bell before that brought on the attack."

Ned slid across the floor, and once more pulled the rope with the old fervor, sending the notes of the tune that he could play best far out over the valley of the San Antonio. But no reply came from the Comanches. They did not dare to rush the place again in the face of those deadly Texan rifles. They made no sound while the bell played on, but the Texans knew that they still lay behind the adobe wall, ready for a shot at any incautious head.

Ned rang for a full half hour, before Bowie told him to quit. Then he crept back to his place. He put his head on his folded blanket and, although not intending it, fell asleep, despite the close air of the place. But he awoke before it was dawn, and hastily sat up, ashamed.

When he saw in the dark that half the men were asleep he was ashamed no longer. Bowie, who was standing by one of the doors, but sheltered from a shot, smiled at him.

"The sun will rise in a half hour, Ned," he said, "and you've waked up in time to hear the answer to your ringing of the bell. Listen!"

Ned strained his ears, and he heard a faint far sound, musical like his own call. It seemed to him to be the note of a trumpet.

"Horsemen are coming," said Bowie, "and unless I am far wrong they are Texans. Ring again, Ned."

The bell boomed forth once more, and for the last time. Clear and sharp, came the peal of the trumpet in answer. One by one the men awoke. The light was now appearing in the East, the gray trembling into silver. From the valley came the rapid beat of hoofs, a rifle shot and then three or four more. Bowie ran out at the door, and Ned followed him. Across the meadows the Comanches scurried on their ponies, and a group of white men sent a volley after them. Then the white men galloped toward the convent. Bowie walked forward to meet them.

"You were never more welcome, Fannin," he said to the leader of the group.

The man sprang from his horse, and grasped Bowie's hand.

"We rode as fast as we could, but I didn't know it was you, Jim," he said. "Some of our scouts heard a bell somewhere playing The Star Spangled Banner in the night. We thought they were dreaming, but they swore to it. So we concluded it must be a call for help and I came with the troop that you see here. We lost the direction once or twice, but the bell called us back."

"For that," said Bowie, "you have to thank this boy here, a boy in years only, a man in action, and two men in mind and courage. This is Ned Fulton, Colonel Fannin."

Ned blushed and expostulated, but Bowie took nothing back. Fannin looked about him curiously.

"You seem to have had something of a fight here," he said. "Down in the grass and weeds we saw several Comanches who will trouble no more."

"We had all we wanted," said Bowie, "and we shall be glad to ride at once with you to camp. I bring some good men for the cause, and there are more behind."

They buried the fallen man in the old flower garden, and then rode swiftly for the Texan camp on the Salado.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN SAN ANTONIO

It was a crisp October morning, and as he galloped through the fresh air, all of Ned's spirits came back to him. He would soon be with the full array of the Texans, marching forward boldly to meet Cos himself and all his forces. The great strain of the fight the night before passed away as he inhaled the sparkling air. The red came back to his cheeks, and he felt that he was ready to go wherever the boldest of the Texans led. The Ring Tailed Panther shared his emotions.

"Fine, isn't it?" said he. "Great valley, too, but it oughtn't to belong to the Mexicans. It's been going down under them for a long time. They haven't been able to protect it from Comanches, Apaches and Lipans. The old convent that we held last night had been abandoned for fear of the Indians, an' lots of other work that the Spaniards an' Mexicans did has gone the same way."

The beauty of the country increased, as they rode. Fine springs of cold water gushed from the hills and flowed down into the clear green stream of the San Antonio. The groves of oaks and pecans were superb, but they passed more desolate and abandoned buildings and crossed more irrigation ditches choked up with refuse.

Bowie called Ned up to his side, and had him to relate again all that he had seen and heard in Mexico.

"Mr. Austin is at the camp," said Fannin, "and he has been asking about you."

Ned's heart thrilled. There was a strong bond between him and the gentle, kindly man who strove so hard to serve both Texas and Mexico, and whom Santa Anna had long kept a prisoner for his pains.

"When will we reach the camp?" he asked Bowie.

"In less than a half hour. See, the scouts have already sighted us."

The scouts came up in a few moments, and then they drew near the camp. Ned, eager of eye, observed everything.

The heart of the camp was in the center of a pecan grove, where a few tents for the leading men stood, but the Texans were spread all about in both groves and meadows, where they slept under the open sky. They wore no uniforms. All were in hunting suits of dressed deerskin or homespun, but they were well armed with the long rifles which they knew how to use with such wonderful skill. They had no military tactics, but they invariably pressed in where the foe was thickest and the danger greatest. They were gathered now in hundreds from all the Texas settlements to defend the homes that they had built in the wilderness, and Cos with his Mexican army did not dare to come out of San Antonio.

The Texans welcomed Bowie and his men with loud acclaim. Ned and his comrades unsaddled, tethered their horses and lay down luxuriously in the grass. Mr. Austin was busy in his tent at a conference of the leaders and Ned would wait until the afternoon to see him. Obed suggested that they take a nap.

"In war eat when you can and sleep when you can," he said. "Sleep lost once is lost forever."

"Obed has got some sense if he don't look like it," chuckled the Ring Tailed Panther. "Here's to followin' his advice."

Ned took it, too, and slept until the afternoon, when a messenger asked him to come to Mr. Austin's tent, a large one, with the sides now open. Obed was invited to come with him, and, as Ned stood in the door of the tent the mild, grave man advanced eagerly, a glow of pleasure and affection on his face.

"My boy! my boy!" he said, putting both hands on Ned's shoulders. "I was sure that I should never see you again, after you made your wonderful escape from our prison in Mexico. But you are here in Texas none the worse, and they tell me you have passed through a very Odyssey of hardship and danger."

Water stood in Ned's eyes. He rejoiced in the affection and esteem of this man, and yet Mr. Austin was very unlike the rest of the Texans. They were rough riders; men of the plains always ready to fight, but he, cultivated and scholarly, was for peace and soft words. He had used his methods, and they had failed, inuring only to the advantage of Santa Anna and Mexico. He had failed most honorably, but he looked very much worn and depressed. He was now heart and soul for the war, knowing that there was no other resort, but for battle he did not feel himself fitted.

Ned introduced Obed as the companion of most of his wanderings, and Obed received a warm greeting. Then other men in the great tent came forward, and Ned, surprised, saw that one of them was Urrea, dressed neatly, handsome and smiling. But the boy was glad to see him.

"Ah, Señor Ned," he said, "you did not expect that I would get here before you. I came by another way, and I have brought information for our leader."

Ned met the other men in the tent, all destined to become famous in the great war, and then he gave in detail once more all that he knew of the Mexicans and their plans. Mr. Austin sat on a little camp stool, as he listened, and Ned noticed how pale and weak he looked. The boy's heart sank, and then flamed up again as he thought of Santa Anna. It was he who had done this. Away from Santa Anna and free from his magnetism he had a heart full of hatred for him. Yet it depressed him to see Mr. Austin who, good man, was obviously unfit for the leadership of an army, about to enter upon a desperate war against great odds.

When Ned was excused, and left the tent he found that Smith, Karnes and the rest of their force had come up. The camp which was more like that of hunters than of an army, was in joyous mood. Several buffaloes had been killed on the plains and the men had brought them in, quartered. Now they were cooking the meat over great fires, scattered about the groves. The younger spirits were in boisterous mood. Several groups were singing, and others were dancing the breakdowns of the border.

Ned and Obed were joined by the Ring Tailed Panther and then by Urrea. Ned felt the high spirits of the young Texans, but he did not join in the singing and dancing. He learned from Urrea that Houston would arrive in a day or two with more volunteers from Eastern

Texas, and the young Mexican also told him something about San Antonio.

"Cos has a large force of regular troops," he said, "but he is alarmed. He did not think that the Texans were in such earnest, and that they would dare so much. Now, he is barricading the streets and building breastworks."

The Texans were so resolute and confident that the next day they sent a demand to Cos for his surrender. He would not receive it, and threatened that if another white flag appeared he would fire upon it. A day or two later, Houston and the Eastern Texans arrived, and Ned, Obed, the Ring Tailed Panther and Urrea planned a daring adventure for the following night. They had heard how Cos was fortifying San Antonio, and as they expected the Texan army to make an assault they intended to see just what he was doing.

They made their way very cautiously toward the town, left on foot when the full dark had come. It was only four miles to San Antonio, and they could reach the line of Mexican sentinels within an hour. The Ring Tailed Panther was growling pleasantly between his teeth. He had tired of inaction. His was a character such as only the rough world of the border could produce. If he did not live by the sword he lived by the rifle, and since childhood he had been in the midst of alarms. Long habit had made anything else tiresome to him beyond endurance, but he was by nature generous and kindly. Like Obed he had formed a strong attachment for Ned who appealed to him as a high-souled and generous youth.

They made their way very cautiously toward the town, passing by abandoned houses and crossing fields, overgrown with weeds. Both the Ring Tailed Panther and Urrea knew San Antonio well, and Obed had been there once. They were of the opinion that the town with its narrow streets, stone and adobe houses was adapted particularly to defense, but it was of the greatest importance to know just where the new outworks were placed.

The four came within sight of Mexican lights about nine o'clock. The town was in the midst of gently rolling prairies and as nearly as they could judge these lights—evidently those of camp fires—were about a quarter of a mile from San Antonio. They were three in number and appeared to be two or three hundred yards apart. They watched a little while but they did not see any human outlines passing in front of the fires.

"They are learnin' caution," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "They are afraid of the Texan rifles, an' while those fires light up a lot of ground they keep their own bodies back in the shadow."

"Wise men," said Obed.

The Ring Tailed Panther looked his companions in the eye, one by one.

"We come out here for business," he said. "What we want to acquire is learnin', learnin' about the new defenses of San Antonio, an' we'd feel cheap if we went back without it. Now, I don't care to feel cheap myself. Good, careful, quiet fellows could slip between them sentinels, an' get into San Antonio. I mean to do it. Are you game to go with me?"

"I am," said Urrea, speaking very quickly and eagerly.

"And I," said Ned.

"To turn back is to confess one's weakness," said Obed.

The Ring Tailed Panther roared gently, and with satisfaction.

"That's the talk I like to hear an' expected to hear," he said. "You boys ain't afraid of rippin' an' tearin', when it's in a good cause. There's pretty good grass here. We'll just kneel down in it, an' crawl."

The Panther marked a point about midway between the nearest two lights and they advanced straight for it on hands and knees, stopping at intervals of a hundred yards or so to rest, as that method of locomotion was neither convenient nor comfortable. As they drew near to the fires they saw the sentinels some distance back of them, and entirely in the shadow, pacing up and down, musket on shoulder. The four were now near enough to have been seen had they been standing erect, but they lay very close to the earth, while they conferred a moment or two.

"There's a patch of bushes between those two sentinels," whispered the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' I think we'd better creep by in its shelter. If either of the sentinels should look suspicious every one of us must lay flat an' hold his breath. We could handle the sentinels, but what we want to do is to get into San Antonio."

They continued their slow and tiresome creeping. Only once did they stop, and then it was because one of the sentinels paused in his walk and took his musket from his shoulder. But it was only to light a cigarette and, relieved, they crept on until they were well beyond the fires, and within the ring of sentinels. Then at the signal of the Ring Tailed Panther they rose to their feet, and stretched their cramped limbs.

"It is certainly good," whispered Obed, "to stand up on two legs again and walk like a man."

They were now very near to the town and they saw the dark shapes of houses, in some of which lights burned. It was the poorer portion of San Antonio, where the Mexican homes were mostly huts or jacals, made of adobe, and sometimes of mere mud and wattles. As all the four spoke Spanish, they advanced, confident in themselves, and the protecting shadows of the night. A dog barked at them, but Obed cursed him in good, strong Mexican, and he slunk away. Two peons wrapped to the eyes in serapes passed them but Obed boldly gave them the salutations of the night and they walked on, not dreaming that the dreaded Texans were by.

Fifty yards further they saw a long earthwork, with the spades and shovels lying beside it, as if the Mexicans expected to resume work there in the morning. Toward the north they saw another such defense but they did not go very near, as Mexican soldiers were camped beside it. But Ned retained a very clear idea of the location of the two earthworks.

Then they curved in toward the more important portion of the town, the center of which was two large squares, commonly called Main Plaza and Military Plaza, separated only by the church of San Fernando. Here were many houses built heavily of stone in the Spanish style. They had thick walls and deep embrasured windows. Often they looked like and were fortresses.

Ned and his comrades were extremely anxious to approach those squares, but the danger was now much greater. They saw barricades on several important streets and many soldiers were passing. They learned from a peon that both the squares and many other open places also were filled with the tents of the soldiers.

Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther having seen so much were eager to see more, but Urrea hung back. He thought they should return with the information they had obtained already, and not risk the loss of everything by capture, but the Ring Tailed Panther was determined.

"I know San Antonio by heart," he said, "an' there's somethin' I want to see. Down this street is the house of the Vice-Governor, Veramendi, and I want to see what is going on there. If the rest of you feel that the risk ain't justified you can turn back, but I'm goin' on."

"If you go I'm going with you," said Ned.

"Me, too," said Obed.

Urrea shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said. "It's against my judgment, but I follow."

They had pulled their slouch hats down over their faces, in the Mexican style, and they handled their rifles awkwardly, after the fashion of Mexican recruits. The Ring Tailed Panther led boldly down the street, until they came to the stone house of Veramendi. Lights shone from the deep embrasured windows of both the first and second floors. The Ring Tailed Panther saw a small door in the stone wall, and he pushed it open.

"Come in! Come quick!" he said to his comrades.

His tone was so sharp and commanding that they obeyed him by impulse, and he quickly closed the door behind the little party. They stood in a small, dark alley that ran beside the house and they heard the sound of music. Crouching against the wall they listened, and heard also the sounds of laughter and feminine voices.

The Ring Tailed Panther grinned in the darkness.

"Some kind of a fandango is goin' on," he said. "It's just like the Mexicans to dance and sing at such a time. I wouldn't be s'prised if Cos himself was here, an' I mean to see."

He led the way down the little alley, which was roughly paved with stone, and, as they advanced, the sounds of music and laughter increased. Unquestionably Governor Veramendi was giving a ball, and Ned did not doubt that the Panther's surmise about the presence of Cos would prove correct.

They found a little gate opening from the alley into a large patio or enclosed court. This gate, like the first, was not locked and the Ring

Tailed Panther pushed it open also. The patio was filled with palms, flowering plants and a dense shrubbery.

The Ring Tailed Panther again led boldly on, and entered the patio, hiding instantly among the palms and flowers. The others followed and did likewise. Ned quivered with excitement. He knew that the danger was great. He knew also that if they lay close and waited they were likely to hear what was worth hearing.

The boy was in a dense mat of shrubbery. To his right was Obed and to his left were the Ring Tailed Panther and Urrea. He saw that the patio was faced on three sides by piazzas or porticos, from which wide doors opened into the house. He heard the music now as clearly as if it were at his side. It was the music of a full band, and it was played with a mellow, gliding rhythm. He saw, also, officers in brilliant uniform and handsome women, as in the dance they passed and repassed the open doors. It was Spanish, Mexican to the core, full of the South, full of warmth and color. The lean, brown Texans crouching in the shrubbery furnished a striking contrast.

While they waited, several officers and ladies came out on the piazzas, ate ices and drank sweet drinks. They were so near that the four easily heard all they said. It was mostly idle chatter, high-pitched compliments, allusions to people in the distant City of Mexico, and now and then a jest at the expense of the Texans. Ned realized that many of the younger Mexicans did not take the siege of San Antonio seriously. They could not understand how a strong city, held by an army of Mexican regulars, could have anything to fear from a few hundred Texan horsemen, mostly hunters in buckskin.

The music began again and the officers and women went in, but presently several older men, also in uniform, came out. Ned instantly recognized in the first the square figure and the dark, lowering face of Cos.

"De La Garcia, Ugartchea, Veramendi," whispered the Ring Tailed Panther, indicating the others. "Now we may hear something."

Cos stood at the edge of the piazza and his face was troubled. He held in his hand a small cane, with which he cut angrily at the flowers. The others regarded him uneasily, but for a while he said nothing. Ned hardly breathed, so intense was his interest and curiosity, but when Cos at last spoke his disappointment was great.

The General complimented Veramendi on his house and hospitality, and the Vice-Governor thanked him in ornate sentences. Some more courtesies were exchanged, but Cos continued to cut off the heads of the flowers with his cane, and Ned knew now that they had come from the ballroom to talk of more important things. Meanwhile, the music flowed on. It was the swaying strains of the dance, and it would have been soothing to anyone, whose mind was not forced elsewhere. The flowers and the palms rippled gently under a light breeze, but Ned did not hear them. He was waiting to hear Cos speak of what was in the mind of himself and the other men on the piazza, the same things that were in the minds of the Texans in the shrubbery.

"Have you any further word from the Texan desperadoes, General?" asked Veramendi, at last.

Swish went the general's cane, and a flower fell from its stem.

"Nothing direct," he replied, his voice rising in anger.

"They have not sent again demanding my surrender knowing that a messenger would be shot. The impudence of these border horsemen passes all belief. How dare a few hundred such men undertake to besiege us here in San Antonio? What an insult to Mexico!"

"But they can fight," said Ugartchea. "They ride and shoot like demons. They will give us trouble."

"I know it," said Cos, "but the more trouble they make us the more they shall suffer. It was an evil day when the first American was allowed to come into Texas."

"Yet they will attack us here," persisted Ugartchea, "They have driven our men off the prairies. Our lances are not a match for their rifles. Your pardon, General, but it will be wise for us to fortify still further."

Cos frowned and made another wicked sweep with the cane. But he said:

"What you say is truth, Colonel Ugartchea, but with qualifications. Our men are not a match for them on the open prairie, but should they attack us here in the city they will be destroyed."

Then he asked further questions about the fortifications, and Ugartchea, who seemed to be in immediate charge, began to repeat the details. It was for this that the Texans had come into the patio, and Ned leaned forward eagerly. He saw Obed on one side of him and the Ring Tailed Panther on the other do the same. Suddenly there was a noise as of something falling in the shrubbery, and then a sharp whistle. The men on the piazza instantly looked in the direction of the hidden Texans. Cos and Ugartchea drew pistols.

The Ring Tailed Panther acted with the greatest promptness and decision.

"We must run for it, boys," he exclaimed in a loud whisper. "Something, I don't know what, has happened to warn them that we are here. Keep your heads low."

Still partly hidden by the palms and flowers they ran for the gate. Cos and Veramendi fired at the flitting forms and shouted for soldiers. Ned felt one of the bullets scorch the back of his hand, but in a few moments he was out of the gate and in the little dark alley. The Ring Tailed Panther was just before him, and Obed was just behind. The Panther, instead of running toward the street continued up the alley which led to a large building of adobe, in the rear of the governor's house.

"It's a stable and storehouse," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' we'll hide in it while the hunt roars on through the city."

He jerked open a door, and they rushed in. Ned in the dusk saw some horses eating in their stalls, and he also saw a steep ladder leading to lofts above. The Ring Tailed Panther never hesitated, but ran up the ladder and Ned followed sharply after him. He heard Obed panting at his heels.

The lofts contained dried maize and some vegetables, but they were mostly filled with hay. The fugitives plunged into the hay and pulled it around them, until only their heads and the muzzles of their rifles protruded. They lay for a few moments in silence, save for the sound of their own hard breathing, and then Ned suddenly noticed something. They were only three!

"Why, where is Urrea?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, where in thunder is Don Francisco?" said the Ring Tailed Panther in startled tones.

Urrea was certainly missing, and no one could tell when they had lost him. Their flight had been too hurried to take any count of numbers. There could be only one conclusion. Urrea had been taken in the patio. The Ring Tailed Panther roared between his teeth, low but savagely.

"I don't like many Mexicans," he said, "but I got to like Don Francisco. The Mexicans have shorely got him, an' it will go 'specially hard with him, he bein' of their own race."

Ned sighed. He did not like to think of Don Francisco at the mercy of Cos. But they could do nothing, absolutely nothing. To leave the hay meant certain capture within a few minutes. Already they heard the sounds of the hunt, the shouts of soldiers and the mob, of men calling to one another. Through the chinks in the wall they saw the light of torches in the alley. They lay still for a few minutes and then the noise of the search drifted down toward the plazas. The torches passed out of the alley.

"Did you hear that whistle just before Cos and Ugartchea fired?" asked Ned.

"I did," replied Obed. "I don't understand it, and what I don't understand bothers me."

The Ring Tailed Panther growled, and his growl was the most savage that Ned had ever heard from him. The growl did not turn into words for at least a minute. Then he said:

"I'm like you, Obed; I hate riddles, an' this is the worst one that I was ever mixed up with. Somethin' fell in the shrubbery; then came the whistle, the Mexicans shot, away we went, lickety split, an' now we're here. That's all I know, an' it ain't much."

"I wonder if we'll ever find out," said Ned.

"Doubtful," replied the Ring Tailed Panther. "I'm afeard, boys, they won't waste much time on Urrea, he bein' a spy an' of their own blood, too. It's war an' we've got to make the best of it."

But Ned could not make very well of it. A fugitive hidden there in the hay and the dark, the fate of Urrea seemed very terrible to him. The three sank into silence. Occasionally they heard cries from distant parts of the town, but the hunt did not seem to come back toward them. Ned was thankful that the Ring Tailed Panther had been so ready of wit. The Mexicans would not dream that the Texans were hiding in the Vice-Governor's own barn, just behind the Vice-Governor's own house. He made himself cozy in the hay and waited.

After about an hour, the town turned quiet, and Ned inferred that the hunt was over. The Mexicans, no doubt, would assume that the three had escaped from San Antonio, and they would not dare to hunt far out on the prairies. But what of Urrea! Poor Urrea! Ned could not keep from thinking of him, but think as hard as he could he saw no way to find out about his fate. Perhaps the Ring Tailed Panther was

right. They would never know.

The three did not stir for a long time. Ned felt very comfortable in the hay. The night was cold without, but here he was snug and warm. He waited for those older and more experienced than himself to decide upon their course and he knew that Obed or the Ring Tailed Panther would speak in time. He was almost in a doze when Obed said that it must be about one o'clock in the morning.

"You ain't far wrong," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "but I'd wait at least another hour. That ball will be over then, if we didn't break it up when we were in the garden."

They waited the full hour, and then they stole from the hay. Veramendi's house was silent and dark, and they passed safely into the street. Ned had a faint hope that Urrea would yet appear from some dark hiding place, but there was no sign of the young Mexican.

They chose the boldest possible course, thinking that it would be safest, claiming to one soldier whom they passed that they were sentinels going to their duty at the farthest outposts. Luck, as it usually does, came to the aid of courage and skill, and they reached the outskirts of San Antonio, without any attempt at interference.

Once more, after long and painful creeping, they stole between the sentinels, took mental note of the earthworks again, and also a last look at the dark bulk that was the town.

"Poor Urrea!" said Ned.

"Poor Urrea," said Obed. "I wonder what in the name of the moon and the stars gave the alarm!"

"Poor Urrea!" said the Ring Tailed Panther. "This is the worst riddle I ever run up ag'inst an' the more I think about it the more riddlin' it gets."

The three sighed together and then sped over the prairie toward the camp on the Salado.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE BY THE RIVER

It was not yet daylight when they approached the Texan camp. Despite the fact that the Texan force was merely a band of volunteer soldiers there was an abundance of sentinels and they were halted when they were within a half mile of the Salado. But they were recognized quickly, and they passed within the lines, where, in the first rosy shoot of the dawn, they saw Bowie going the rounds of the outposts.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Back already! Then you did not get into the town!"

"We went right into it. We split it wide open," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

Bowie's blue eyes glittered.

"But you are only three," he said. "Where is Urrea?"

"We lost him an' we don't know how it happened. We know that he's gone, an' that's all."

Bowie took them to Mr. Austin's tent, where they told to him, Houston, Fannin and the others all that they had seen in San Antonio. In view of the fact, now clearly proved, that Cos was fortifying night and day, Bowie and all the more ardent spirits urged a prompt attack, but Mr. Austin, essentially a man of peace, hung back. He thought their force too small. He was confirmed, too, in the belief of his own unfitness to be a leader in war.

"General," he said, turning to Houston, "you must take the command here. It would be impossible to find one better suited to the place."

But Houston shook his head. He would not agree to it. Able and ambitious, he refused, nevertheless. Perhaps he did not yet understand the full fighting power of the Texans, and he feared to be identified with failure, in case they made the assault upon San Antonio.

When Ned and his comrades withdrew from the tent they went to one of the breakfast fires, where they ate broiled strips of buffalo and deer, and drank coffee. Then Ned rolled in his blankets, and slept under an oak tree. When he awoke about noon he sprang to his feet with a cry of joy and surprise. Urrea was standing beside him, somewhat pale, and with his left hand in a sling, but the young Mexican himself, nevertheless. Ned seized his right hand and gave it a powerful grip.

"We thought you as good as dead, Don Francisco," he said. "We were sure that you had been taken by Cos."

"I thought both things myself for a few wild moments," said Urrea, smiling. "When we rushed from the patio one of the bullets grazed me, but in my excitement as we passed the gate I ran down the alley toward the street, instead of turning in toward the barn, as I have since learned from Mr. White that you did. My wrist was grazed by one of the bullets, fired from the piazza, but fortunately I had the presence of mind to wrap it in the serape that I wore."

"When I reached the street there was much excitement and many soldiers running about, but being a Mexican it was easy for me to pass unsuspected in the crowd. I reached the home of a relative, at heart a sympathizer with Texas and liberty, where my wound was bound up, and where I lay hidden until morning, when I was smuggled out of the town. Then I made my way among the oaks and pecans, until I came here to our camp on the Salado. I had inquired for you during the night, and, not hearing any news of your capture, I was sure that you were in hiding as I was, and when I came here my best hopes were confirmed by the news of your complete escape. Mr. White has already given me all the details. We have been very lucky indeed, and we should be thankful."

"We are! We truly are!" exclaimed Ned, grasping his hand again.

The news brought by Ned and his comrades was so important that the Texans could not be restrained. A few mornings later Bowie called upon the boy, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther for a new service.

"Mr. Austin has told me to take a strong party," he said, "and scout up to the very suburbs of San Antonio, because we are going to choose a new and closer position. There are to be ninety of us, including you three, 'Deaf' Smith and Henry Karnes, and we are to retire if the Mexicans undertake an attack upon us, that is, if we have time—you understand, if we have time."

Ned saw Bowie's big eyes glitter, and he understood. The party, the envy of all the others, rode out of the camp in the absence of Urrea. Bowie had not asked him, as he did not seem to fancy the young Mexican, but Ned put it down to racial prejudice. Urrea had not been visible when they started, but Ned thought chagrin at being ignored was the cause of it. Fannin also went along, associated with Bowie in the leadership, but Bowie was the animating spirit. They rode directly toward San Antonio, and, as the distance was very short, they soon saw Mexican sentinels on horseback, some carrying lances and some with rifles or muskets. They would withdraw gradually at the appearance of the Texans, keeping just out of gunshot, but always watching these dangerous horsemen whom they had learned to fear. The Texans were near enough to see from some points the buildings of the town, and the veins of the Ring Tailed Panther swelled with ambition.

"Ned," he said to the boy who rode by his side, "if Bowie would only give the word we would gallop right into town, smashing through the Mexicans."

"We might gallop into it," said Ned, laughing, "but we couldn't gallop out again. No, no, Panther, we mustn't forget that the Mexicans can fight. Besides, Bowie isn't going to give the word."

"No, he ain't," said the Ring Tailed Panther with a sigh, "an' we won't get the chance to make one of the finest dashes ever heard of in war."

"He who doesn't dash but rides away will live to dash another day," said Obed White oracularly.

They rode on in a half circle about the town, keeping a fairly close array, every man sitting his saddle erect and defiant. It seemed to Ned that they were issuing a challenge to the whole army of Cos, and he enjoyed it. It appealed to his youthful spirit of daring. They practically said to the Mexican army in the town: "Come out and fight us if you dare!"

But the Mexicans did not accept the challenge. Save for the little scouting parties that always kept a watch at a safe distance they remained within their intrenchments. But Bowie and Fannin were able to take a look at the fortifications, confirming in every respect all that Ned and his comrades had told them.

They ate in the saddle at noon, having provided themselves with rations when they started, and then rode back on their slow half circle about the town, Mexican scouts riding parallel with them on the inner side of the circle, five hundred yards away. The Texans said little,

but they watched all the time.

It made a powerful appeal to Ned, who had been a great reader, and whose mind was surcharged with the old romances. It seemed to him that his comrades and he were like knights, riding around a hostile city and issuing a formal challenge to all who dared to meet them. He was proud to be there in such company. The afternoon waned. Banks of vapor, rose and gold, began to pile up in the southwest, their glow tinting the earth with the same colors. But beauty did not appeal just then to the Ring Tailed Panther, who began to roar.

"A-ridin', an' a-ridin'," he said, "an' nothin' done. Up to San Antonio an' back to camp, an' things are just as they were before."

"A Texas colonel rode out on the prairie with ninety men, and then rode back again," said Obed.

"But we are not going back again!" cried Ned joyfully.

Bowie, who was in the lead, suddenly turned his horse away from the camp and rode toward the river. The others followed him without a word, but nearly every man in the company drew a long breath of satisfaction. Ned knew and all knew that they were not going back to camp that night.

Ned eagerly watched the leader. They rode by the Mission Concepcion, passed through a belt of timber and came abruptly to the river, where Bowie called a halt, and sprang from his horse. Ned leaped down also, and he saw at once the merits of the position into which Bowie had led them. They were in a horseshoe or sharp bend of the river, here a hundred yards in width. The belt of thick timber curved on one side while the river coiled in a half-circle about them and in front of the little tongue of land on which they stood, the bank rose to a height of eighteen feet, almost perpendicular. It was a secluded place, and, as no Mexicans had been following them in the course of the last hour, Ned believed that they might pass a peaceful night there. But the Ring Tailed Panther had other thoughts, although, for the present, he kept them to himself.

They tethered the horses at the edge of the wood, but where they could reach the grass, and then Bowie placed numerous pickets in the wood through which an enemy must come, if he came. Ned was in the first watch and Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther were with him. Ned stood among the trees at a point where he could also see the river, here a beautiful, clear stream with a greenish tint. He ate venison from his knapsack as he walked back and forth, and he watched the last rays of the sun, burning like red fire in the west, until they went out and the heavy twilight came, trailing after it the dark.

Ned's impression of mediævalism that he had received in the day when they were riding about San Antonio continued in the night. They had gone back centuries. Hidden here in this horseshoe, water on one side and wood on the other, they seemed to be in an absolutely wild and primitive world. Centuries had rolled back. His vivid imagination made the forest about them what it had been before the white man came.

The surface of the river was now dark. The stream flowed gently, and without noise. It, too, struck upon the boy's imagination. It would be fitting for an Indian canoe to come stealing down in the darkness, and he almost fancied he could see it there. But no canoe came, and Ned walked back and forth in a little space, always watching the wood or the river.

The night was very quiet. The horses, having grazed for an hour or two, now rested content. The men not on guard, used to taking their sleep where they could find it, were already in slumber. There was no wind.

The dark hours as usual were full of chill, but Ned's vigorous walk back and forth kept him warm. He was joined after a while by the famous scout, Henry Karnes, who, like "Deaf" Smith, seemed to watch all the time, although he came and went as he pleased.

"Well, boy," said Karnes, "do you find it hard work, this watching and watching and watching for hours and hours?"

"Not at all," replied Ned, responding to his tone of humorous kindness. "I might have found it so once, but I don't now. I'm always anxious to see what will happen."

"That's a good spirit to have," said Karnes, smiling, "and you need it down here, where a man must always be watching for something. In Texas boys have to be men now."

He walked back and forth with Ned, and the lad felt flattered that so famous a scout should show an interest in him. The two were at the edge of the wood and they could see duskiy before them a stretch of bare prairie. Karnes was watching this open space intently, and Ned was watching it also.

The boy saw nothing, but suddenly he heard, or thought he heard, a low sound. It was faint, but, unconsciously bending forward a little, he heard it again. It was a metallic rattle and instantly he called the attention of Karnes to it. The scout stopped his walk and listened. Then Ned saw his form grow rigid and tense.

"Let's put our ears to the ground, Ned," said he.

The two stretched out ear to earth, and then Ned not only heard the noise much more distinctly, but he knew at once what it was. He had heard it more than once in the marching army of Cos. It was the sound made by the approaching wheel of a cannon.

"Artillery," he said in a whisper.

"Beyond a doubt," said Karnes. "It means that the Mexicans have crossed the river—there's a ford two or three hundred yards above—and mean to attack us. It was your good ear, Ned, that gave us the first warning."

Ned flushed with pleasure at the compliment, but, a moment or two later, they saw dark figures rising out of the prairie and advancing toward them.

"Mexicans!" cried Karnes, and instantly fired at a dusky outline. The figures flitted away in the dusk, but the camp of Bowie was aroused at once. Inside of a minute every man was on his feet, rifle in hand, facing the open place in the horseshoe. They knew that they could not be attacked from the river. Bowie came to the side of Ned and Karnes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Ned heard a sound," Karnes replied, "and when we put our ears to the earth we knew that it was made by artillery. Then I saw their scouts and skirmishers and fired upon them. They must have crossed the river in strong force, Colonel."

"Very likely," said Bowie. "Well, we shall be ready for them. Henry, you and Smith and the Ring Tailed Panther scout across the prairie there, and see what has become of them."

"Can't I go, too?" asked Ned.

Bowie patted him on the shoulder.

"You young fire eater!" he replied. "Haven't you done enough for one night? You gave us the first warning that the Mexicans were at hand. I think you'd better rest now, and let these old boys do this job."

The three chosen men disappeared in the darkness, and Ned sat down among the trees with Obed. They, like everybody else, waited as patiently as they could for the reports of the scouts.

"Obed," said Ned, "do you think we're going to have a battle?"

"The signs point that way."

Bowie set everybody to work cutting out undergrowth, in order that they might have a clear field for the work that they expected. By the time this task was completed the scouts returned and their report was alarming.

The Mexicans had crossed the river in heavy force, outnumbering the troop of Texans at least five to one. They had artillery, infantry and cavalry, and they were just out of range, expecting to attack at dawn. The avenue of escape was cut off already.

"Very good," said Bowie. "We'll wait for them."

It was too dark to see, but Ned knew that his blue eyes were glittering. He advanced to the point where the bluff rose nearly ten feet to the edge of the prairie, and took a long look.

"I can see nothing," he said, "but I know you men are right. Now we'll cut steps all along the edge of this bluff, in order that our men can stand in them, and fire at the enemy as he comes. Then we'll have as fine a fort here as anybody could ask."

The men fell to work with hatchets and big knives, cutting steps in the soft earth, at least a hundred of them in order that everybody might have a chance. Meanwhile the hour of dawn was at hand, but a heavy mist had thickened over prairie and river. Beyond the mists and vapors, the sun showed only a yellow blur, and it did not yet cast any glow over the earth.

But Ned could clearly hear the Mexicans; officers shouting to men; men shouting to horses; horses neighing and mules squealing, and he knew from these noises that the report of their great force by the scouts was correct. He also heard the clank of the artillery wheels again,

and he feared that the cannon would prove a very dangerous foe to them. All the pulses in his body began to beat fast and hard.

"Will the sun ever get through the fog and let us see?" he exclaimed impatiently. It was hard to wait at such a time.

"It's comin' through now," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

The pale yellow light turned suddenly to full red gold. The banks of mist and vapor dissolved under the shining beams, and floated away in shreds and patches. The river, the forest and the prairie rose up into the light, everything standing out, sharp and clear.

Ned drew a deep breath. There was the Mexican array, massed along the entire open space of the horseshoe, at least five to the Texan one, as the scouts had said, and now not more than two hundred yards from them. Five companies of cavalry were gathered ready to charge; infantry stood just behind them and back of the infantry Ned caught the gleam of the cannon he had heard in the night. Evidently the Mexicans had not yet brought it to the front, because its fire would interfere with the charge of the cavalry which they expected would end the battle in five minutes. There was no chance for the Texans to retreat, but it was not of retreat that they were thinking.

"How's your pulse, Ned?" asked the Ring Tailed Panther.

"It's beating fast and hard, I won't deny that," replied Ned, "but I believe my finger will be steady when it presses the trigger."

"Fine feathers make fine Mexicans," said Obed White. "How they do love color! That's a gorgeous array out there, and it seems a pity to break it up."

The Mexican force certainly looked well. The cavalry, in brilliant uniforms, presented a long front, their lances gleaming. The Texans, standing in the steps that they had cut in the earth, were in sober attire, but resolute eyes looked out from under their caps or the wide brims of their hats.

"They'll charge in a moment," said Obed, "and they'll try to break their way through the wood. They cannot ride down this bluff."

The Ring Tailed Panther raised his rifle, and looked down the sights. His eyes were glittering. He drew the trigger and the sharp lashing report ended the silence. A Mexican officer fell from his horse, and then, with a great shout, the Mexican horsemen charged, presenting a gallant array as they bent forward, their rifles and lances ready. The beat of their horses' hoofs came over the prairie like roiling thunder. They wheeled suddenly toward the wood, and then the infantry, advancing, opened heavy and repeated volleys upon the Texans. The horsemen also fired from their saddles.

It was the heaviest fire under which Ned had ever come, and, for a few moments, he quivered all over. He saw a great blaze in front, above it a cloud of lifting smoke, and he heard over his head the hum of many bullets, like the whistling of hail, driven by a heavy wind. But he was experienced enough now to note that the Mexican fire was wasted. That bank was a wonderful protection.

"It's almost a shame to shoot 'em," roared the Ring Tailed Panther who had reloaded. But up went his rifle, his finger pressed the trigger and another Mexican officer fell from his horse. All along the Texan front ran the rifle fire, a rapid crackling sound like the ripping apart of some great cloth. But the Texans were taking aim. There was no confusion among the hardy veterans of the plains. Lying against the face of the bluff they were sending in their bullets with deadly precision. Horse after horse in the charging host galloped away riderless over the prairie, and the front rank of the infantry was shot down.

Ned, like the others, was loading and firing swiftly, but with care. The imminent danger kept down any feeling that he would have had otherwise. The Mexicans sought their lives, and he must seek theirs. The smoke and the odor of burned gunpowder inflamed him. There was still a blaze in front of him, but he also saw the brown faces of the Mexicans yet pressing forward, and he yet heard the continued thunder of the charging hoofs.

"Another bullet, Ned," roared the Ring Tailed Panther and he and the others around him sent a fresh volley at the horsemen. The Mexican cavalry could stand no more. Five companies strong, they broke and galloped away, seeking only to escape from the deadly fire of the Texan rifles. The infantry also gave back and for a few minutes there was a lull.

"That's the end of Chapter One," said Obed White. "Our Mexican friends came in haste and they will repent at a distance."

The smoke lifted and Ned saw many fallen, both men and horses, on the plain in front of them, and there was confusion in the Mexican force, which was now out of gunshot. Never had the Texan rifles done more deadly service. The Texan loss was small.

Ned dropped down from the steps and sat on the grass. His face was wet with perspiration, and he wiped it on his sleeve. He was compelled to cough once or twice to clear his throat of the smoke. The Ring Tailed Panther also was warm, but satisfied.

"A Texan does best in a fight against odds," he said, "an' we have the odds to-day. But don't you think, Ned, that it's over already?"

"I don't," said Ned. "I know that they will be up to some new trick soon. They will realize that they underrated us at first."

He sprang back into the steps that he had cut in the bluff, and took a good look at the Mexicans.

"They are nearly ready with Chapter Second, Obed," he said. "They are bringing up that cannon."

"Should have used it in the first place," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "They didn't show much sense."

The Mexicans were running the gun forward to a little mound, whence they could drop shells and shot over the edge of the bluff, directly among the Texans. It was a far more formidable danger than the impulsive charge, and Bowie at once took measures to meet it. He called the best rifle shots. Among them were Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther.

"There are fifteen of you," said the dauntless leader, "and your rifles will reach that gun. Shoot down every man who tries to handle it. The rest of us will attend to the new charge that is coming."

The second attack was to be more formidable than the first. The Mexican cavalry had massed anew. Ned saw the officers, driving the men into place with the flats of swords, and he heard the note of a trumpet, singing loud and clear over the prairie. Then his eyes turned back to the gun, because there his duty lay.

Ned heard the trumpet peal again, and then the thud of hoofs. He saw the rammers and spongers gather about the gun. The rifle of the Ring Tailed Panther cracked, and the man with the rammer fell. Another picked it up, but he went down before the bullet of Obed. Then a sponger fell, and then the gunner himself was slain by the bullet. The Texans were doing wonderful sharpshooting. The gun could not be fired, because nobody could live near it long enough to fire it. Its entire complement was cleared away by the swift little bullets.

Off to right and left, Ned heard again the rising crackle of the rifle fire, and he also heard the steady monotonous beat of the hoofs. He knew that the charge was still coming on, but Bowie would attend to that. He and his immediate comrades never took their eyes from the gun. New cannoners, an entire complement, were rushing forward to take the place of their fallen comrades. The Mexicans showed plenty of courage that day but the deadly sharpshooters were slaying them as fast as they came. They were yet unable to fire the gun. Nor could they draw it back from its dangerous position. A second time all about it were slain, but a third body came forward for the trial.

"Greasers or no greasers," cried Obed, "those are men of courage!"

But he continued to shoot straight at them nevertheless, and the third group of cannoners was fast melting away.

"Some of you aim at the mules hitched to the caisson," cried the Ring Tailed Panther. "I hate to kill a mule, but it will be a help now."

One of the mules was slain and two others, wounded, dashed wildly through the Mexican infantry, adding to the confusion and turmoil. The last of the third group of cannoners fell and the gun stood alone and untouched, the shell still in place. No one now dared to approach it. The dead now lay in a group all about it. Meanwhile, the second charge broke like the first and the cavalry galloped wildly away.

Ned could turn his eyes now. He saw more riderless horses than before, while the fallen, lying still on the prairie, had doubled in number. Then his eyes turned back to the gun, standing somber and silent among those who had died for it. The battle-fire gone, for the present, Ned felt pity for the Mexicans who lay so thick about the cannon. Nor did he fail to admire the courage that had been spent so freely, but in vain.

"They won't come again," said the Ring Tailed Panther, dropping to the grass. "They have had enough."

"I don't blame 'em," said Obed, lying down by his side. "They must have lost a third of their number, and they'd have lost another third if they had charged once more."

"They're not going away," said Ned, who had remained on his perch. "They're coming again."

A third time the Mexicans charged and a third time they were driven back by the rifles. Then they formed on the prairie beyond gunshot, and marched away to San Antonio, leaving behind the mournful and silent cannon as proof alike of their courage and defeat.

CHAPTER XX

THE WHEEL OF FIRE

Ned watched the Mexicans marching away until the last lance had disappeared behind a swell of the prairie. Then he joined in the cheer that the Texans gave, after which he and his comrades went out upon the field, and gazed upon their work. The killed among the Mexicans nearly equaled in numbers the whole Texan force, sixteen lying dead around the cannon alone, and many of them also had been wounded, while the Texans had escaped with only a single man slain, and but few hurt. But Ned quickly left the field. The sight of it was not pleasant to him, although he was still heart and soul with the Texans, in what he regarded as a defensive war.

Bowie drew his forces out of the horseshoe and they rode for the Texan camp, carrying with them the trophies of arms that they had taken. On their way they met Mr. Austin and a strong force who had heard of their plight and who were now coming to their relief. They, too, rejoiced greatly at the victory, and all went back in triumph to the Salado.

"Now that they have seen how we can fight I reckon that Mr. Austin and Houston will order an attack right away on San Antonio," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

"I don't believe they will," said Obed White. "Seeing is sometimes doubting. I believe that they still fear our failure."

Ned inclined to Obed's belief but he said nothing. At twilight Urrea came back, rejoicing and also full of regrets. He rejoiced over the victory and he regretted that he had not been there.

"Seems to me, Don Francisco," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "that you're missin' a lot of things."

"There's many a slip 'twixt Francisco and the fight-o," said Obed.

Ned was hurt by the irony of his friends, but Urrea only laughed as he spread his blanket in a good place, and lay down on it.

"I will admit, gentlemen," he said in his precise English, "that I seem always to be absent when anything important happens, but it is owing to the nature of the service that I can best render the Texans. Being of the Mexican race and knowing the country so thoroughly, I am of most value as a seeker after information. I had gone off on a long scout about San Antonio, and I have news which I have given to Mr. Austin."

"Spyin' is a dangerous business, but it's got to be done," said the Ring Tailed Panther. Ned saw that he again looked with disfavor upon Urrea, but he ascribed it as before to racial aversion.

Obed was right. Despite the brilliant victory of Bowie, Houston and Austin still held back, and the Ring Tailed Panther roared long and loud. But his roaring was cut short by an order for him, Obed, Ned and Urrea to ride eastward to some of the little Texan towns in search of help. The leaders were anxious that their utmost strength be gathered when they should at last make the attack upon San Antonio. Since he could not have just what he wished, the Panther was glad to get the new task, and the others were content.

They rode away the next morning, armed and provisioned well. Their horses, having rested long and fed abundantly, were strong and fresh, and they went at a good pace, until they came to the last swell from which they could see San Antonio. The town was distant, but it was magnified in the clear Texas sunlight. It looked to Ned, sitting there on his horse, like a large city. It had come to occupy a great place in his mind and just now it was to him the most important town in the world. He wondered if they would ever take it. Urrea, who was watching him, smiled.

"I know what you are thinking," he said, "and I will wager that it was just the same that I was thinking."

"I was trying to read the future and tell whether we would take San Antonio," said Ned.

"Exactly. Those were my thoughts, too."

"I reckon you two wasn't far away from my trail either," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "'cause I was figgerin' that we'd take it inside of a month."

"Count me in, too," said Obed. "Great minds go in bunches. I was calculating that we would capture it some day, but I left out the limit of time."

They turned their horses, and when they reached the crest of the next swell San Antonio was out of sight. Before them stretched the prairies, now almost as desolate as they had been when the Indians alone roamed over them. They passed two or three small cabins, each built in a cluster of trees near a spring, but the occupants had gone, fled to a town for shelter. One seemed to have been abandoned only an hour or two ago, as the ashes were scarcely cold on the hearth, and a bucket of water, with its gourd in it, still stood on the shelf. The sight moved the Ring Tailed Panther to sentiment.

"Think of the women an' children havin' to sleep out on the prairie," he said. "It ain't right an' fittin'."

"We'll bring them all back before we are through," said Obed.

They left the little cabin, exactly as they had found it, and then rode at an increased pace toward the north and the east, making for the settlements on the Brazos. A little while before nightfall, they met a buffalo hunter who told them there were reports of a Mexican cavalry force far north of San Antonio, although he could not confirm the truth of the rumors. Urrea shook his head vigorously.

"Impossible! impossible!" he said. "The Mexicans would not dare to come away so far from their base at San Antonio."

The hunter, an old man, looked at him with curiosity and disapproval.

"That's more than you an' me can say," he said, "although you be a Mexican yourself and know more about your people than I do. I jest tell what I've heard."

"Mr. Urrea is one of the most ardent of the Texan patriots," said Ned.

"I jest tell what I've heard," said the old man, whistling to his pony and riding away.

"Obstinate!" said Urrea, laughing in his usual light, easy manner. "These old hunters are very narrow. You cannot make them believe that a Mexican, although born on Texas soil, which can be said of very few Texans, is a lover of liberty and willing to fight against aggression from the capital."

At night they rode into a splendid belt of forest, and made their camp by a cool spring that gushed from a rock and flowed away among the trees. Ned and Obed scouted a little, and found the country so wild that the deer sprang up from the bushes. It was difficult to resist the temptation of a shot, but they were compelled to let them go, and returning to camp they reported to Urrea and the Ring Tailed Panther that they seemed to have the forest to themselves, so far as human beings were concerned.

"Do you think it is safe to light a fire?" asked Urrea.

"I see no danger in it," replied Obed, "that is, none in a little one. There are so many bushes about us that it couldn't be seen fifty yards away."

It was now November and as the night had become quite cold Urrea's suggestion of a fire seemed good to Ned. He showed much zeal in gathering the dry wood, and then they deftly built a fire, one that would throw out little flame, but which would yet furnish much heat. The Ring Tailed Panther, who had the most skill in wilderness life, kindled it with flint and steel, and while the flames, held down by brush, made hot coals beneath, the smoke was lost among the trees and the darkness.

The horses were tethered near, and they warmed their food by the coals before eating it. The place was snug, a little cup set all around by bushes and high trees, and the heat of the fire was very grateful. While Ned sat before it, eating his food, he noticed great numbers of last year's fallen leaves lying about, and he picked the very place where he would make his bed. He would draw great quantities of the leaves there under the big beech, and spread his blankets upon them.

They were tired after the long day's journey, and they did not talk much. The foliage about them was so thick, making it so dark within the little shade that the need of a watch seemed small, but they decided to keep it, nevertheless. The Ring Tailed Panther would take the first half of the night and Urrea the second half. The next night would be divided between Obed and Ned.

Ned raked up the leaves at the place that he had selected, folded himself between his blankets, and was asleep in five minutes. The last thing that he remembered seeing was the broad figure of the Ring Tailed Panther, sitting with his back against a tree, and his rifle across his knees.

But Ned awoke hours later—after midnight in fact—although it was not a real awakening, instead a sort of half way station from slumberland. He did not move, but opened his eyes partly, and saw that Urrea was now on guard. The young Mexican was not sitting as the

Ring Tailed Panther had been, but was standing some yards away, with his rifle across his shoulder. Ned thought in a vague way that he looked trim and strong, and then his heavy lids dropped down again. But he did not fall back into the deep sleep from which he had come. The extra sense, his remarkable power of intuition or divination was at work. Without any effort of his will the mechanism of his brain was moving and gave him a signal. He heard a slight noise and he lifted the heavy lids.

Urrea had walked to the other side of the little glade, his feet brushing some of the dry leaves as he went. There was nothing unusual in such action on the part of a sentinel, but something in Urrea's attitude seemed to Ned to denote expectancy. His whole figure was drawn close together like that of one about to spring, and he leaned forward a little. Yet this meant nothing. Any good man on guard would be attentive to every sound of the forest, whether the light noise made by a squirrel, as he scampered along the bark of a tree, or a stray puff of wind rustling the leaves.

Ned made another effort of the will, and closed his eyes for the second time, but the warning sense, the intuitive note out of the infinite, would not be denied. He was compelled to open his eyes once more and now his faculties were clear. Urrea had moved again and now he was facing the sleepers. He regarded them attentively, one by one, and in the dusk he could not see that Ned's eyelids were not closed. The boy did not stir, but a cold shiver ran down his spine. He felt with all the power of second sight that something extraordinary was going to happen.

Urrea walked to the smoldering fire, and now Ned dropped his eyelids, until he looked only through a space as narrow as the edge of a knife blade. Urrea stooped and took from the dying heap a long stick, still burning at the end. Then he took another look at the three and suddenly disappeared among the bushes, carrying with him the burning stick. He was so light upon his feet that he made no sound as he went.

Ned was startled beyond measure, but he was like a spring released by a key. He felt that the need of instant action was great, and, as light of foot as Urrea himself, he sprang up, rifle in hand, and followed the young Mexican. He was thankful for the wilderness training that he had been compelled to acquire. He caught sight of Urrea about twenty yards ahead, still moving swiftly on soundless feet. He moved thus a hundred yards or more, with Ned, as his shadow, as dark and silent as he, and then he stopped by the side of a great tree.

Ned felt instinctively, when Urrea halted that he would look back to see if by chance he were followed, and he sank down in the bushes before the Mexican turned. Urrea gave only a glance or two in that direction and, satisfied, began to examine the tree which was certainly worthy of attention, as it rose to an uncommon height, much above its fellows.

Ned's amazement grew. Why should Urrea be so particular about the size or height of a tree? It grew still further, when he saw Urrea lay his rifle down at the foot of the tree, spring up, grasp the lowest branch with one hand, and then deftly draw himself up, taking with him the burning stick. He paused a moment on the bough, looked again toward the little camp and then climbed upward with a speed and dexterity worthy of a great monkey.

Ned saw the Mexican's figure going up and up, a dark blur against the stem of the tree, and it was hard to persuade himself that it was reality. He saw also the bright spark on the end of the stick that he carried with him. The tree rose to a height of nearly 150 feet, and when Urrea passed above the others that surrounded it, the moon's rays, unobstructed, fell upon him. Then, although he became smaller and smaller, Ned saw him more clearly. The boy was so much absorbed now in the story that was unfolding before him that he did not have time to wonder.

Urrea went up as high as the stem would sustain him. Then he rested his feet on a bough, wrapped his left arm around the tree, and, with his right arm, began to whirl the burning stick rapidly. The spark leaped up, grew into a blaze, and Ned saw a wheel of fire. He had seen many strange things, but this, influenced by circumstances of time and place, was the most uncanny of them all.

Far above his head, and above the body of the forest revolved the wheel of fire. Urrea's own body had melted away in the darkness, until it was fused with the tree. Ned now saw only the fiery signal, for such it must be, and his heart rose in fierce anger against Urrea. Once he lifted his rifle a little, and studied the possibilities of a shot at such range, but he put the rifle down again. He would watch and wait.

The wheel ceased presently to revolve, and Ned saw Urrea again, torch in hand, but motionless. He, too, was waiting. He did not stir for a full quarter of an hour, but all the while the torch burned steadily. Then he suddenly began to whirl it again, but in a direction opposite to that made by the first wheel of fire. Around and around went the burning brand for some minutes. When he stopped, he waited at least ten minutes longer. Then, as if he had received the answer that he wished, making the claim of communication complete, he dropped the torch. Ned saw it falling, a trail of light, until it struck among the bushes, where it went out. Then Urrea began to descend the tree, but he came down more slowly than he had gone up.

Ned slipped forward, seized Urrea's rifle, and then slipped back among the bushes. He put the Mexican's weapon at his feet, cocked his own and waited.

Urrea, coming slowly down the tree, stopped and stood there for a few moments as if in contemplation. A shaft of moonlight piercing through the foliage fell upon his face illumining the olive complexion and the well-cut features. It was hard for Ned to believe what he had seen. What could it be but a signal? and that signal to the enemies of the Texans! And yet Urrea did not look like a villain and traitor. There was certainly no malevolence in his face, which on the other hand had rather a melancholy cast, as he stood there on the bough before swinging to the ground.

Ned strengthened his will. He had seen what he had seen. Such things could not be passed over in times when lives were the forfeit of weakness. Urrea let himself lightly to the earth, and stooped down for his rifle. It was not there, and when he straightened up again Ned saw that his face was ghastly pale in the moonlight. Urrea, with his quick perceptions, was bound to know from the absence of the rifle that he had been followed and was caught. His hand went down toward his belt where a pistol hung, but Ned instantly called from the bush:

"Hands up, Don Francisco, or I shoot!"

His tone was stern and menacing, and Urrea's hands went up by the side of his head. But the paleness left his face, and his manner became careless and easy.

"Is that you, Ned?" he called in the most friendly tones. "Is it a joke that you play upon me? Ah, you Anglo-Saxons, you seem rough in your play to us Latins."

"It is no joke, Don Francisco. I was never more earnest in my life," said Ned, stepping from the bush, but still keeping Urrea covered with his rifle. "Your merits as a climber of trees are great, but you interested me more with your wheel of fire. I think I can account now for your absences, when any fighting with the Mexicans was to be done. You are a spy and you were signaling with that torch to our enemies."

Urrea laughed lightly, musically, and he regarded Ned with a look of amusement. It seemed to say to him that he was only a boy, that one so young was bound to make mistakes, but that the Mexican was not offended because he was making one now at his cost. The laugh was irritating to the last degree, and yet it implanted in the boy's mind a doubt, a fear that he might have been mistaken.

"Signaling to friends, not enemies, you mean," said Urrea. "This forest ends but a few hundred yards beyond, and I learned when I was scouting about San Antonio that some allies of ours in this region were waiting night and day for the news from us to come. I took this method to communicate with them, a successful method, too, I am happy to say, as they answered. In a wild region one must do strange things."

His tone was so light, so easy, and it rang so true that Ned hesitated. But it was only for a moment. Manner could not change substance. He cleared away the mists and vapors made by Urrea's light tone and easy assurance, and came back to the core of the matter.

"Don Francisco," he said, "I have liked you, and I believed that you were a true Texan patriot, but I cannot believe the story that you tell me. It seems too improbable. If you wished to make these signals to friends, why did you not tell us that you were going to do so?"

"I did not know of the possibility of such a signal until I saw this tree and its great height. Then, as all of you were asleep, I concluded to make my signal, achieve the result and give you a pleasant surprise. Come now, Señor Edward, hand me my rifle, and let us end this unpleasant joke."

Ned shook his head. It was hard to resist Urrea's assurance, but manner was not all. His logical mind rejected the story.

"I'm sorry, Don Francisco," he said, "but I must refer this to my comrades, Mr. Palmer and Mr. White. Meanwhile, I am compelled to hold you a prisoner. You will walk before me to the camp, keeping your hands up."

Urrea shrugged his shoulders and gave Ned a glance, which seemed to be a mixture of disgust and contempt.

"Very well, if you will have it so," he said. "There is nothing like the stubbornness of a boy."

"March!" said Ned, who felt his temper rising.

Urrea, hands up, walked toward the camp, and Ned came behind him, carrying the two rifles, one of them cocked and ready for instant use. The Mexican never looked back, but walked with unhesitating step straight to the camp. The Ring Tailed Panther and Obed were still sound asleep, but, when Ned called sharply to them, they sprang to their feet, gazing in astonishment at the spectacle of Urrea with his

hands up, and the boy standing behind him with the two rifles.

"Things seem to have happened while I slept," said Obed.

"Looks as if there might have been some rippin' an' tearin'," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "What have you been up to, Urrea?"

Urrea gave the Ring Tailed Panther a malignant glance.

"I have not been up to anything, to use your own common language," he replied. "If you want any explanation, you can ask it of your suspicious young friend there. As for me, I am tired of holding my hands as high as my head, and I intend to light a cigarette. Three of you, I suppose, are sufficient to watch me."

There were still a few embers and touching his cigarette to one of them he sat down, leaned against the trunk of a tree and began to puff, as if the future of the case had no interest for him.

"Just hand me that pistol at your belt, will you?" said Obed. "There seems to be some kind of a difference of opinion between you and Ned, and, without knowing anything about it, I'm for Ned."

Urrea took the pistol and tossed it toward Obed. The Maine man caught it deftly and thrust it in his own belt. He did not seem to be at all offended by the young Mexican's contemptuous manner.

"Besides being one of the best watch makers the State of Maine ever produced," he said, "I'm pretty good at sleight-of-hand. I could catch loaded pistols all day, Urrea, if you were to pitch them at me."

Urrea did not deign a reply and Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther looked at Ned, who told them all he had seen. Urrea did not deny a thing or say a word throughout the narrative. When Ned finished the Ring Tailed Panther roared in his accustomed fashion.

"Signalin' to the enemy from a tree top while we was asleep an' he was supposed to be on guard!" he exclaimed. "What have you got to say to this, Urrea?"

"Our young paragon of knowledge and wilderness lore has given you my statement," replied Urrea. "You can believe it or not as you choose. I shall not waste another word on thickheads."

The teeth of the Ring Tailed Panther came together with a click, and he looked ominously at Urrea.

"You may not say anything," he growled, "but I will. I didn't trust you at first, Don Francisco, an' there have been times all along since then when I didn't trust you. You're a smooth talker, but your habit of disappearin' has been too much for me. I believe just as Ned does that you were signalin' to the enemy an' that you meant Texas harm, lots of harm. It was a lucky thing that the boy awoke. Now, what do you think, Obed?"

"Appearances are deceitful sometimes but not always. Don Francisco seems to have spun a likely yarn to Ned, but I've heard better and they were not so mighty much."

"You see the jury is clean ag'inst you, Don Francisco," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' it's goin' to hold you to a higher court. Did you hear what I said?"

Urrea nodded.

"Yes, I heard you," he replied, "but I heard only foolishness."

The Ring Tailed Panther growled, but he had the spirit of a gentleman. He would not upbraid a prisoner.

"The verdict of the jury bein' given," he said soberly, "we've got to hold the prisoner till we reach the higher court. We ain't takin' no chances, Urrea, an' for that reason we've got to tie you. Ned, cut off a piece of that lariat."

Urrea leaped to his feet. He was stung at last.

"I will not be bound," he cried.

"Yes, you will," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "I ain't goin' to hurt you, 'cause I'm pretty handy at that sort of thing, but I'll tie you so you won't get loose in a hurry. Better set down an' take it easy."

Urrea, after the single flash of anger, sat down, and resuming his careless air, held out his hands.

"Since you intend to act like barbarians as well as fools," he said, "I will not seek to impede you."

None of the three replied. The Ring Tailed Panther handily tied his wrists together, and then his ankles, but in such fashion that he could still sit in comfort, leaning against the tree, although the pleasure of the cigarette was no longer for him.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I think I shall go to sleep."

"No objections a-tall, a-tall," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "Have nice dreams."

Urrea closed his eyes, and his chest soon rose and fell in the regular manner of one who sleeps. Ned could not tell whether he really slept. A feeling of compassion for Urrea rose again in his heart. What if he should be telling the truth after all? Wild and improbable tales sometimes came true. He was about to speak of his thoughts to the men, but he checked himself. Disbelief was returning. It was best to take every precaution.

"You go to sleep, Ned," said Obed. "You've done a good job and you are entitled to a rest. The Panther and I will watch till day."

Ned lay down between his blankets and everything was so still that contrary to his expectations, he fell asleep, and did not awaken again until after dawn, when Obed told him that they would resume the march, eating their breakfast as they went. Urrea was unbound, although he was first searched carefully for concealed weapons.

"I wouldn't have a man to ride with his arms tied," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "but we'll keep on both sides of you an' you needn't try to make a bolt of it, Urrea."

"I shall not try to make any bolt of it," said Urrea scornfully, "but you will pay dearly to Austin and Houston for the indignity that you have put upon me."

The Ring Tailed Panther, true to his principle of never taunting a prisoner, did not reply, and they mounted. The Panther rode ahead and Obed and Ned, with Urrea between them, followed. Urrea was silent, his face melancholy and reproachful.

The belt of timber extended only a few hundred yards farther, when they came upon the open prairie extending to the horizon. Far to the left some antelope were feeding, but there was no other sign of life of any kind.

"I don't see anything of them friends of ours to whom you were signalin'," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

Urrea would not reply. The Panther said nothing further, and they rode on over the prairie. But both the Ring Tailed Panther and Obed were watching the ground, and, when they had gone about two miles, they reined in their horses.

"See!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

They had come to a broad trail cutting directly across their path. It was made by at least a hundred horses, and the veriest novice could not have missed it. The trail was that of shod hoofs, indicating the presence of white men.

"What is this, Don Francisco?" asked the Ring Tailed Panther.

"I do not have to reply to you unless I wish," said Urrea, "but I am willing to tell you that it is undoubtedly the trail of the Texan reinforcements to which I was signaling last night."

Ned looked quickly at him. Again the young Mexican's voice had the ring of truth. Was the wild and improbable tale now coming true? If so, he could never forgive himself for the manner in which he had treated Urrea. Still, it was for the older men to act now, and he continued his silence.

"Maybe Texans made this trail, and maybe they didn't," said Obed, "but I think we'd better follow it for a while and see. About how old would you say this trail is, Panther?"

"Not more'n two hours."

They turned their course, and followed the broad path left by the horsemen across the prairie. Thus they rode at a good pace, until nearly noon, and the trail was now so fresh that they could not be far away. The change of direction had brought them toward forest, heavy with undergrowth. It was evident that the horsemen had gone into this forest as the trail continued to lead straight to it, and the Ring

Tailed Panther approached with the greatest caution.

"Can you see anything, Ned, in there among them trees an' bushes?" he asked. "You've got the sharpest eyes of all."

"Not a thing," replied Ned, "nor do I see a bough or bush moving."

"It would be hard for such a big party to hide themselves," said Obed, "so I think we'd better ride straight in."

They entered the forest, still following the trail among the trampled bushes, riding slowly over rough ground, and watching wanly to right and left. Urrea had not said a word, but when they were about a mile within the wood, he suddenly leaned from his horse, snatched the knife from the belt of the Ring Tailed Panther and slashed at him. Fortunately, the range was somewhat long for such work, and, as the Panther threw up his arm, the blade merely cut his buckskin sleeve from wrist to elbow, only grazing his skin. Urrea, quick as lightning, turned his horse, threw him against that of Obed which was staggered, and then started at a gallop among the trees.

The Ring Tailed Panther raised his rifle, but Urrea threw himself behind his horse, riding with all the dexterity of a Comanche in the fashion of an Indian who wishes to protect himself; that is, hanging on the far side of the horse by only hands and toes. The Panther shifted his aim and shot the horse through the head. But Urrea leaped clear of the falling body, avoided Obed's bullet, and darted into the thickest of the bushes. As he disappeared a sharp, piercing whistle rose. Ned did not have time to think, but when he heard the whistle, instinct warned him that it was a signal. He had heard that whistle once before in exciting moments, and by a nervous action as it were, he pulled hard upon the reins of his horse. In this emergency it was the boy whose action was the wisest.

"Come back, Obed, you and Panther!" he shouted. "He may have led us into an ambush!"

Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther were still galloping after Urrea, and, even as Ned shouted to them, a flash of flame burst from the undergrowth. He saw Obed's horse fall, but Obed himself sprang clear. The Panther did not seem to be hurt, but, in an instant, both were surrounded by Mexicans. Obed was seized on the ground and the Panther was quickly dragged from his horse. But the Maine man, even in such a critical moment, did not forget the boy for whom he had such a strong affection. He shouted at the top of his voice:

"Ride, Ned! Ride for your life!"

Ned, still guided by impulse, wheeled his horse and galloped away. It was evident that his comrades had been taken, and he alone was left to carry out their mission. Shots were fired at him and bullets whistled past, but none touched him, and he only urged his horse to greater speed.

The boy felt a second impulse. It was to turn back and fall, or be taken with the two comrades whom he liked so well. But then reason came. He could do more for them free than a captive, and now he began to take full thought for himself. He bent far over on his horse's neck, in order to make as small a target as possible, holding the reins with one hand and his rifle with the other. A minute had taken him clear of the undergrowth, and once more he was on the prairie.

Ned did not look back for some time. He heard several shots, but he judged by the reports that he was practically out of range. Now he began to feel sanguine. His horse was good and true, and he rode well. As long as the bullets could not reach and weaken, he felt that the chances were greatly in his favor. He was riding almost due north and the prairie stretched away without limit, although the forest extended for a long distance on his right.

He now straightened up somewhat in the saddle, but he did not yet look back, fearing that he might check his speed by doing so, and knowing that every moment was of the utmost value. But he listened attentively to the pursuing hoofs and he was sure that the beat was steadily growing fainter. The gap must be widening.

He glanced back for the first time and saw about twenty Mexicans spread out in the segment of a circle. They rode ponies and two or three were recoiling lariats which they had evidently got ready in the hope of a throw. Ned smiled to himself when he saw the lariats. Unless something happened to his horse they could never come near enough for a cast. He measured the gap and he believed that his rifle of long range would carry it.

One of the Mexicans rode a little in front of the others and Ned judged him to be the leader. Twisting in his saddle he took aim at him. It is difficult to shoot backward from a flying horse, but Ned had undergone the wilderness training and he felt that he could make the hit. He pulled the trigger. The jet of smoke leaped forth and the man, swaying, fell from his saddle, but sprang to his feet and clapped his hands to his shoulder, where the boy's bullet had struck.

There was confusion among the Mexicans, as it was really their leader whom Ned had wounded, and, before the pursuit was resumed with energy, the fugitive had gained another hundred yards. After that, the gap widened steadily, and, when he looked back a second time, the Mexicans were a full quarter of a mile in the rear. He maintained his speed and in another hour they were lost behind the swells.

Sure that he had now made good his escape, Ned pulled his horse down to a walk. The good animal was dripping with foam and perspiration and he did not allow him to cool too fast. Without his horse he would be lost. But when they had gone on another hour at a walk, he stopped and let him have a complete rest.

Ned was not able to see anything of the Mexicans. The prairie, as far as he could tell, was bare of human life save himself. To his right was the dark line of the forest, but everywhere else the open extended to the horizon. He had escaped!

They had started as four and now but one was left. Urrea had proved to be a traitor and his good friends, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther were captured or—he refused to consider the alternative. They were alive. Two men, so strong and vital as they, could not have fallen.

Now that his horse had rested, Ned mounted again, and rode at a trot for the forest. He knew the direction in which the settlements lay, and he could go on with his mission. Men would say that he had shown great skill and presence of mind in escaping from the ambush, when those older and more experienced had been trapped. But when the alternatives were presented to Ned's mind he had not hesitated. They were lingering before San Antonio and the call for volunteers was not so urgent. He was going back to rescue his comrades or be taken or fall in the attempt.

One of the great qualities in Ned's mind was gratitude. Had it not been for Obed he might yet be under the sea in a dungeon of the Castle of San Juan de Ulua. The Ring Tailed Panther had done him a hundred services, and would certainly risk his life, if need be, to save Ned's. He would never desert them.

The forest was not so near as it looked on the prairie, but two hours' riding brought him to it. He knew that it was the same forest in which Obed and the Panther had been taken, here extending for many miles.

He believed that the Mexicans, being far north of their usual range, would remain in the forest, and he was glad of it. He could work much better under cover than on the prairie. This was undoubtedly the Mexican band of which the old hunter had spoken, and Urrea had given his signal to it from the tree. Ned did not believe that it would remain long in this region, but would go swiftly south, probably to reinforce Cos in San Antonio. He must act with speed.

It was several hours until night, and he rode southward through the forest which consisted chiefly of oak, ash, maple and sweet gum. There was not much undergrowth here, and he did not have any great fear of ambush. Turning in, yet farther to the right, he saw a fine creek, and he followed its course until the undergrowth began to grow thick again. Then he dismounted and fastened his horse at the end of his lariat.

The boy had already come to his conclusion. The presence of the creek had decided him. He believed that the Mexicans, for the sake of water, had encamped somewhere along its course, and all he had to do was to follow its stream. He marked well the spot at which he was leaving his horse, and began what he believed to be the last stage of his journey.

Ned was glad now that the undergrowth was dense. It concealed him well, and he had acquired skill enough to go through it swiftly and without noise. He advanced two or three miles, when he saw a faint light ahead, and he was quite sure that it came from the Mexican camp. As he went nearer, he heard the sound of many voices, and, when he came to the edge of a thicket, belief became certainty.

The entire Mexican force was encamped in a semi-circular glade next to the creek. The horses were tethered at the far side, and the men, eighty or a hundred in number, were lying or standing about several fires that burned brightly. It was a cold night, and the Mexicans were making themselves comfortable. They were justified in doing so, as they knew that there was no Texan force anywhere within a day's ride. They had put out no sentinels, quite sure that wandering Texans who might see them would quickly go the other way.

Ned crept up as close as he dared, and, lying on his side in a dense thicket, watched them. Their fires were large, and a bright moon was shining. The whole glade was filled with light. The Mexicans talked much, after their fashion, and there was much moving about from fire to fire. Presently the eyes of the boy watching in the bush lighted up with a gleam which was not exactly that of benevolence.

Urrea was passing before one of the fires. Ned saw him clearly now, the trim, well-knit figure, and the handsome, melancholy face. But he was no prisoner. Many of the Mexicans made way for him and all showed him deference. Ned had liked Urrea, but he could not understand how a man could play the spy and traitor in such a manner, and his heart flamed with bitterness against him.

The Mexicans continued to shift about, and when two more men came into view Ned's heart leaped. They were alive! Prisoners they were, but yet alive. He had believed that two so vivid and vital as they could not perish, and he was right.

Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther sat with their backs against the same tree. They were unbound but the armed Mexicans were all about them, and they did not have a chance. They were thirty yards away, and Ned could see them very plainly, yet there was a wall between him and these trusty comrades of his.

Obed and the Panther remained motionless against the tree. Apparently they took no interest in the doings of the Mexicans. Ned, yet seeing no way in which he could help them, watched them a long time. He saw Urrea, after a while, come up and stand before them. The light was good enough for him to see that Urrea's expression was sneering and triumphant. Again Ned's heart swelled with rage. The traitor was exulting over the captives.

Urrea began to speak. Ned could not hear his words, but he knew by the movement of the man's lips that he was talking fast. Undoubtedly he was taunting the prisoners with words as well as looks. But neither Obed nor the Ring Tailed Panther made any sign that he heard. They continued to lean carelessly against the tree, and Urrea, his desire to give pain foiled for the time, went away.

Now Ned bestirred his mind. Here were the Mexicans, and here were his friends. How should he separate them? He could think of nothing at present and he drew back deeper into the forest. There, lying very close among the bushes, he pondered a long time. He might try to stampe the horses, but the attempt would be more than doubtful, and he gave up the idea.

It was now growing late and the fires in the Mexican camp were sinking. The wind began to blow, and the leaves rustled dryly over Ned's head. Best thoughts sometimes spring from little things, and it was the dry rustle of the leaves that gave Ned his idea. It was a desperate chance, but he must take it. The increasing strength of the wind increased his hope. It was blowing from him directly toward the camp.

He retreated about a quarter of a mile. Then he hunted until he found where the fallen leaves lay thickest, and he raked them into a great heap. Drawing both the flint and steel which he, like other borderers, always carried, he worked hard until the spark leaped forth and set the leaves on fire. Then he stood back.

The forest was dry like tinder. Ned had nothing to do but to set the torch. In an instant the leaves leaped into a roaring flame. The blaze ran higher, took hold of the trees and ran from bough to bough. It sprang to other trees, and, in an incredibly brief space, a forest fire, driven by the wind, sending forth sparks in myriads, and roaring and crackling, was racing down upon the Mexican camp.

Ned kept behind the fire and to one side. Sparks fell upon him, and the smoke was in his eyes and ears, but he thought little just then of such things. The fire, like many others of its kind, took but a narrow path. It was as if a flaming sword blade were slashed down across the woods.

Ned saw it through the veil of smoke rush upon the Mexican camp. He saw the startled Mexicans running about, and he heard the shrill neigh of frightened horses. Never was a camp abandoned more quickly. The men sprang upon their horses and scattered in every direction through the woods. Two on horseback crowded by Ned. They did not see him, nor did he pay any attention to them, but when a third man on foot came, running at the utmost speed, the boy seized him by the shoulder, and was dragged from his feet.

"It is I, Obed!" he cried. "It is I, Ned Fulton!"

Obed White stopped abruptly and the Ring Tailed Panther, unable to check himself, crashed into him. The three, men and boy, went to the ground, where they lay for a few moments among the bushes, half stunned. It was a fortunate chance, as Urrea, who had retained his presence of mind, was on horseback looking for the prisoners, and he passed so near that he would have seen them had they been standing.

The three rose slowly to their feet and the two men gazed in admiration at Ned.

"You did it!" they exclaimed together.

"I did," replied Ned with pride, "and it has worked beautifully."

"I was never so much in love with a forest fire before," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "How it roars an' tears an' bites! An' just let it roar an' tear an' bite!"

"We'd better go on the back track," said Obed. "The Mexicans are all running in other directions."

"My horse is back that way, too," said Ned. "Come on."

They started back, running along the edge of the burned area. Before they had gone far the Ring Tailed Panther caught a saddled and bridled horse which was galloping through the woods, and, they were so much emboldened, that they checked their flight, and hunted about until they found a second.

"There must be at least thirty or forty of 'em dashin' about through the woods, mad with fright," said Obed.

"Three are all we can use, includin' Ned's," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "but I wish we had more weapons."

They had found across the saddle of one of the horses a couple of pistols in holsters, but they had no other weapons except those that Ned carried. But they were free and they had horses. The Ring Tailed Panther's customary growl between his teeth became a chant of triumph.

"Did the Mexicans capture Obed an' me?" he said. "They did. Did they keep us? They didn't. Why didn't they? There was a boy named Ned who escaped. He was a smart boy, a terribly smart boy. Did he run away an' leave us? He didn't. There was only one trick in the world that he could work to save us, an' he worked it. Oh, it was funny to see the Mexicans run with the fire scorchin' the backs of their ears. But that boy, Ned, ain't he smart? He whipped a hundred Mexicans all by himself."

Ned blushed.

"Stop that, you Panther," he said, "or I'll call for Urrea to come and take you back."

"Having horses," said Obed, "there is no reason why we shouldn't ride. Here, jump up behind me, Ned."

They were very soon back at the point where Ned had left his own horse, and found him lying contentedly on his side. Then, well mounted each on his own horses they resumed their broken journey.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TEXAN STAR

Just after the three started, they looked back and saw a faint light over the trees, which they knew was caused by the forest fire still traveling northward.

"It seemed almost a sin to set the torch to the woods," said the boy, "but I couldn't think of any other way to get you two loose from the Mexicans."

"It's a narrow fire," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' I guess it will burn itself out ag'inst some curve of the creek a few miles further on."

This, in truth, was what happened, as they learned later, but for the present they could bestow the thought of only a few moments upon the subject. Despite the Mexican interruption they intended to go on with their mission. With good horses beneath them they expected to reach the Brazos settlements the next day unless some new danger intervened.

They turned from the forest into the prairie and rode northward at a good gait.

"That was a fine scheme of yours, Ned," repeated the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' nobody could have done it better. You set the fire an' here we are, together ag'in."

"I was greatly helped by luck," said Ned modestly.

"Luck helps them that think hard an' try hard. Didn't that fellow, Urrea, give you the creeps? I had my doubts about him before, but I never believed he was quite as bad as he is."

But Ned felt melancholy. It seemed to him that somebody whom he liked had died.

"I saw him talking to you and Obed," he said. "What was he saying?"

The Ring Tailed Panther frowned and Ned heard his teeth grit upon one another.

"He was sayin' a lot of things," he replied. "He was talkin' low down, hittin' at men who couldn't hit back, abusin' prisoners, which the same was Obed an' me. He was doin' what I guess you would call tauntin', tellin' of all the things we would have to suffer. He said that they'd get you, too, before mornin' an' that we'd all be hanged as rebels an' traitors to Mexico. He laughed at the way he fooled us. He said that spat he had with Sandoval was only make-believe. He said that we'd never get San Antonio; that he'd kept Cos informed about all our movements an' that Santa Anna was comin' with a great army. He said that most of us would be chewed right up, an' that them that wasn't chewed up would wish they had been before Santa Anna got through with 'em."

"Many a threatened man who runs away lives to fight another day," said Obed cheerfully.

"That's so," said the Ring Tailed Panther, "an' I say it among us three that if we don't take San Antonio we'll have a mighty good try at it, an' if it comes to hangin' an' all that sort of business there's Texan as well as Mexican ropes."

They reached another belt of forest about 3 o'clock in the morning, and they concluded to rest there and get some sleep. They felt no fear of the Mexicans who, they were sure, were now riding southward. They slept here four or five hours, and late the next afternoon reached the first settlement on the Brazos.

Ned and his companions spent a week on the river and when they rode south again they took with them nearly a hundred volunteers for the attack on San Antonio, the last draft that the little settlements could furnish. Very few, save the women and children, were left behind.

On their return journey they passed through the very forest in which Ned had made his singular rescue of Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther. They saw the camp and they saw the swath made by the fire, a narrow belt, five or six miles in length, ending as the Ring Tailed Panther had predicted at a curve of the creek. The Mexicans, as they now knew definitely, were gone days ago from that region.

"Perhaps we'll meet Urrea when we attack San Antonio," said Ned.

"Maybe," said Obed.

They rode to the camp on the Salado without interruption, and found that indecision still reigned there. The blockade of San Antonio was going on, and the men were eager for the assault, but the leaders were convinced that the force was too small and weak. They would not consent to what they considered sure disaster. The recruits that the three brought were welcomed, but Ned noticed a state of depression in the camp. He found yet there his old friends, Bowie, Smith, Karnes, and the others. His news that Urrea was a spy and traitor created a sensation.

Ned was asked by "Deaf" Smith the morning after his arrival to go with him on a scout, and he promptly accepted. A rest of a single day was enough for him and he was pining for new action.

The two rode toward the town, and then curved away to one side, keeping to the open prairie where they might see the approach of a superior enemy, in time. They observed the Mexican sentinels at a distance, but the two forces had grown so used to each other that no hostile demonstration was made, unless one or the other came too close.

Smith and Ned rode some distance, and then turned on another course, which brought them presently to a hill covered with ash and oak. They rode among the trees and from that point of vantage searched the whole horizon. Ned caught the glint of something in the south, and called Smith's attention to it.

"What do you think it is?" he asked after Smith had looked a long time.

"It's the sun shining on metal, either a lance head or a rifle barrel. Ah, now I see horsemen riding this way."

"And they are Mexicans, too," said Ned. "What does it mean?"

A considerable force of mounted Mexicans was coming into view, and Smith's opinion was formed at once.

"It's reinforcements for Cos," he cried. "We heard that Ugartchea was going to bring fresh troops from Laredo, and that he would also have with him mule loads of silver to pay off Cos' men. We'll just cut off this force and take their silver. We'll ride to Bowie!"

They galloped at full speed to the camp and found the redoubtable Georgian, who instantly gathered together a hundred men including the Ring Tailed Panther and Obed and raced back. The Mexican horsemen were still in the valley, seeming to move slowly, and Bowie at once formed up the Texans for a charge. But before he could give the word a trumpet pealed, and the Mexicans rode at full speed toward a great gully at the end of the valley into which they disappeared. The last that the Texans saw were some heavily-loaded mules following their master into the ravine.

The Ring Tailed Panther burst into a laugh.

"Them's not reinforcements," he cried, "an' them's not mules loaded with silver. They're carryin' nothin' but grass. These men have been out there cuttin' feed in the meadow for Cos' horses."

"You're right, Panther," said "Deaf" Smith, somewhat crestfallen.

"But we'll attack, just the same," said Bowie. "Our men need action. We'll follow 'em into that gully. On, men, on!"

A joyous shout was his reply and the men galloped into the plain. They were about to charge for the gully when Bowie cried to them to halt. A new enemy had appeared. A heavy force of cavalry with two guns was coming from San Antonio to rescue the grass cutters. They rode forward with triumphant cheers, but the Texans did not flinch. They would face odds of at least three to one with calmness and confidence.

"Rifles ready, men!" cried Bowie. "They're about to charge."

The trumpets pealed out the signal again, and the Mexicans charged at a gallop. Up went the Texans' rifles. A hundred fingers pressed a hundred triggers, and a hundred bullets crashed into the front of the Mexican line. Down went horses and men, and the Mexican column stopped. But it opened in a few moments, and, through the breach, the two cannon began to fire, the heavy reports echoing over the plain. The Texans instinctively lengthened their line, making it as thin as possible, and continued their deadly rifle fire.

Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther as usual kept close together, and "Deaf" Smith also was now with them. All of them were aiming as well as they could through the smoke which was gathering fast, but the Mexicans, in greatly superior force, supported by the cannon, held their ground. The grass cutters in the gully also opened fire on the Texan flank, and for many minutes the battle swayed back and forth on the plain, while the clouds of smoke grew thicker, at times almost hiding the combatants from one another.

The Texans now began to press harder, and the Mexicans, despite their numbers and their cannon, yielded a little, but the fire from the men in the gully was stinging their flank. If they pushed forward much farther they would be caught between the two forces and might be destroyed. It was an alarming puzzle, but at that moment a great shout rose behind them. The sound of the firing had been heard in the main Texan camp and more Texans were coming by scores.

"It's all over now," said Obed.

The Texans divided into two forces. One drove the main column of the Mexicans in confusion back upon the town, and the other, containing Ned and his friends, charged into the gully and put to flight or captured all who were hidden there. They also took the mules with their loads of grass which they carried back to their own camp.

Ned, the Ring Tailed Panther, Obed and "Deaf" Smith rode back together to the Salado. It had been a fine victory, won as usual against odds, but they were not exultant. In the breast of every one of them had been a hope that the whole Texan army would seize the opportunity and charge at once upon Cos and San Antonio. Instead, they had been ordered back.

They made their discontent vocal that and the following evenings. There was no particular order among the Texans. They usually acted in groups, according to the localities from which they came, and some, believing that nothing would be done, had gone home disgusted. Mr. Austin himself had left, and Houston had persisted in his refusal to command. Burluson, a veteran Indian fighter, had finally been chosen for the leadership. Houston soon left, and Bowie, believing that nothing would be done, followed him.

It was only a few days after the grass fight, and despite that victory, Ned felt the current of depression. It seemed that their fortune was melting away without their ever putting it to the touch. Although new men had come their force was diminishing in numbers and San Antonio was farther from their hands than ever.

"If we don't do something before long," said Henry Karnes, "we'll just dissolve like a snow before a warm wind."

"An' all our rippin' an' tearin' will go for nothin'," growled the Ring Tailed Panther. "We've won every fight we've been in, an' yet they won't let us go into that town an' have it out with Cos."

"We'll get it yet," said Obed cheerfully. "In war it's a long lane that has no battle at the end. Just you be patient, Panther. Patience will have her good fight. I've tested it more than once myself."

Ned did not say anything. He had made himself a comfortable place, and, as the cold night wind was whistling among the oaks and pecans, the fire certainly looked very good to him. He watched the flames leap and sink, and the great beds of coals form, and once more he was very glad that he was not alone again on the Mexican mountains. He resolutely put off the feeling of depression. They might linger and hesitate now, but he did not doubt that the cause of Texas would triumph in the end.

Ned was restless that night, so restless that he could not sleep, and, after a futile effort, he rose, folded up his blankets and wandered about the camp. It was a body of volunteers drawn together by patriotism and necessity for a common purpose, and one could do almost as one pleased. There was a ring of sentinels, but everybody knew everybody else and scouts, skirmishers and foragers passed at will.

Ned was fully armed, of course, and, leaving the camp, he entered an oak grove that lay between it and the city. As there was no underbrush here and little chance for ambush he felt quite safe. Behind him he saw the camp and the lights of the scattered fires now dying, but before him he saw only the trunks of the trees and the dusky horizon beyond.

Ned had no definite object in view, but he thought vaguely of scouting along the river. One could never know too much about the opposing force, and experience added to natural gifts had given him great capabilities.

He advanced deeper into the pecan grove, and reached the point where the trees grew thickest. There, where the moonlight fell he saw a shadow lying along the ground, the shadow of a man. Ned sprang behind a tree and lay almost flat. The shadow had moved, but he could still see a head. He felt sure that its owner was behind another tree not yet ten feet distant. Perhaps some Mexican scout like himself. On the other hand, it might be Smith or Karnes, and he called softly.

No answer came to his call. Some freak of the moonlight still kept the shadowy head in view, while its owner remained completely hidden, unconscious, perhaps, that any part of his reflection was showing. Ned did not know what to do. After waiting a long time, and, seeing that the shadow did not move, he edged his way partly around the trunk, and stopped where he was still protected by the ground and the tree. He saw the shadowy head shift to the same extent that he had moved, but he heard no sound.

He called again and more loudly. He said: "I am a Texan; if you are a friend, say so!" No one would mistake his voice for that of a Mexican. No reply came from behind the tree.

Ned was annoyed. This was most puzzling and he did not like puzzles. Moreover, his situation was dangerous. If he left his tree, the man behind the other one—and he did not doubt now that he was an enemy—could probably take a shot at him.

He tried every maneuver that he knew to draw the shot, while he yet lay in ambush, but none succeeded. His wary enemy knew every ruse. Had it not been for the shadowy head, yet visible in the moonlight, Ned might have concluded that he had gone. He had now been behind the tree a full half hour, and during all that time he had not heard a single sound from his foe. The singular situation, so unusual in its aspect, and so real in its danger, began to get upon his nerves.

He thought at last of something which he believed would draw the fire of the ambushed Mexican. He carried a pistol as well as a rifle, and, carefully laying the cocked rifle by his side, he drew the smaller weapon. Then he crept about the tree, purposely making a little noise. He saw the shadowy head move, and he knew that his enemy was seeking a shot. He heard for the first time a slight sound, and he could tell from it exactly where the man lay.

Raising his pistol he fired, and the bark flew from the right side of the tree. A man instantly sprang out, rifle in hand, and rushed toward him expecting to take him, unarmed. Like a flash Ned seized his own cocked rifle and covered the man. When he looked down the sights he saw that it was Urrea.

Urrea halted, taken by surprise. His own rifle was not leveled, and Ned held his life at his gun muzzle.

"Stop, Don Francisco, or I fire," said the boy. "I did not dream that it was you, and I am sorry that I was wrong."

Urrea recovered very quickly from his surprise. He did not seek to raise his rifle, knowing that it was too late.

"Well," he said, "why don't you fire?"

"I don't know," replied Ned.

"I would do it in your place."

"I know it, but there is a difference between us and I am glad of that difference, egotistical as it may sound."

"There is another difference which perhaps you do not have in mind. You are a Texan, an American, and I am a Mexican. That is why I came among you and claimed to be one of you. You were fools to think that I, Francisco Urrea, could ever fight for Texas against Mexico."

"It seems that we were," said Ned.

Urrea laughed somewhat scornfully.

"There are some Mexicans born here in Texas who are so foolish," he said, "but they do not know Mexico. They do not know the greatness of our nation, or the greatness of Santa Anna. What are your paltry numbers against us? You will fail here against San Antonio, and, even if you should take the town, Santa Anna will come with a great army and destroy you. And then, remember that there is a price to be paid. Much rope will be used to good purpose in Texas."

"You have eaten our bread, you have received kindness from us, and yet you talk of executions."

"I ate your bread, because it was my business to do so. I am not ashamed of anything that I have done. I do not exaggerate, when I say that I have rendered my nation great service against the Texan rebels. It was I who brought them against you more than once."

"I should not boast of it. I should never pretend to belong to one side in war and work for another."

"Again there is a difference between us. Now, what do you purpose to do? I am, as it were, your prisoner, and it is for you to make a beginning."

Ned was embarrassed. He was young and he could not enforce all the rigors of war. He knew that if he took Urrea to the camp the man would be executed as a spy and traitor. The Mexicans had already committed many outrages, and the Texans were in no forgiving mood. Ned could not forget that this man had broken bread with his comrades and himself, and once he had liked him. Even now his manner, which contained no fear nor cringing, appealed to him.

"Go," he said at last, "I cannot take your life, nor can I carry you to those who would take it. Doubtless I am doing wrong, but I do not know what else to do."

"Do you mean that you let me go free?"

"I do. You cannot be a spy among us again, and as an open enemy you are only as one among thousands. Of course you came here to-night to spy upon us, and it was an odd chance that brought us together. Take the direction of San Antonio, but don't look back. I warn you that I shall keep you covered with my rifle."

Urrea turned without another word and walked away. Ned watched him for a full hundred yards. He noticed that the man's figure was as trim and erect as ever. Apparently, he was as wanting in remorse as he was in fear.

When Urrea had gone a hundred yards Ned turned and went swiftly back to the camp. He said nothing about the incident either to Obed or the Ring Tailed Panther. The next day Urrea was crowded from his mind by exciting news. A sentinel had hailed at dawn three worn and unkempt Texans who had escaped from San Antonio, where they had long been held prisoners by Cos. They brought word that the Mexican army was disheartened. The heavy reinforcements, promised by Santa Anna, had not come.

A great clamor for an immediate attack arose. The citizen army gathered in hundreds around the tent of Burlson, the leader, and demanded that they be led against San Antonio. Fannin and Milam were there, and they seconded the demands of the men. Ned stood on the outskirts of the crowd. The Ring Tailed Panther on one side of him uttering a succession of growls, but Obed on the other was silent.

"It looks like a go this time," said Ned.

"I think it is," said Obed, "and if it isn't a go now it won't be one at all. Waiting wears out the best of men."

The Ring Tailed Panther continued to growl.

A great shout suddenly arose. The Panther ceased to growl and his face beamed. Burlson had consented to the demand of the men. It was quickly arranged that they should attack San Antonio in the morning, and risk everything on the cast.

The short day—it was winter now—was spent in preparations. Ned and his comrades cleaned their rifles and pistols and provided

themselves with double stores of ammunition. Ned did not seek to conceal from himself, nor did the men seek to hide from him the greatness and danger of their attempt.

"They outnumber us and they hold a fortified town," said Obed. "Whatever we do we three must stick together. In union there is often safety."

"We stick as long as we stand," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "If one falls the other two must go on, an', if two fall, the last must go on as long as he can."

"Agreed," said Ned and Obed.

They were ready long before night, but after dark an alarming story spread through the little army. Part of it at least proved to be true. One of the scouts, sent out after the decision to attack had been taken, had failed to come in. It was believed that he had deserted to the Mexicans with news of the intended Texan advance. The leaders had counted upon surprise, as a necessary factor in their success, and without it they would not advance. Gloom settled over the army, but it was not a silent gloom. These men spoke their disappointment in words many and loud. Never had the Ring Tailed Panther roared longer, without taking breath.

The Texans were still talking angrily about the fires, when another shout arose. The missing scout came in and he brought with him a Mexican deserter, who confirmed all the reports about the discouragement of the garrison. Once more, the Texans crowded about Burleson's tent, and demanded that the attack be made upon San Antonio. At last Burleson exclaimed:

"Well, if you can get volunteers to attack, go and attack!"

Milam turned, faced the crowd and raised his hand.

There was a sudden hush save for the deep breathing of many men. Then in a loud, clear voice Milam spoke only ten words. They were:

"Who will go with old Ben Milam into San Antonio?"

And a hundred voices roared a single word in reply. It was:

"I!"

"That settles it," said the Ring Tailed Panther with deep satisfaction. "Old Satan himself couldn't stop the attack now."

The word was given that the volunteers for the direct attack, three hundred in number, would gather at an old mill half way between the camp and the town. Thence they would march on foot for the assault. Ned and his comrades were among the first to gather at the mill and he waited as calmly as he could, while the whole force was assembled, three hundred lean, brown men, large of bone and long of limb.

No light was allowed, and the night was cold. The figures of the men looked like phantoms in the dusk. Ned stood with his friends, while Milam gave the directions. They were to be divided into two forces. One under Milam was to enter the town by the street called Acequia, and the other under Colonel Johnson was to penetrate by Soledad Street. They relied upon the neglect of the Mexicans to get so far, before the battle began. Burleson, with the remainder of his men would attack the ancient mission, then turned into a fort, called the Alamo.

"Deaf" Smith, who knew the town thoroughly, led Johnson's column, and Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther were just behind him.

Ned was quivering in every nerve with excitement and suspense, but he let no one see it. He moved forward with steady step and he heard behind him the soft tread of the men who intended to get into San Antonio without being seen. He looked back at them. They came in the dusk like so many shadows and no one spoke. It was like a procession of ghosts, moving into a sleeping town. The chill wind cut across their faces, but no one at that moment took notice of cold.

High over Ned's head a great star danced and twinkled, and it seemed to him that it was the Texan Star springing out.

The houses of the town rose out of the darkness. Ned saw off to right and left fresh earthworks and rifle pits, but either no men were stationed there or they slept. The figure of Smith led steadily on and behind came the long and silent file. How much farther would they go without being seen or heard? It seemed amazing to Ned that they had come so far already.

They were actually at the edge of the town. Now they were in it, going up the narrow Soledad Street between the low houses directly toward the main plaza, which was fortified by barricades and artillery. A faint glimmer of dawn was just beginning to appear in the east.

A dusky figure suddenly appeared in the street in front of them and gave a shout of alarm. "Deaf" Smith fired and the man fell. A bugle pealed from the plaza and a cannon was fired down the street, the ball whistling over the heads of the Texans. In an instant the garrison of Cos was awake, and the alarm sounded from every point of San Antonio. Lights flashed, arms rattled and men called to one another.

"Into this house" cried "Deaf" Smith. "We cannot charge up the narrow street in face of the cannon!"

They were now within a hundred yards of the plaza, but they saw that the guide was right. They dashed into the large, solid house that he had indicated, and Ned did not notice until he was inside that it was the very house of the Vice-Governor, Veramendi, into which he had come once before. Just as the last of the Texans sprang through the doors another cannon ball whistled down the street, this time low enough. Milam's division, meanwhile, had rushed into the house of De La Garcia, near by.

As Ned and the others sprang to cover he trampled upon the flowers in a patio, and he saw a little fountain playing. Then he knew. It was the house of Veramendi, and he thought it a singular chance that had brought him to the same place. But he had little time for reflection. The column of Texans, a hundred and fifty in number, were taking possession of every part of the building, the occupants of which had fled through the rear doors.

"To the roof!" cried "Deaf" Smith. "We can best meet the attack from there."

The doors and windows were already manned, but Smith and many of the best men rushed to the flat roof, and looked over the low stone coping. It was not yet day and they could not see well. Despite the lack of light, the Mexicans opened a great fire of cannon and small arms. The whole town resounded with the roar and the crash and also with the shouting. But most of the cannon balls and bullets flew wide, and the rest spent themselves in vain on the two houses.

The Texans, meanwhile, held their fire, and waited for day. Ned, Smith and the others on the roof lay down behind the low coping. They had achieved their long wish. They were in San Antonio, but what would happen to them there?

Ned peeped over the coping. He saw many flashes down the street toward the plaza and he heard the singing of bullets. His finger was on the trigger and the temptation to reply was great, but like the others he waited.

The faint light in the east deepened and the sun flashed out. The full dawn was at hand and the two forces, Texans and Mexicans, faced each other.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TAKING OF THE TOWN

The December sun, clear and cold, bathed the whole town in light. Houses, whether of stone, adobe or wood, were tinted a while with gold, but everywhere in the streets and over the roofs floated white puffs of smoke from the firing, which had never ceased on the part of the Mexicans. The crash of rifles and muskets was incessant, and every minute or two came the heavy boom of the cannon with which Cos swept the streets. The Texans themselves now pulled the trigger but little, calmly waiting their opportunity.

Ned and his comrades still lay on the roof of the Veramendi house. The boy's heart beat fast but the scene was wild and thrilling to the last degree. He felt a great surge of pride that he should have a share in so great an event. From the other side of the river came the rattle of rifle fire, and he knew that it was the detachment from Burleson attacking the Alamo. But presently the sounds there died.

"They are drawing off," said Obed, "and it is right. It is their duty to help us here, but I don't see how they can ever get into San Antonio. I wish the Mexicans didn't have those cannon which are so much heavier than ours."

The Texans had brought with them a twelve pounder and a six pounder, but the twelve pounder had already been dismantled by the overpowering Mexican fire, and, without protection they were unable to use the six pounder which they had drawn into the patio, where it stood silent.

Ned from his corner could see the mouths of the guns in the heavy Mexican battery at the far end of the plaza, and he watched the flashes of flame as they were fired one by one. In the intervals he saw a lithe, strong figure appear on the breastwork, and he was quite sure that it was Urrea.

An hour of daylight passed. From the house of De La Garcia the other division of Texans began to fire, the sharp lashing of their rifles sounding clearly amid the duller crash of musketry and cannon from the Mexicans. The Texans in the lower part of the Veramendi house were also at work with their rifles. Every man was a sharpshooter, and, whenever a Mexican came from behind a barricade, he was picked off. But the Mexicans had also taken possession of houses and they were firing with muskets from windows and loopholes.

"We must shoot down the cannoneers," shouted the Ring Tailed Panther to "Deaf" Smith.

Smith nodded. The men on the roof were fifteen in number and now they devoted their whole attention to the battery. Despite the drifting smoke they hit gunner after gunner. The fever in Ned's blood grew. Everything was red before him. His temples throbbed like fire. The spirit of battle had taken full hold of him, and he fired whenever he caught a glimpse of a Mexican.

"Deaf" Smith was on Ned's right, and he picked off a gunner. But to do so he had lifted his head and shoulders above the coping. A figure rose up behind the Mexican barricade and fired in return. "Deaf" Smith uttered a little cry, and clapped his hand to his shoulder.

"Never mind," he said in reply to anxious looks. "It's in the fleshy part only, and I'm not badly hurt."

The bullet had gone nearly through the shoulder and was just under the skin on the other side. The Ring Tailed Panther cut it out with his bowie knife and bound up the wound tightly with strips from his hunting shirt. But Ned, although it was only a fleeting glimpse, had recognized the marksman. It was Urrea who had sent the bullet through "Deaf" Smith's shoulder. He was proving himself a formidable foe.

But the men on the roof continued their deadly sharpshooting, and now, the battery, probably at Urrea's suggestion, began to turn its attention to them. Ned was seized suddenly by Obed and pulled flat. There was a roaring and hissing sound over his head as a twelve pound cannon ball passed, and Ned said to Obed: "I thank you." The cannon shot was followed by a storm of bullets and then by more cannon shots. The Mexican guns were served well that day. The coping was shot away and the Texans were in imminent danger from the flying pieces. They were glad when the last of it was gone.

But they did not yet dare to raise themselves high enough for a shot. Balls, shell, and bullets swept the roof without ceasing. Ned lay on his side, almost flat. He listened to the ugly hissing and screaming over his head until it became unbearable. He turned over on his other side and looked at Smith, their leader. Smith was pale and weak from his wound, but he smiled wanly.

"You don't speak, but your face asks your question, Ned," he said. "I hate to say it, but we can't hold this roof. I never knew the Mexicans to shoot so well before, and their numbers and cannon give them a great advantage. Below, lads, as soon as you can!"

They crept down the stairway, and found that the house itself was suffering from the Mexican cannon. Holes had been smashed in the walls, but here the Texans were always replying with their rifles. They also heard the steady fire in the house of De La Garcia and they knew that their comrades were standing fast. Ned, exhausted by the great tension, sat down on a willow sofa. His hands were trembling and his face was wet with perspiration. The Ring Tailed Panther sat down beside him.

"Good plan to rest a little, Ned," he said. "We've come right into a hornets' nest an' the hornets are stingin' us hard. Listen to that, will you!"

A cannon ball smashed through the wall, passed through the room in which they were sitting, and dropped spent in another room beyond. Obed joined them on the sofa.

"A cannon ball never strikes in the same place twice," misquoted Obed. "So it's safer here than it is anywhere else in this Veramendi house. I'd help with the rifles but there's no room for me at the windows and loopholes just now."

"Our men are giving it back to them," said Ned. "Listen how the rifles crackle!"

The battle was increasing in heat. The Mexicans, despite their artillery, and their heavy barricades, were losing heavily at the hands of the sharpshooters. The Texans, sheltered in the buildings, were suffering little, but their position was growing more dangerous every minute. They were inside the town, but the force of Burleson outside was unable to come to their aid. Meanwhile, they must fight five to one, but they addressed themselves with unflinching hearts to the task. Even in the moment of imminent peril they did not think of retreat, but clung to their original purpose of taking San Antonio.

Ned, tense and restless, was unable to remain more than a few minutes on the sofa. He wandered into another room and saw a large table spread with food. Bread and meat were in the dishes, and there were pots of coffee. All was now cold. Evidently they had been making ready for early breakfast in the Veramendi house when the Texans came. Ned called to his friends.

"Why shouldn't we use it!" he said, "even if it is cold?"

"Why shouldn't we?" said Obed. "Even though we fight we must live."

They took the food and coffee, cold as it was, to the men, and they ate and drank eagerly. Then they searched everywhere and found large supplies of provisions in the house, so much, in fact, that the Ring Tailed Panther growled very pleasantly between his teeth.

"There's enough here," he said, "to last two or three days, an' it's well when you're in a fort, ready to stand a siege, to have something to eat."

Some of the men now left the windows and loopholes to get a rest and Ned found a place at one of them. Peeping out he saw the bare street, torn by shot and shell. He saw the flash of the Texan rifles from the De La Garcia house and he saw the blaze of the Mexican cannon in the plaza. Mexican men, women and children on the flat roofs, out of range, were eagerly watching the battle. Clouds of smoke drifted over the city.

While Ned was at the window, a second cannon ball smashed through the wall of the Veramendi house, and caused the débris to fall in masses. The Colonel grew uneasy. The cannon gave the Mexicans an immense advantage, and they were now using it to the utmost. The house would be battered down over the heads of the Texans, and they could not live in the streets, which the Mexicans, from their dominating position, could sweep with cannon and a thousand rifles and muskets. A third ball crashed through the wall and demolished the willow sofa on which the three had been sitting. Plaster rained down upon the Texans. They looked at one another. They could not stay in the house nor could they go out. A boy suddenly solved the difficulty.

"Let's dig a trench across the street to the De La Garcia house!" cried Ned, "and join our comrades there!"

"That's the thing!" they shouted. They had not neglected to bring intrenching tools with them, and they found spades and shovels about the house. But in order to secure the greatest protection for their work they decided to wait until night, confident that they could hold their present position throughout the day.

It was many hours until the darkness, and the fire rose and fell at intervals. More shattered plaster fell upon them, but they were still holding the wreck of a house, when the welcome twilight deepened and darkened into the night. Then they began work just inside the doorway, cutting fast through plaster and adobe, and soon reaching the street. They made the trench fairly wide, intending to get their six pounder across also. Just behind those who worked with spade and shovel came the riflemen.

A third of the way across, and the Mexicans discovered what was going on. Once more a storm of cannon, rifle and musket balls swept the street, but the Texans, bent down in their trench, toiled on, throwing the dirt above their heads and out on either side. The riflemen behind them, sheltered by the earth, replied to the Mexican fire, and, despite the darkness, picked off many men.

Ned was just behind Obed, and the Ring Tailed Panther was following him. All three were acting as riflemen. Obed was seeking a glimpse of Urrea, but he did not get it. Ned was watching for a shot at the gunners.

Once the Mexicans under the cover of their artillery undertook to charge down the street, but the sharpshooters in the trench quickly drove them back.

Thus they burrowed like a great mole all the way across Soledad Street, and joined their comrades in the strong house of De La Garcia. They also succeeded in getting both of their cannon into the house, and, now united, the Texans were encouraged greatly. Ned found all the rooms filled with men. A party broke through the joint wall and entered the next house, thus taking them nearer to the plaza and the Mexican fortifications.

All through the night intermittent firing went on. The Mexicans increased their fortifications, preparing for a desperate combat on the morrow. They threw up new earthworks, and they loopholed many of the houses that they held. Cos, his dark face darker with rage and fury, went among them, urging them to renewed efforts, telling them that they were bound to take prisoners all the Texans whom they did not slay in battle, and that they should hang every prisoner. Great numbers of the women and children had hidden in the Alamo on the other side of the river. San Antonio itself was stripped for battle, and the hatred between Texan and Mexican, so unlike in temperament, flamed into new heat.

Ned was worn to the bone. His lips were burnt with his feverish breath. The smoke stung his eyes and nostrils, and his limbs ached. He felt that he must rest or die, and, seeing two men sound asleep on the floor of one of the rooms, he flung himself down beside them. He slept in a few minutes and Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther seeing him there did not disturb him.

"If any boy has been through more than he has," said Obed, "I haven't heard of him."

"An' I guess that he an' all of us have got a lot more comin'," said the Ring Tailed Panther grimly. "Cos ain't goin' to give up here without the terriblest struggle of his life. He can't afford to do it."

"Reckon you're right," said Obed.

Ned awoke the next morning with the taste of gunpowder in his mouth, but the Texans, besides finding food in the houses, had brought some with them, and he ate an ample breakfast. Then ensued a day that he found long and monotonous. Neither side made any decided movement. There was occasional firing, but they rested chiefly on their arms. In the course of the second night the Mexicans opened another trench, from which they began to fire at dawn, but the Texan rifles quickly put them to flight.

The Texans now began to grow restless. Cooped up in two houses they were in the way of one another and they demanded freedom and action. Henry Karnes suggested that they break into another house closer to the plaza. Milam consented and Karnes, followed closely by Ned, Obed, the Ring Tailed Panther and thirty others, dashed out, smashed in the door of the house, and were inside before the astonished Mexicans could open an accurate fire upon them. Here they at once secured themselves and their bullets began to rake the plaza. The Mexicans were forced to throw up more and higher intrenchments.

Again the combat became intermittent. There were bursts of rifle fire, and occasional shots from the cannon, and, now and then, short periods of almost complete silence. Night came on and Ned, watching from the window, saw Colonel Milam, their leader, pass down the trench and enter the courtyard of the Veramendi house. He stood there a moment, looking at the Mexican position. A musket cracked and the Texan, throwing up his arms, fell. He was dead by the time he touched the ground. The ball had struck him in the center of the forehead.

Ned uttered a cry of grief, and it was taken up by all the Texans who had seen their leader fall. A half dozen men rushed forward and dragged away his body, but that night they buried it in the patio. His death only incited them to new efforts. As soon as his burial was finished they rushed another house in their slow advance, one belonging to Antonio Navarro, a solid structure only one block from the great plaza. They also stormed and carried a redoubt which the Mexicans had erected in the street beside the house. It now being midnight they concluded to rest until the morrow. Meanwhile, they had elected Johnson their leader.

Ned was in the new attack and with Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther he was in the Navarro house. It was the fourth that he had occupied since the attack on San Antonio. He felt less excitement than on the night before. It seemed to him that he was becoming hardened to everything. He looked at his comrades and laughed. They were no longer in the semblance of white men. Their faces were so blackened with smoke, dirt and burned gunpowder that they might have passed for negroes.

"You needn't laugh, Ned," said Obed. "You're just as black as we are. This thing of changing your boarding house every night by violence and the use of firearms doesn't lead to neatness. If fine feathers make fine birds then we three are about the poorest flock that ever flew."

"But when we go for a house we always get it," said the Ring Tailed Panther. "You notice that. This place belongs to Antonio Navarro. I've met him in San Antonio, an' I don't like him, but I'm willin' to take his roof an' bed."

Ned took the roof but not the bed. He could not sleep that night, and it was found a little later that none would have a chance to sleep. The Mexicans, advancing over the other houses, the walls of all of which joined, cut loopholes in the roof of the Navarro house and opened fire upon the Texans below. The Texans, with surer aim, cleared the Mexicans away from the loopholes, then climbed to the roof and drove them off entirely.

But no one dared to sleep after this attack, and Ned watched all through the dark hours. Certainly they were having action enough now, and he was wondering what the fourth day would bring forth. From an upper window he watched the chilly sun creep over the horizon once more, and the dawn brought with it the usual stray rifle and musket shots. Both Texan and Mexican sharpshooters were watching at every loophole, and whenever they saw a head they fired at it. But this was only the beginning, the crackling prelude to the event that was to come.

"Come down, Ned," said Obed, "and get your breakfast. We've got coffee and warm corn cakes and we'll need 'em, as we're already tired of this boarding house and we intend to find another."

"Can't stay more than one night in a place while we're in San Antonio," said the Ring Tailed Panther, growling pleasantly. "A restless lot we are an' it's time to move on again."

Ned ate and drank in silence. His nerves were quite steady, and he had become so used to battle that he awaited whatever they were going to attempt, almost without curiosity.

"Ain't you wantin' to know what we're goin' to do, Ned?" asked the Ring Tailed Panther.

"I'm thinking that I'll find out pretty quick," replied Ned.

"Now this boy is shorely makin' a fine soldier," said the Panther to Obed. "He don't ask nothin' about what he's goin' to do, but just eats an' waits orders."

Ned smiled and ate another corn cake.

"Maybe," said Obed, "we'll meet our friend Urrea in the attack we're going to make. If so, I'll take a shot at him, and I won't have any remorse about it, either, if I hit him."

They did not wait long. A strong body of the Texans gathered on the lower floor, many carrying, in addition to their weapons, heavy iron crowbars. The doors were suddenly thrown open and they rushed out into the cool morning air, making for a series of stone houses called the Zambrano Row, the farthest of which opened upon the main plaza, where the Mexicans were fortified so strongly. Scattering shots from muskets and rifles greeted them, but as usual, when any sudden movement occurred, the Mexicans fired wildly, and the Texans broke into the first of the houses, before they could take good aim.

Ned was one of the last inside. He had lingered with the others to repel any rush that the Mexicans might make. He was watching the Mexican barricade, and he saw heads rise above it. One rose higher than the rest and he recognized Urrea. The Mexican saw Ned also, and the eyes of the two met. Urrea's were full of anger and malice, and raising his rifle he fired straight at the boy. Ned felt the bullet graze his cheek, and instantly he fired in reply. But Urrea had quickly dropped down behind the barricade and the bullet missed. Then Ned rushed into the house.

The boy was blazing with indignation. He had spared Urrea's life, and yet the Mexican had sought at the first opportunity to kill him. He could not understand a soul of such caliber. But the incident passed from his mind, for the time being, in the strenuous work that they began now to do.

They broke through partition wall after wall with their powerful picks and crowbars. Stones fell about them. Plaster and dust rained down, but the men relieving one another, the work with the heavy tools was never stopped until they penetrated the interior of the last house in the row. Then the Texans uttered a grim cry of exultation. They looked from the narrow windows directly over the main plaza and their rifles covered the Mexican barricades. The Mexicans tried to drive them out of the houses with the guns, but the solid stone walls resisted balls and shells, and the Texan rifles shot down the gunners.

Then ensued another silence, broken by distant firing, caused by another attack upon the Texan camp outside the town. It was driven off quickly and the Texans in the houses lay quiet until evening. Then they heard a great shouting, the occasion of which they did not know until later. Ugartchea with six hundred men had arrived from the Rio Grande to help Cos. But it would not have made any difference with the Texans had they known. They were determined to take San Antonio, and all the time they were pressing harder on Cos.

That night, the Texans, Ned with them, seized another large building called the Priests' House, which looked directly over the plaza, and now their command of the Mexican situation was complete. Nothing could live in the square under their fire, and in the night Ned saw the Mexicans withdrawing, leaving their cannon behind.

Exhaustion compelled the boy to sleep from midnight until day, when he was roused by Obed.

"The Mexicans have all gone across the river to the Alamo," said the Maine man. "San Antonio is ours."

Ned went forth with his comrades. Obed had told the truth. The great seat of the Mexican power in the north was theirs. Three hundred daring men, not strongly supported by those whom they had left behind, had penetrated to the very heart of the city through house after house, and had driven out the defenders who were five to their one.

The plaza and Soledad Street presented a somber aspect. The Mexican dead, abandoned by their comrades, lay everywhere. The Texan rifles had done deadly work. The city itself was silent and deserted.

"Most of the population has gone with the Mexican army to the Alamo," said Obed. "I suppose we'll have to attack that, too."

But Cos, the haughty and vindictive general, did not have the heart for a new battle with the Texans. He sent a white flag to Burleson

and surrendered. Ned was present when the flag came, and the leader of the little party that brought it was Urrea. The young Mexican had lost none of his assurance.

"You have won now," he said to Ned, "but bear in mind that we will come again. You have yet to hear from Mexico and Santa Anna."

"When Santa Anna comes he will find us here ready to meet him," replied Ned.

The Texans in the hour of their great and marvelous victory behaved with humanity and moderation. Cos and his army, which still doubled in numbers both the Texans who had been inside and outside San Antonio, were permitted to retire on parole beyond the Rio Grande. They left in the hands of the Texans twenty-one cannon and great quantities of ammunition. Rarely has such a victory been won by so small a force and in reality with the rifle alone. All the Texans felt that it was a splendid culmination to a perilous campaign.

Ned, Obed and the Ring Tailed Panther, seated on their horses, watched the captured army of Cos march away.

"Well, Texas is free," said the Ring Tailed Panther.

"And San Antonio is ours," said Obed.

"But Santa Anna will come," said Ned, remembering the words of Urrea.

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